

Artist Steve Locke set for keynote speech

by Michael Smallwood October 27, 2021



Artist Steve Locke said he believes in confronting the causes of injustice rather than glossing over them with what he calls decorative gestures | Photo by Liza Voll

The Gibbes Museum of Art's Distinguished Lecture Series brings world-renowned artists to Charleston for programs designed to stimulate conversations around art. Nov. 3, Gibbes will host artist Steve Locke for a talk about the future of public art installations and the form they should take.

Locke was born in Cleveland and spent his formative years in Detroit. His master's of fine arts degree, earned in 2001, is from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design. He also received the Guggenheim Fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation in 2020. His acclaimed work throughout the years, including painting, sculpture, photography, and installations, is what led the Gibbes to offer Locke the invitation.

"It's a time where my work is starting to move into the public realm in a new way," Locke said. "And we're having a big conversation about how to think about things in public as a country. And I think they were thinking about that particularly in South Carolina."

From the murder of George Floyd and through the debates over the Calhoun statue at Marion Square — a year of racial injustice protests and discussions on how to move forward as a community have made Charleston the perfect place for Locke's brand of artistic expression and activism, he said.

"The city's History and Culture Subcommittee for the Special Commission on Equity, Inclusion and Racial Conciliation, has been involved in discussions over the past year on how we can address and correct systemic inequities as a community," said Angela Mack, executive director of the Gibbes Museum of Art.

"As Charleston's leading arts institution, we are committed to extending engaging and thought-provoking programs that address issues in our community. We believe this discussion by Steve Locke will be one of the most sought-after and timely of the year, especially since greater public discussion and programming is a key recommendation in the special commission report."

"I love working in the public realm, but I'm not interested in public art," Locke said. "I'm much more interested in how we remember things in public than just, like, making objects for contemplation."

His Boston installation, *Three Deliberate Grays for Freddie*, was described as a "public site of mourning" rather than an individual memorial.

"I'm very interested in what is 'public memory,'" he said, "and how it is preserved and how we talk about it."

Locke confronts the causes of injustice instead of just glossing over those injustices with decorative gestures. His 2017-2019 work, #Killers, challenges the murders of Black people by illustrating the murderers directly. This series includes Dylann Roof, who killed nine people in 2015 at Charleston's Emanuel AME Church.

"The source is these men and the inchoate and unnameable whiteness that creates and supports them," he said. "In these drawings, I make that whiteness visible ... it is the condition that makes these people and their crimes inevitable."

Locke speaks passionately about the idea of public memory over simply installing objects. He views monuments and statues as lost opportunities to address actual issues in the community. "When you look at some of these statues that were built to honor people," Locke said, "are we really doing that, or are we doing it to intimidate other people?"

He acknowledges that many of our statues were put up in periods to remind people of America's past during periods of civil rights battles and justice. So for Locke, the conversation is less about glorifying people who can disappoint, but rather creating works of art that help educate the public to historic events and can help with the healing of those spaces.

The removal of the Calhoun statue feeds into the larger national conversation of memorials to problematic historical figures, and what to do with those spaces when the original monuments are removed. Locke's feelings on statues to commemorate our shared history is a fitting perspective for the Charleston community. What, or who, should replace these problematic figures poses a unique challenge in Locke's eyes.

"Do we need a statue, or do we need to talk about what happened?" he asked. "In some ways, people making statues is a way to talk about representation without talking about the problem. I don't need a statue, I need redlining to stop."

"So when we talk about public memory and we talk about sites or places for us to remember things in public, I think those are more necessary than ever. I don't think we need to be organized around a person or around an e g y of a person. I think that we can organize ourselves around events, around different activities of people."