

Gallery Network

This Black History Month, Get to Know 7 African American Artists Who Are Building a New Legacy

These contemporary artists are inventing new visual idioms to capture the full spectrum of their lives and communities.

Artnet Gallery Network, February 16, 2022



Jeremy Okai Davis, *Sepia (Dorothy Dandridge)* (2022).

February welcomes Black History Month, a time to reflect on and celebrate the myriad contributions African Americans have made to society. While historical or famous figures often get the spotlight, it is also an ideal moment to zoom in on the Black artists who are shaking up the world today. Since we here at the Artnet Gallery Network make it our mission to discover emerging talents, in honor of Black History Month, we've narrowed the field to seven contemporary African American creators we think everyone should know.

Jeremy Okai Davis



Jeremy Okai Davis, *Thelma Study (Thelma Street Johnson)* (2020). Courtesy of Elizabeth Leach Gallery.

Artist: Jeremy Okai Davis

Hometown: Charlotte, N.C.

Current City: Portland, Ore.

Medium: Davis's figurative paintings are rooted in his interest in the relationship between photography and portraiture.

Gallery: Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland

Why We Like It: Jeremy Okai Davis's canvases are inspired by representations of Black people in vintage media. His paintings have often responded to the standard portrait images Kodak produced into the 1970s. Known as Shirley cards, these images were used to calibrate color film processing and were based on white skin as the norm. In paintings, the artist situates his subjects in the Shirley format but allows for a depth and complexity of color that would not have been possible on film. The artist has also portrayed overlooked Black historical figures, such as the civil-rights activist Pauli Murray and Nellie Hill, an early screen star.

Cascadia Whole Health Honors Community Justice Leader, Fine Artist with Culture of Caring Awards



Fine artist Jeremy Okai Davis's portrait of Rev. Dr. John Garlington, social justice activist in Oregon during the late 1970s and early 1980s. (Photo/Cascadia Whole Health)

Saundra Sorenson

Published: 14 October 2021

In its fifth year of celebrating contributions to a more equitable society, Cascadia Whole Health Care is recognizing a leader in community justice and a fine artist with the 2021 Culture of Caring awards.

Erika Preuit, director of the Multnomah County Department of Community Justice, is this year's Health & Civic Engagement Award recipient, while painter and graphic artist Jeremy Okai Davis will be accepting the Art & Social Justice Award.



Jeremy Okai Davis

This year's honorees represent pioneering work in both justice reform and restoring Black stories to a prominent place in the country's history.

"The bodies of work that I do tend to come from something that I'm blind to myself, and want to know more about," Davis told *The Skanner*.

Now in its fifth year, the Culture of Caring Award has also been given to the late Rev. Dr. T. Allen Bethel, jazz pianist Darrell Grant, and psychologists Joseph Matarazzo and Ruth Matarazzo, among others.

Fine Art

Jeremy Okai Davis melds his interest in photography and portrait with a background in graphic design to produce works that are often heavily inspired by vintage media. The more technical aspects of his career come out in the "pixelated" technique he uses to capture his subjects.

Initially frustrated by the "lo-res" quality of his own enhanced photos that he used as reference in painting, he came to embrace the aesthetic.

"At first, it was a distraction. Like, how am I going to blend skin tones?" Davis told *The Skanner*. "Instead of just kind of guessing, I just painted it all.

"I use all the same colors for everybody, it's almost like a unifier.

"Like we're all cut from the same material, is how I describe it."

In the last couple years, he's drawn inspiration from "Shirley cards," standard portrait images Kodak produced as reference to calibrate colors and shadow for the film development process. Until the 1970s, the subject was always a White woman who was often labeled "normal," with other skin colors -- if they were included at all -- referred to as "other." Davis explored the idea of working with visual media that had white skin and whiteness already programmed in as a default. The effect is his often vintage-style portraits of Black subjects in their own Shirley card-evoking layouts, much more vibrant and colorful than Kodak's restrictive calibration would have allowed.

"I did these paintings that were about that, so a lot of the subject matter that circles around the subject and the piece kind of references those Shirley cards, or magazine publications from the



Davis's portrait of Black Panther member Sandra Ford

fifties, more Black-centered publications like *Jet* and *Ebony*,” Davis said. “I try to include a little bit more content in the bodies of work that are about an idea versus a particular subject.”

For a more recent project, however, Davis stuck to the portrait approach.

In 2015 and 2016, Davis wrestled with the feverish press coverage of police killings of unarmed Black Americans. While he felt the attention was necessary, he also wanted to see more Black media presence that wasn't overwhelmingly sad.

“I wanted to also spotlight achievements from Black people,” Davis said. “So I started doing these paintings around then that kind of highlighted these different artists, poets, people that I knew and people that I just found out about through research that just really enhanced the work for me, and enhanced the experience for people viewing the work.”

He was drawn to the lesser-known histories in particular, like civil rights and women's rights activist Pauli Murray and singer and early screen star Nellie Hill.

“The idea of making work that calls people to do their own research, find out something new and dig in, just became really interesting to me,” Davis said. “It just continues the process of seeing the piece in the museum, then you want to go home and find out more, to expand upon -- it being an art piece, it being a learning experience at the same time.”

ADELSHEIM

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS 1971 - 2021



For decades, Ginny Adelsheim's iconic hand-drawn illustrations graced our bottles. Today, we continue that artistic heritage with our Artist Series Rosé labels. Each year, our Willamette Valley Rosé features artwork by a talented, local artist who shares our belief that to create something great, you must push boundaries and take risks. The 2020 bottling marks our second vintage of the Artist Series Rosé, featuring labels created by Portland artist, Jeremy Okai Davis!



JEREMY OKAI DAVIS

Artist Series



Jeremy created such an incredible selection of designs that we couldn't choose just one ... so we didn't! Our 2020 Artist Series Rosé features a trio of collectible labels in Jeremy's unique style, showcasing three of our estate vineyards: Quarter Mile Lane, Ribbon Springs, and Bryan Creek.



2020 Artist Series Rosé - \$28
Heritage Club: \$23.80 | Quarter Mile & Legacy Club: \$22.40

STRAWBERRY | MINERALITY | JUICY

My first impression is of strawberries and cream, framed with floral notes, citrus zest, and an intriguing minerality. The palate is supple and juicy and provides a balanced framework. I want to drink this every day of the year—with the excitement of a new spring, in the middle of the summer heat, and for a cozy Thanksgiving dinner.

-Gina Hennen, Winemaker



2020 Artist Series Rosé 3-Pack - \$95
Heritage Club: \$80.75 | Quarter Mile & Legacy Club: \$76

Why choose one when you can have all three? Collect all three beautiful labels to have the complete 2020 Artist Series lineup!

Meet the Artist

JEREMY OKAI DAVIS

Jeremy Okai Davis received a BFA in painting from the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, NC. Davis relocated to Portland, OR in 2007 where he has continued his studio practice in addition to working as a graphic designer and illustrator. Davis' work resides in the Lonnie B. Harris Black Cultural Center at Oregon State University and the University of Oregon's permanent collection. Elizabeth Leach Gallery began representing Jeremy Okai Davis in 2019.



See more of his work at elizabethleach.com/jeremy-okai-davis-featured-work and follow [@jeremyokaiart](https://www.instagram.com/jeremyokaiart) on Instagram. Visit our Tasting Room to see the original canvas pieces that appear on our labels, plus more original pieces by Jeremy!

Artist Profile:

JEREMY OKAI DAVIS

BY STEPHANIE GEHRING

Jeremy Okai Davis is a Portland painter, partner to Brittany and dad of two boys, Runey (2) and Rhye (almost brand-new). He grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina, in a tight-knit family and describes his parents and siblings as his biggest cheerleaders, but moved here in 2007 for the artistic diversity. You may have seen him on OPB's *Oregon Art Beat*, which highlighted his gallery shows *The Presence of Color* and *Black Wood*.

When you paint white skin, it's not white at all — and Black skin isn't black. They're both all these patches of color. Is that mostly about realism and depicting how skin actually looks, or is it a statement about how absurd it is to call anyone "white" or "black"?

When I developed this style and technique, I was thinking of digitized images and how pixels break down and create a range of colors up close. I was essentially painting pixels. I've always been a big fan of Chuck Close and his approach to portraiture. With other people's art, I love getting really close to it and seeing what makes the image; the way I paint invites that investigation, but also stepping back and taking in what those small elements turn into. Those painted pixels and elements have now taken on new importance in showing how unified we all are in what makes us who we are.

When did you find out about Portland's racial history?

It was gradual — around 2013 I met Intisar Abioto, who was doing a project called *Black Portlanders*. And in 2009 someone told me about the Vanport flood. I'm not making work necessarily about Portland. But the cultural climate, the previous president, the killings of unarmed Black people — when Trump was elected, I started making art about being a Black man.



When I look at your work on race, I feel invited in despite my privilege and ignorance as a white person. Is that on purpose?

My own ignorance is on full display a lot of the time when it comes to the plight of African American people, so me looking down at anyone else would be counterproductive. I do have a Black father and my mom is from Liberia. But I didn't learn a lot in school about African American history, and I didn't see myself in history books, and we didn't watch videos about people that look like me — it just seemed like everybody who did amazing things didn't look like you. It would be crazy for me to point fingers when I have so much to learn about my culture. My work is not a lecture; we're trying to have a conversation and figure it out together.

How has becoming a dad changed how you work?

Once Runey got old enough and I was able to get back into the studio and work, the act of painting didn't change a ton; the content more so — it coincided with everything going on in the world and I think I was a little more affected by having a young son to raise. I want to make sure the work he's seeing represents him. In my work and in things I show him. The second one — Rhye — we're pretty fresh in. I haven't figured out how that's going to change my studio practice other than that it's getting harder to get into the studio for a little while.

Is there anything you want to say to parents in Portland?

I think one of the greatest gifts a parent can give to their kid is to show them different cultures, and I think art is one of the best vehicles for showing off culture. Take your kids to art galleries. I'm a new parent, so for me to be preachy about it would be crazy. But I wish I had been exposed to that when I was younger. African Americans are in the minority in Portland, but there are a lot of Black and Brown artists making incredible stuff, and it's not hard to find.

MAKING ART AT HOME

Whether your kids are full-on da Vincis or just fingerpainting dabblers, you'll find just the right supplies at these local arts and crafts stores.

Artist & Craftsman Supply (locations in North Portland and Southeast):
artistcraftsman.com

Blick Art Materials: dickblick.com

Collage:
collagepdx.com

I've Been Framed:
ivebeenframedpdx.com

Jeremy Okai Davis: Art That Speaks To Racism And Healing

[opb.org/artsandlife/article/jeremy-okai-davis-portland-artist-racism-healing](https://www.opb.org/artsandlife/article/jeremy-okai-davis-portland-artist-racism-healing)

Eric Slade

In 2016 painter Jeremy Okai Davis changed directions. The election of Donald Trump and news reports on multiple deaths of African American men at the hands of police had an impact.

Davis needed his painting to help him process the wave of emotions he was experiencing. But he also wanted his paintings to be “a response to help others. So I did a body of work that kind of highlighted Black faces.”



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/C3ylWtq-9z8>

In addition to highlighting what was happening in the world, he also wanted his paintings to “show a positivity for people of color,” Davis said. “Young people of color is what I thought about a lot. If they were to see people that look like them in galleries, a certain amount of positivity would spawn from that.”

Four years later, in the wake of George Floyd’s death at the hands of Minneapolis police, Davis’ work has a new, and not so new, resonance. He posted some of that earlier work on Instagram, “a day after, I think it was Wednesday,” Davis said. “And it felt good that I could put those works back out and people would respond to them. But it’s also unfortunate that they’re still necessary. They still touch on the same things that we were dealing with in 2015, 2016.”



Jeremy Okai Davis with his work-in-progress portrait of civil rights activist Pauli Murray at his Portland, Ore., studio on June 8, 2020.

Eric Slade/OPB

Davis is encouraged by the protests he's witnessed in the weeks since George Floyd's death.

"Some of the images that I've seen have just made me feel really good. Being able to see people on TV all over the country standing for the same thing is really important," Davis said.

But he's cautious, too, having seen protest movements come and go in the past.

"After things kind of fizzle and die down a little bit, I want that same protest energy to come home with a person in to their grandfather's house or talk to their children about what they saw," he said. "It just needs to stay consistent."

New work by Jeremy Okai Davis will be featured in an August group show at Stephanie Chefas Projects and in a solo show at Elizabeth Leach Gallery in October.



Photo by: Brittany Barkdull

Oké!

Jeremá



Think back to growing up in North Carolina and your first jobs. What were they, and how do you think they shaped your character and your career?

My first job was at theme park called Carowind's. I don't think working there directly influenced me as an artist. I do remember going as a kid and loving to watch the caricature artists work. I remember trying to do a little art hustle with a friend drawing caricatures of NBA players and trying to sell them to friends. I worked at McDonald's, Old Navy and in a Converse warehouse in High School. At Converse I worked with a bunch of people way older than me and couple other High School students. To this day that is probably the hardest job physically I've done. We unloaded cargo from the trucks in the middle of North Carolina Summer. It was brutal. I'd probably say having that job taught me hard work and also what I didn't want to do when I got older so it really made me focus on doing something I loved and making it work for me. It's a well worn quote but, "Find a job you enjoy doing, and you will never have to work a day in your life."

58





Something most of the artists in this first issue of Plastikcomb Magazine share is that they are also graphic designers, including you. How do you think your two disciplines, fine art and graphic design, interact? How do you split your time, your creativity?

My day job is working as a Graphic Designer and it has been since I graduated from University in 2002. I've always had some sort of work in that field and the same job working at a publishing company since I moved to Portland in 2007. Working in a creative field has allowed me to stay in touch with that side of myself even when I'm not in the studio. I used to work in the office a lot more than now. I work from home more often than not these days. But when I was in the office and I had downtime in front of the computer I was able to search the Internet for inspiration and see what other artists were doing. Having skills with Adobe products has allowed me to be able to do my own marketing from show cards, business cards, creatively directing what I wanted my website to look like, etc. In regards to my actual work, graphic design weighs pretty heavy in my compositions and how I set up my pieces. I use a sketchbook for ideas but before I start a piece I usually do a digital mock up to see how the content lays out before I go to canvas with paint. Graphic Design and my Fine Art are definitely intertwined and will continue to be.

REP



The influence of the Abstract Expressionists on your paintings comes through clearly--Robert Rauschenburg, Jackson Pollock, Jasper Johns, Mark Rothko, and more can all be seen. I'm a fan of these guys, and so are several of the artists featured in this issue. What do you think it is about this mid-20th century aesthetic that remains so current, and so universally appealing, two generations later?

Rauschenburg and Johns are really big influences in my work. I became aware of them both in college through another artist and they've been on my mind ever since. I think that era of artists starting with the Abstract Expressionists and continuing into Johns and Rauschenburg and into the Pop Artists had a control or sometimes a knowing lack of control with media that's given way to a lot of experimentation with what can be done in a painting or a piece of art. In Rauschenburg there is this kitchen sink vibe to his work that is empowering. He and Johns used text in their work to great affect and that's figured into mine and so many artists that followed them's work. Rothko, Pollock, Krasner, Frankenthaler and artist of that time, When I became aware of them and how they used color to tell stories and create mood, that stuck with me and continues to be very important to my practice.





A process question--music or silence? If music, what's playing while you paint?

I always have something playing, whether it's music, a movie, or TV I need some sort of audio playing. Sometimes it's Podcasts but I end up paying too much attention to those. I really need something that kind of zones me out while I'm working and some TV shows do that, especially when I'm working on detail or finer areas of a painting, mindless TV shows and movies really help. When I'm doing big washes and backgrounds music is super freeing and allows for more gesture. Basically there is something auditory for each element of a painting that assists with whatever I'm working on at the moment. Silence feels like it would be impossible for me to work in...Though I've never really tried.

In researching you and your work, I was struck by the contrast between two video interviews you gave, a few years apart. In a promotional piece for M. Graham acrylics, dated 2017, you described your subject matter as "people having a good time," and you talk about the mechanics of making your paintings, then in the June 2020 piece for OPB, "Art that Speaks to Racism and Healing" you say things shifted after the 2016 election and the seemingly unending reports of police shootings of unarmed Black men and women. In the footage, you are bearded, somber, reflecting on the murder of George Floyd and talking about offering representations of hope. Do you think the changes we see in your career in that short period are the inevitable growth of an artist, or the inevitable realities of being a Black artist in Donald Trump's dystopian America? Or not inevitable at all?

You know, the M. Graham video I think was re uploaded in 2017. That video is from probably around 2009, 2010 or so. At that point in my career i was just exiting my 20's and fairly fresh in Portland. I wasn't as concerned with social issues and was really just cutting my teeth on what kind of power art has. I was trying to get a foot hold in Portland and on myself really. The work was lighter and reflected what I was into at the time which was just trying to have a good time and enjoy my friends and new surroundings. The OPB piece came 10 years later and a few months into the quarantine and a few weeks after the George Floyd murder so in regards to the somber tone, there was a lot going on in the world and in my personal life that contributed to the vibe. Speaking generally about my work and how it's shifted in this version of America, I'm definitely way more aware of what power it has to uplift or educate and as an artist and man now into his 40's with a kid, it's imperative that I not waste whatever opportunities I have to use my talent.

You open-heartedly support other artists by featuring their work on your tumblr and Instagram accounts, and you also share your works in progress, showing you are not perfect or invulnerable. Here is what you said about this approach in an interview with May Barruel: "...[it] just feels like what we're supposed to do as artists. Offer support, feed others and be fed, it's a give and take like everything in this world. I genuinely enjoy it and have always wanted to lift others up...". Have you had people in your career or your personal life who have offered that lift to you--the boost, the opportunity--that made a difference in the path you took?

I've been blogging or posting about artist for years. I kept a Live Journal which really ages me here but I used that to post about art that I was enjoying or TV shows or really whatever was on my mind at the time. That slowly morphed into just posting images of other peoples art with their website link and when Tumblr became a thing I moved to blogging there. It ended up being an amazing repository for me and whoever else wanted to dig up inspiration. I don't think I personally had people offer that sort of a boost but seeing websites like Fecal Face when I was younger and Supersonic Art and magazines like Juxtapoz really inspired me. I wanted to be featured on the blogs and in magazines so it was a sort of carrot that I was trying to reach. My posting about artists and lifting up felt really natural and necessary for me personally but I know what it feels like when you are championed by someone you respect so it's a two-fold act.



In a brighter future, post-Covid, post-Trump, what would you see happening next for you?

I don't think the work will change to much. I'm pretty comfortable with my practice at this point and see it necessary to continue doing the work to uplift and educate through art. Again, it's two-fold. I need to make this art for my sanity and need to know more so I don't see myself going back to creating carefree art. At least not the work I'm showing. One thing that these last 4 plus years have shown is that there is a lot of work to do and in the least pessimistic way possible, that bright future is a ways off and we have to continue doing the work, but at the same time enjoy our time here and do what we love cause there is happiness and hope in that.



Jeremy Okai Davis Curates "Favorite Things" Group Show @ Stephanie Chefas Projects, Portland

juxtapoz.com/news/installation/jeremy-okai-davis-curates-favorite-things-group-show-stephanie-chefas-projects-portland

Stephanie Chefas Projects // August 15, 2020 - September 05, 2020

August 19, 2020 | in Installation

All photos by Mario Gallucci





Stephanie Chefas Projects welcomes the return of artist Jeremy Okai Davis as guest curator for *Favorite Things*. Featuring a full spread of bold talent that includes Davis himself, the show culls inspiration from perspiration and no shortage of style. That is to say, Davis chose each artist based not just on their aesthetic voice, but on their level of commitment to the craft itself. By cultivating the spirit of artistic perseverance and personal growth, these artists have struck a personal chord with Davis over the years, motivating him to likewise stay the course and evolve in the process.

While the style of each artist is distinctive, Davis (seen below) tied them together through their emphasis on portraiture or the existence of figures either within the frame or just outside of it. Being primarily a portraiture artist himself, he remains very aware of how the hand creates and how one puts themselves inside of a work. Davis is also drawn to color usage and that too informed both his curatorial decision process and his personal output. His interest extends to both the colors included in each painting, collage, or sculpture and the ones omitted as well. It all results in a highly uniform experience, albeit one that still touches down a complete spectrum of distinctive styles.



“*Favorite Things* is my attempt to speak to the commitment of art practice and personal inspiration,” Davis wrote. “I’ve chosen artists for this exhibit that over the years have maintained a devotion to their work, that has in turn inspired me in one way or the other. Each artist’s distinctive styles are tied together through portraiture or the existence of

figures within the frame or just outside of it. In curating this show I was very aware of how the hand creates and how one puts themselves inside of a work. I've always been drawn to color usage, what is included or omitted from a collage, sculpture or painting and these works and artists exemplify this interest of mine and inform my practice both directly and indirectly."

Artists in the exhibition include: Alisa Sikellianos Carter , Aremy Stewart , Ivan Salcido , Jeremy Okai Davis , Molly Bounds , Nathaniel Lancaster , Pace Taylor , Shiela Laufer , Stephen Chellis , and William Paul Thomas .

Portland Painter Jeremy Okai Davis Celebrates the Pixel

opb.org/television/programs/artbeat/segment/portland-painter-jeremy-okai-davis-finds-unity-in-pixels

Eric Slade

Fresh out of art school in North Carolina in 2002 Jeremy Okai Davis wanted to book a show, but he knew he needed a body of work and a style all his own. So he grabbed the only thing he had – a bunch of portraits he'd taken of friends on a simple digital camera. He printed them out on his dad's computer, then blew them up so he could paint them.



Jeremy Okai Davis in his SE Portland studio with the painting "Metering" from his show "Presence of Color."

And when he blew them up he saw something new: hundreds of pixels; the greens, blues and reds that make up skin tones. Instead of trying to blend those colors back into a smooth, even flesh tone, he emphasized these colorful pixels in a modern take on pointillistic painting. And he created a style all his own.

His pixelated approach gives him a chance to explore the bold, graphic style of his art school heroes Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. But it's also his attempt to unify people. No matter what the skin tone of his subjects, the pixels show a commonality. "We're all kind of built with the same material," Jeremy said.

His new body of work did lead to shows, and for many years a steady gig creating cover art for American Songwriter magazine with portraits of artists like Tom Petty, Blind Boy Fuller, and Taylor Swift.



Ornette," Jeremy Okai Davis, 2019.

Since moving to Portland in 2007 he's had plenty of group and solo shows around town, including an impressive solo effort at P:ear Gallery titled, An Education. The show was his response to both the 2016 presidential election, and the shootings of young unarmed black men.

"It was like self-investigation," Davis said. "It's a long form self-portrait without an actual portrait of myself. In that show, there's pieces of my father holding my big brother. There's a painting of my mom and my big brother and my sister together. The show ended up being just 10 paintings of different elements that basically fed me as a person."

Most recently he completed *The Presence of Color*, through the Stumptown Artist Fellowship program. The show explores the Kodak Shirley Card, the iconic female image used to gauge color in early photography and film. But until the 1970s, the Shirley Card only showed white women.

"So I thought that it would be really interesting to do some research on that idea," Davis said, "but also end up doing these paintings that I see as basically black Shirley cards." His six large paintings, drawn from the pages of *Jet* and *Hue* magazines, celebrate everyday people who were often featured on the magazines' covers.



"Coach," Jeremy Okai Davis, 2019.
Mario Gallucci

These days Davis is immersed in research, looking for images and ideas that jump off the page at him, just as he wants his work to jump off the canvas for his viewers. And he's enjoying the steady growth of his career as a painter.

He recalled wisdom from his friend Seth Avett, of Avett Brothers fame. Seth repeated advice he'd heard about his own trajectory: "This isn't going to be a rocket ship. This ride is going to be more like a hot air balloon. It's going to be slow, but you're going to be able to enjoy the scenes and the sights."

More Oregon Art Beat

SPOTLIGHT

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Brother II

Featured artist: **Jeremy Okai Davis**



Metering



Ornette

JEREMY OKAI DAVIS is a visual artist originally from Charlotte, North Carolina, currently residing in Portland, Oregon. His practice is influenced by popular culture, race relations, design, and portraiture. Each new body of work is a vehicle for exploring the qualities and flexibility of paint. His work has been included in exhibitions regionally and nationally, including Portland State's White Gallery; Disjecta; The Studio Museum of Harlem in New York; Portland, Maine's Able Baker Contemporary, and elsewhere. His work is permanently collected by Oregon State University, Oregon University's Allen Hall & The Studio Museum. He is represented locally by Elizabeth Leach Gallery.

Be a *Willamette Week* featured artist!
Contact us at art@wwweek.com

Jeremy Okai Davis is the latest recipient of the Stumptown Artist Fellowship program. Davis's solo exhibition, *The Presence of Color*, is on view at the Downtown Portland café from September 12th through November 13th, 2019.

In this collection of large paintings, Davis uses the history of "Shirley cards" as a vehicle for the exploration of racial bias and cultural injustices. Shirley cards were used as a visual reference for calibration of skin tones during film processing starting in the 50s. The typically solitary Caucasian female depicted the "standard" for skin-color balancing. As a result, disregard was shown toward darker complexions being photographed. This bias serves as a platform for Davis' recent work and as a microcosm of a wider prejudice in the world at large. Davis has employed his signature drips and pointillistic approach in an attempt to propagate a more inclusive narrative. In juxtaposing everyday African American women of the era with public figures and more recognizable subjects, he hopes to adjust the focus of the past. The bold graphics and color bars of the Shirley cards make appearances, but are also filtered through the lens of Davis's aesthetic. In *The Presence of Color*, the strong gazes of Davis's subjects attempt to make a case for inclusion.

The Fellowship's curator, May Barruel of [Nationale](#), interviewed the artist.



May Barruel: Jeremy, until November 13th we will be showing your newest series of work, *The Presence of Color*, as part of the Stumptown Artist Fellowship at our Downtown café in Portland. Can you tell us a little bit more about how and why you started working on these large portraits?

Jeremy Okai Davis: As a pastime photographer the history of it has always interested me. I'm not sure when it was but at some point I came across "Shirley cards." They were cards used by Kodak in house to calibrate for skin tones. At the time, the standard they used was a fair skinned Caucasian women. With that in mind I've been interested in exploring that and in essence doing a little course correcting.



Shirley card, 1978. Courtesy of Hermann Zschiegner

MJB: I love that you featured both well known African-American figures, such as Angela Davis and Shirley Chisholm, and anonymous women as well. What was your process like choosing your subjects and what were you hoping your audience would get from seeing this wide range of portraits?

JOD: When I started creating this body of work I knew that I wanted to prop up people whose voices have been unheard, namely African-Americans but more specifically Black women. Using the Shirley cards was the vehicle for doing this. When doing research I noticed that some of the early Johnson Publishing magazines like *Jet*, *Tan* & *Hue* would feature everyday people on the covers so I wanted to juxtapose them with Angela & Shirley to make the viewers think about who they are looking at a little more intently. Also, the woman used on the Shirley cards were somewhat anonymous so I wanted to play with that idea, too.



Jeremy Okai Davis, Metering, 2019, acrylic and oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches

MJB: These new portraits are very much in line with your earlier works. Upon seeing the pointillism, the drips, the fractured background, if one is familiar with your style, one immediately knows that these paintings are yours. Yet, I've noticed a few details that felt very new to me, less controlled, more abstract. Can you tell us more about your process in the studio, your approach to paint itself? I'm also curious about the kind of pressure you put on yourself as an artist to not keep doing the same thing. I would think that being mostly a portraitist can be daunting in that regard. How do you keep finding new ways to represent people?

JOD: A lot to break down in that question. I love the history of painting and I'm forever influenced by it, so some of the loosening up in the backgrounds on these paintings came as a sort of sly and sometimes not so sly homage to Abstract Expressionism and pre-Pop artists like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. I was looking at images from the late 50's and 60's, so I wanted to insert some art history references to that time. When in the studio and not working on the more representational elements in my paintings, I love seeing what the paint does when you add in a little chance. In turn that typically influences the approach to the portraits and more straightforward parts of the pieces. It can get a little daunting and challenging to just do portraits but honestly, even if I describe myself as a portrait artist, a lot of the times the portraits are just a vehicle for story telling. So if I have a message to convey, the subjects are just used to service that. So the idea is paramount: if I feel like it is strong enough and if I'm excited enough about it, the process never gets stale for me.



Jeremy Okai Davis, Dufay, 2019, acrylic and oil on canvas, 54 x 54 inches

MJB: I know you have a dedicated studio practice and are also very present on [social media](#), where you share not only finished pieces, but also works in progress and scenes from your studio. How do you reconcile with the "business" of being an artist when it takes you away from precious time in the studio. How much do you think that aspect of an art career dictate successes?

JOD: I personally love seeing other artists' processes and WIPs. It sort of removes the veil of creating a painting or artwork. 9 times of 10 my paintings early on are at a stage that I wouldn't want to share with anyone but there is sort of a relief in letting go and showing them. For me it's sort of an exhale that allows me to say "ok, that stage is complete, let's really get into this." These days, social media and creating for a lot of artist are 1a and 1b. It sounds kind of dirty to say it out loud but that doesn't make it untrue. I attempt to keep them separate and not let "likes" influence what I do, I've done pretty good at it but it's pretty hard not to let it slip its way into your mind. So long as you're attempting to be authentic with the work and what you post, I think that comes through, and that's all that matters at the end of the day.

MJB: Over the past eight years that I've known you, I would say that you are hands down one of the most supportive artists in town: you always go see other people's shows, you give shout-outs on your [Tumblr](#) — which seems entirely dedicated to sharing other people's work — and Instagram feed, you often exchange studio visits with your peers. Can you share with us what you learn through this, how that approach has served you as an artist?

JOD: Since college I've loved sitting with artists or visiting studios. After college I went on a school trip to New York and we visited Arnold Mesches's studio. At the time I enjoyed it and found value in it but it's only recently that I've been able to look back at that experience of,

again, the veil being removed and that I realized how paramount it was in my growth as an artist. In a way it levels the playing field and humanizes the paintings we see in galleries that are "finished products." You get to see the hand, the splatters, the false starts and some of the tricks. It's inspirational. On top of visiting studios, going to the art shows of peers just feels like what we're supposed to do as artists. Offer support, feed others and be fed, it's a give and take like everything in this world. I genuinely enjoy it and have always wanted to lift others up and do whatever I can to spread the word of art and people I believe in, hence the Tumblr page. I've been posting about other artists for years. If I find something that inspires me it feels selfish to not in turn share that with others.

To see what inspires Davis, check out his amazing Tumblr, [This Looks Okay](#), which will turn 10 next month!

11 Portland art exhibits to freshen up your fall

By Briana Miller | For The Oregonian/OregonLive

14 FRIDAY, AUGUST 30, 2019 THE OREGONIAN



Jeremy Okai Davis' painting "Metering" (2019). (Courtesy of the artist)

Jeremy Okai Davis: "The Presence of Color"

For a solo show as part of the Stumptown Artist Fellowship program, [Jeremy Okai Davis](#) is preparing six large-scale paintings that take Kodak's Shirley cards as visual inspiration. The cards, which depicted white models next to color bars, were used to calibrate film processing machines starting in the 1950s. Kodak didn't include people of color until the 1970s, and when film was developed, black and brown skin tones could get lost. Davis does some recalibration of his own in this series that uses vintage Jet magazine images to get at questions of historical inclusion and exclusion.

Sept. 12–Nov. 6, *Stumptown Coffee Roasters*, 128 S.W. Third Ave., stumptowncoffee.com or 503-295-6144.

Jeremy Okai Davis | Oregon ArtsWatch

 orartswatch.org/tag/jeremy-okai-davis

Jeremy Okai Davis

By: Nim Wunnan

Published May 1, 2019, in CULTURE, VISUAL ART

Spring is in full-swing and the galleries are blooming. A new pop-up appears on Alberta, LACMA loans PAM a 17th-century masterpiece, and Wolff gallery presents the wild self-portraiture of Rachel Mulder, an artist as comfortable making images with typewriters as she is making them with human hair. We've got some exciting group shows at Littman Gallery, the Portland Japanese Garden, and Roll-Up Gallery, spanning painting, book arts, and traditional ceramics. Get out there and enjoy the sun and the art!



Okai Davis — Messenger

[aRT.pdx](#)

April 25th – May 13th
Temporary gallery
1603 Alberta St.

A three-week, pop-up gallery featuring five artists from the Northwest and beyond – Heday de la Cruz, Joshua Flint, Alexandra Becker-Black, Jeremy Okai Davis, Samir Khurshid, and Samuel Eisen-Meyers. Painting, portraiture, and the human figure form through-lines in this group show. Davis’s portraiture, Flint’s dreamy “memoryscapes” and de la Cruz’s illustrative engagement with identity seem to be in dialogue with each other and are joined by Becker-Black’s watercolors and Eisen-Meyers’ themes of “social reality.” The gallery will be open every day during the run of the show.

MORE EDUCATION BY JEREMY OKAI DAVIS ELEVATES CONCOURSE A WITHIN PDX

10th October 2018 | [No Comments](#)



More Education is a handsome and timely solo exhibition/exploration of diverse elements and ideas that have informed Portland artist Jeremy Okai Davis to be the person he is today. Davis creates paintings that are both personal and engaging through multi-layered subject matter that invites further investigation.



PJ & Spree, 2016, Acrylic on panel, 12 x 10 inches and *ABA*, 1977, 2016, Acrylic on panel, 12 x 10 inches

Utilizing concepts from popular culture and incorporating imagery from family photos in his paintings, Davis successfully converges complex themes that are also a pleasure to view.

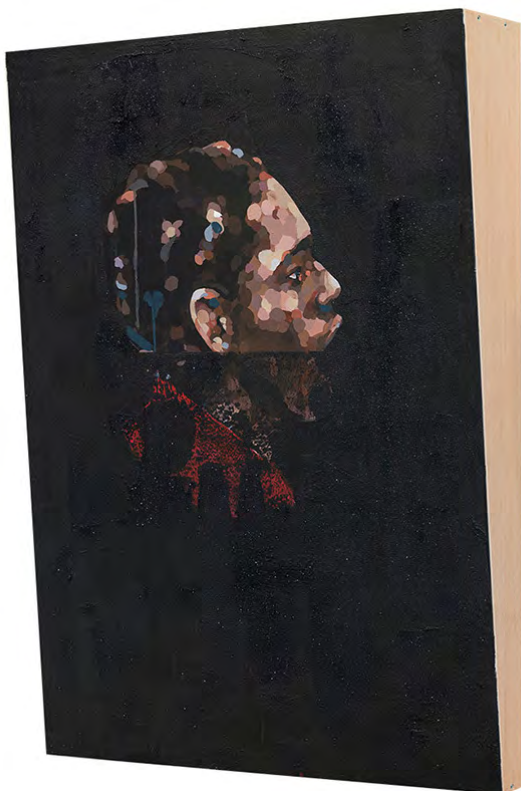


Image Left - *Untitled (Black)*, 2017, Acrylic and pumice on panel, 40 x 30 inches

With this incredible body of work on display through September 29th of 2019 within fourteen Concourse A display cases post-security, Davis has added three dimensional found wood elements that further push the themes of his paintings.



Claims, 2017, Acrylic and found wood on canvas wrapped panel, 24 x 24 inches

The angled structures are an attempt to bring the viewer closer to the paintings as they enter space in a different way, creating a new and unexpected visual experience.



Image Left: *Ma, Jon, & Julie*, 2017,
Acrylic and found wood on panel,
40 x 30 inches

The work focuses primarily on me as an African American, artist, son, brother and friend. Thematically these paintings touch on my personal history as it relates to popular culture – from art, sports, and literature. They also attempt to address the current climate in the United States for African Americans and people of color. —Jeremy Okai Davis

Image Right: *Olympic*, 2017, Acrylic on
panel, 40 x 30 inches

Jeremy Okai Davis' color use and fidelity to his subjects make the work feel alive, but without being too literal.



Image Right: *Required Reading*, 2016, Acrylic and glitter on canvas, 12 x 12 inches

The work's impression is quite light at first glance, but on closer examination of text and posture the work is full of conflict, an exploration of the contrast between the shiny, smiling exterior that is frequently presented on the surface and the inner, self-conscious, status-obsessed mind state that so many of us endure beneath it all.

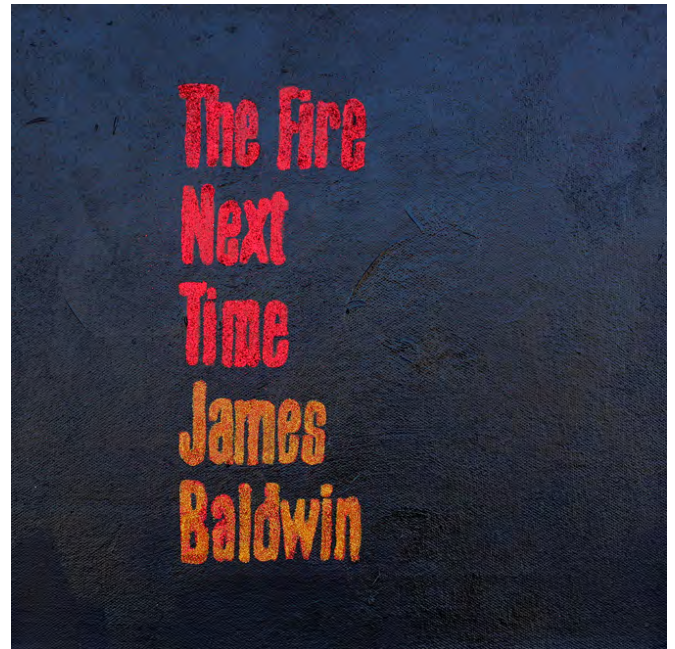


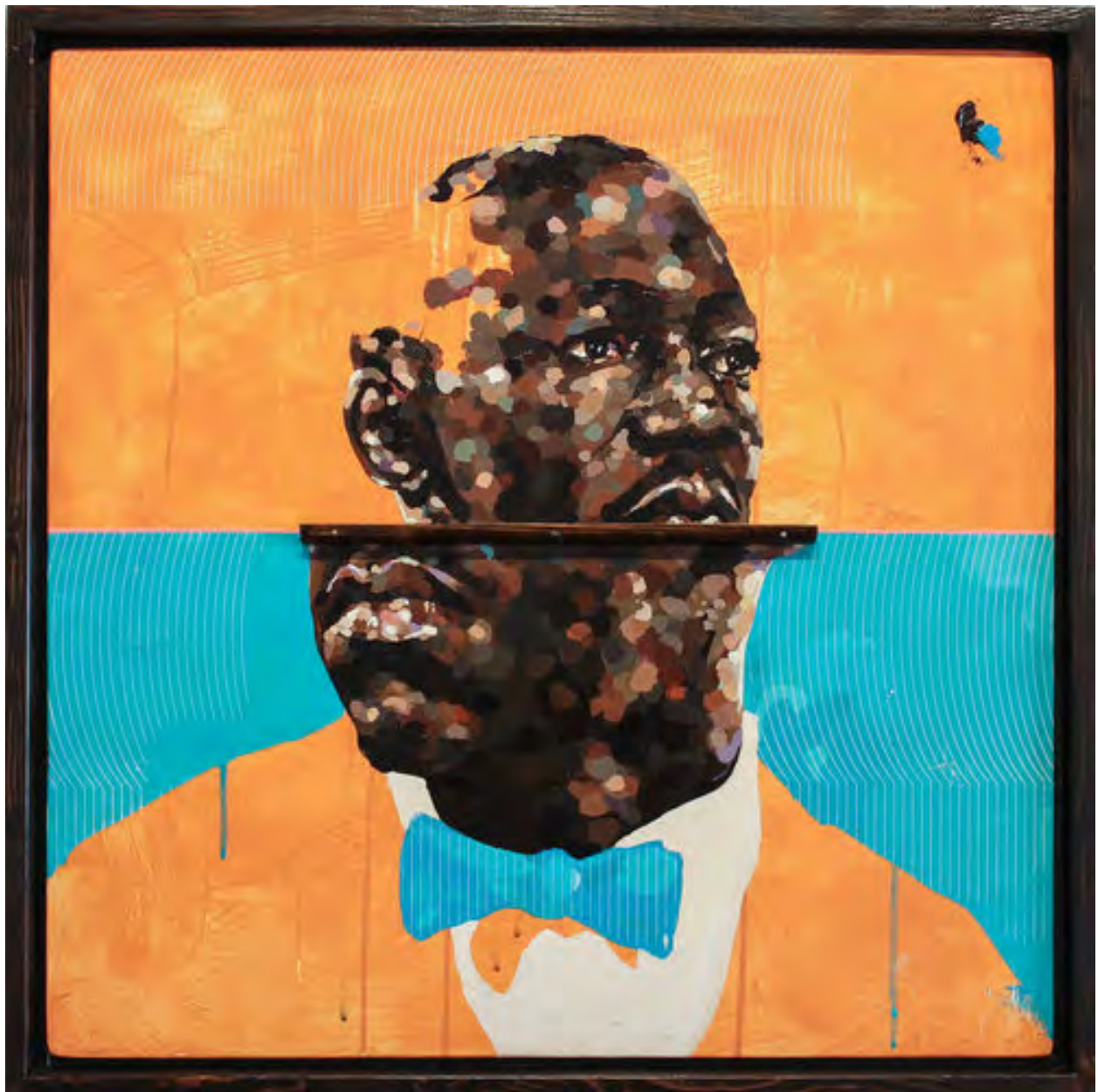
Image Left: *Ebony*, 2017, Acrylic and pumice on panel, 40 x 30 inches

Jeremy Okai Davis was born in Charlotte, North Carolina and received a BFA in Painting from UNC-Charlotte. After a few years of trying to push through the North Carolina art scene, Davis relocated to Portland, Oregon in 2007. Davis splits his time as a professional graphic designer and as a professional fine artist. He has also illustrated for American Songwriter Magazine and has produced artwork for several recording artists.



Untitled (White), 2017, Acrylic and pumice on panel, 40 x 30 inches

Davis' work has shown locally and nationally in Los Angeles, Seattle, Nashville and at the famed *Studio Museum of Harlem* in New York City. He has permanent installations of his work in the *Lonnie B. Harris Black Cultural Center* at Oregon State University and recently installed six large-scale paintings in the University of Oregon's *Allen Hall*.



Messenger (For Art Blakely), 2018, Acrylic on panel and found wood, 24 x24 inches

jeremyokaidavis.com

Instagram: [@jeremyokaiart](https://www.instagram.com/jeremyokaiart)

Long-Form Self-Portrait: The Art Of Jeremy Okai Davis

opb.org/radio/article/jeremy-okai-davis-portland-painting-gallery-135

Arts | local | NW Life Long-Form Self-Portrait: The Art Of Jeremy Okai Davis by April Baer Follow OPB Sept. 8, 2017 7:24 p.m. | Updated: Sept. 9, 2017 12:25 p.m. | Portland

“Coach” is Davis’ homage to his father, a respected high school basketball coach. “There’s an idea I was trying to get across that he was our life coach.”

Jeremy Okai Davis paints portraits — people of many ages and backgrounds, brought to life in rafts of interweaving brush strokes.

His subjects take shape as a mesh of related hues — skin tones in chocolate brown or rosy beige, dappled with yellow, green, red, blue and white — all carefully balanced to play off each other.

“The first body of work I did out of college,” he said, “I wanted to do 10 paintings on the same theme.”

He chose 10 candid photos of friends and blew them up so that he could see them better as he painted. “And when I blew them up, I started to notice the pixels — the blues and greens and pinks in skin tones that you don’t see or think about when you’re looking at a person.”

The end result is vibrance and complexity. Faces and bodies aren’t stuck to one color value.



Davis has an exhibition called “An Education” at Portland’s Gallery 135 through the end of September representing new work made last winter, and a shift toward more personal work in his portfolio. The turning of the year, and the new administration in Washington left him frustrated and needing speak out.

“The way I describe the show is a long-form self-portrait,” he said. “I wanted to make work that was a little bit more personal. I think being vulnerable in this time is really important.”

Davis just wrapped work on a new mural in downtown Portland on the side of the Living Room Theater on Southwest 10th Avenue. The University of Oregon’s Journalism school commissioned more work for its campus home at Allen Hall.

Listen to the full interview for more on Davis’ recent work, his take on [Kara Walker’s exhaustion](#) and what’s at the top of his playlist.



“Like Like”: Jeremy Okai Davis’ post-digital portraits

orartswatch.org/like-then-paint-jeremy-okai-davis-post-digital-portraits

A.L.
Adams

Jeremy Okai Davis’ “Like Like,” on view for the rest of the month at Cast Iron Studios, is titled after the banal postmodern act of thumbs-upping a digital image on a social media site—and maybe that’s all there is to it? If that’s what you see, the artist won’t argue. “My choosing of what to paint does come from my liking of these images,” Davis explains of the photos he’s painted from friends’ Facebooks and Instagrams.

Frankly hipsterish subjects mug a range of expressions and gestures with obvious awareness of the camera, but they shrug off prior generations’ “smile and say cheese” poses. This generation of image-crafters clearly prefers to be caught in an act, rather than frozen from some flattering angle. This evolution fascinates Davis, both because people in motion are so graphically dynamic, and because the habit of acting rather than posing has become a hallmark of our visual times and virtual selves.



“Pink Cup” is a prime example of Davis’s favorite subjects: Young, self-styled, expressive women, captured in a moment of social acting meant for online sharing. They couldn’t look more complicit.

Davis's 2009 show *Shits 'n' Giggles* and his 2010 works had a similar tone to "Like Like," featuring mostly young, boldly-dressed-and-accessorized-subjects captured in moments of expressive action. In 2011, Davis changed his focus to bygone child sitcom stars. 2012 brought his most conceptual work to date: recreating 1970's African-American pomade ads, but superimposing visual edits with heavy philosophical intention: some subjects were reduced to pixels to indicate that population's lack of public recognition, while light-skinned subjects got Elizabethan neck-ruffs as a sinister symbol of their shade-stratified status. Davis's 2013 paintings again crib from 70's and 80's retro advertising and celebrity images, but now with primarily white subjects, board game poses, and uneasy self-help-book titles. Not what they seem, these pieces have been Davis's way of processing a surreal personal experience: being interrogated by police after a recent stay in a hotel coincided with another guest's murder.



In "Ruffnecks," Davis bestowed his light-skinned 70's model subjects with a symbol of shade-stratified status.

Davis's body of work viewed as a whole invites an important question: where does he see himself—among White hipsters, or Black history? "I don't," he admits. Where many portraitists use their paintings of others as a secret vehicle for self-revelation, Davis instead attempts to stay out of the way. Once, when specifically asked to paint a self-portrait, he submitted only his torso in a polo shirt, wearing a button reading "URYIMHERE [you are why I'm here]." Yet even through his near-militant selflessness, Davis's work highlights a distinctive style. Here are a few defining motifs to look for in *Like Like*.

Solid Backgrounds with isolated, almost floating subjects.

In “Giggles,” Davis used textured color fields and geometric shapes to subdivide the canvas and make its pattern a secondary subject. “Like” backgrounds, however, are solids with a mere hint of atmosphere, allowing subjects to float to the foreground and be sole occupants of the space.

Bold textile patterns, bright colors.

Davis has a mixed reaction to the observation that his subjects seem like hipsters. On one hand, the designation seems fitting and inevitable, and matches up with modern dictionary defs. On the other, it can seem pejorative, or pin his work too tightly in its era. Spawned by beatniks and later appropriated by Black bohemianism (“You down with Digable Planets, yous a hipster. Shit.” ~1993) the term now seems to favor those for whom style and lifestyle (too?) tightly intertwine. Do or don’t call Davis’s subjects “hipsters,” but they’re undeniably stylin’, wearing a lot of bold prints and large accessories that Davis enjoys the painterly challenge of re-creating. Through the rigors of their self-design, hipsters make themselves preeminently paintable. Shit.

Painterly decisions, drips.

The images in “Like” tend to taper into drips toward their base, both as an homage to Warhol’s works, and as a concession to the medium of paint—as Keith Haring advocated, “letting...materials have a kind of power for themselves.” Daub pointillism is also a favorite for Davis, forcing the viewer’s eye to make the final assembly of only-nearly-smooth forms.

Tough girls.

Davis favors female subjects over male, and confrontational character poses over “beauty shots.” In contrast to his 60’s beatnik influences, Davis belongs to a school of artists (his former housemates include rockabilly superstar Sallie Ford and riot grrl comedian Rebecca Waits) who treats women as characters rather than objects. This perspective wouldn’t be worthy of mention if it weren’t still rare in the realm of portraiture.

Thumbs-up and gun-slinging.

Those who’ve taken or seen photos of folks from various countries may notice the following: Americans tend to give a thumbs-up or shoot a “finger-gun,” while people from elsewhere more habitually give the “V” that signifies “victory” or “peace.” Guns and thumbs, therefore, mark Davis’s subjects as distinctly American, with the social predispositions that that identity implies.

Davis’s initial attraction to pointing gestures was subconscious; as a graphic designer, he automatically favors images that direct gaze motion. However, as the hand-gesture motif has begun to recur in his work, he’s highlighted it, and sometimes even isolated it from the

rest of the canvas. In one image, an “actual” gun (though a toy) is brandished with exactly the same social performance attitude that elsewhere accompanies the “finger-gun.” Elsewhere, “thumbs up” hands float free of their subjects for added emphasis.

“It can seem like a cop-out to not state the meaning of your work, but I really do want people to experience it for themselves,” says Davis. “I’m happy just generating discussion.” Well, shoot. Discuss.

A. L. Adams also writes monthly column [Art Walkin’](#) for The Portland Mercury, *and is former arts editor of Portland Monthly Magazine.*

Read more from Adams: [Oregon ArtsWatch](#) | [The Portland Mercury](#)