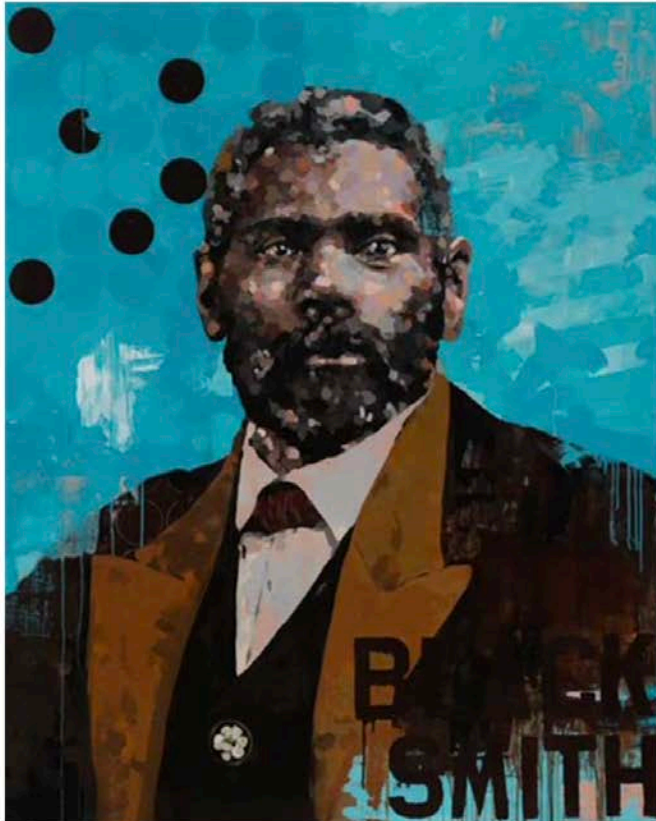


Black Oregon Pioneers Claim Their Space Thanks To Jeremy Okai Davis



Left: The Blacksmith by artist Jeremy Okai Davis depicts Oregon Black pioneer Ben Johnson. Right: Advocate.jpg The Advocate by artist Jeremy Okai Davis depicts trailblazing Oregonian Beatrice Morrow Cannady.

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Artist Jeremy Okai Davis has created entire shows inspired by a discarded box of photographs, the role of Black men in American sports and the white-centric practice of calibrating color in early photo processing. His latest show, more than two years in the making, brings Davis' eye for intimate detail to pay tribute to some of Oregon's Black pioneers.

In February, the Salem Art Association-commissioned Ben Johnson and Beatrice Morrow Cannady were unveiled at the Bush House Museum. Another pair of portraits will be displayed for Juneteenth. All four feature Davis' modern impressionistic style.

“The pointillistic and kind of pixelation idea that I use is kind of a method of unifying people and realizing that whether white, Black, whatever race, we’re all kind of built with the same material,” Davis explained in a previous interview.

‘Reverence For History’

Originally from Charlotte, N.C., Davis spent much of his youth surrounded by basketball and was convinced it would be a part of his professional future. He wasn’t in college long before he realized his fate lay in the art department, and he completed his bachelor’s degree in fine arts in painting at the University of North Carolina instead.

His fascination with the impressionistic approach came from a simple exercise: printing old photos off his father’s computer. When he enhanced the photos and saw hues of green and pink in subjects’ skin tones, he decided to create “digitized versions of my friends,” he said.

A box of photos Davis’ landlord rescued from a dumpster became Davis’ 2015 show at Duplex Gallery in New York: *Those Days Are Over*.

“The images I got were all from the late 70s and early 80s of this one group of friends,” Davis said at the time. “I was really attracted to the images and I wanted to figure out a way to honor the way documentation was done back in the day, with film photography.”

The collection comprises images of large hair and loud prints, smiling faces in a jacuzzi and candid moments of spontaneous dancing. Davis admits his early work was fairly lighthearted. The presidential election of 2016, and the ongoing epidemic of Black killings at the hands of the police, created a shift.

As the subject matter changed, so did the canvas.

“Recycled wood became really prevalent in the work – old wood that had been on homes and torn down and been beat by the weather, but when I saw it it still had this beauty that resonated with me,” Davis said. “It also spoke to the perseverance of African Americans and everything that we’ve been through, we’re still able to shine and put our best foot forward.”

A deeply personal and self-reflective exhibit, called *An Education*, was shown at the Pear Gallery downtown. Davis said he began to notice his work sticking with audiences in a deeper way.

Davis’ familiarity with photography of a certain vintage naturally led to his next exhibit: A reimagining of the white-centric Shirley cards issued early on by Kodak to aid in photo processing. The cards contained an image meant to aid in calibrating colors, and they categorically ignored darker skin tones.

So Davis created his own line of Shirley cards, using images of Black subjects often based on photos run in *Jet Magazine*.

“One of my favorite things when I go to a gallery, instead of looking at a painting head-on, I like to get on the side of it and see what textures, the ripples and things that are poking out,” Davis said during a recent interview at Portland’s Elizabeth Leach Gallery, where his work has been exhibited since 2019. “In the studio, I take that into consideration quite a bit – the textures and looseness of the backgrounds. And

being ok with leaving raw canvas a little bit. I scraped away a lot of the initial stages and I loved how it looked to see the canvas kind of peaking through.”

He added, “In these days of Instagram and paintings posted for phone consumption or computer consumption, I think sometimes the idea of texture and painterliness gets left behind.”

It is important that in texture and in immediate impression, his work resembles a painting.

Artistic Research

Fueled by curiosity, Davis has integrated a lot more research into his work.

“That’s the only thing that’s changed for me (in my studio practice),” Davis said during the interview at his current gallery. “At some point, just going to the studio and painting, I got a little bored with it and felt like I needed to do more for myself but also for the community and people, so my practice now and a good chunk of my studio time or thoughts with studio time is rooted in that research and trying to make sure that the work I’m making is important and tells stories I think people want to hear.”

That research is evident in Davis’ first pair of Black pioneer portraits, unveiled in February. [Beatrice Morrow Cannady](#) was an influential community organizer, civil rights activist and founding member of the Portland NAACP; the editor and owner of Portland’s first Black-owned newspaper, The Advocate; and the first Black woman to graduate from law school in the state of Oregon when she received her degree from Northwestern College of Law in 1922. Her legislative work ultimately led to the overturning of racist laws that disenfranchised African Americans in Oregon. In “The Advocate,” Davis depicts Morrow Cannady as still youthful, wearing a soft if fixed gaze that seems to penetrate into the future. Minimal blooms of gray hair frame her face, suggesting experience and struggle.

“The Blacksmith” depicts Ben Johnson, a Black pioneer who traveled the Oregon Trail in 1853 and eventually settled in Linn County, where he was well liked and well respected in his blacksmithing business. He and freed slave Amanda Gardner were trailmates who would reconnect 15 years after the trip out west, eventually marrying and purchasing a home in Albany.

Davis translates one of the few photos of Johnson into a softer portrait, depicting a man who seems at once at peace and intensely focused. Both Morrow Cannady and Johnson are looking in the same direction, suggesting their connection. As Davis has pointed out, their lifespans overlapped for just over a decade.

Davis’ next two pieces will include America Waldo Bogle, who traveled the Oregon trail at the age of 10 without either of her parents -- her mother was likely a slave, and her father was presumed to have been one of two Missouri farmers. She traveled to Oregon with her stepmother and ultimately married, becoming one of the first Black settlers in Walla Walla, Wa.

Davis’ other piece is of Sybil Harber, another Missouri native who became a beloved midwife in Lakeview. Harber ran a de facto hospital for everyone when the town otherwise lacked one and, with her son Bert, ran a number of businesses in town.

Notably, these two trailblazing subjects will be unveiled and displayed for a Juneteenth celebration at the Bush House Museum, where they could be viewed as a protest against the museum’s namesake and the

founder of the Oregon Statesman paper, Asahel Bush. Oregon Black Pioneers have pointed out Bush used his newspaper to air his racist views and full-throated support for exclusionary laws.

The unveiling on June 19 will not only celebrate the Juneteenth holiday, but also the renaming of one of the rooms in the museum: the new America Waldo Bogle Gallery.

For more information, visit <https://bushhousemuseum.org> and <https://www.elizabethleach.com>.