

Art in America

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EXHIBITION REVIEWS

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Steve Locke: *you don't deserve me* (detail), 2009-12, mixed mediums, painting: 10 inches square; at Samsøn.

STEVE LOCKE SAMSON

For his second solo show at Samsøn, titled “you don’t deserve me,” Boston artist Steve Locke—known for installations of variously scaled male portraits that subtly explore relationships through the gaze—has freed many of his subjects from the gallery walls. Over half of the 16 sensuously painted heads—somnolent, winking or wide-eyed, many with outsize tongues protruding from open mouths—on beveled panels were attached to steel piping fitted into decorated wood bases. The painted, sandblasted or polished pipes (of different heights) suggest both phalluses and the inner plumbing of the beings. Seen from behind, the hybrid pieces—whose panels have been spray-painted on their versos in fluorescent colors—call to mind the neat edges of 20th-century Constructivism.

Locke, whose process often involves years of reworking and repainting a single portrait, creates evocative memory palaces for desire, loss, domination and submission. *Empire* (2009-12) features a man’s head on a ground that is light pink over yellow. He has closely cropped hair, one

eye open and a large mouth dominated by expressionistically painted big white teeth and a huge tongue. The panel, mounted on a 40-inch-tall pink and white pipe inserted into a base with an empire-style wallpaper collage, is tilted, resembling a music stand or lectern. In a lexicon written by the artist to accompany this exhibition, Locke suggests that the exaggeratedly swollen painted tongues may be “a response to Medusa.” Like the other barbaric-looking male heads, *Empire* seems to reference the mythic female Gorgon, the sight of whom “was enough to turn men to stone.” According to Locke’s lexicon (which includes meditations on such subjects as mocking, poles, angles and Turkey), Medusa is a metaphor for “a man confronting female sexuality which literally stiffens him.” One is left wondering if Locke also considered Freud’s interpretation of Medusa as an iconic image of castration.

In *you don’t deserve me* (2009-12), the head and shoulders of a curly-haired man with thick pink pursed lips are painted on vintage floral wallpaper on plywood. The solemn portrait is affixed to a short steel pole set at a 45-degree angle on a rectangular yellow base, all placed on a Turkish prayer rug facing Mecca. Locke had a residency in Istanbul, where he purchased

the rug, and this piece alludes to a kneeling supplicant. In his lexicon, Locke claims that “45 degrees is an indication of love.”

A sense of interaction existed between the hybrid pieces, which were sometimes arranged facing one another, and between the works and viewers, who were beckoned to accommodate a variety of heights and angles. Locke provides insight into his own challenges and disappointments in such titles as *what becomes of the broken hearted?* and *nothing’s changed*. Within the swirls of paint are echoes of the artist’s keen observational practices of looking, as well as of his being seen, wanted and rejected.

—Francine Koslow Miller