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[what it is]



STEVE LOCKE, ARTIST
Dick jokes, black identity and Boston as an art town
KATE LEDOGAR

Most of the times I've seen Steve Locke, I've been naked. And he has the pictures to prove it.



No, no—nothing burlesque going on here—I was merely an art model and he a student. I remember him as a very sweet, mature, quietly well-dressed fellow with a smile in his voice—not your typical "Hey, hey, look at me!" art student. And he painted way-fine portraits that I can (although vaguely) still call to mind eight years later.

Since then, Locke has been drawing and painting and exhibiting his works at The Copley Society, The Gallery at Green Street, Bernard Toale Gallery, Samson Projects, Mills Project Space and other notorious venues. Landing in Boston in 1980 for an early academic career at BU (in marketing, no less), Locke stayed on to earn both a BA and an MFA from Mass College of Art, and now teaches at Mass Art and Emmanuel College and has a studio in Hyde Park—a true working artist resident. Just when I thought they'd all left town.

His current show at the Mills Gallery involves over 50 self-portraits done in pencil on Mylar, drafted within the circumference of a cock ring. Locke, whose art generally addresses maleness and sexuality through the vehicle of facial expressions and body gestures, says that he's felt an expectation from his audience for him to be dealing with issues of "blackness." "When I had my show at Framingham State college," he says, "a lot of the students were asking why I was painting white people. I find that interesting because, 1) Am I not supposed to do that?; and 2) What is making them [Locke's racially indistinct portraits] white to the viewer? Because they are wearing suits or something?" He adds that he is excited to hear this reaction, since it means that, intentionally or not, his work is raising these questions—and in turn educating him about his audience.

So, self-portraits of a gay black man inside the circumference of a cock ring ... sounds like there's a joke on someone in there. "Very much so," says Locke. "Once



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you get past the dick joke, you have the variation, the multiplicity inherent in a black identity. Which one of those images is me? All of them. So the limitations of the dominant culture can't really hold the human persona." In other words, you can't contain this man inside a cock ring.



Although such issues inspire his work, Locke says they are not the driving force of his creativity: "I just make the work about my interests, my life. I look at people all the time. I draw all the time. I don't really think about an audience."

Locke is a big believer in Boston as art town. "I love being a Boston artist. There are a lot of spaces and a lot of things to see. It is very inspiring to see whole communities of artists organizing shows, alternative spaces, performances and all." But, he adds, "the hard thing is the loss of some really great spaces," specifically the Oni Gallery in Chinatown.



His wish as a Boston artist? "I would love to see a big New England survey show at the MFA," which, he says, hasn't demonstrated much interest in artists living and working around Boston. Other than that, he's pretty satisfied: "I am an artist and I am working and making some things that I like a lot. I was able to buy my studio in Hyde Park, and I'm doing OK."

Sounds like success to me.

Steve Locke's *Circumference* will be on view at the Boston Center for the Arts' Mills Project Space through 10.30.05. 539 Tremont St., Boston. 617.426.8835. www.bcaonline.org

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