



Jeremy Okai Davis has completed four of the ten portraits of Oregon Black pioneers commissioned by the Salem Art Association, including newspaper editor Beatrice Morrow Cannady (left) and midwife Sybil Harber.



Built between 1877 and 1878, the Bush House Museum now belongs to the City of Salem and is managed by the Salem Art Association.

In Equal Colors

Jeremy Okai Davis paints new life and perspective into Oregon's Black pioneers

written by Daniel O'Neil

IF THE PEN proves mightier than the sword, art can speak louder than words. The emerging portraits of Black pioneers in Salem's Bush House Museum peer calmly outward, but their gaze asks viewers serious questions, questions that painter Jeremy Okai Davis both poses and answers in his work.

Originally from Charlotte, North Carolina, Davis moved to Portland in 2007. He had already earned a BFA in painting from the University of North Carolina and was looking for a new start as an artist. But first he had to get acquainted with his new home.

"Go back and look at my art—it wasn't always front of my mind to tell the story of my people," Davis said. "To be honest, when I moved here, I wasn't keyed in on the history of Oregon. I wasn't as in tune with the salty history that we had here."

As far back as 1849, Oregon's constitution prohibited new Black residents, making it the only free state to join the Union

with such an exclusion clause. Rarely enforced, Oregon voters still did not repeal the law until 1926. In 1860, the state census recorded only 128 Black people living in Oregon.

Fast-forward to 2015, as Donald Trump gained a grip on politics and unarmed Black men were frequently killed by police. Davis, now familiar with Oregon's shady past, refined his focus. He started applying his skill, education and resources as an artist to validate Black Oregonians. "I wanted to tell more stories with my art and use it for good, as a means of educating others but also as a means of educating myself," he said.





FROM LEFT Jeremy Okai Davis' *The Bogles* (America Waldo Bogle and Family), part of the *Black Pioneers* series; *Thelma Study* (Thelma Johnson Street); and *Wink* (Jimmy Winkfield).

Davis began paintings that uncovered or elaborated on Black people whose stories were never fully or truthfully told. In 2021, he formed part of a five-person exhibition titled *Black Matter*, which spoke to the underrepresentation of Black artists in Oregon. Tammy Jo Wilson curated *Black Matter*, and she is also director of museum exhibits and programming at the Bush House Museum in Salem, where the exhibition culminated.

As it reconciles the racist legacy of its founder, the Bush House Museum conceived a new project that relied on Davis' emotive portraiture. In collaboration with the Elizabeth Leach Gallery in Portland, which represents Davis, the *Black Pioneers* project found direction. Composed of ten paintings, the exhibition unveils only a few at a time, every six months, to keep the conversation going.

So far, Davis has produced four portraits of early Black Oregonians in a style that bridges eras. "Jeremy's use of vibrant colors, combined with a modern graphic designer's sensibility, added a contemporary feel to portraits of historic figures," said Wilson, curator of *Black Pioneers*.

Davis' approach provides a renewed perspective and invites a broad audience. His lively portraits of Black pioneers in Oregon invite inquisitiveness and introspection from the art world, but also from everyday viewers. "It brings a different angle of entryway into the knowledge of the existence of these important Black Oregonians," Davis said. "Stories have been told, but maybe they haven't gotten to all the eyes and ears that they need to. I want to create a curiosity with the paintings that makes people want to dig deeper."

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— Jeremy Okai Davis

Images of Oregon's earliest Black residents can be difficult to find, but the Oregon Black Pioneers nonprofit has assisted Davis with its collection. Intisar Abioto, curator of the upcoming Portland Art Museum exhibition *Black Oregonians*, which will include Davis' portrait of Beatrice Morrow Kennedy, considers each newfound image a treasure.

"The story grows with each person that shares about these people and these communities," Abioto said. "Jeremy is recontextualizing that story and actually bringing life and color back into the images of these people and their lives. His work is intuitive, important and investigative in a way that is accessible to us here today."

In the new America Waldo Bogle Gallery at the Bush House Museum, a family portrait of the gallery's namesake pioneer holds distinction. Davis thought it important to have her whole family in the

house, as a slap in the face to its previous, racist owner. But the painting, like the others in the *Black Pioneers* series and in Davis' other works, also stands out for its style.

Rather than blend paint, Davis practices a pointillism based on the pixelation of low-resolution digital images. Little dabs of pixelated pink or blue accompany the range of usual skin tones, likewise presented as single-color dabs. The technique gave Davis a deeper understanding of his subject matter.

"When I'm working on these paintings, I'm squeezing the paint onto the palette, and for black skin, white skin, whatever race I'm painting, I'm using the same materials," he said. "There may be a bit more of a burnt or a peach tone, but all these same colors go into everybody." ■