

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

The Potential of Ancestral Memory to Reconcile Personal and Racial Histories

In his exhibition at Yours Mine & Ours gallery Steve Locke aestheticizes the entanglement of personal, familial, and racial histories which sits upon the mantel of every Black American home.



Jasmine Weber 2 hours ago



Steve Locke, "DYLANN (profile)" (2017), Graphite on Paper, 22 x 30 inches (all photos by the author)

Steve Locke's racial imaginings uncover the quiet nuances of American history since chattel slavery. The deeply embedded traumas of enslavement, Jim Crow, and contemporary police brutality exist in a blended genealogy, each one successively descended from the other. Each generation is a landmark in American history, a forbearer acting upon its progeny to make it morph into newly imagined articulations of race and power that maintain the lineage of violent domination.

In the exhibition *Family Pictures*, at *Yours Mine & Ours* gallery Locke aestheticizes the entanglement of personal, familial, and racial histories which sits upon the mantel of every Black American home, and inconspicuously seeps into domestic realities. He also places infamous images of racial violence — lynchings, slave ships, and brutal torture — inside kitschy picture frames boasting clichéd phrases like “Memories” and “always & forever.”



Steve Locke, “Untitled (Mother-red)” (2015), Ultrachrome pigment ink on Hahnemuhle 100% cotton photo rag, 50.5 x 62.6 cm

Locke's photographs present these images in this strange context in a matter-of-fact manner. The glossy high-resolution photographs sit on dining tables before gleaming, multicolored walls. They are normalized as pictures you pass every day but no longer notice, but their constant presence looms over the space; the frames define the table, the living room, the household. These memorials become a facet of your existence; almost like they aren't there. Other Black folks come over and realize, "Oh, we've got the same set at home!" A happy coincidence.

Steve Locke's family pictures are memories of extensive inherited community histories, presented through the ironic veneer of pleasant remembrance.



Steve Locke, "Untitled (Always and Forever 2-blue)" (2015),
Ultrachrome pigment ink on Hahnemuhle 100% cotton
photo rag, 50.5 x 62.6 cm

Modern Black trauma is inextricably linked to US history, and Locke makes this fact known. This history was passed down and across generations, parent to child, spouse to spouse, slave master to slave. Ancestral memory makes relatively recent tragic occurrences seem all too distant: like the murder of Emmett Till in 1955, or Ruby Bridges attacked for integrating a grade school in 1960.

Lynchings and 21st-century police killings host the same societal ancestors. Both have

similar social and political consequences by their associated images being widely circulated, as in the appalling smartphone clips of the murders of Philando Castile and Eric Garner.

Locke turns these images into bereavement photos, their cheery frames an ironic reminder of their normalization. The work is smart, and successfully obvious without being overstated. He is reconciling histories formed by African-American communities' memories to understand just what got us to this point as a nation.

Upstairs, in *#Killers*, Locke explores the way these ongoing traditions of violence impact White Americans. He has sketched small, unassuming portraits in graphite on large swathes of white paper. They look miniature in comparison to their canvases, almost like a sketch made as an afterthought by a talented art student.



Installation view of *#killers* at Yours Mine & Ours gallery

Closer examination reveals many of the faces are unsettlingly familiar — George Zimmerman, Dylann Roof, Darren Wilson, and others notorious for killing Black Americans. These drawings, suddenly, are deeply disconcerting. You are staring into the face of mass murderers, extrajudicial killers, and merciless law officers. They smile back — what do killers really *look* like, after all?

While certain figures smile cheerily, others wear recognizable V-neck prison jumpsuits, and some wear suits and ties in court hearings. One is wrapped in an American flag, while another rides atop an enormous eagle (ostentatious nationalism at its finest). A different subject seems to be a boy scout. The most ominous wears a Ku Klux Klan hood.



Steve Locke, "George Zimmerman (courtroom prayer)" (2018), Graphite on Paper, 22 x 30 inches and "Emmett Till Memorial Marker with Bullet Holes" (2018), Graphite on Paper, 22 x 30 inches

Often, these killers make headlines for a short period — their images circulated on Twitter (hence the title’s hashtag) and on the news cycle, but are ultimately forgotten. But Locke reminds us. The gallery is papered with these infamous figures; there are enough to fill each and every wall, and many more have been left out. They have formed their own lineage and tradition of contemporary lynching, indirectly birthed from not-long-ago traditions of Jim Crow and slaver brutality. At least 10 portraits on the wall depict police officers.

A few sketches depart from the portraits, one being an illustration of Emmett Till’s memorial, which sits at the site of his death, barraged by bullet holes. Another one is a sketch of a protest sign that reads “One Tragedy Two Victims,” captured from a rally in support of Peter Liang, a Chinese-American police officer indicted in the slaughter of Akai Gurley. It hangs adjacent from a portrait of Liang in court. His circumstance accompanied national headlines insisting he was scapegoated in the national narrative of police brutality as an Asian-American man — as opposed to countless white officers who have never been indicted for similar actions. Liang received five years of probation and 800 hours of community service.

Throughout the room, these killers drown in whiteness, visually and metaphorically. They are hardly differentiated from their backdrop from a distance — likely commentary on the fact that they are not outstandingly different from what is expected and perpetuated by white supremacy.

White, in most Western understandings, indicates purity. Our cultural associations with the color are communions, weddings, and heaven (all associated with Christianity, a grotesquely ironic association considering that one of the subjects, Dylann Roof, carried out his vicious massacre on Black churchgoers). These drawings seem innocent, peculiarly light, and inconsequential. From a distance, they are unproblematic and unspectacular.



Installation view of *Family Pictures* at Yours Mine & Ours gallery

The exhibition overall is unassuming — it is certainly not the most polished, with frameless drawings and photographs attached to the wall with magnetic clips. The success of Locke's work lies in its underlying philosophies, rather than outright visual merit. His critiques are quiet, pensive renderings of Black trauma and White power. They possess a subtlety not often found — a quiet call to remember, and to heal.

Steve Locke's #Killers and Family Pictures continues at yours mine & ours (54 Eldridge Street, Chinatown, Manhattan) through October 28.
