

ADRIAN WALKER

The nearly erased artist behind the hidden face of the proposed Faneuil Hall memorial

PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF/FILE 2016

Steve Locke (pictured with one of his past exhibits) is an African-American artist, who is also one of the city of Boston's current artists-in-residence.



By [Adrian Walker](#)

GLOBE COLUMNIST AUGUST 21, 2018

Steve Locke sat in a tranquil museum courtyard the other day and pondered a controversy of which he never thought he would be a part.

“I’m really new at making public art works,” Locke said. “I was sort of hoping for an informed and intelligent conversation, but that isn’t the conversation that’s come out.”

Locke is an African-American artist, who is also one of the city of Boston's current artists-in-residence. In January, he wrote an intriguing proposal for an installation addressing the tragic origins of Faneuil Hall, a gift from a merchant — Peter Faneuil — who made part of his fortune from the slave trade.

At the time Locke made his proposal, he was unaware that there was a campaign to rename Faneuil Hall. But his idea — which has been embraced by City Hall — has collided head-on with the protests to rename the space. On social media, particularly, Locke has been denounced for somehow undermining the notion of stripping the slave trader's name

from the landmark, and accused of providing political cover to Mayor Martin J. Walsh.

Those charges are fact-free, but they open a window into what sometimes passes for political discourse in this town. He's right: We should be having a debate over how to come to terms with Boston's Colonial (and slave-connected) history. Instead, it has immediately degenerated into a food fight over who is in the pocket of whom.

Whatever dialogue Boston needs to have about race, it isn't that.

I wanted to talk to Locke because the artist behind the monument idea is in danger of being overshadowed in a political war he isn't part of.

Locke, 55, has had gallery shows in multiple cities, and is a man whose art has long been devoted to protest. A case in point: The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum is currently the site of an installation of Locke's that is devoted to the death of Freddie Gray, an African-American man who died while in police custody in Baltimore in 2015.

"I wish I was the happy artist who painted happy things, but that's just never been my thing," Locke said.

He was raised in Detroit, and came to Boston, at 16, to attend Boston University. He went on to earn two degrees at Massachusetts College of Art and Design and is now on the faculty there. Along the way, Locke fell in love with Boston.

Faneuil Hall drew his interest because he believes this city, so steeped in history, has turned a blind eye to the way it was shaped, in the Colonial era, by the illicit riches of the trade in enslaved people.

Locke's proposed memorial would evoke a slave auction, with one ground-level bronze plate reflecting an auctioneer; a much larger one representing people trafficked in slavery. That plate measuring 10 feet by 16 feet would include a map showing the route traveled by people and goods between Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States. It would be heated to 98.6 degrees — the temperature of the human body — reflecting the humanity of the

people sold as chattel.

That hardly sounds like a feel-good proposal meant to quiet debate.

But the criticism of Locke's proposal isn't about art — it's about politics. In one missive to supporters, Kevin Peterson, who is leading the call to rename Faneuil Hall, claimed that “no black leader” had asked for a slave memorial at Faneuil Hall. Who is he to proclaim who gets to propose things?

We can — and should — debate the merits of Locke's ideas. But it shouldn't be a debate over who gets to have ideas, or who gets to call himself a “leader.”

For Locke, it is the racially charged nature of the criticism that surprises and wounds him. His critics, to his mind, don't understand that his is not the world of politics.

“I'm not making my work for black people,” Locke said. “I'm making my work for Boston — black and white. I'm making work to help my city heal.”

*Adrian Walker is a Globe columnist. He can be reached at adrian.walker@globe.com.
follow him on Twitter: [adrian_walker](https://twitter.com/adrian_walker).*

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Banned Porte'

08/21/18 08:53 PM

“I'm not making my work for black people,” Locke said. “I'm making my work for Boston — black and white. I'm making work to help my city heal.”

That's it in a nutshell. Good luck Mr Locke!

 Reply

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[lccprez1](#)

Mr. Locke sounds like he has the right idea - and some gravitas. The other guy may be an empty suit.

Like (31)

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[nahantjim](#)

08/21/18 10:33 PM

Happy to find agreement with Banned Porte. See below,

Like (3)

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[nahantjim](#)

08/21/18 10:37 PM

I wrote this to Kevin Peterson when I got an email seeking support for the renaming of Faneuil Hall.

"I am a 75 year old white guy who has been involved in civil rights work since I was a teenager. I do not support this effort. It is not at all the same as taking down statues of Confederate generals who fought to preserve the institution of slavery. I see Faneuil Hall as stop on the way forward to transformation and broader justice for all people. I would very much support some sort of plaque added to the building that explains that it had its origins in a time when slavery was a disgraceful part of our human history. It was a world wide phenomenon. But Faneuil Hall became better known as a place where the beginnings of resistance to monarchy took place and where ideas were expressed that only found their fullest realization in our lifetime with the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States.

I see this effort as unnecessarily divisive and playing into the hands of people like Donald Trump. I cannot support it."

I'm sure Banned Porte would agree with every word of my email but one takes what one can get.

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[Koch_Brothers](#)

08/22/18 12:39 AM

Excellent letter Jim.

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[Banned Porte'](#)

08/22/18 09:34 AM

NahantJim,

I see nothing to disagree with you on in your post Jim. I find most of your comments well thought out and, for the most part, reasonable. Except when all republicans are cast in the same light relating to Trump.

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[da2005](#)

08/21/18 10:42 PM

When did Kevin Peterson become the spokesperson for black people? Mr. Peterson is blind to the fact that changing a name does not change the reality of who built Faneuil Hall. Does Peterson want the names of portraits of slave owners that hand in the MFA to be changed to some other name?

Stephen Locke realizes that if you brush facts under the carpet by changing the name then the facts of slavery are also brushed underneath the carpet.

Changing the name does not change the past. Finding ways to look at the past without blinking or hiding it is what we need to do.

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[BillConcord](#)

08/22/18 01:49 AM

It has been 150 years since slavery and since then every color, culture, language and ethnicity has come to the US and have been able to thrive. In the black community 3 of 4 kids grow up without a father in the home. More money is spent per pupil in the inner city but the results are horrible. There is a huge drug culture. Work ethic is lacking.

The problem is not racism or slavery. Work hard, educate your kids and fix these problems. End the "woo-is-me" victimization please.

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[garymichael](#)

08/22/18 09:09 AM

you ignore segregation which only ended in our lifetimes, mine anyway. African Americans were not allowed to own a new home or even live in new housing developments and it was the FHA that enforced this rule, large employers in Boston and other place did not hire blacks for good jobs, since blacks were not allowed to move out they were stuck in derelict housing in neighborhoods where there were only poverty stricken schools. No job, no home, no education, no hope, those people had to be strong. Segregation was insidious.

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[Antietem](#)

08/21/18 10:50 PM

These are two different questions. We need to tell the story of slaver Faneuil and the people he abused, and sensitive public art is a great way to do that. Thank you, Mr. Locke.

The discussion of renaming is separate, and should continue. I vote to change the name. Peter Faneuil did not simply own slaves as Hancock, Washington, and Jefferson did. He engaged in the slave trade, sending many more people and their descendants to centuries of bondage. A historian who has studied his family also told me that he raped his slaves to "breed" more profits. A noble name for the building would be Frederick Douglass Hall - he spoke in the "Cradle of Liberty" many times, and his bust is on the stage.

Reply

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[adriannel](#)

08/22/18 04:07 AM

I disagree. The building was not named in honor of Faneuil. Faneuil built the building and named it after himself. To change its name would make a lie out of history. Mr. Locke's art exhibit is a better explanation of the facts than changing the building's name. We are try to teach history not make it more muddled.

Like (22)

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[DCOW25786](#)

08/22/18 05:58 AM

If we're to put a contextual history exhibit on every building built with slave trade money, we're going to be building a heckuva lot of exhibits. For no

reason other than white guilt. Let's focus on the present and the future to build a better society. Not dwell or try to rewrite the past.



[user_1700434](#)

08/22/18 06:32 AM

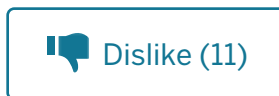
Mr. Locke please be resolute, your design sounds magnificent, I look forward to seeing it.



[vladjr](#)

08/22/18 06:59 AM

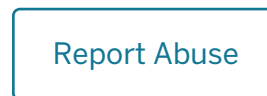
Looking at the picture, you call that crap art?



[user_1700434](#)

08/22/18 07:37 AM

vlad, look again.



[Indominus](#)

08/22/18 08:58 AM

I have no problem with a display showing the history of the slave trade at the sight. I'm against changing the name.



[Pabloc](#)

I think the proposed are installation is very thoughtful and appropriate and would be a great addition to Boston's history. Kevin Peterson sounds like a self-promoter interested in headlines and attention, at least in this case.

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08/22/18 09:55 AM

[Burncoatgirl](#)

Best of luck Mr. Locke, you are right person at the right time.

[Like \(4\)](#)[Dislike \(1\)](#)[Report Abuse](#)

08/22/18 01:40 PM

[LonnigansTheName](#)

To make up for the travesty on the other side of town, why not rename it Yawkey Hall

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08/22/18 05:07 PM

[OD24DOC](#)

This seemingly incessant rekindling of old wounds is to the point of counterproductivity. Yawkey Way, Fanueil Hall, the Smith College Snowflake and all the less noteworthy perceived aggrievances countrywide only serve to perpetuate this myth of widespread racism. Now we have a lesser standard-"bias." I agree with Bill from Concord. When is the Black community going to look inward? From my perspective, we were better off 40 years ago. My ancestors fled Ireland in the mid 1850's. They weren't exactly received or treated as royalty. Today when there is any sort of a police action involving a minority- the first thing to come out is a cell phone! Police officers are wary of any sort of interaction with a minority- fearful of being "race baited." So who

suffers- the overall Black community of course. We've had a Black president, a Black Police Commissioner in Boston, a black senator, senior military officers who are Black- I could go on and on. Unfortunately, we have people like Al Sharpton, Spike Lee and many others who have vested interests in engendering this perceived idea of systemic racism.



[user_399401](#) (Not you? [Log out](#))

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