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Hello from DCA Newsletter #62: Steve Locke artist interview

by Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Dear Contemporaries,

Another great artist interview for you this week, this time from Brooklyn-based Steve Locke who works across media, drawing from the intersections of art history and visual culture including portraiture, identity, and histories of modernism.

We were lucky enough to welcome one of his works into the MFA's collection last year. *Homage to the Auction Block #70*, 2020, is part of a larger series that posits the basic Modernist form epitomized by the work of an artist like Josef Albers can be reframed as a signifier of a slave auction block.

In the artist's own words, "The application of flat color, the use of the grid, and the reliance on "primary structures" have art historical meanings central to Western Modernism." Locke resists "the notion that form could be separated from its content ... Instead of solely memorializing victims or revisiting trauma, I steer the viewer to the source of the violence."

Read on and enjoy!

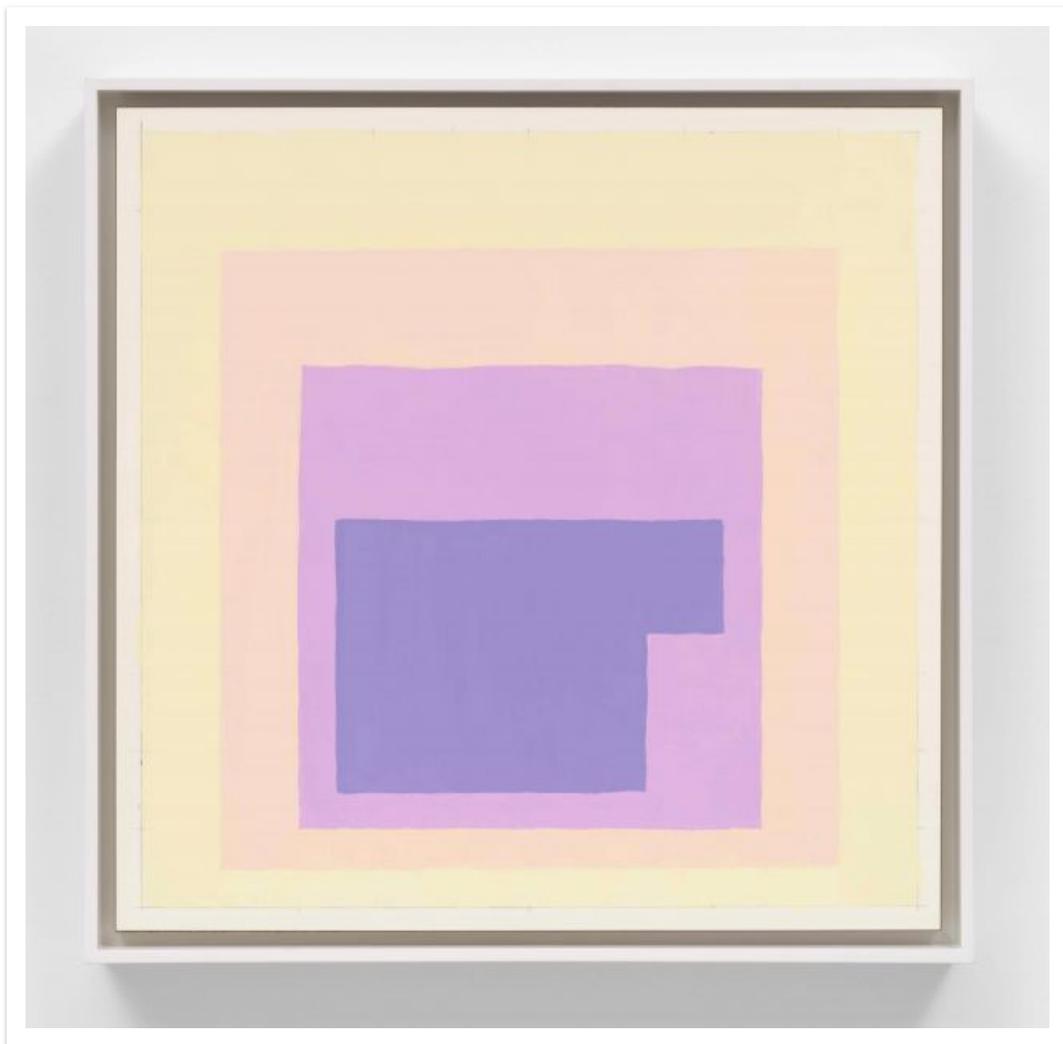
Warmest,
Team Contemporary

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Locke was born in 1963 in Cleveland, Ohio and raised in Detroit, Michigan. He received his MFA in 2001 from Massachusetts College of Art and Design. In 2020, he was awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. Solo exhibitions include the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, and Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, among others. He has done projects with

For Freedoms, Kickstarter, the Boston Public Library, and P.S. Satellites/Prospect IV in New Orleans and has had gallery exhibitions with yours mine & ours, Samsøñ, LaMontagne Gallery, Gallery Kayafas, and Mendes Wood.

He attended residencies with the City of Boston (2018), the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (2016), The MacDowell Colony (2015), and Skowhegan (2002). Locke is a recipient of grants from Pollock-Krasner Foundation, Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, and Art Matters Foundation. His work has been reviewed in *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The New Yorker*, and his writing has been published in *Artforum* as well as in museum catalogues. Locke is a Professor of Fine Arts at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, NY. He is represented by Alexander Gray Associates.



Steve Locke, *Homage to the Auction Block #120a-a public face*, 2022. Initialed and numbered on recto; signed, titled, and dated on verso. Acrylic on Claybord. 16 x 16 in (40.6 x 40.6 cm); 17 x 17 x 2 in framed (43.2 x 43.2 x 5.1 cm framed). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2022 Steve Locke / Artists Rights Society

We know and admire your practice, but how would you describe it in no more than three sentences to an interested stranger?

I know and admire the MFA as well. When I talk about my work, I usually say that I am an artist deeply engaged in portraiture and modernism. That seems to strike a large place on the field of art that allows a lot of different people to enter the work. I am also deeply in love with the history of art and the way paintings-specifically paintings of men-have been and are used to convey ideas of power.

Where are you currently? Where have you spent the last few months?

I am up in my studio in Catskill, NY where I have been since classes at Pratt ended back in May. I have a show coming up at Alexander Gray Associates in Chelsea in October and I am making new work for it.

Has your domestic landscape changed at all during the last two years?

Well, Boston was my home for over 30 years but in 2019 I got a job at Pratt Institute which meant a move to New York City. I had never lived in NY and I wasn't planning on moving but you go where the work is. Within 3 months of my arrival, COVID really devastated the world and the impact was greatly felt in Brooklyn where I live. I was essentially in my apartment for a long time making work at my desk in my living room. While I do enjoy solitude, isolation was not really what I had planned for moving to a city with major cultural institutions-all of which were closed. It was also impossible to find a studio space during that time. So I started to rethink things and when the opportunity to have a studio in the Hudson Valley to prepare for my show came my way, I took it. It's nice up here.

Has your practice or process changed at all during the last two years, and if so, how?

It's such a strange question. I work all the time, so that has not changed. I just adapted to the constraints that COVID and living in Brooklyn put on the work. It's what artists always have done. I don't want to make it sound like it was heroic to be making paintings during a pandemic. It was just business as usual in the studio. Also, my sister Barbara works in public health (at the [Community Health Awareness Group in Detroit](#)) so I heard first hand how hard things were for folks. If anything it made me grateful to have the limited space I had at the time.

But moving my studio to Catskill has been great. I have been able to expand the work to scale and return to some ideas I had to suppress because of space concerns. I also have been able to use oil paint again which is an absolute dream come true.



Steve Locke, *Homage to the Auction Block #120b-a private life*, 2022. Initialed and numbered on recto; signed, titled, and dated on verso. Acrylic on Claybord. 16 x 16 in (40.6 x 40.6 cm); 17 x 17 x 2 in framed (43.2 x 43.2 x 5.1 cm framed). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2022 Steve Locke / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

What are you working on right now?

I am painting for a show in October at Alexander Gray Associates. The working title is “you’re blues ain’t like mine.” It’s a new body of work based in portraiture and includes paintings that are on the wall and paintings that are free standing. I haven’t been able to work this way in YEARS so I am very excited about the new work.

How are you keeping your sense of equilibrium? Where do you normally look for inspiration in your work and has that changed?

I am not really an inspiration-based person, to be honest. Chuck Close used to say, “Inspiration is for amateurs” and while that is kind of harsh I have always agreed with it. I like to work and I don’t really need any urging to make art. What I will say is that I have been listening to a lot of 80s music in the studio and that has really kept

my spirits up.

Where are you finding support right now? Are there any support networks that you've been missing?

You know I really had to think about this question. I don't really know. I really uprooted everything in my life a few years ago and COVID still has a lot of those networks disrupted. I got off Facebook so I miss a lot of things. I talk and text with my sister a lot (she's in Detroit). I miss running into people, mostly. That is a huge loss, but starting over in a new place is an opportunity to build new networks.

Is there a place you're hoping to visit or a place you've traveled to recently that you'd share with us?

Once I get some free time I really want to go to Paris. I have not been in YEARS and with teaching and all it is hard to get time off to really go and not worry about work. Also for my birthday my friends Audrey, Moe, Brooke, and Liz took me to Dia:Beacon for the first time and it was incredible.

What art is giving you life right now? Or simply providing you comfort?

Like I said 80s music is really keeping me going these days. Live everyone else, I'm listening to Beyoncé's RENAISSANCE on repeat. The Guston show is a balm and I am so glad that I was able to contribute to it. Ruth Erickson's shows at ICA are both knockouts and I am so glad I was able to see them when I was there. A PLACE FOR ME: FIGURATIVE PAINTING NOW was really refreshing to see after so much bad figuration was haunting all of the art fairs.

What troubles you most about this moment?

The rise of American Fascism and Christian Nationalism. It's not a joke. Folks are starting to realize that a lot of these people are out for blood and are starting to act accordingly. People need to realize that just because they are not targeting you doesn't mean that they won't eventually get around to you. It's like Fred Hampton said, "Nothing is more important than stopping Fascism, because Fascism is gonna stop us all."

Are there any artists, writers, or others working in the arts whose work you want to share and make readers aware of?

Artists I'm looking at include [Craig Drennen](#), [Samantha Vernon](#), [Jane Fox Hipple](#), and [Mario Moore](#).

I just finished [Mothercare](#) by Lynne Tillman and I cannot recommend it enough. It's a powerful book.