

MASS MoCA

Steve Locke: *the fire next time*

Exhibition, curated by Fellow Evan Garza, is the first presentation from MASS MoCA's Curatorial Exchange Initiative

**On View August 3, 2024 – November 2025
Building 6: The Robert W. Wilson Building**

North Adams, MA, August 1, 2024 – MASS MoCA presents the first exhibition from the Curatorial Exchange Initiative (CEI) by New York-based artist Steve Locke. Curated by CEI Fellow Evan Garza, *the fire next time* is a meditation on uniquely American forms of violence directed at Black and queer people. Locke's interdisciplinary practice engages issues of identity, desire, race, violence, spectacle, and memory. In the artist's hands, these complexities reveal as much tenderness and humor as they do brutality.

For most of his decades-long career, Locke has largely worked in portraiture, though recently he has pushed the discipline of painting to its material and conceptual limits through the creation of "freestanding paintings" and works of public art. This exhibition combines both new and recent works that introduce an increasingly personal, political, and critical engagement with histories of racism, anti-Blackness, modernism, and both the Western art historical canon and American society at large.

"I have never really been interested in trauma, to be completely honest with you," explains Locke. "I have been interested in justice...the work of healing is not mine to do. My work is to make you look, and to make you unable to look away."

the fire next time takes its title from the 1963 book by American author and civil rights activist James Baldwin, which galvanized the American public with its brutal honesty about racial inequality. "Like Baldwin, Locke invites the viewer to grapple with the legacies of racial violence and lynchings," said Evan Garza. "Yet in the Artist's work there are no images of killings to be found. Whether through the pictorial use of negative space, the contexts contained within images and objects, or the conceptual use of data, Locke engages deeply with histories of racial violence by allowing the specter of their legacies to hang over his work — a contextual presence that never announces itself but constantly makes itself known."

The floating or suspended head has been a recurrent figure in Locke's studio practice for much of the last two decades, often appearing in paintings with a tongue sticking out. Long interested in disrupting the power relationships structured by portraiture, for Locke, the floating or

suspended head is as much a representation of precarity, anxiety, or humor as it is a means of reconsidering ways of looking and being seen. Works in the exhibition include *the rainbow sign* (2024), a new installation commissioned by MASS MoCA, whose towering metal armature and brightly painted exterior gently glow against the wall behind it; a series of wall-mounted companion works, *signs 1-6* (2024), which features satyr heads adorned with hooks and hardware, suspended from spray-painted industrial pipes and plumbing fixtures; a new series of freestanding paintings; thirty graphite drawings on paper from Locke's *#Killers* series (2017-ongoing) — the largest number of these works exhibited together to date; a data-driven site-specific installation, *A Partial List of Unarmed African-Americans Who Were Killed By Police or Who Died in Police Custody During My Sabbatical from Massachusetts College of Art and Design, 2014-2015* (2016); several new freestanding paintings; and other recent works on view for the first time.

About the Artist:

Steve Locke (b.1963, Cleveland, OH) lives and works in the Hudson Valley, NY. He received his MFA from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in 2001. Locke's work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at Moss Arts Center at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg (2022); The Gallatin Galleries, New York University, NY (2019); Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, MA (2018); Boston Public Library, MA (2018); Bard College at Simon's Rock, Great Barrington, MA (2018); Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, MI (2014); Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA (2013), and Savannah College of Art and Design, GA (2008). He has participated in group exhibitions at the Green Family Art Foundation, Dallas, TX (2023); MassArt Art Museum (MAAM), Boston, MA (2023); Jack Shainman Gallery, Kinderhook, NY (2021); Fitchburg Art Museum, MA (2020); Fruitlands Museum, Harvard, MA (2020); Boston Center for the Arts, MA (2018); Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African & African American Art, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA (2018); Longwood Art Gallery, Bronx Council of the Arts, NY (2014); deCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, MA (2013); and the Danforth Museum, Framingham, MA (2002). Locke is the recipient of several awards, including the Rappaport Prize, deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum (2022); the Guggenheim Fellowship, John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation (2020); The Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation (2013); and the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant (2014); among many others.

About the Curatorial Exchange Initiative (CEI):

MASS MoCA's new Curatorial Exchange Initiative (CEI) works collaboratively with curators and artists whose diverse practices, knowledge, and exhibition-making can be exchanged, supported, and deepened. The six fellows are at various points in their careers and with varying relationships to museums, including independent and institutionally-based curators working in the United States and Puerto Rico. As part of a three-year program, CEI fellows receive the support of MASS MoCA's curators, art fabrication and public programs teams, and with other key staff to realize exhibitions that will be mounted at, and supported through, MASS MoCA over the next five years. Among the defining features of the fellowship is its emphasis on curatorial exchange — intellectual, experiential, cultural, interpersonal, and institutional. MASS MoCA provides direct support for research, travel, residency, and commission/studio time for the artists each fellow is working with, and an annual stipend for the fellows that spans a two to

three year period. The six fellows are Ryan N. Dennis, Marissa Del Toro, Evan Garza, Michy Marxuach, Risa Puleo, and Terrence Washington.

About MASS MoCA

MASS MoCA is currently celebrating its 25th Anniversary Season under Director Kristy Edmunds, not only as the largest, multidisciplinary, contemporary art museum in North America, but also as a creative campus with a regional, national, and global impact. MASS MoCA is one of the world's liveliest centers for making and enjoying today's most evocative art, and is an indispensable home for artists who stretch toward what has yet to be created. From its beginnings as the major textile mill Arnold Print Works in the mid-19th century, to its days as the Sprague Electric Company in the mid-20th century, to its current iteration as a globally renowned contemporary art museum and fabrication center, the 24-acre MASS MoCA campus has a rich history of serving as an economic engine of the city of North Adams and the surrounding region. With vast galleries and a stunning variety of indoor and outdoor performing arts venues, MASS MoCA is able to embrace art in all forms. For more information visit www.massmoca.org or follow on Instagram at [@massmoca](https://www.instagram.com/massmoca).

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