

Bush House Museum's historical reboot

The Salem Art Association opens the Waldo Bogle Gallery in the Bush House and unveils the two latest paintings in Jeremy Okai Davis's portrait series. The house's original owner and namesake would not be pleased.

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CULTURE, VISUAL ART

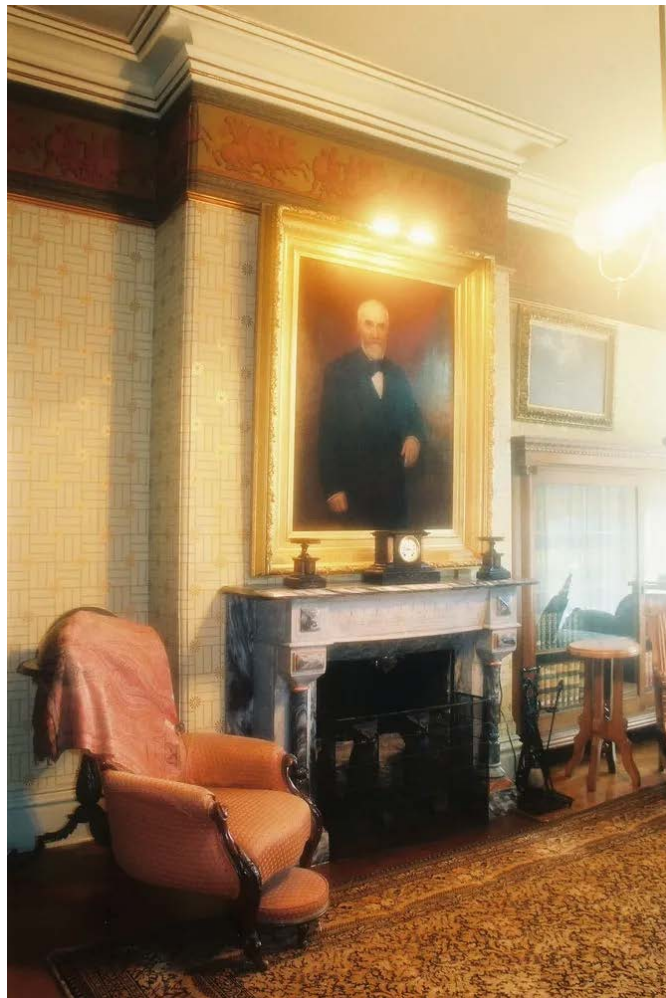


Visitors at the Bush House Museum with Jeremy Okai Davis's portraits *The Advocate* (Beatrice Morrow Cannady) and *The Midwife* (Sybil Harber)

On Juneteenth, the Salem Art Association (SAA) officially christened the Waldo Bogle Gallery in the Bush House in Salem. The event included the official unveiling of two new portraits by Jeremy Okai Davis: one of the gallery's namesake, America Waldo Bogle along with her family, and a second of Sybil Harber. The two new paintings are part of SAA's commission for ten large-scale portraits by Davis of Black residents of Oregon.

Davis completed portraits of Ben Johnson and Beatrice Morrow Cannady in February of 2023. The gallery renaming and portrait commission are part of an ambitious project to recast and reconsider Bush House, its contemporary resonance, and the nature of historical record.

Davis's paintings mark a shift for Bush House. They are not the only portraits on display: A painting of the house's original owner and namesake, Asahel Bush, hangs commandingly over the fireplace in the downstairs library. The portrait itself is of high quality; the artist, William Cogswell, painted **Abraham Lincoln in 1869**. Bush commissioned the portrait ten years later, and though he was no fan of Lincoln, he was certainly aware of the painter's august reputation and client roster. Cogswell's portrait depicts Bush three-quarters length, with his arm propped up against a marble column. His confident gaze, immaculately trimmed beard, and tailored black suit present him as a formidable presence, someone who is accustomed to a level of respect and deference.



Bush House Museum library with William Cogswell portrait of Asahel Bush from 1880. Photo by Kris Lockard, courtesy of the Bush House Museum

The portrait was made shortly after Bush moved into the house in 1878. **Bush arrived in Oregon in 1850** and spent 13 years as the editor of the Statesman Journal in Salem. As the mouthpiece of the paper, he weighed in on all of the important debates of the day: statehood, slavery, suffrage, and the fate of Indigenous populations among them. Bush sold the paper in 1863 and founded the Ladd & Bush Bank with William Ladd. He later bought Ladd out and continued shaping the state as a member of university boards and a figure in state politics. In other words, Bush cut the revered figure of the Cogswell portrait.

Salem Art Association director, Matthew Boulay, identifies Bush as someone who was interested in portraiture as a mechanism for establishing his legacy. His confidence about his legacy as a “mover and shaker” in the state was not misplaced. His confidence in the moral rectitude of that same legacy certainly was.

In her 2009 article “**Oregon Voices: Oregon Democracy: Asahel Bush, Slavery, and the Statehood Debate,**” Barbara Mahoney collects together many of Bush’s views. The passage is worth quoting in full:

“When a pioneering figure of the woman suffrage movement, Dr. Ada Weed, spoke in Salem in 1858, Bush responded by specifically denouncing women who pursued careers ‘which properly belong to the ruder sex.’ The *Oregon Statesman* opposed any recognition of Native American rights. In 1858, treaties negotiated by Joel Palmer that reserved land for Indians in central Oregon were before Congress for ratification. Bush objected that such treaties ‘value the degraded and bestial savages, at least in their own estimation, to a political equality with the whites.’ He warned new American immigrants against the ‘idle, slovenly, and unthrifty habits, acquired in Europe.’”

Bush opposed slavery in Oregon, not because of a belief in equality or the immorality of the institution, but because of pragmatism about balance between free or slave states in the Union. He criticized abolitionists for what he saw as meddling and went so far as to oppose the emancipation of slaves in 1862, and continued to question the wisdom of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation even after it was signed the next year. The Salem Clique, of which Bush was an integral part, fought against the admission of free African Americans to Oregon. Bush was adamant in arguing that the Donation Land Law of 1850, by which settlers to the state received 640 acres of land without having to pay for them, only applied to white settlers.

In an editorial for the *Oregon Statesman* in 1851, Bush quipped that allowing Black residents to vote, sit on courts, or participate in congress was no “more rational” than

allowing bulls, goats, and pigs to do so. In a particularly vitriolic private letter to his colleague Judge Matthew P. Deady from 1863, Bush railed against a wedding party at which white and Black Oregonians had dined and celebrated together. Bush referred to the Black guests as the n-word, clarifying further, “three bucks and three wenches.” The wedding day was January 1, 1863 – the same day that Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. The bride was America Waldo Bogle, the namesake of the newly renamed gallery in the Bush House.

Mahoney’s article includes mention of an earlier letter from Matthew P. Deady in which he presciently cautions Bush to: “Leave out your vulgarity when you address decent folk. Think how your memory will suffer, when a future Biographer will give your memoirs to the world, with your blackguard letters to myself interspersed through the dog-eared volume.” Bush did not heed the warning but his public remarks and actions, while perhaps more erudite and less slur-ridden, are as narrow-minded as his private letters.

Bush’s hateful views, however, have been glossed over or under emphasized. His personal history has become entangled with that of his home, now known as the Bush House. Bush’s family donated the 1878 home to the city of Salem in 1953 and it has been administered by the Salem Art Association ever since.

As with many historic houses across the country, Bush House has been lovingly preserved as a period piece, a fly in amber. For decades, it has been used to teach schoolchildren about Oregon state history. Traipsing tourists gawk at the wallpaper and then marvel at the 19th-century kitchen and the player piano. There’s fake food strewn on the countertops. Bush gets to be the benevolent patriarch, an influential newspaper man and later successful financier celebrated for his contributions to Salem and Oregon.



Exterior of the Bush House Museum, photo courtesy of Virginia Green and the Bush House Museum

That purpose, though, gives Bush a pass he doesn't deserve. It is part of a larger pattern in the United States in which the people with power and money have dominated the historical narrative. Asahel Bush had both, and the fact that his handsome home ended up as a municipal property in the center of a lovely park doesn't mean that his is the only story worth telling or that the story should only be told from his perspective.

Awareness of the incompleteness of the historical narrative has been more prominent in recent years. I've written about the issue several times for ArtsWatch. The exciting thing about the larger efforts of SAA, specifically manifested in the new gallery name and this set of commissioned artworks from Jeremy Okai Davis, is that it is an elegant and concrete solution. It is a way to rectify the overexposure of people like Bush by introducing alternatives while at the same time acknowledging that records of the past are always selective.

SAA director Matthew Boulay explained that **Willie Richardson** and the **Oregon Black Pioneers** first approached the organization about the partial truth the Bush House was relaying about Asahel Bush in 2019, before he became director of the organization. When Boulay stepped in as director, he started in on rectifying the larger issue by hiring a diverse advisory board. **Tammy Jo Wilson** joined SAA as the Director of Bush House Museum Exhibits and Programming in 2022. As part of the redesign, last summer's

Salem Art Fair included fifty lawn signs by artist [Steph Littlebird](#) proclaiming, “This IS Kalapuyan Land.”

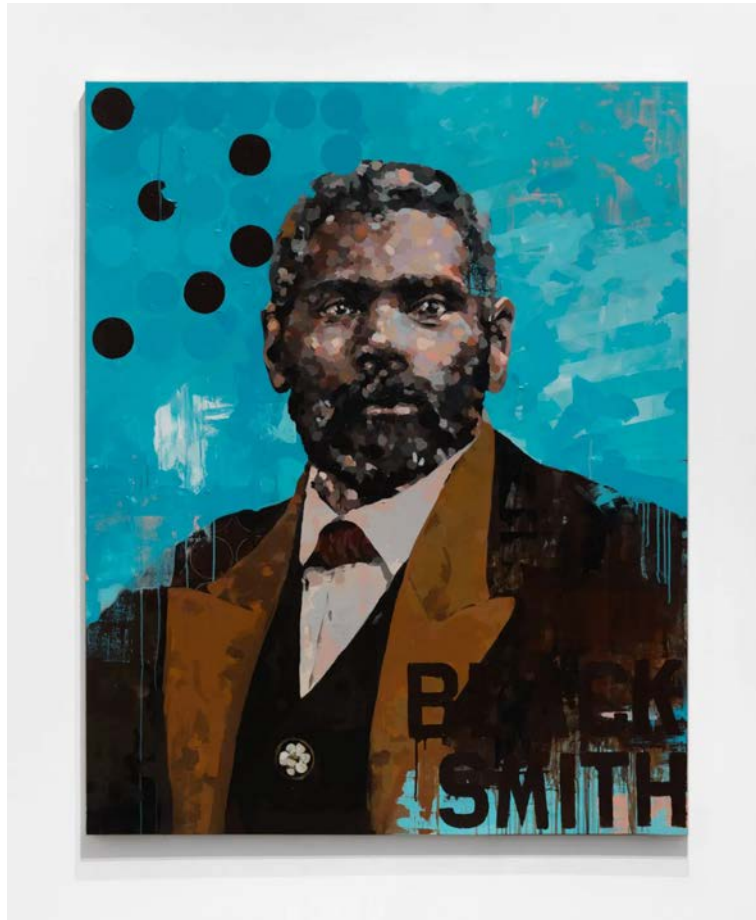


Lisa Harnisch, SAA Board President with Steph Littlebird’s This IS Kalapuyan Land signs in 2022, Photo by Laura Tesler Photography

Despite Bush’s efforts and lobbying to the contrary, there was a community of Black pioneers and a Black activist community during Bush’s lifetime. Davis’s project uses the familiar notion of creating a legacy through portraiture. The portraits that Davis has made for the project thus far have all been adaptations of existing photographs of the subjects, an approach that Davis has used successfully in other work. His [show at Elizabeth Leach Gallery](#) in the fall of 2022 consisted of paintings departing from photographs of athletes to explore the concept of sportsmanship.

In the case of the photographs of Black Oregon pioneers, however, having a formal photograph taken was an undertaking, a deliberate choice to capture oneself with a certain gravitas. That gravitas is particularly evident in the photograph of [Ben Johnson](#).

Johnson was a blacksmith in Jackson County in 1868 and 1869. His shop was at the base of a mountain and the mountain was given a moniker reflecting his presence, albeit one that is considered wholly inappropriate today, Negro Ben Mountain. The mountain was **officially renamed Ben Johnson Mountain** in November of 2020.



Jeremy Okai Davis, The Blacksmith (Ben Johnson, 1834-1901), 2023, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 48 inches

Davis's painting departs from a photograph of Johnson taken about 1870, after the blacksmith had moved to Albany, Oregon. The painted portrait is an interpretation rather than a direct translation from one medium to another. The faces of Davis's sitters, in this portrait series and others, are rendered in a pointillist fashion with daubs of overlapping colors. Davis includes many painterly flourishes that add intrigue and create a lush surface: drips, linear chevrons, patterned circles. In the portrait of Johnson, crisply outlined circles and black stenciled letters for "blacksmith" in opposing corners contrast with looser passages of paint.

In an **article for the Salem Reporter**, Davis explained: "Initially I want people to appreciate the art. I spend a lot of time trying to make good paintings...In realizing these

are really good paintings, they move closer and start to investigate. I want people's curiosity to be sparked."

Davis thinks of the first two paintings in the series, of Ben Johnson and **Beatrice Morrow Cannady**, as "end caps" to the project: Johnson as the beginning and Cannady as the end.

Davis was drawn to Cannady as a subject for the series after learning of her through friend and fellow artist **Intisar Abioto and her project to buy Cannady's home**. Cannady was born in 1889 but the bulk of her activities and activism in Oregon place her firmly in the 20th century; she died in 1976. She is an especially apt counterpoint to Bush because Cannady was also an editor of a newspaper, the Advocate, though she used her position for the good of Black Oregonians rather than ill. She was the first Black woman to graduate from Northwestern College of Law in Portland in 1922 and a founding member of the Portland chapter of the NAACP. Davis's portrait of Cannady projects her resolve. A magnolia pendant hangs on a black ribbon around her neck; stenciled letters spelling "ADVOCATE" banner across the lower third of the painting, subtly set off against her red dress.



Jeremy Okai Davis, detail of The Advocate (Beatrice Morrow Cannady), 2023

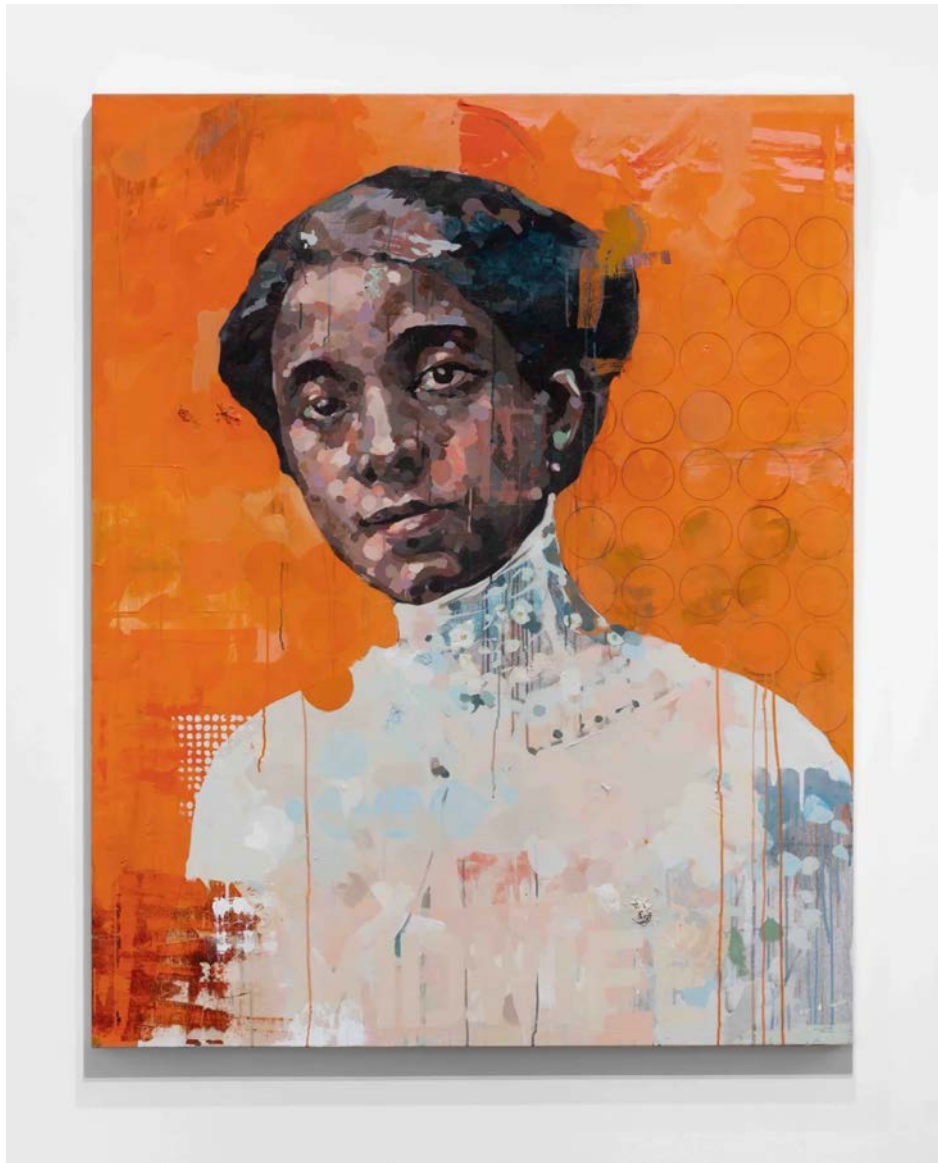
Johnson and Cannady are the end caps, perhaps even the symbolic patriarch and matriarch of the project grouping, the next 8 portraits will feature subjects from within the rough date range of 1860 to 1970, with more weight on late-19th and early-20th century figures. The subjects of the two newly installed paintings, Sybil Harber and America Waldo Bogle, are both from the 19th century. Future portraits in the series will follow as SAA raises money to fund the project.

The historical element of the project, choosing subjects and finding out about their lives, is one that Davis feels particularly connected with. His father was a U.S. History teacher and he sees this project as “picking up the torch.” His father passed away in 2020, before Davis was working on the project in earnest, “I wish I could have talked to him about this project and what he knew about Oregon history.”



Jeremy Okai Davis with his work The Advocate (Beatrice Morrow Cannady) at the Bush House Museum in February 2023

Sybil Harber came to Oregon from California in 1888. She was a midwife who set up a nursery and seems to have cared for adults as well. Davis's portrait is based on a photograph taken shortly after Harber arrived in Oregon. Davis's interpretation captures the sitter's pensive gaze and high-necked blouse, a rich tangerine hued background seems to push the sitter forward into the viewer's space creating a tangible sense of presence. As with all of Davis's work, the handling of the paint is especially adroit and emphasized through hints of pattern throughout – the magnolias at the neck of Sybil's blouse, for example, or the patterns of differently-sized circles.



Jeremy Okai Davis, The Midwife (Sybil Harber), 2023, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 48 inches

Davis's background in graphic design accounts for the compositional balance of these elements, but they aren't without meaning. The larger circles are a nod to circles found on Kodak's "Shirley Cards" from the mid-20th century. These were used in the development process to ensure color balance. One of the system's shortcomings, however, was that all of the subjects of the Shirley Cards were white, so the balance was pegged accordingly, ignoring color balance for any other skin tone. The reference is especially appropriate given that Davis's portraits depart from photographs and, with tache brushstrokes of faces, emphasize the myriad of hues that comprise skin.

Other artistic choices are equally significant. The stencil for a tighter pattern of smaller circles is a makeshift stencil that seems likely to be a discarded dishrack. Davis shared that he found the object while doing a residency with GLEAN Portland. The newest work features crumples of paint applied to the surface of the canvas. These irregular rosettes and phalanges of pigment are made from scrapings of acrylic paint from Davis's palette, a sort of aftermath impasto made from what would otherwise be discarded.

This notion of incorporating what has been discarded is poignant in relation to the larger goal of this project, weaving in alternate strands to give a fuller, richer account of the past. Sybil Harber, as is the case with most of the project's other subjects, did not donate a house to the city, write newspaper editorials, or found a bank. Her contributions to Oregon would have been lost were it not for the efforts of historians dedicated to recovering forgotten stories. Her story is notable in its ordinary familiarity.

America Waldo Bogle's story offers a compelling twist on who and what gets remembered or forgotten. She married Richard Arthur Bogle on January 1, 1863 – the same day that Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. America was born in Missouri and was born enslaved. She came to Oregon on one of the early wagon trains and then married Richard Bogle, who was a barber in Salem. There is an extant marriage record; the Reverend Obah Dickinson presided. The couple likely never met Asahel Bush, but he was incensed by their wedding because the reception was interracial. In his letter to Deady he sneered that "It was negro equality sentiment mixed up with a little snob-aristocracy."

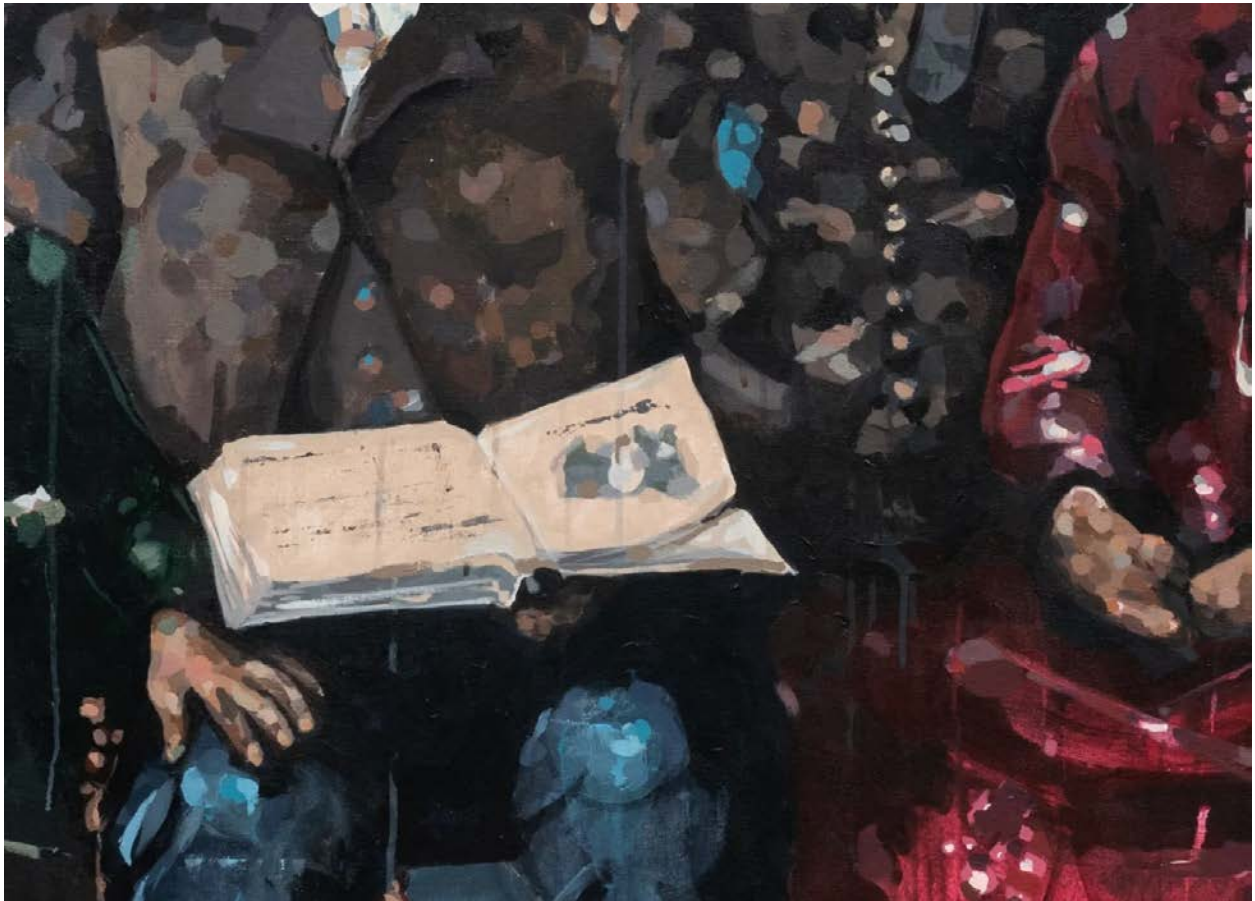


Jeremy Okai Davis, The Bogles (America Waldo Bogle and Family), 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 72 inches

Davis's painting departs from a family portrait photography, a pointed choice for the Bush House given that Bush's house was for his own family. Richard and the three children surrounding him meet the viewer's gaze but America and the two children at her side look off to the right. America clasps the hand of a daughter while a young son leans against Richard and puts his hand on his father's leg. Their faces project strength and resolve even as they're dematerialized by Davis's signature tache brushstrokes. The face of the smallest child in green is less rendered than those of his parents or siblings, as though his personhood is still in the process of coalescing.

I'm struck by the compositional prominence of the book on Richard's lap. The book's light hues make it stand out from the family's dark clothes. Lines on one page suggest text while gray-toned blobs on the other suggest an image. Perhaps because so much has been made of "who is in the history books" or perhaps because Asahel Bush's portrait hangs downstairs in his carefully preserved library, but the book seems almost a challenge here. Its illegibility is a function of Davis's style, but equally a reminder that

the historical record is always partial and mutable depending on who is reading it and why.



Jeremy Okai Davis, detail of The Bogles (America Waldo Bogle and family), 2023

Naming a gallery in Bush House after America Waldo Bogle and commissioning portraits of Oregon's Black pioneers doesn't erase Asahel Bush or his role in Oregon state history. Bush's portrait still glowers at visitors from his perch above the library fireplace. The player piano is still there; the wallpaper is intact. The people with money and power are still the ones with the means to donate houses and park land to the city. Oregon's past is still undeniably racist.

The changes do, however, highlight history's subjectiveness. History is never an objective record of the past, it is always a story and as such, subject to the whims and interests of the teller and their intended audience. The components and details are pulled out from a multitude of potential alternatives to create a coherent narrative. The old story of Asahel Bush was the result of a series of choices too. It's just that those choices were made to present Bush as a benevolent elder statesman and SAA has now

changed its approach to include Bush but to take issue with his supposed benevolence and to let his story be one among the many worth telling and repeating.

Davis's portraits broadcast their facture with faces fractured into brushstrokes, strata of paint, layers of colors, stenciled letters, and applied patterns. The portraits are painted from photographs of the sitters but they don't claim objectivity; rather they highlight that they're made, and therefore, subjective things. They're the result of a series of choices, just like the historical record. SAA could have chosen to put up the photographs of Oregon's Black pioneers in Bush House. The choice to instead commission Davis to make these portraits shows a higher level of intention and acknowledgement of history's precarity.

Asahel Bush wouldn't have invited America Waldo Bogle or Ben Johnson or Sybil Harber, or Beatrice Morrow Cannady, or presumably any of the future portrait subjects into his home. He didn't regard their lives as worthy of consideration or their stories as part of or equivalent to his own. Thankfully, this is no longer Bush's choice to make.