



STEVE LOCKE

the fire next time

MASS MoCA



**As James Baldwin says,
“If I love you, I have to tell you the truth.”
So my job, as I see it, is to tell the truth.**

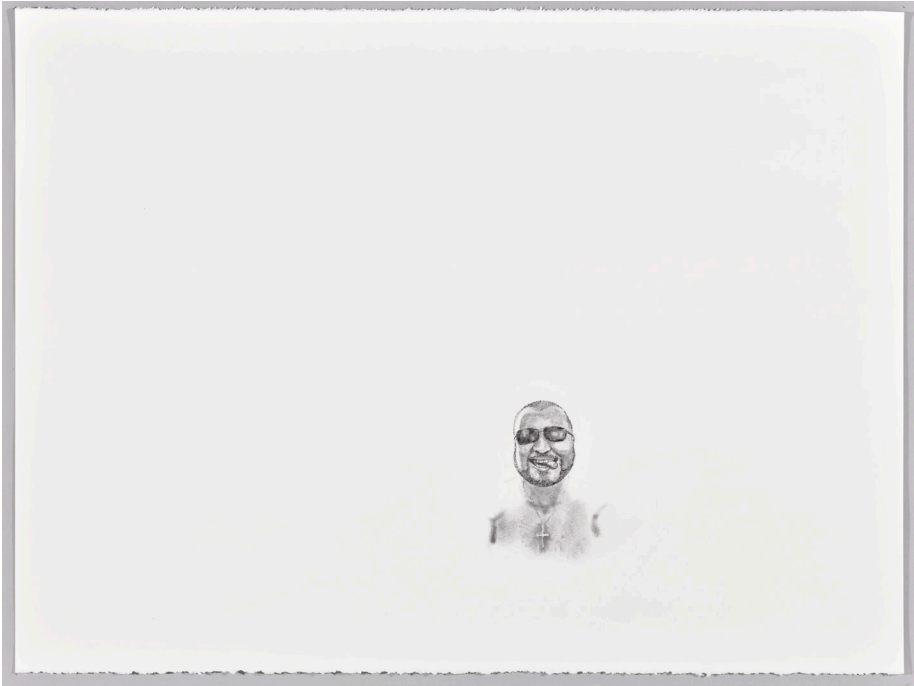
— Steve Locke

Steve Locke’s interdisciplinary practice engages issues of identity, desire, race, violence, and memory, revealing as much tenderness and humor as he does brutality. The artist, who has largely worked in portraiture for most of his decades-long career, in recent years has pushed the discipline of painting to its material and conceptual limits through “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.

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, 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.

This strategy of association and absence is articulated in Locke’s 2016 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*. Displayed on a dark wall at the exhibition’s entrance, under the light of a blue neon sign that reads “a dream,” the names of hundreds of Black victims of police violence are presented as columns of data: the date of their respective deaths, their name, gender,



age, place of death, and the means by which they were killed by law enforcement. There is no state violence to witness here. The implications of that violence, and its sheer scale, however, are unmissable.¹

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. The viewer is met by floating heads in multiple forms in the exhibition: in wall-mounted and freestanding paintings, in sculptural installations, and in a suite of thirty drawings on paper.

The peculiar cast plaster head of a satyr, a male human-animal hybrid and woodland spirit from Greek mythology, caught the artist's eye in 2006 at a Maine antique store. With its cheeky tongue out and a smirk, the playful, beastly head seemed to echo his work. Locke, who grew up in Detroit, later discovered the bust to be a replica of *Head of Pan*, a 2nd-century BCE Greek marble sculpture held in the Detroit



Institute of Arts collection.² Painted and altered versions of Locke's cast heads are suspended from an industrial gantry in **the rainbow sign** (2024),³ a new installation, commissioned by MASS MoCA, whose towering metal armature and brightly painted exterior gently glow against the wall behind it. Inside the gallery, a wall-mounted companion installation, **signs** (2024), features satyr heads adorned with hooks and hardware, suspended from spray-painted industrial pipes and plumbing fixtures. In Greco-Roman mythology, Pan is sometimes substituted for the satyr Marsyas, who was violently attacked and maimed by Apollo, the beautiful and

fair-skinned god of music.⁴ Locke's suspension of these satyr heads invites historical comparisons to lynchings and racial violence and creates an opportunity to more closely consider European cultural influence and examples of art historical violence directed at the *other* in society.

However, there are no violent images of killings to be found in Locke's work—only killers. Lining the gallery walls are thirty graphite drawings on paper from Locke's **#Killers** series (2017–present), whose images depict American mass shooters and accused or acquitted murderers of African Americans. Drawn from images of

courtroom surveillance, police interviews, press images, and social media, Locke's killers are surrounded by a white field of negative space. We might consider the whiteness that surrounds these subjects as a space to contemplate the contextual violence and trauma left absent from these drawings.

"I have never really been interested in trauma, to be completely honest with you," the artist explains. "I have been interested in justice."⁵ Exemplary of his career-long exploration of the meeting place of image-making, spectacle culture, and social justice in American society, Locke made this statement as part of *In Session*, a virtual panel discussion hosted by MASS MoCA and the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA) in December 2020. Dr. Kalima Young, in her introductory remarks to the panel, encouraged artist panelists — Shaun Leonardo, Xaviera Simmons, Nick Cave, Locke, and moderator M. Carmen Lane — to consider forms of "empathetic witnessing" in a society of spectacle and surveillance in which viral images of Black death are normalized.⁶ However, as Locke's work testifies, the implications of violence do not require violent images to conjure injustice in the viewer's imagination. Injustice is always already there, never announcing itself but constantly making itself known.

"The work of healing is not mine to do," Locke continued in his panel remarks. "My work is to make you look, and to make you unable to look away. For the entire time of

my career, from my work dealing with the annihilation of a group of people from the AIDS epidemic until now, I have been engaged in an active assault on spectacle culture...As James Baldwin says, 'If I love you, I have to tell you the truth.' So my job, as I see it, is to tell the truth."⁷

— Evan Garza, Curatorial Exchange Initiative Fellow, MASS MoCA

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- 1 Locke's conceptual engagement with violence through textual and numerical data on a wall bears a conceptual link to the Wall Drawings of Sol LeWitt (1928–2007), whose *Wall Drawing Retrospective* is on view at MASS MoCA. For both Locke and LeWitt, their conceptual embrace of limitations and sets of instructions yield profound implications for art, ourselves, and how we make sense of the conditions of the world around us. While LeWitt's concerns were formal and architectural, Locke's installation is concerned with justice.
 - 2 Text conversation with the artist, Saturday, June 29, 2024.
 - 3 The phrase "the rainbow sign" is in reference to the original African American slave song, "God Gave Noah the Rainbow Sign," later popularized in 1929 by white American folk singers, the Carter Family. It is from the slave song's lyrics that Baldwin titled his 1963 book, *The Fire Next Time*. The song's chorus ends, "God gave Noah the rainbow sign / No more water, the fire next time." Locke's identity as a gay man adds an additional implication for the rainbow's meaning.
 - 4 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. Edited by R. J. Tarrant. Oxford Classical Texts. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, 11.146.
 - 5 Steve Locke, "In Session: Nick Cave, Shaun Leonardo, Steve Locke, Xaviera Simmons, M. Carmen Lane, Dr. Kalima Young," a virtual panel presented by MASS MoCA and the Berkshire Cultural Resource Center at MCLA, December 10, 2020, <https://massmoca.org/event/in-session>.
 - 6 Dr. Kalima Young, "In Session," December 10, 2020.
 - 7 If we follow Locke's line of argumentation, the implication is that he loves you, the viewer.



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. His 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). Locke 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); The 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.

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Steve Locke: the fire next time

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Curated by Evan Garza, Curatorial Exchange Initiative Fellow, MASS MoCA

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Cover: Steve Locke, *the harbinger (detail)*, 2022. Oil on canvas. 55 x 60 inches. © 2024 Steve Locke / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York