The Boston Globe

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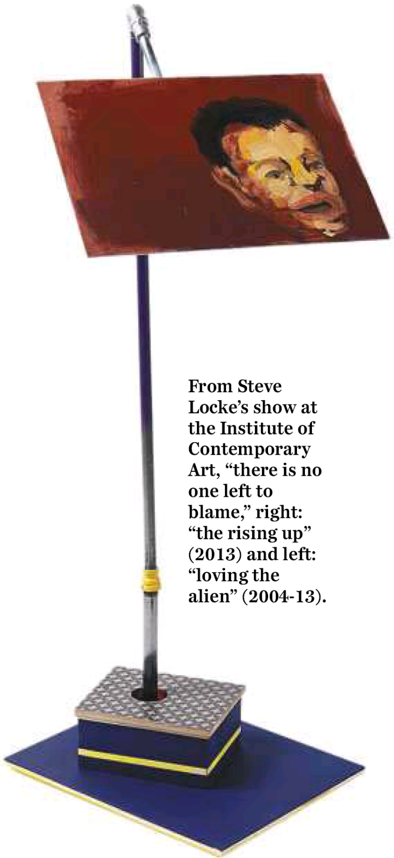
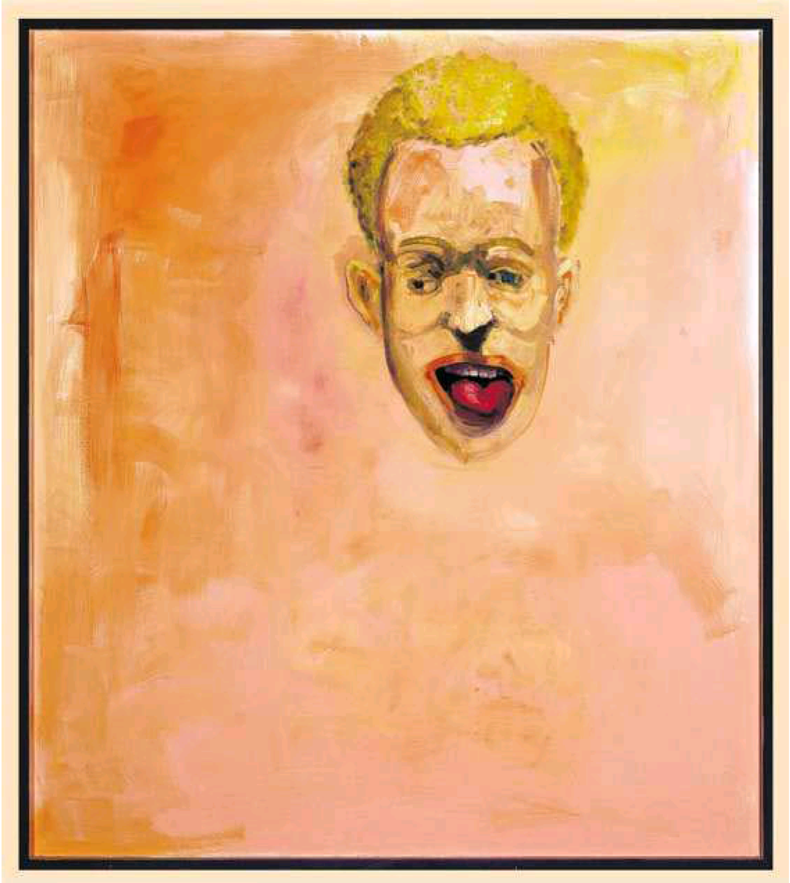
art+performance





From Steve Locke's show at the Institute of Contemporary Art, "there is no one left to blame," right: "the rising up" (2013) and left: "loving the alien" (2004-13).

PHOTOS BY STEWART CLEMENTS

Images speaking of desire and fear

Steve Locke and Mary Reid Kelley shows at ICA reveal seams of vulnerability

By Cate McQuaid
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Steve Locke paints guys sticking out their tongues. Some of them seem to be concentrating intently; others mock, one or two appear comically erotic. Some may be following that classic doctor's directive.

Locke, a Boston artist, has his first solo museum show up now at the Institute of Contemporary Art. On first pass, his works come across as puckish — some made me laugh out loud — but "Steve Locke: there is no one left to blame" only incidentally uses humor to explore topics that cut to the quick of what it means to be a man.

The show sets up a strong counterpoint to "Mary Reid Kelley," another inaugural solo exhibit in the gallery next door. Locke uses the face and color to reveal men's vulnerabilities; Reid Kelley, in her startling videos, masks characters in bold black and white as a way to examine women's roles in history and mythology as perpetrators and victims of progress.

ART REVIEW

STEVE LOCKE: there is no one left to blame

MARY REID KELLEY
At: Institute of
Contemporary Art,
100 Northern Ave., through
Oct. 27. 617-478-3100,
www.icaboston.org

Both use language pointedly. In Locke's show, the text "there is no one left to blame" hangs on the wall as a white neon sign. As long as there's someone to blame, there's someone to objectify, someone upon whom to project our fears and desires. With no one to blame, it all comes back to us. Locke, an African-American gay artist, has no doubt been on the other side of somebody's projection in his lifetime.

His paintings, made with lovingly loose, wet strokes in eye-tingling colors, follow a juicy trajectory of feminist art that lets the hot air out of the possessive power of the artist's gaze. A century and a half after Ingres offered up a sultry reclining female nude for viewers to drool at, artists such as Nancy Spero and Joan Snyder explored the experience of a woman from within. For Locke, the subject is the man's: He defies classic portraiture's tendency to render men in power as blandly monumental.

That's why these fellows are sticking out their tongues. They're goofy or they're loving, they're caught off guard. Maybe they're retching. Hard to say. But they are not in command.

Look at the enthralled bloke

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in "the rising up." His head floats amid creamy fields of peach; his skin is peachy, too, and he has close-cropped kinky yellow hair. His blue eyes gaze downward, his mouth wide. Locke emphasizes the mouth and lolling tongue with cherry red. The man's head hovers near the top of the panel — is he rising up? Or is he salivating over someone else's arousal?

The erotic elements — the tongues! The hot tones! The sumptuous slurp of the paint! — keep the thrum of desire palpitating, even as Locke turns our attention away from the desired and toward the desirer. After all, it's not a one-way street. Nor is the racial dynamic between black and white, which the artist confounds with similar brio.

Lately, Locke has been mounting his paintings on poles, pushing them off the wall and onto the floor. His portraits on poles set up a dynamic relationship with other paintings, and with the viewer, because they occupy space the way people do.

Take the peppery conversation between "all received wisdom" and "a brief history." They stand on poles on platforms painted in breezy colors. In "all received wisdom," a well-kempt fellow in a tie presses his lips together, tongue tamed. He seems to carefully regard the man who looks down upon him from "a brief history." That guy sticks his tongue out, one eye closed. His race, as in many of Locke's paintings, is hard to discern, because the artist is so free with his palette.

Locke has built a shelf on the back of "a brief history," and there perches a vintage figurine from the artist's personal collection of black Americana: a boyish fellow with jet-black skin. He kneels, hands clasped, a grating picture of docility, with a cigarette jutting from his lips. The figurine and the portrait could be two sides of the same coin — controlled and exposed. The man in the tie looking on from "all received wisdom" might be witness or judge. Either way, things don't feel quite safe.

Most of the rest of the show is given over to a two-wall installation of more than 25 paintings. It's unfortunately like a cocktail party at which nearly everyone is sticking out a tongue — awkward and repetitive. Individually and in small groups, these pieces animate each other and tease the viewer. But a hoard of them does a disservice; they chatter and cackle and, ultimately, disengage.

Locke's men are exposed. Mary Reid Kelley, who plays most of the characters in her videos, is always masked. She paints her face in black and white. She blocks out her eyes with big black buttons. She converts herself into a cartoon. The videos are like live-action graphics.

The masks turn every character into an exaggeration, an avatar of a particular idea. Like Locke's paintings, these videos reveal a seam of vulnerability. Reid Kelley demonstrates how, through seething iterations of Western cultures and ideologies, we strive for what we perceive is right, and we're blind to those we leave in the dust behind us.

The videos, performed in punning verse, explore niches of social history, such as when British women joined the workforce during World War I, in "Sadie, the Saddest Sadist."

Using hand-drawn backdrops that recall the art of that era — the jagged planes of Cubism — the artist, as Sadie, tells of working at a munitions factory and bedding a sailor named Jack. "I want to be a Modern Girl, / and I'm at the cutting edge," she says. The words come out of her black mouth, in which she has even painted her teeth black; it's a despairing maw of darkness, and, in close-up, an unnerving echo of Locke's mouthy paintings. "To say I don't enjoy it, / that would be sacrilege. / I'll lay back and think of England, / but it's a mental trap; / I gave you my applause, / and you gave me the clap."

"Sadie," made in 2009, and the short "Camel Toe," from 2008, in which Reid Kelley plays a World War I flying ace, a la Snoopy in "Peanuts," are rudimentary compared with the more recent videos on view.

Reid Kelley's husband and collaborator, Patrick Kelley, digitally converts her drawings into increasingly complex three-dimensional sets. But these recent works are not only technically sterling, they're frothy with historical and literary references, they burble with densely punning verse, and they pop visually.

"The Syphilis of Sisyphus" revolves around a pregnant Parisian prostitute and aesthete in 1852, who argues, like Baudelaire (another syphilitic), for the power of artifice over that of nature, even as she covers her sores with cosmetics that give her the mien of a skull.

Masks predominate in "Priapus Agonistes," a mash-up of Greek myths and church-league volleyball games. The minotaur, a bull-woman in Reid Kelley's telling, is imprisoned in a labyrinth beneath a gym. Tourney losers are sacrificed to her. Benign but wild, she sees them as playmates, but they end up dead. The well-endowed Priapus (not, as in the myth, Theseus) goes into the labyrinth to kill her, but Zeus only knows what shenanigans those two will get into.

Locke focuses on the individual, and Reid Kelley on society and its paradigms of beauty. Both, though, break down stuffy old power structures, and build the rubble into something fresh.

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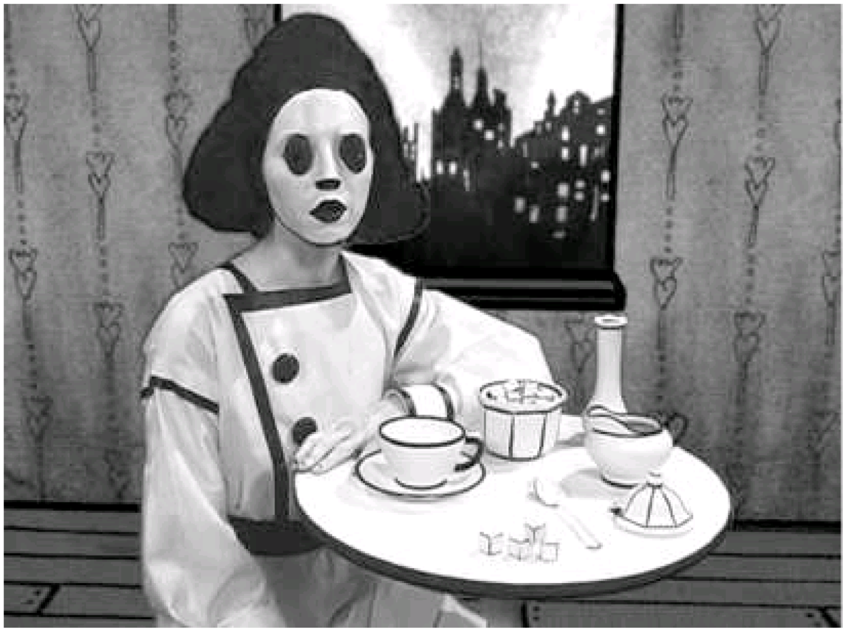
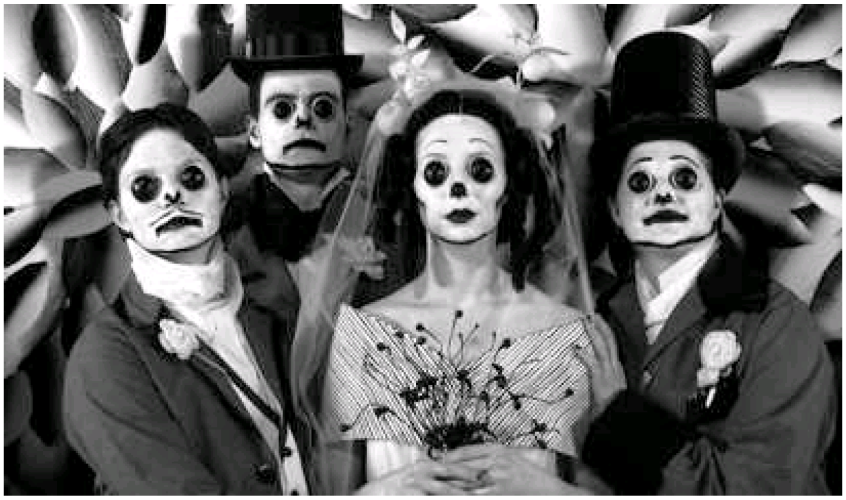


COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, FREDERICKS & FREISER GALLERY, SUSANNE VIELMETTER LOS ANGELES PROJECTS, AND PILAR CORRIAS, LONDON

Mary Reid Kelley wears masks in her videos, painting her face and putting buttons on her eyes. Above: "Sadie, the Saddest Sadist" (2009); below: "The Syphilis of Sisyphus" (2011).



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