

Outside The Gardner, A Place To Mourn Freddie Gray Through Color

June 28, 2018

- [Maria Garcia](#)



Outside the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, a massive vertical triptych with three distinct monochromes hangs from the front facade of the building — an abstract memorial that serves as a place to weep, to remember and to honor Freddie Gray.

Gray, the young black man who [died](#) as a result of injuries he sustained while in police custody in Baltimore in April 2015, has been on the mind of Boston-based artist Steve Locke for the last few years.

"I didn't feel like I could make a portrait of Freddie Gray because I didn't think that there was anything I could do in traditional portraiture that would be more elegant or more heroic than the actual person," Locke said.

Instead, he created the panel, which is actually a painting, with three different colors: a luminous raspberry sherbet at the very top, a dark brown in the middle and a cloudy gray at the bottom. The triptych form came to him after months wandering the Gardner Museum as an artist-in-residence in 2016, both admiring the textiles in the collection and mourning Gray. He also grieved that there was no physical or emotional space in our society to agonize over the injustice.



Artist Steve Locke watches the installation of his piece, "Three Deliberate Grays for Freddie." (Courtesy Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum)

"We never really got to mourn that loss because it was brought into our homes, like that [Gray's death] was on our television," he said. "For that sort of public elimination of a person, I felt like there should have been a public recognition of that life."

Twenty-five-year-old Freddie Gray died on April 19, 2015, less than a week after Baltimore police arrested him for nothing more than carrying a pocket knife. In cell phone video taken by bystanders, officers drag Gray, whose leg appears to be limp and is wailing in pain, onto the back of a police van. Inside the van, officers did not secure Gray with a seat belt and shackled his legs. During what prosecutors called an extremely rough ride in the back of the van, Gray asked for medical attention several times, but officers ignored his pleas. During the ride, Gray suffered a spinal cord injury that led to his death.

None of the officers involved were convicted of Gray's death.

"I want people to look at the Gardner Museum and think about a black man who was eliminated by the state and nobody was held accountable for that. And I think we all need to mourn that. And that's why it's called a memorial for Freddie Gray. It's not a portrait of Freddie Gray, solely," said Locke.

The piece also symbolizes a timeline. Locke used three photographs of Gray that were widely circulated by the media at the time of his death, averaged the pixels for each of the photos and then created a distinct monochrome for each of the panels of his painting.

In the first photograph, Gray wears a red T-shirt, looking at the camera, with his neighborhood in the background.



The photo of Freddie Gray that inspired Locke's top panel in "Three Deliberate Grays For Freddie." (Courtesy Wikipedia)

"I had the image of Mr. Gray on a street corner in his home and he's looking directly at the camera and [I was] thinking of him in the fullness of himself, which is what that photograph is. It's an image that he has some agency in making," Locke said. "That's why for me, [the top panel] has the richest color. It has the most vibrant presence, that's why it's at the top."

In the second photo, Gray is being arrested and in the third, he's in the hospital in a coma shortly before his death. "The other two images, Gray is not participating in the creation of the images. Someone else is and that's why the colors [in the artwork] have such a marked difference in saturation and in luminosity," said Locke.

The new installation, the 12th on the Gardner's facade, is also a statement that the museum aims to have a stake in issues beyond its walls.

"The museum is alive. So it speaks the language of today," said Pieranna Cavalchini, the Gardner's curator of contemporary art.

It's with form — color, scale, textile — that Locke hopes to point our attention to the death of black men in the hands of the state.

"If art is anything, it's a public discourse. I'm not making art because I'm trying to express myself or share my feelings with the world because my feelings are no different than anyone else's. I'm not special because I'm an artist. What I can do is I can make people pay attention to things through composition, through color, through scale, through organization, through conceptual frameworks. I can make people look at something and think about it."

"Three Deliberate Grays For Freddie" will be up on the Gardner Museum until January 2019.

This segment aired on June 28, 2018.