OREGON ARTSWATCH
ARTS & CULTURE NEWS

Portraits by Jeremy Okai Davis add new faces to Oregon history

By Laurel Reed Pavic

FEBRUARY 12, 2025

Visual Arts

Commissioned as part of a "reimagining" process at the historic Bush House in Salem, the newly completed set of portraits of Oregon's Black ancestors offers new stories to celebrate and reflect upon.

Installation view of *ReEnvisioned: Contemporary Portraits of Our Black Ancestors* in the A.M. Bush Gallery at Salem Art Association, 2025. Photo credit: Mario Gallucci, image courtesy of Salem Art Association

After a three-year process, the complete set of ten portraits of Black Oregon ancestors by Jeremy Okai Davis is on view at the A.M. Bush Gallery at the Salem Art Association through February 22. The portraits are a key element of the “reimagining” of the historic Bush

Bush House, an intentional consideration of alternative historical narratives. The Salem Art Association commissioned the portraits in direct recognition of Bush's racist rhetoric and actions against Oregon's Black community during his lifetime (1824-1913). The size and composition of Davis's portraits consciously parallel a formal 1880 portrait of Asahel Bush painted by Thomas Cogswell that hangs in the library of the historic house.

I wrote about this project in June of 2023 on the occasion of the delivery of the third and fourth portraits and accompanying rechristening of the America Waldo Bogle gallery inside the historic Bush house. That story provides background on Bush and the impetus for the portrait project. I framed the project in terms of the subjectivity of history:

"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."

Jeremy Okai Davis, *The Laundress (Rose Jackson)*, acrylic on canvas, 2024. From the collection of Salem Art Association, Bush House Museum. Image courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery.

The six new portraits are unmistakably Davis's work, with faces rendered in large pointillist daubs, brightly colored backgrounds, and the graphic flourishes described above. Each portrait is accompanied by a wall tag with a narrative written by the Director of Bush House Museum Exhibits and Programming, Tammy Jo Wilson. The wall tags include reproductions of many of the photographs Davis used as reference points for each portrait. I was able to speak with both Davis and Wilson about the completion of the commission.

When I spoke to him in 2023, Davis expressed some trepidation about painting portraits of sitters for whom he had no photographic reference. The photographs are part of the interpretive process and, though Davis didn't frame it in exactly this way, it seems that the presence of a photograph affords a sort of implicit permission to be portrayed. Having a photograph taken in the 19th century was not the throwaway endeavor it is today; it was a conscious and deliberate undertaking. As a result, 19th century photographic portraits are almost always formal.

Jeremy Okai Davis, *The Homesteader (Letitia Carson)*, Acrylic on canvas, 2024. From the collection of Salem Art Association, Bush House Museum. Image courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Photo credit: Mario Gallucci

I spoke with Davis again in January of this year about the completion of the next six portraits and closure of the project. Davis recounted that he relinquished his hesitancy to paint a portrait of Leticia Carson, even without an extant photograph, because her story was so compelling. As explained in Wilson's summary, Carson was "the first Black person to file a land claim in Oregon under the Homestead Act of 1862. She successfully homesteaded at Soap Creek, establishing a thriving homestead that included a home, barn, granary, smokehouse, and hundreds of fruit trees." She is also the namesake of the Leticia Carson Project at Oregon State University.

Davis created the portrait's reference photograph of Carson by using a photograph of her daughter, Martha Carson Lavadour, as an older woman. He used an AI image-generator to "reverse age" the photograph in order to create the three-quarter length likeness. (Wilson included a portrait of Carsons's sister with her husband and child as the illustration for the wall tag, but the daughter's photograph is used in the OSU Project and visible on this page.)

The fact that Carson's photograph is invented explains the more informal nature of her portrait. As opposed to the other sitters in the series who are all wearing formal attire, Carson is shown in a straw hat with white blouse, dark vest, and red skirt. She clasps a bouquet of flowers: a multitude of textures including a goldenrod spray of circular blooms and a peach magnolia. In an interview, Davis explained this as "wanting to give her her flowers as a way to honor her."

Installation view, Jeremy Okai Davis, *The Advocate (Beatrice Morrow Cannady)*, acrylic on canvas, 2022. Photo credit: Mario Gallucci, image courtesy of Salem Art Association

The magnolia is especially prominent in Carson's portrait. The peachy color and precise edges propel it to the front of the composition, clearly the star of the bouquet. Magnolias feature in all ten of the portraits in various guises, usually rendered as a brooch or a pattern on fabric. This is a consistency that Davis started with in the earliest portraits in the series. In The Blacksmith (Benjamin Davis), the magnolia appears as an oversized button on the sitter's waistcoat. In The Advocate (Beatrice Morrow Cannady), a magnolia pendant is suspended on a black ribbon at the sitter's neck. The level of detail of the magnolia varies: in both

The Midwife (Sybil Harber) and The Hostess (Louisa Sewell), the shape is the fabric pattern motif. In The Homesteader (Thomas King), the magnolia inspires the background pattern, two geometric renderings in blue just above the sitter's shoulder.

Jeremy Okai Davis, *The Homesteader (Thomas King)*, acrylic on canvas, 2024. From the collection of Salem Art Association, Bush House Museum. Image courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery.

There's remarkable variety in the consistency – which initially sounds like an oxymoron but raises an interesting parallel to the experience of

Oregon's Black pioneers. All were affected by Oregon's Exclusion law, which was part of the state's 1857 Constitution. The clause remained part of the Constitution when Oregon joined the Union in 1859, and wasn't formally repealed until 1926. All were affected by the laws, and the repercussions run through all ten stories.

The shapes of their stories, however, their lived experiences – those are all unique, and celebrated as such in their portraits. Wilson's wall tag narratives give the sitter's details, the outlines of their stories, and how Oregon's Exclusion laws shaped their experiences. Davis's portraits amplify their lives, giving each sitter his or her due with the monumentality lent by the scale and attention of the painted portrait.

Jeremy Okai Davis, *The Fiddler (Louis Southworth)*, acrylic on canvas, 2023. From the collection of Salem Art Association, Bush House Museum. Image courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery.

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Thomas King was likely born enslaved; he fought in the Civil War in one of the regiments of African American soldiers. He arrived in Oregon and ultimately purchased 160 acres of forest in Tillamook County. Davis's portrait shows him as confident and dapper, his pocket square jauntily askew. What matters is steely resolve.

Of the new portraits, the one that has captivated me the most is The Hostess (Louisa Sewell). Sewell sits sharply upright with a baby on her lap. One hand loosely wraps around the child. (I fully admit to loving any "Madonna and Child" update and I'll spare you my musings on this as a 19th-century theotokos inspiration.) Two things immediately struck me: the three vertical stripes on the right of the composition and the look of utter disdain on the baby's face.

The rectangular stripes, in bubble gum pink, white, and a deep brown, stand out from the rest of the composition, particularly from the deep orange red backdrop. The color scheme begs comparison to Neapolitan ice cream – strawberry, vanilla, and chocolate. Their presence is a charming reference to part of Sewell's biography – she was known in her Central Oregon community for her ice cream. Davis uses stripes as graphic elements in other portraits (diagonal stripes feature in both The

Blacksmith and The Advocate) but in those cases, they're incorporated into the background, a hue darker than the background and a graphic element. Sewell's stripes are a visual shorthand, a way to tell her story.

Jeremy Okai Davis, *The Hostess (Louisa Sewell)*, acrylic on canvas, 2023. From the collection of Salem Art Association, Bush House Museum. Image courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery.

There's another layer to the stripes, though – one that links directly back to Davis. The flavor of Sewell's ice cream isn't part of the historical record. Like many other details, that information is lost.

When I asked Davis about the choice, he explained that Neapolitan ice cream was the standard choice in his childhood home – Davis liked strawberry ice cream and his brother liked chocolate, so Neapolitan was his mom's middle ground solution (if only all sibling management/negotiation were so straightforward!). She bought a brand of ice cream that came in a rectangular box, the visual parallel unmistakable in the rectangular stripes at Sewell's elbow. This isn't a falsehood, just evidence of interpretation – like anyone's, Davis's telling reflects his own experience.

I thought that Sewell's baby's scowl could possibly be another reflection of personal experience, and honestly, I probably latched onto the baby's expression in the first place because I had my own judgment-faced baby at one point. I know Davis has young children, so I thought maybe he had had a similar withering-stare-baby experience, but he demurred when I asked. He said that the baby looked dour in the source photo.

I can't see that baby's expression as anything but challenging. I want to see Sewell's portrait hung directly across from the Cogswell portrait of Asahel Bush in the library of the historic house, a direct intervention challenging Bush's intention to keep Oregon white. A staring contest between Bush and the scowling baby would be acknowledgment of resolve and generational change. This approach is shaped by my familiarity with and admiration for projects like Fred Wilson's 1992 Mining the Museum, in which he challenged the dominant narrative of the Maryland Historical Society by intervening on the permanent collection. I bring my own perspective to the portraits and this project too.

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The act of telling stories, and by extension writing history, is a collaborative and iterative process. The story morphs each time it is told, not because the hard facts of what transpired change, but because the vantage point of the "teller" and the intended audience change. Different aspects or angles of what is known of the past become relevant, worth telling and learning from.

Installation view of *ReEnvisioned: Contemporary Portraits of Our Black Ancestors* in the A.M. Bush Gallery at Salem Art Association, 2025. Central image is The Bogle Family (America Waldo Bogle and her family). Photo credit: Mario Gallucci, image courtesy of Salem Art Association

In February of 2025, I look at these portraits and read the stories of the sitters and see individuals resisting an outwardly racist and unjust system not by loudly proclaiming their objections but by living their lives and engaging with their communities. Quiet resolve – moving through the world with integrity, authenticity, and care – can be resistance, too.

Asahel Bush and others lobbied heartily against the Black community in Oregon. The state's exclusion policies are a direct reflection of these attitudes. The racist rhetoric and policies couldn't stop Leticia Carson from growing flowers. They didn't stop Louis Southworth from playing the fiddle or Rose Jackson from caring for her family. They didn't stop Louisa Sewell from hosting parties and making ice cream and having a baby that maybe scowled in photos. Bigotry made things difficult, far more difficult than they should have been, but it didn't prevail in the long run.

Davis's portraits, accompanied by Wilson's wall tags and research, tell stories that had been previously overlooked. They equally offer the

opportunity to reflect on the stories we tell, how we tell them, and how to tell them in ways that matter in the current moment. Especially resonant today is the reminder that hate doesn't win.

ReEnvisioned: Contemporary Portraits of our Black Ancestors *is on view at the Bush Barn Art Center through February 22nd. Bush Barn Art Center is located at 600 Mission St. SE in Salem and is free and open to the public noon to 4 pm, Thursdays through Saturdays*

Laurel Reed Pavic is an art historian. Her academic research dealt with painting in 15th and 16th century Dalmatia. After finishing her PhD, she quickly realized that this niche, while fascinating, was rather small and expanded her interests so that she could engage with a wider audience. In addition to topics traditionally associated with art history, she enjoys considering the manipulation and presentation of cultural patrimony and how art and art history entangle with identity. She teaches a variety of courses at Pacific Northwest College of Art including courses on the multiple, the history of printed matter, modernism, and protest art.

statesman journal

LOCAL

10 Oregon Black pioneers brought to life in exhibit at Bush Barn

Capi Lynn
Salem Statesman Journal

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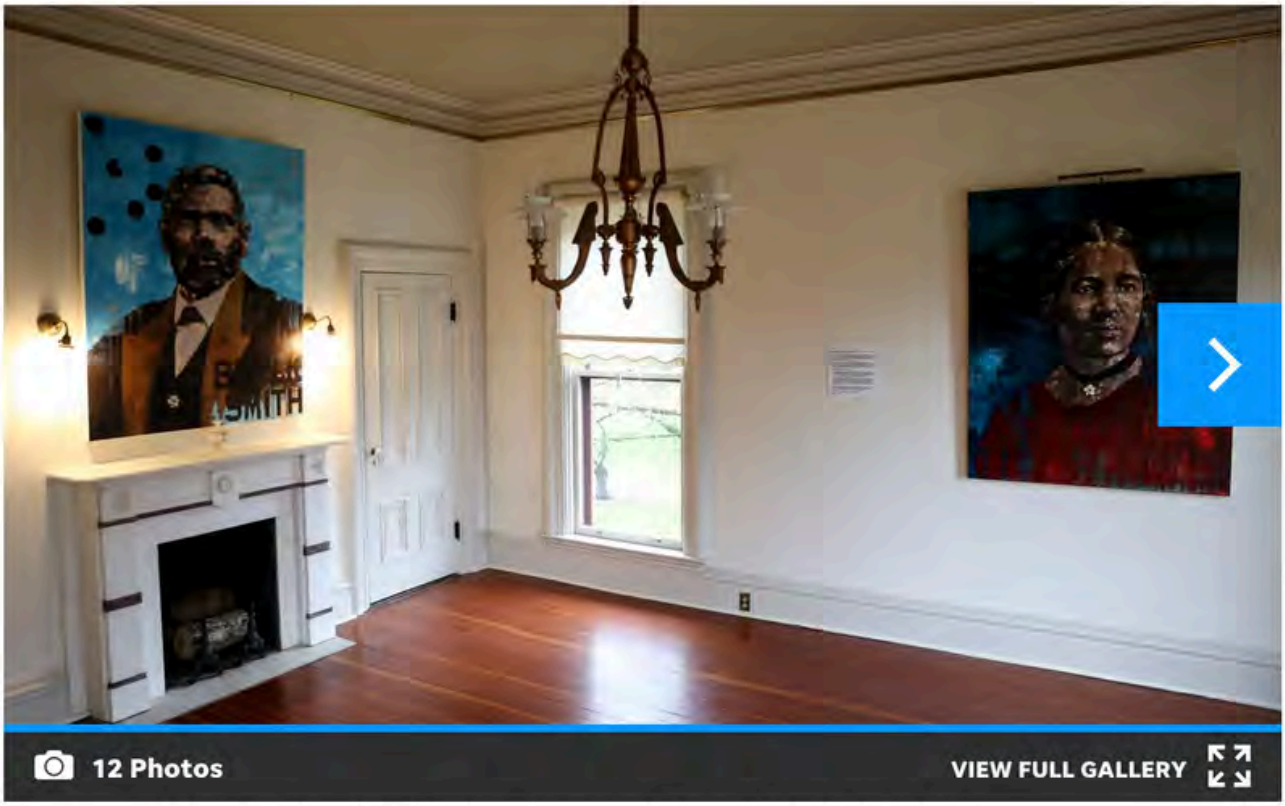


Portraits of Oregon Black pioneers exhibit at Bush Gallery in Salem

The collection of 10 contemporary portraits by Portland-based artist Jeremy Okai Davis is believed to be the only one of its kind.

Artist Jeremy Okai Davis has brought to life 10 Oregon Black pioneers in captivating color on canvas, using his unique pixelated style imbued with words, graphics and symbols.

The larger-than-life portraits, commissioned by the Salem Art Association, are on exhibit in the upstairs gallery at Bush Barn Art Center.

Curator Tammy Jo Wilson took into consideration the colors, body position and eye direction of the portrait subjects when arranging the exhibit.

“I could really get that feeling of them all looking at you when you come up the stairs,” Wilson said. “It has a more personal feeling.”

Oregon Black pioneers are featured in a 10-portrait series by Portland-based artist Jeremy Okai Davis and commissioned by the Salem Art Association for its permanent collection. *Capi Lynn/Statesman Journal*

The intent was not lost on Gwen Carr, who provided Davis with a list of potential subjects and their stories.

“This is going to stand corny, but as I stood there, I felt like they were looking at me and saying thank you,” Carr said. “We are lifting up their stories and faces.”

Some of their stories are familiar, having been passed on for generations. And until now, their faces were recognizable only in grainy black-and-white photographs.

Portraits help confront history of racism

Davis based all but one of the portraits on those historic images. For that one, he used an image of the woman's daughter for guidance.

When painting from photographs, Davis blows them up until they become pixelated. He emphasizes the pixels in his work, explaining that no matter the skin tone of his subject, the pixels show "we're all built from the same thing."

Jeremy Okai Davis discusses his process and his paintings during a 2023 presentation in the A.N. Bush Gallery. He was commissioned to do a series of paintings of Oregon Black pioneers for the Salem Art Association permanent collection. *Capi Lynn/Statesman Journal*

Choosing vibrant colors for clothing and background was a process of "looking at the photos and letting my mind see what the color needs to be or should be, and to revitalize them," he said.

Capturing the subjects' eyes was especially important. Early in the series, he described seeing a similarity. Their eyes looked worn but revealed a quiet strength through adversity.

Davis imagined their struggles while learning about their successes. They owned businesses and property, served as midwives and newspaper editors, and fought for their freedom and rights, most at a time when Oregon had Black exclusion laws.

Portraits of Oregon Black pioneers at A.N. Bush Gallery. *Capi Lynn/Statesman Journal*

Excerpts from the Oregon State Constitution, in an 1857 document courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society, are included in the exhibit. The state passed laws between 1844 and 1857 that explicitly sought to exclude Black individuals from settling here and created a legal framework for discriminatory practices that shaped the state's development.

Asahel Bush, a former publisher of the Statesman Journal and namesake of the museum managed by the Salem Art Association, was a racist who used the power of the press to incite public support for exclusion laws.

The Salem Art Association has spent the past few years confronting that history through art and conversation. One way it did that was by commissioning Davis to paint portraits of Black pioneers with long-overlooked contributions to Oregon history for its permanent collection.

The nearly $100,000 investment — the single largest investment in art the nonprofit has made — is part of the organization's broader effort to reinvent and reimagine the Bush House Museum.

“As far as we know, a series of contemporary portraits of early Black Americans doesn’t exist in the country,” said Matthew Boulay, executive director of the Salem Art Association. “And here it is in Salem with an Oregon artist.

“Individually, each portrait is artistically and aesthetically pleasing and powerful, but as a series, it really is a contribution to history and art history.”

Sybil Harber, who settled in eastern Oregon and was widely known for her skills as a midwife, is one of the subjects featured in the series. *Capi Lynn/Statesman*

Series features symbolism of a flower

Each of the portraits has a title: The Advocate, Beatrice Morrow Cannady; The Blacksmith, Ben Johnson; The Midwife, Sybil Harber; The Fiddler, Louis Southworth; The Hostess, Louisa Sewell; The Homesteader, Thomas King; The Homesteader; Letitia Carson; The Laundress, Rose Jackson; The Restauranteur, Roscoe Dixon; and The Bogles, America Waldo Bogle & Family.

Some of the titles are incorporated into the paintings. Midwife is embedded in Sybil Harber's ivory cream-colored dress, for example. Homesteader is in the bright blue background of Thomas King's portrait, but only some of the letters are discernible.

Davis purposely left the titles out in a few of the later paintings.

"It was kind of like my desire shifted, from wanting it to be obvious about what they contributed to wanting to see the people and not the text as what defines them," he said.

The paintings are connected in other symbolic ways, including each having some representation of a white magnolia.

The flower is noticeable in some on a necklace, a vest, or a dress. In others, he didn't force it. For the King portrait, he created a graphic off his left shoulder that represents the flower, which symbolizes nobility, perseverance and dignity and takes Davis back to his childhood and growing up with a magnolia tree in the yard.

Davis said the collection is more powerful than he anticipated. It was rewarding, after the nearly three-year project, for him to see all 10 portraits exhibited as one.

"A lot of times there can be sort of a detachment from the subject, and it just becomes work," the Portland-based artist said. "That never happened with this project."

How to see the exhibit and what's next

The exhibit, titled "ReEnvisioned: Contemporary Portraits of Our Black Ancestors," continues through Feb. 22 in the A.N. Bush Gallery of Bush Barn Art Center, 600 Mission St. SE. Winter hours are from noon to 4 p.m. Thursday through Saturday.

A free panel discussion featuring Davis, Wilson and Carr will be held the final day of the exhibit.

Carr has been using her connections, as a former executive director of the nonprofit Oregon Black Pioneers, to drum up interest in the collection as a traveling show. The leaders of two area museums, which generally schedule one to three years out, are expected to join her next week to visit the exhibition.

The portrait of Roscoe Dixon is titled "The Restauranteur." Dixon relocated to Astoria in 1880 and opened an oyster saloon, the city's first Black-owned business. *Capi Lynn/Statesman Journal*

The Patricia Reser Center for the Arts in Beaverton jumped on the bandwagon early, before Davis had even completed the series. Wilson said the Reser is scheduled to show the paintings this fall.

Boulay said no matter how often and far the portraits travel, Salem will remain their home.

"In between traveling exhibitions, we'll exhibit as many as we can at Bush House, and then every few years we'll bring it back here," he said.

Capi Lynn is a senior reporter for the Statesman Journal. Send comments, questions and tips to her at clynn@statesmanjournal.com, and follow her work on X @CapiLynn and Facebook @CapiLynnSJ.

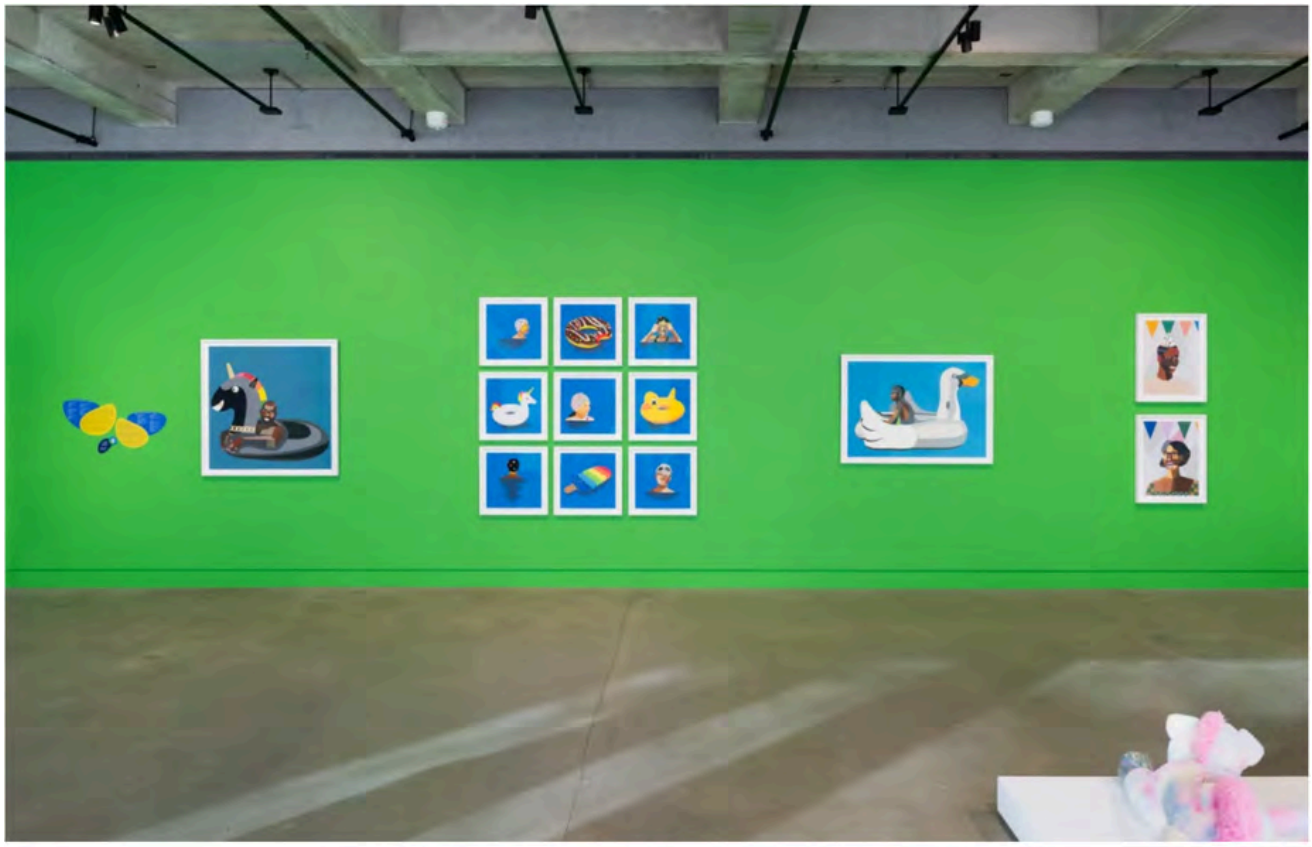
Portland MONTHLY

AT THE MUSEUM

Please, Play with the Art

A new show at PSU's Schnitzer museum celebrates play as a critical life force, and a means of political resistance.

By Matthew Trueblez • January 30, 2025

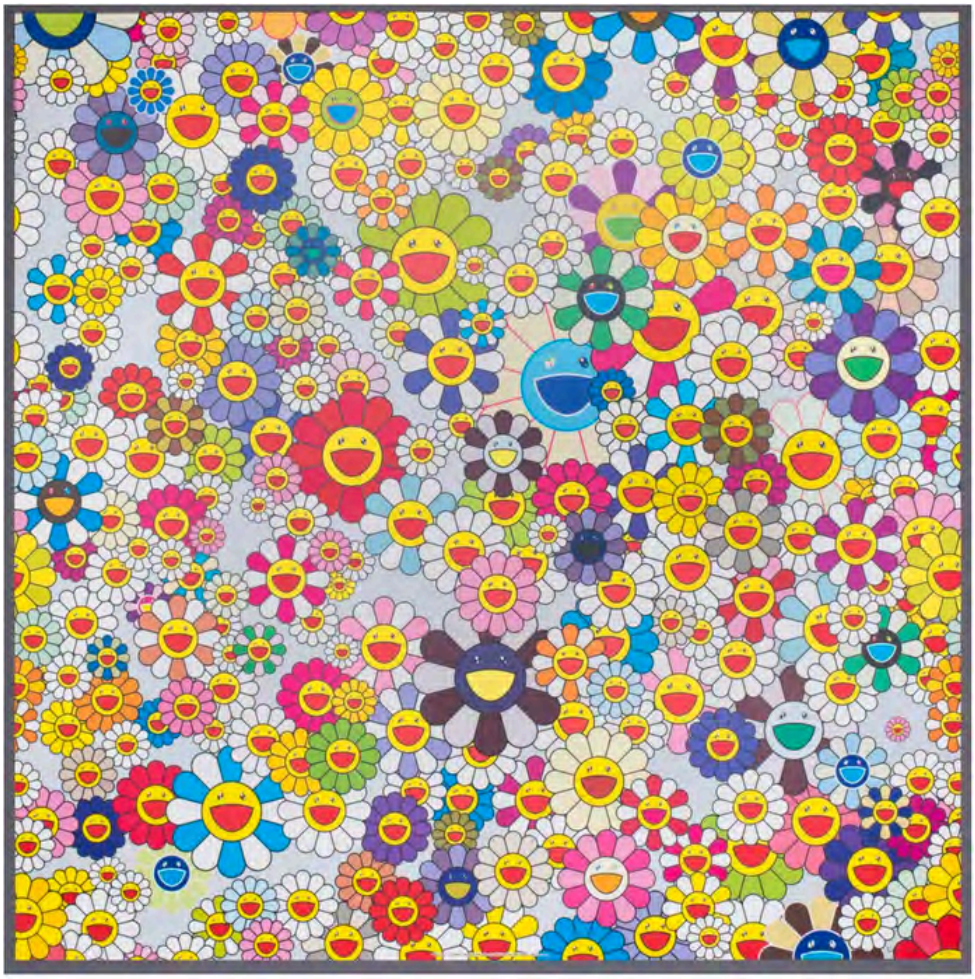


Installation view of works from Derrick Adams's *Floater* series, inspired by a picture the artist found of Martin Luther King Jr. swimming.

IMAGE: COURTESY JORDAN SCHNITZER MUSEUM OF ART AT PSU

IN JELLY BELLY SCRIPT on the entryway wall, the title ***Just Playin' Around*** announces the latest show at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Portland State University. Going off the jesting title, and artist Joshua Sin's pair of totem-like stuffed animal towers sitting beside it (they're titled Power Up; you're meant to hug them), it would be easy to write the show off as merely amusing, or worse, dismiss it as frivolous. But play, the theme connecting the show's cast of 11 international artists, is something of a Trojan horse.

In industrialized societies, play is "only worth it if you can monetize it," the show's cocurator Theo Downes-Le Guin told me. "—Or a luxury that you only can do if you have the resources," added his wife and cocurator Nancy Downes-Le Guin. Both see this lack of respect for play as the fatal flaw of market-driven societies. Playing around with no productive goal in sight has been a facet of every civilization as far back as Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, and for good reason: Prevailing sociological thought views play as critical to forming and maintaining cultures, as a bonding, learning, and problem solving exercise. To bring things into the present, Theo puts it like this: "Activities that are pointless to capitalism are not necessarily pointless to humanity."



Flowers (Superflat) by Takashi Murakami.

IMAGE: COURTESY JORDAN SCHNITZER MUSEUM OF ART AT PSU

And that is about as fine of a point as the curators are interested in putting on this show. Several brashly cartoonish yet endearing prints by the Japanese celebrity artist **Takashi Murakami** signal one end of its spectrum, while New York artist **Derrick Adams**'s series of screen-printed paintings, inspired by a photo of Martin Luther King Jr. taking a swim, might signal the other (you don't often see MLK in an innertube). Other works take up video games, sports, toys, corporate America, and child labor to represent play's function in modern culture, and the trouble with forgoing it, especially in the grips of political turmoil. Play! It's all kinds of good for you, is the message. The curators don't dare tell a viewer what they should or shouldn't do with their playtime.

A group of prints from Derrick Adams's *Floaters* series.

IMAGE: COURTESY JORDAN SCHNITZER MUSEUM OF ART AT PSU

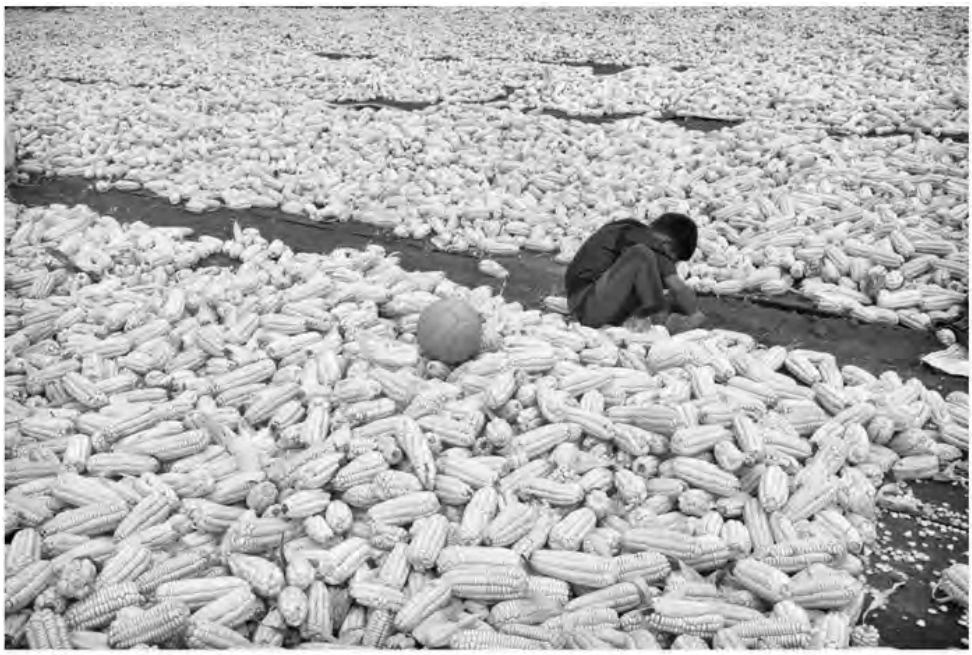
Assembling the show, the Downes-Le Guins noticed almost every artist they visited equated play with the ever elusive flow state: that creative moment of ease when inhibitions dissipate and inspiration and digested knowledge take over. Viewed a certain way, you could call this state freedom. Theo's mother, the massively influential author **Ursula K. Le Guin** (1929–2018), was famous for the ways she explored the tenets of freedom in her speculative fiction. Carrying some of her insights, Theo is quick to mention that nearly every culture, historical or fantastical, has taken to playing games and making art immediately after securing food and shelter. In an industrialized culture of optimization, however, play's benefits are less immediately tangible than, for instance, profit.

The result is a harshly critical societal view of play. Activities that you play, instead of simply do, are ousted from the realm of serious business. The word implies fiction, practice, play-acting for some eventual real-life corollary. Play is the opposite of work and therefore worthless.

Installation view of *Just Playin' Around*. At right, *Power Up* by Joshua Sin.

IMAGE: COURTESY JORDAN SCHNITZER MUSEUM OF ART AT PSU

Except when you're a kid, of course. Portland artist Joshua Sin's huggable pillars of discarded stuffed animals take advantage of this tender memory space. Sin pieced apart over a hundred plushies—stuffed frogs, unicorns, a smiling purple swirl of poop, and a rainbow-sequined dachshund among them—and meticulously stitched the toys into a pair of sculptures that look like snuggly Festivus poles. Conceptually, they're in line with that Seinfeldian holiday's critique of hollow consumerist joys, but there's another bit. "How do you take an object that comforted and protected a child—and then has been discarded—how do you reanimate it in a way that can comfort people anew?" Nancy explains.



Cornfield by Calvin Chen.

IMAGE: COURTESY JORDAN SCHNITZER MUSEUM OF ART AT PSU

Portland photographer Calvin Chen approaches child's play with a more somber tone. In Cornfield, an unused soccer ball sits next to a small child picking through an endless run of corn cobs. The print is a modest size, but it's a humongous picture. The field seems to expand past the edges of the photo forever, magnifying the juxtaposition of play (the ball) and work (the corn). The ball itself also comes to represent childhood more thoroughly than the actual kid in this dissonant child labor scene.

The ball also brings up sports, the great exception when it comes to the value society places on play. Jeremy Okai Davis's portraits of Marshall Major Taylor, the nineteenth-century star track cyclist, and Althea Gibson, the pioneering midcentury tennis and golf pro, both of whom were Black, speak more directly to sport's function in our society. Instead of championing tennis and cycling, Davis's paintings resurrect histories handicapped by racism. In doing so, they bring up one of the earliest and most impactful pathways toward desegregation. Why is it that playing sports is so integral to modern life, while playing games, and playing around making art, is extracurricular?

Crown (Althea Gibson) by Jeremy Okai Davis.

IMAGE: COURTESY JORDAN SCHNITZER MUSEUM OF ART AT PSU

While clarifying that he doesn't love the book, Theo mentions James P. Carse's Finite and Infinite Games to help explain. According to Carse, sports, as well as politics and war, are finite games: competitions with clear rules and clearer winners. Every other pursuit, including art and even life itself, is an infinite game. In these, rules are perpetually in flux, you play in order to keep playing, and, more often than not, it's impossible to tell how well you're doing. The tidy metrics of sports line up nicely with capitalist systems. Yet attempting to make the infinite game of life a finite game—applying the neatly legible stats of, say, a tennis match to existence itself—has its downsides. "In the end, winning and losing is binary," Theo says, "and binarism has its limitations as a world view." As Davis's pictures make clear, sporting rules aren't necessarily fair either.

Installation view of *Just Playin' Around*. At right, *They are all equal now* by Heidi Schwegler.

IMAGE: COURTESY JORDAN SCHNITZER MUSEUM OF ART AT PSU

The artist Heidi Schwegler, who lives in California's Yucca Valley, looked to bugs for playful inspiration, asking, Do cockroaches play? Across countless fields of study, trying to understand how and why animals and insects do things—play, in this case—is a helpful abstraction to understand how and why humans do things. It's also a good exercise in interspecies empathy, as the resulting sculptural installation's cheekily sinister title, They are all equal now, suggests. The piece involves both a sculptural tableau and a video of the scene in motion. Next to several larger-than-life metal insect sculptures, which sit in miniature bumper cars, a video of those same buggies motoring around plays projected against a small box. The catch is you have to stoop to cockroach-eye-level to watch the bugs play with human toys.

Though he hopes he has a good sense of humor ("one never knows"), Theo says curating this exhibition forced him to confront his own biases. Despite best intentions, he admits he's always felt seriousness and play were "at odds with each other." A year-and-change of studying play quite seriously later, he feels differently, and now calls play a "deadly serious" act of creativity, subversion, and resistance.

Nancy, who also works in early childhood development, didn't need convincing. "Play can help you get unstuck," she says. "We're in a time where a lot of people feel very stuck in their views, or their abilities to affect any kind of change; play is a way to unlock that." Play is a kind of cognitive escape to an extra-reality, one that's proven itself as a generative or soothing or joyful resource for millennia. "My mother always said, 'What is escape but the search for freedom?'" Theo says, "and who doesn't want and deserve freedom?"

JORDAN SCHNITZER MUSEUM OF ART AT PSU

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Jeremy Okai Davis, *Crown (Althea Gibson)*, 2023, Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 inches, Collection of the Salem Convention Center, Salem, OR, Image Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, OR

Just Playin' Around

ON VIEW JANUARY 21 THROUGH APRIL 26, 2025

The Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at PSU is pleased to present *Just Playin' Around*, featuring the work of Derrick Adams, Calvin Chen, Jeremy Okai Davis, Latoya Lovely, Jillian Mayer, Takashi Murakami, Jeremy Rotsztain, Heidi Schwegler, Joshua Sin, Matthew Earl Williams, and Erwin Wurm. The exhibition is on view from January 21 through April 26, 2025, with a panel discussion at 4 PM on Thursday, January 23, followed by the opening reception. All events are free to the public.

Play and humor have deep but often unacknowledged roles in the history of art. Like art, play exists outside of the realms of logic and utility; yet both are universal across human history and cultures. Many artists acknowledge that playfulness is a necessary state for making art, allowing them to think flexibly, to take risks and to achieve states of creative flow. Playfulness and humor in art can also be a crucial form of subversion and resistance, especially for artists whose identities and subject matters challenge societal norms and conventions.

"The artists in this exhibition show us how play is a form of freedom, and art and artists can't exist without freedom," said Nancy and Theo Downes-Le Guin, co-curators of the exhibition. "These connections between play, art, and freedom are worth serious consideration. But we didn't want this exhibition to explore play in art just as an idea–the experience should be fun and participatory. We hope people are going to find a lot to laugh about and think about in *Just Playin' Around*."

Just Playin' Around is curated by Nancy Downes-Le Guin and Theo Downes-Le Guin. This exhibition is supported by The Ford Family Foundation, The Reser Family Foundation, the Jackson Foundation, Elements Roofing, the Richard and Helen Phillips Charitable Fund, and the JSMA Exhibition Circle.

Upcoming Events

Conversation with Artists & Curators

Thursday, January 23 | 4:00 – 5:00 PM

JSMA at PSU is thrilled to host *Just Playin' Around* featured artists Heidi Schwegler and Joshua Sin in conversation with curators Nancy Downes-Le Guin and Theo Downes-Le Guin. Starting at 4:00 PM, the artists will discuss their art practice and its connection to play.

RSVP HERE

Opening Reception

Thursday, January 23 | 5:00 – 7:00 PM

Join us for a night of fun at the opening reception of *Just Playin' Around*! Featuring the work of 11 contemporary artists, the exhibition is a peephole into some of the many ways in which art is play, play is art, and both are in all of us.

RSVP HERE

Storytime

Saturday, February 1 | 11:00 AM – 12:00 PM

Join us for Storytime with Portland-based artist Latoya Lovely! Lovely invites you to interact with her installation on view through stories and songs!

Storytime includes ASL interpretation and is geared toward pre-K through early elementary students (guardians must accompany). Storytime will take place **inside** the museum.

RSVP HERE

JSMA at PSU Hours

Tuesday:	11 am – 5 pm
Wednesday:	11 am – 5 pm
Thursday:	11 am – 7 pm
Friday:	11 am – 5 pm
Saturday:	11 am – 5 pm
Sunday:	Closed
Monday:	Closed

Please note that hours are subject to staffing availability. Please check our social media and website for our most up-to-date information.

JORDAN SCHNITZER MUSEUM OF ART AT PSU

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PORTLAND, OR 97201
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Portland MONTHLY

ART REVIEW

Jeremy Okai Davis Paints the Complex Legacy of Black Performance

Past and present, vaudeville to Pryor to Kendrick, the stage has been a fraught mix of expression and oppression.

By Matthew Trueherz • November 15, 2024

Portland artist Jeremy Okai Davis's *from the stage, a calling...*, at Elizabeth Leach Gallery through December 7, collects portraits of Black performers across America's history.

IMAGE: COURTESY MARIO GALLUCCI/ELIZABETH LEACH GALLERY

AT PICKUP BASKETBALL GAMES, one of Portland artist Jeremy Okai Davis's friends would shout "thick gravy" when he hit a shot. People say all kinds of things in the uniquely competitive trance of a pickup game, metaphors and brags ranging from poetic and even profound to completely nonsensical. "Thick gravy" was tough to decode, though. And when Davis asked, his friend's answer launched a sort of pop culture feedback loop. It was an attempt at a reference to the 1990 movie *House Party*. "Peanut, fix me some of that Dick Gregory," uncle Otis says in the movie, referring to the diet drink the legendary comedian and activist put out in the '80s. According to the comments section of a nine-second clip from the film on YouTube, with nearly 55,000 views, Davis's friend was not alone in hearing "thick gravy" instead of "Dick Gregory."

Tareyton (Dick Gregory) by Jeremy Okai Davis from *Shrine* at Elizabeth Leach Gallery.

IMAGE: COURTESY MARIO GALLUCCI/ELIZABETH LEACH GALLERY

It's exactly these instances—generational games of telephone, digested, mutated, and transmogrified collages of culture—that Davis is interested in painting. About the Dick Gregory malapropism, he painted *Tareyton (Dick Gregory)*, a portrait of the comedian overlaid with a pack of Tareytons, the cigarettes he smoked onstage, and a glossy plate of biscuits and (no doubt thick) gravy. Collected, the subject matter arrays past and present, personal and public performances, onscreen, -stage, and court. *from the stage, a calling…*, Davis's current show at Elizabeth Leach gallery, takes up the endless subject of Black performance. From '70s stand-up to minstrel shows, magic acts to vaudeville numbers and cakewalks, Davis's paintings signal the complex function performance has served in American Black culture, as a simultaneous means for expression and oppression, exploitation and protestation.

The Yams (Richard Pryor) by Jeremy Okai Davis.

IMAGE: COURTESY MARIO GALLUCCI/ELIZABETH LEACH GALLERY

Next to Dick Gregory, making something of a diptych, is half a portrait of Richard Pryor; a glassy, sparkling plate of candied yams takes up the top third of the painting and a sign advertising "Big Bertha's Sweet Potatoes" is plastered over Pryor's face. Because, of course, Kendrick Lamar once declared that "the yam brought it out of Richard Pryor." So many words on the internet have been spent trying to decode what exactly "the yam" is. It's a woman's seductive curves, a reference to drug balloons, and a vegetable thoroughly engrained in African cuisine. It's "the ability to subvert without appearing to subvert," is where a *W Magazine* profile of Lamar landed. The yam, here, is a stand-in for power, an intractable, invaluable vitality. Maybe the yam is the glamour in that dangerous glint of unpredictability we call stage presence.

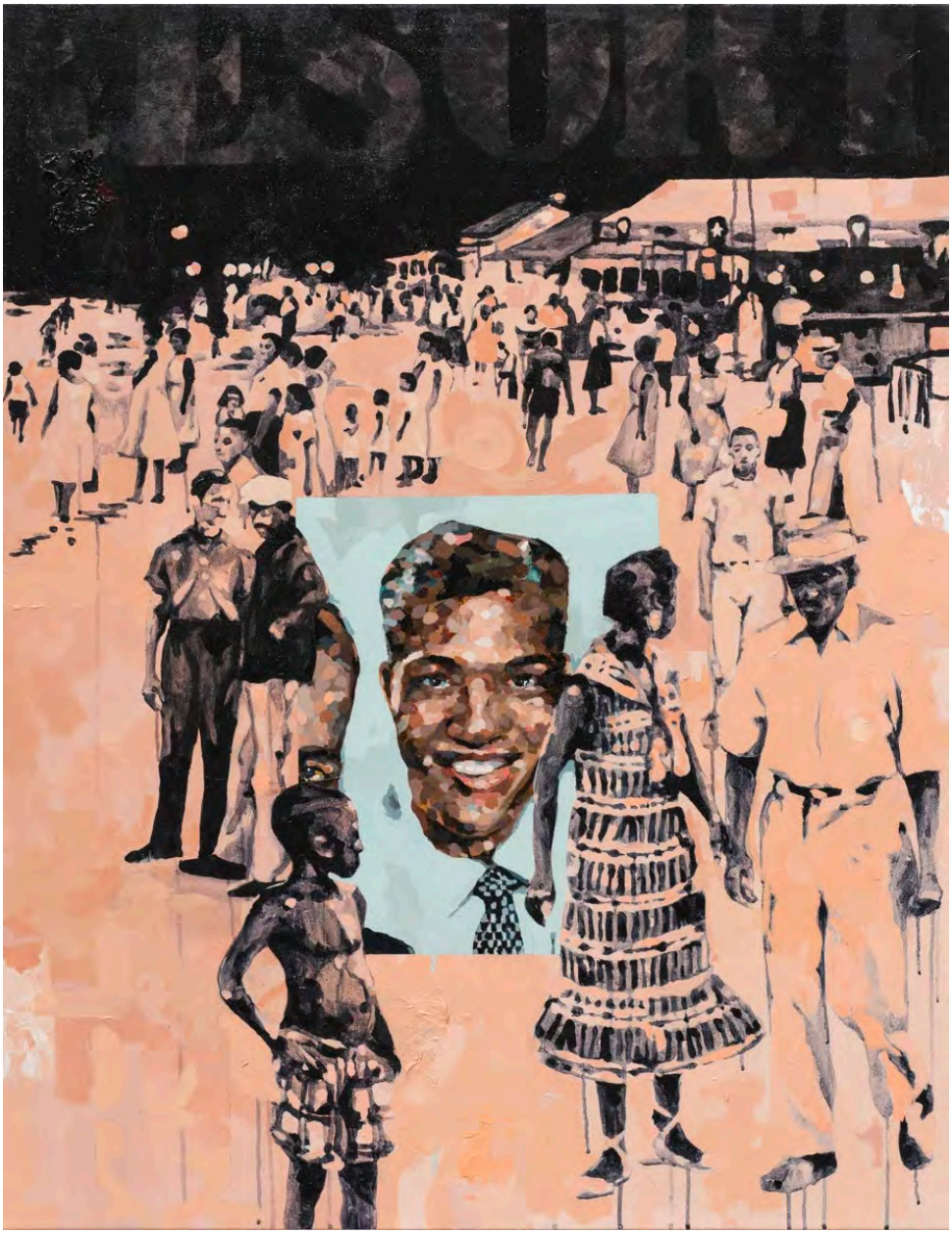
Both paintings play in what the philosopher Julia Kristeva called intertextuality —the ways artworks and cultural artifacts ("texts") affect each other back and forth through time, accumulating and altering their references and inspirations to then be, in turn, altered and accumulated by future works. By collecting them, Davis seems to be asking, how do these past cultural touchstones function in the present? How does one thing, however accurately it's interpreted, eventually become something else? When does Dick Gregory, the comedian known for addressing bigotry onstage in a Southern US governed by Jim Crow, become shorthand for a diet drink and a swish and eventually a plate of biscuits and gravy? These two paintings play directly with references across timelines, but the rest of the show homes in on singular historical figures and spaces, showing how *re*-presenting these lesser- or unknown figures in a modern context complicates their legacies.

Hopalong Hamlet (Juliette Whittaker) by Jeremy Okai Davis.

IMAGE: COURTESY MARIO GALLUCCI/ELIZABETH LEACH GALLERY

Davis paints exclusively from photo reference (confirmed by the fact that everyone he paints is dead), which gives his layered pictures the archival feel of news clippings and photos that look important because they're old. It's as if someone saved this information and your job as viewer is to understand why. Such is the case with *Hopalong Hamlet (Juliette Whittaker)*, a layered portrait of Pryor's first mentor. Whittaker taught Pryor at an afterschool community center in Peoria, Illinois, first casting him in a production of *Rumpelstiltskin* and ultimately aiding in his path from humble beginnings to stardom. In effect, the

painting is both a tribute to Whittaker and a subtext of how Richard Pryor became Richard Pryor.



Resort (Chowan Beach) by Jeremy Okai Davis.

IMAGE: COURTESY MARIO GALLUCCI/ELIZABETH LEACH GALLERY

Resort (Chowan Beach) is named for the vacation town in North Carolina, Davis's home state. Starting in the 1920s, Chowan Beach was an oasis for Black

Americans living in this violently segregated country. A bathhouse, dance hall, restaurant, and even a carousel made for something like a hidden wonderland: a space to vacation from oppression. It also drew major performers, the likes of B.B. King, James Brown, and Sam Cooke. Which brings up a crucial aspect of performance: By definition, a show needs an audience. At Chowan Beach, Black performers played to Black audiences, creating a rare opportunity for a show as unbothered by a white gaze as was possible a century ago.

Cake Walk (Bert & George) by Jeremy Okai Davis.

IMAGE: COURTESY MARIO GALLUCCI/ELIZABETH LEACH GALLERY

By contrast, the painting *Cake Walk (Bert & George)*, a dual portrait of famed vaudeville performers Bert Williams and George Walker, directly addresses the ways an audience can grossly twist a performance. The cakewalk was a dance developed in the late nineteenth century in which slaves covertly mocked slave owners' mannered gestures. Slave owners eventually held competitions—giving out a literal cake to the winner—unaware they were the butt of the joke. And as if that weren't enough of a loop, the act soon became a regular facet of minstrel shows, in which white dancers performed the cakewalk in blackface, appropriating and, in a jarringly ignorant racist romp, mocking the dance they failed to realize mocked them.

In the painting, Davis spells out "Cake Walk" with prominent letters in primary colors. Other paintings in the show feature text, but this, the crudest example of a cultural phenomenon being abducted by racism, features the most overt words. "Resort" is spelled out across the top of *Resort (Chowan Beach)*, but you can only see it if you catch the right light, if you know to look for it, as it's painted black over black. Whether the hidden text is a reference to the resort's somewhat covert nature or to its entirely Black patronage, it too seems to comment on how an audience shapes a performance.

Minstrel versions of the cakewalk wanted to make perfectly clear they were stealing the Black dance, whereas Sam Cooke didn't need such flagrant signaling to be understood at Chowan Beach. Still, however authentic the bond between performer and audience, every show is at least a little bit synthetic. Putting on a show is stretching reality to represent something intangible. And because a performance is a living work, specific to a unique moment that can never be repeated, it's necessarily wild. You need the yams, you need thick gravy. Things are not to be as they appear, and that unwieldy power enables both greatness and horror. Davis's paintings embody this complicated duality while placing past and present in dialogue. They collapse time and force you to ask how much things stay the same as they appear to change.

WILLAMETTE WEEK

Jeremy Okai Davis' Newest Portraits Uncover Once-Obscure Black American Entertainment History

"This is like…Black Girl Magic, you know?" Davis says about his portrait of midcentury magician Ellen Armstrong.

Jeremy Okai Davis (JP Bogan)

By Mac Smiff

October 22, 2024 at 11:40 pm PDT

Viewers should lose themselves in Jeremy Okai Davis' latest portrait exhibit, *from the stage, a calling…*, which opens Thursday, Nov. 7 at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, as soon as possible.

For his third art installment since he began working with the gallery in 2019, Davis looks to highlight the history and spirit of Black performance through a collection of portraits analyzing and celebrating the rich, complex and often tragic development of African American arts as acts of resistance and resilience.

For Davis, a Portland resident since 2007, the dynamic and often outlandish cultural critiques of Richard Pryor and Dick Gregory provided clear examples of comedy creating jovial—if not contentious—spaces to explore inequality, cultural faux pas, and racial tensions. That clever dedication to honest self-expression despite the risks and threats of being understood has always been remarkably appealing, and it's that very duality that drives this exhibit.

“I started with this idea of stage comedy,” the Charlotte, N.C., native recalls. “Laugh to keep from crying…Black people often have to do that.”

Jeremy Okai Davis Paintings in Jeremy Okai Davis' new Elizabeth Leach Gallery show await installation. (JP Bogan)

Davis’ research on each artist and their circumstances informed his portraits visually, and soon he was beyond comedy, finding that same inspiring duality across genres in African American stage acting and music, particularly during the vaudeville era, which overlapped neatly with Jim Crow. With his impressionist portrait style that lends to historical significance, Davis put paint to canvas, memorializing people and places previously new to him.

Davis hasn’t always painted with this sort of cultural depth. About a decade ago at the Studio Museum of Harlem’s *Speaking of People* exhibit, he found himself presenting his cleverly pixelated work alongside that of legendary artists such as Kerry James Marshall and Theaster Gates, and felt inspired, “called” even, to speak more with his art.

Davis’ latest exhibit seems to be a culmination of that calling, showcasing his ability to tell the most inspiring stories through fine art.

During a recent reading of Hanif Abdurraqib's *A Little Devil in America: In Praise of Black Performance*, Davis learned about Ellen Armstrong, born 1914, a little-known Black magician who started apprenticing at the tender age of 6 with her father, the famous J.H. Armstrong, and his traveling show. In 1939, when the elder Armstrong died, Ellen kept the show going for another 30 years with the help of her stepmother, finally retiring in 1970. Davis was in awe and felt he had to create a piece about her. "This is like…Black Girl Magic, you know?" he asks, before admitting, "I have to say, she inspired me."

In his focal piece, *Cake Walk (Bert + George)*, 2024, Davis toys with abstract brushstrokes in muted pastels, stenciling the words "CAKE WALK" in a bold font and curious coloration seemingly at odds with the tempered backdrop. Below the words, two circles contain portraits in Davis' signature style—a distorted effect reminiscent of looking through a droplet-splashed window—portraying sharply dressed bow-tied Black men with less than jovial, or perhaps even sad, expressions.

A "cakewalk" now means an easy task, "a piece of cake." But before the Civil War, the term described a dance that slaves routinely used to covertly parody how slave masters moved. When slave masters saw the dancing, they were intrigued, holding dance contests for their slaves to win a chance at cake. By the late 1800s, the dance was a key part of minstrel shows, often performed by white people in blackface. Bert Williams and George Walker were Black men who performed in blackface, billing themselves as "Two Real Coons" in order to draw moneyed white crowds. Away from the bright lights of the stage, they had little reason to smile.

Dripping with lustrous details that quickly tease out audience curiosity, each article of Davis' artwork tells the essence of a story, inviting viewers to seek further details and get lost in a beautiful history encompassing Black American existence that may have otherwise gone untold."I see this as a sort of short form," he says. "Like CliffsNotes of African Americans in performance."

SEE IT: *from the stage, a calling…* by Jeremy Okai Davis at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, 417 NW 9th Ave., 503-224-0521, elizabethleach.com. Opening reception 5:30–7:30 pm Thursday, Nov. 7. 10:30 am–5:30 pm Tuesday–Saturday, Nov. 7–Dec. 7.

33 JEREMY OKAI DAVIS ART

THE ART OF PRACTICE

Written by Armin Tolentino; Photographed by Laura Dart

There's a memory from Jeremy Okai Davis's childhood that still echoes within him: his uncle, the late Walter Davis, an NBA All-Star, was visiting family back in North Carolina, shooting hoops with his young nephew. Jeremy missed a shot and it was time to head inside, but Walter dropped a piece of wisdom that Jeremy would never let go of: "You can't walk away on a missed shot."

Basketball was a central part of the Davis household, and for much of his youth, one of Jeremy's deepest passions, along with art. He's since channeled his energies from basketball to painting, but he's applied everything he learned from the court to the canvas.

The Practice

Growing up in Charlotte, Davis's life as an athlete and an artist were always two distinct worlds; but within, the two passions fed each other. He developed a work ethic in the gym that drives his artistic determination today. His studio is a Tuff Shed in his backyard; the proximity to his house, maybe twelve steps door to door, can be a challenge. How do you motivate yourself to show up and work, when you might not have ideas, when you might be bored, when the living room couch sounds much more welcoming than the Tuff Shed at night?

Davis talks about artistic preparation like an elite athlete. He quotes his uncle's advice and tries every day to "make the shot in the studio." Through sixteen years of constant practice since moving to Portland, he's developed an idiosyncratic style of portraiture, in the vein of pointillism, where each brushstroke of color retains its distinct independence instead of melting into homogeny. Step back, and the subject's face blends into gorgeous coherence. Step closer, and the viewer sees the many pebbles of hues that materialize when we pay attention at this more intimate proximity. With only a few colors, Davis is able to recreate the entire spectrum of human skin tone, but also peppers in pops of green and blue and hot pink, which help bring out, he says, "the eccentricities of people."

With only a few colors, Davis is able to recreate the entire spectrum of human skin tone, but also peppers in pops of green and blue and hot pink, which help bring out, he says, "the eccentricities of people."

It's all about showing up: "Just getting in the studio, trying things and playing around. You're flexing a muscle. Trying to see how it feels. That's the workout."

The Game

If basketball and painting have in common a necessary commitment to practice, the ultimate performance for an athlete and an artist look very different. Success in sports is so measurable…there's literally a score. How does Davis, after all that exertion and the late nights in the studio, know whether his work, ultimately, was successful?

Engagement, he tells me. Jeremy's game day is now the opening night of his exhibitions. And while his work has been displayed at dozens of prestigious locations, including the Portland Art Museum, the Washington Convention Center, and the Multnomah Courthouse, he doesn't measure success by the number of people who show up. It's not enough for his paintings to be simply attractive. He expects the portraits to inspire conversations, spark curiosity, and sow new knowledge, especially for viewers outside of the fine arts world. The son of two educators, perhaps it's no surprise that Davis's mission as an artist has evolved in this direction: through the still medium of portraiture, he seeks to reanimate the vibrant histories and accomplishments of Black athletes, leaders, culture bearers, and trailblazers.

In 2018, the Port of Portland displayed an exhibition of Jeremy's work along Concourse A of the Portland International Airport. Some traveling parents were so compelled by his work, they reached out to him. "Your painting stopped my daughter in her tracks," they said. "Here's what it meant to her." These moments of engagement are precious to Davis. That a child, in the frenzy of an airport between gate and baggage claim, could be so taken by works of art. That her family paused and listened to what she and the paintings were trying to share. That they were moved to share with him in turn. Fittingly, this exhibit was called *More Education*, fourteen pieces that reflect Davis's childhood influences and loved ones: a painting of his father holding his infant brother, with the words COACH emblazoned in block letters beneath; the cover of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*.

More recently, in 2022, Davis unveiled A Good Sport, portraits of African American athletes and public figures, many lost in our collective memory due to the pervasive racism these barrier-breakers experienced during their careers. Revisiting their accomplishments invites us to wonder at their wellspring of resilience, the thick skin these figures had to cultivate in order to succeed. I asked him about the impetus for telling their stories. "Part of me feels a responsibility to do it," he says. "It feels like if I didn't insert my people's history into the work I'd be kind of doing a disservice." But it's far from an obligation for Davis; he finds it exciting to uncover and bring these histories back into our consciousness. "I genuinely enjoy the educational aspects of it and not even for the service to the community necessarily. It ends up being that—but a lot of it is for me."

The Offseason

With all the effort he expends—the research, the hours he devotes in deep study of his subjects over the four to six months it takes to create work for a new exhibition—how does Davis maintain the motivation to start from a blank canvas again and imagine what's next, for his work and for himself as an artist?

Davis draws a comparison to the basketball offseason. Truly great ball players don't fritter away the three months between seasons. They use that time to add a new move to their repertoire that will elevate their game. The artist Davis, like the athlete Davis, attacks every offseason with this same vision: "The main thing I've tried to do over the course of my career is to test just how far I can push the paint." Push the paint to capture forgotten stories. Push the paint to extract curiosity and clarity through thousands of brushstrokes, individual in perception, but collective in purpose. And, most critically, to push himself, to test what his abilities and his imagination can manifest with the raw materials in his care.

Rather than wait for opportunities, Davis makes things happen —a skill honed from his earliest days in Portland in 2007, when he and other emerging artists banded together and embraced the DIY ethos. Through their collective resourcefulness and ingenuity, they created art shows, serving as each other's promoters and gallerists. Though it can feel terrifying, his advice to the new crop of artists he has mentored at Pacific Northwest College of Art and Lewis & Clark College is beautiful in its simplicity: "You make the work and you show the work, even if it's not your finest. You get better. Just put it on the wall."

In this way, Jeremy Okai Davis continues to honor his uncle's advice from those many years ago. If we get comfortable with the missed shot, if we get comfortable with complacency, we never learn. We never discover what is possible. What the paint can do. What we can do when we dare to show the world what we've made and, in turn, what has made us.

‘The Evergreen’: Black artists of Oregon

By Mia Estrada

Feb. 26, 2024 6 a.m.

"Untitled (Woman with daughter)," from Carrie Mae Weems' Kitchen Table series, is featured in the Portland Art Museum's "Black Artists of Oregon" exhibition.

Courtesy of Portland Art Museum

0:00 / 19:06

The Portland Art Museum is highlighting “Black Artists of Oregon” collectively for the first time. The exhibition captures Black diasporic experiences in the Pacific Northwest, dating from the 19th century to present day. The exhibition is filled with artwork full of love, joy, anger and darkness from almost 70 Black artists, and remains through March 31.

Featuring:

- Intisar Abioto, artist and curator of “Black Artists of Oregon”
- Jeremy Okai Davis, artist
- Carrie Mae Weems, artist
- Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe, artist
- Mehran Heard aka Eatcho, artist

Eric Slade, OPB Oregon Art Beat producer, narrates this episode.

Portland MONTHLY

SELF PORTRAIT

Painter Jeremy Okai Davis Doesn't Sleep Much

Graphic designer and father to two preschoolers by day, the celebrated portrait artist rewrites Black history in his backyard by night.

By Matthew Trueherz February 23, 2024

Jeremy Okai Davis in his backyard painting studio

IMAGE: MICHAEL RAINES

JEREMY OKAI DAVIS'S PARTNER, Brittany, recently bought him a pair of forest green Dickies coveralls. "I wanted a uniform," he says, to help draw boundaries between his graphic design day job, his busy life fathering their two sons (ages three and five), and the hours he sneaks out to his painting studio in the backyard. When he's in the suit, Davis says in an assuredly calm baritone that still carries a touch of his North Carolina roots, "I know I'm working."

As a portrait painter, Davis, 44, uses a form that's been relatively outmoded by photography. He paints ignored or otherwise thwarted Black historical figures (musicians, actors, pioneers, and athletes), giving them their belated due in a distinct, pointalist style—think pixelated images rendered with painterly textures. His acrylic paintings have hung in the Studio Museum of Harlem, in New York; at THIS, in Los Angeles; and are in permanent collections at both Oregon State and the University of Oregon.

His backyard studio is beginning to fill with paintings for his third solo show at Elizabeth Leach gallery in Portland, scheduled for September. Meanwhile, he's also curating a group show devoted to mixed-media works (featuring artists Rebecca Boraz, Maria Britton, Anthony R. Grant, and Chris Lael Larson), *Mélange*, which opens at Nationale February 24.

How might one person pull all these threads together? He doesn't sleep much. A treadmill, a healthy Blazers fandom, and blurred boundaries enable the rest.

Describe your studio.
It's comfortable, almost like a living room. There's a TV—I've always watched movies while I work. And I want it to be kind of a mess. I keep the same mess [as I'm making] a body of work: works in progress, inspirational pictures pinned to the wall, books I'm working from are out and about. It's organized confusion. I want it to be set up when I get in here.

What's the most impractical but crucial thing you keep here?
Probably the treadmill. If I'm starting to get tired late in the evening, I get on there and jog or walk for a bit—like you'd walk around the neighborhood. It helps process things. I'll zone out and start thinking about my next step on a piece.

What gets you in the right headspace to work?
Deadlines. Necessity. I have to make the work; I have to be in the right headspace, so I just bring myself to the studio and put myself there. To stay in that headspace, jazz helps with backgrounds; podcasts and movies help with detail work.

Give me the bullet points of a typical workday.
Monday, Wednesday, and Friday are the days that I'm home in the studio, and not at the office. I wake up, take the kids to school and daycare, and get back at 8. I

give myself a 30-minute window to check in with work, then I close the laptop and don't open it again. Then painting, reading, anything centered around my art practice. After lunch, another 30 minutes on the laptop. Close it again. Then I'll work until 4:30 or five, when the kids and my girlfriend get home. If I have the energy for it, the evenings still feel like the best time to make work. Sometimes I'm out here pretty late—till 1:30 or two o'clock.

How many hours do you sleep?
Six at the max. Three if I'm in the throes of a body of work.

What are you obsessed with?
Up until a couple years ago, I didn't miss many Blazers games. I would sacrifice studio time. Even if I had a project to do, I would go to a bar with friends to watch a game.

Describe being an artist in America.
Foolish. It's that age-old thing: *why would you choose this?* But it's also empowering, to have this outlet to take in all the negative, the positive—all the things—and throw them back at people in a creative way.

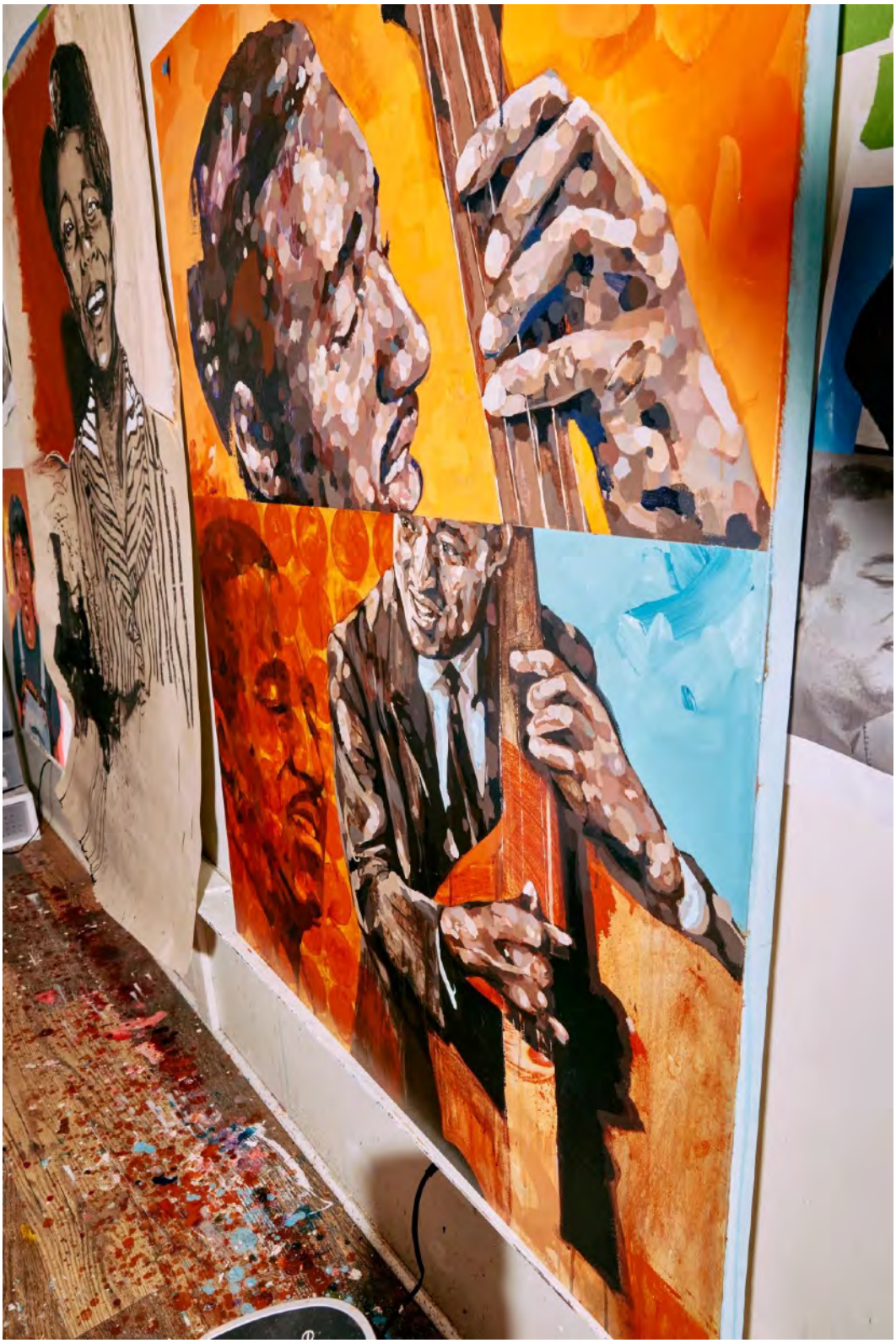


IMAGE: MICHAEL RAINES

Why did you want to curate a show?
I used to have a *highly curated* Tumblr page, where I [posted] things that inspired me. Curating a show, in a sense, is like that in real time, in the real world. Trying to curate a show that feels cohesive, that makes sense and looks good on the wall, makes me consider the work that I'm making. It's inspirational for me. In a way, it selfishly gives me the opportunity to slip into other artists' studios and see what they're doing.

Why did you want to show collages?
I was interested in the idea of a show that speaks to painting without having actual paintings in it. My work doesn't outwardly reference collage, but I am collaging ideas and images in it. I'll often start with a Photoshop "collage," or a physical collage, that I'll then draw and transfer to a painting. The show is, like, "the steps to a painting," in a way.

What was the last great show you saw?
The *Black Artists of Oregon* show at PAM [through March 31]—save the fact that I'm in it. Intisar Abioto curated a show of Oregon-based Black artists. But it's not just about being a Black artist. It's multifaceted. There's an idea that all Black people see things the same way. She did a great job presenting the Black experience from many angles. Some of the work isn't even about the Black experience; it's just about the experience of being a person or an artist in the world.

A show you're looking forward to?
I love Laurie Danial's abstract paintings; she shows with Froelick Gallery and has a few paintings in its current group show (through March 2). I love portraiture, people, figures. But I sometimes think about throwing all that out the window—what it would be like to let the paint be the thing that people respond to. And she does that.

What inspires your work beyond visual art?
I played the Seattle folk singer Dean Johnson's album into the ground the past couple weeks [from Portland's Mama Bird Recording Co.]. His music sits in this old, folky feeling, but somehow feels contemporary, like it was made right now. In my paintings, I reference the past—art history, historical figures—but bring it into the present, and try to make it interesting for all people. Maybe that's why I like Johnson so much.

IMAGE: MICHAEL RAINES

One Portland-centered piece of art that everyone should know?
There's a mural of "Working" Kirk Reeves [the beloved street performer who died by suicide in 2012] on NE Grand, on the side of the Dutch Bros. I would see him every day on my way home from work, on the downtown onramp for the Hawthorne bridge, playing instruments and doing magic tricks. He was struggling with his mental health, but he was always there, wearing these Mickey Mouse ears, trying to make people happy. I'd wave, but I never spoke with him. Thinking back: What would talking to that guy be like? What's his story? What was his life like?

If you could have coffee with one dead Portland artist?
I remember seeing one of Henk Pander's pieces at the Portland Art Museum when I first moved here and wondering, "What amazing, art-historical person made this work?" Then I learned he was alive and working in Portland. But I never met him. If I had met him earlier, I would have asked him, "How do you get to the place you are?" But now, I think I already know that there's no such thing as getting to that place.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

LEGACY HEALTH

Community Impact

Portland artist sees career flourish after work appears at Randall

January 31, 2024

Like many artists, Jeremy Okai Davis spent periods of his childhood doodling. The drawings were just a way to pass the time. Basketball was going to be his future. But after spending a year playing basketball at a junior college, he returned home to Charlotte determined to pursue art as a career.

When he enrolled at the University of North Caroline at Charlotte, he assumed his studies would focus on graphic design. But then he met some students in the school's painting department. He found his calling. Fast forward to 2007 when Jeremy moved to Portland and became serious about his art.

"I finally felt comfortable calling myself a professional artist," he said.

His career took off in 2012 when Legacy commissioned Jeremy to create paintings for Randall Children's Hospital at Legacy Emanuel. Today, we honor Jeremy and other Black artists as we celebrate Black History Month's theme of art as a platform for social justice.

In this Q&A, Jeremy talks about his early years as a professional painter, where he draws inspiration and how art empowers him.

How has art impacted your life?

When I was young, I was finding different ways to express myself. Art was always there; it was a constant. I learned as I got older that art also gave me a voice. I've gotten more recognition for that voice as my career has progressed. I've also learned that as my voice has gotten louder, it's given voice to others and allowed them to raise their voices.

How does art empower you?

It's that voice that I know art can be. I heard that from artists I've impacted. That lets me know that anything is possible and gives me permission to magnify what I'm trying to say.

How have you grown as an artist?

Initially, my work was insular. It was just about me and my friends. It didn't have an opinion. It didn't have enough teeth to it, to grab people. I just worked for myself, which isn't a bad thing.

I've kept that part of my work, but I also started listening to other people and concerning myself with the world at large and inserting that into my work. That's the biggest growth for me. I think about other people, I take in opinions and thoughts I've heard and read when I do research. That makes the work more weighted.

Featured in the slideshow above is Jeremy Okai Davis' artwork at Randall Children's Hospital

How did you get involved with the art project at Randall Children's Hospital?

I was teaching the daughter of a board member on Randall's foundation and the mom told me about the opportunity. I applied and was given the chance to paint. My idea was to create paintings the expressed joy.

I chose bright colors and painted kids having fun. A lot of the time hospital visits are stressful. I wanted to give people a reprieve or something to bring you joy even for a moment. I've had friends who have visited the hospital and they reached out to me to let me know they saw my paintings. It made their visit better. It's worked.

How did that project impact your career?

That project was a catapult. Before then I was grinding at getting my work into galleries. I had tunnel vision on where art can be. Doing that project opened my eyes to other public venues where the work could be. I realized that public spaces also make the work more accessible and available to people who would not normally go into a gallery.

How has your form of art helped or had a positive impact on the community?

Some of the most recent work I've done highlights African Americans in history that maybe didn't get the acclaim they deserved at the time. I'm backtracking, going into history and looking up people, unsung African Americans. This work empowers the community and lets them know we've been here and done important things. It's not a new thing. I want people to feel comfortable being themselves. I think a lot about kids in the work and empowering them. Every so often I'll meet someone who has seen the work and I hear how it impacted them and opened up people's minds.

Why do you think it's essential that we have more Black artist represented?

It's course correction in a way. It's past due and making up for lost time. Seeing work by Black artists in public places as much as possible allows young people of color to see themselves represented and in turn empowers them to follow their dreams. The more people see people who like them on walls, makes them confident to do what they want to do. It also showcases Black excellence.

What Black artist do you look up to and why?

- Kerry James Marshall. He's a beacon for me and some who I look to when I'm stuck for ideas.
- Noah Davis inspires me by how he blended abstraction, loose representation and figuration. His passing right at the beginning of his prime pushes me to go forward because life can be short.
- Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. I get stuck belaboring the work. She paints fast, doing a painting a day. I look to her for the impulsivity and being okay with looseness in my work.

What are some of your proud moments as an artist?

Other than the work at Randall, I'm proud of the other public projects I've done. I did a large painting for the Lonnie B. Harris Black Cultural Center at Oregon State University. I had a painting included in an exhibition at the Studio Museum of Harlem, a legendary museum, in New York. I've also earned representation from the Elizabeth Leach Gallery in Portland, which was a goal of mine.

Any words or encouragement or advice for other Black artists?

Do the things you want to do. Don't worry about acclaim or success. That can hamstring people, wondering if their work is going to sell or appeal to people. Make the work, put yourself into the work and let the chips fall where they may. If you do those things, some sort of success will happen. Stick with it. I've got a tattoo with a candle burning at both ends and underneath the initials, DTW, which stands for do the work. It's just a reminder to myself to get into the studio.

Credit to ryanwarnerphotography.com for photos of Jeremy Davis

OREGON ARTSWATCH
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2023 in Review: The look of visual arts

From the Rothko Pavilion to Converge 45 to the Hallie Ford's 25th anniversary and much more, a look at some of the highlights of Oregon's year in the worlds of museums and visual art.

DECEMBER 26, 2023 | OREGON ARTSWATCH

2023: A YEAR IN REVIEW, CULTURE, VISUAL ART

Design rendition of the Rothko Pavilion looking east from the Eliot Tower Condominiums on Southwest 10th Avenue: Rendering by Hennebery Eddy Architects and Vinci Hamp Architects, courtesy of Portland Art Museum.

While people stayed away from downtown Portland in droves in 2023, some leery of crime and encampments and open drug use, some just used to not going out much after the

shutdowns of the severe pandemic years, hammers and crowbars were clacking away at the Portland Art Museum, portending a revival of energy and activity in what in many ways is the center of Oregon's visual arts scene.

2023: A Year in Review

A few highlights from Oregon's year in visual arts, as ArtsWatch's writers and editors saw them:

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

June 20: Bush House Museum's historical reboot. "On Juneteenth," Laurel Reed Pavic writes, "the Salem Art Association 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's paintings, Pavic writes, "mark a shift for Bush House," which is named for Asahel Bush, a prominent pioneer who arrived in Oregon in 1850 and became a leading power broker, editing Salem's Statesman Journal newspaper for 13 years. He opposed women's rights and entry into "men's professions," denounced the region's Indigenous population, opposed Lincoln's emancipation of slaves, and "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." The Juneteenth event marked a significant reboot for Bush House, and a commitment to explore the history and impact of Black Oregonians.

1859
Oregon's Magazine

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 Streat)*; 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."

> "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."
>
> — 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."

Photos, from left: Courtesy of Salem Art Association's Permanent Collection, the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery, the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery

Black Artists of Oregon Exhibit Creates More Complete History of Contemporary Art in the Northwest

Like 11 Share

Artist Adriene Cruz

Saundra Sorenson
Published: 09 August 2023

Artist Jeremy Okai Davis's first visit to the city happened to align with the 2006 Oregon Biennial at the Portland Art Museum. Impressed by the show, Davis made it a personal goal to see his work exhibited in the venue.

In September, Davis will indeed see three of his large pieces on display as part of the groundbreaking Black Artists of Oregon show, which will run through March of next year.

"This exhibit, I think, is a great example of putting a spotlight on a history that didn't get the attention that it deserved, or people that didn't get the attention that they deserved when they were producing the work," Davis told *The Skanner*.

At right, artist Jeremy Okai Davis's portrait of trailblazing Oregonian Beatrice Morrow Cannady, "The Advocate."

Davis will be one of 67 featured Black artists. The oldest, painter, cartographer and lithographer Grafton Tyler Brown, was born in 1841. The youngest, painter Sadé DuBoise, was born more than 150 years later.

> "It's about the history and presence of Black artists in the state," guest curator Intisar Abioto told *The Skanner.*

"For me, it's really community and ancestral work. Who were these artists? What did they care about? What did they have to endure? To live as artists in this region, and to be able to understand their work and what it meant for their lives, what their work says about their lives, their thoughts – it's really, for me, just an aspect of honoring and caring for and with Black people."

Surfacing History

Like Davis and so many other artists, Abioto's story began outside of Oregon. She moved from Memphis to Portland 13 years ago with her mother, a writer and activist, and her four sisters, who are each artists in their own right. A graduate of Spelman College in Atlanta, GaAbioto has advanced as an artist while delving deep into her adopted city's uneasy reckoning with racial justice.

Intisar Abioto at her exhibit, Black Domain, at the Architectural Heritage Center in October (Photo/Saundra Sorenson)

Last year, she launched a campaign to purchase and preserve a house in northeast Portland that was first the home of Beatrice Morrow Cannady, 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. Cannady's legislative work ultimately led to the overturning of racist laws that disenfranchised African Americans in Oregon.

Although the effort to purchase Cannady's home fell victim to Portland's bruising real estate market, none of it was in vain: Abioto produced a body of research and writing further documenting Cannady's life and work. And Abioto, who has seen her own work exhibited at the Portland Art Museum, has made sure Cannady has a strong presence in the milestone exhibit.

"She's in this story, too," Abioto said. "In 1932, she helped bring an exhibition of Black artists to the Portland Art Museum."

Abioto wanted to tell a similar story, something she realized was missing in the city's art narrative. In 2018, while sitting on an intergenerational civil rights activists panel hosted by Oregon Black Pioneers, she realized she was the only artist represented.

"There wasn't someone older to talk to how things were in the nineties or the eighties or the 60s," she said. "I realized I did not know that history."

A couple months later, she applied for and received an Emerging Journalists Community Stories Fellowship through Oregon Humanities. It allowed her to do the kind of tenacious deep-dive necessary to compile a more complete history of Black artists in the state.

"It's a fellowship where you have a mentor to guide you in some journalism process, so I focused my research on that history and presence of Black artists," she said. "I started doing oral history interviews, (exploring) archives and collections here in the region but also elsewhere. I was hearing different names I didn't know – I would just follow up and do the research. I published an essay that came out of Oregon Humanities in April 2019.

> "I just kept going because it was compelling and felt important."

She also "went all out," frequenting eBay and other resale websites to purchase works by elder Black artists and those who had passed.

With another fellowship, this time from the Independent Publishing Resource Center, Abioto began sharing salient pieces of information with Grace Kook-Anderson, the Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Curator of Northwest Art at the Portland Art Museum. Kook-Anderson subsequently asked Abioto to curate this exhibit.

Together, they have secured a number of grants totalling around $500,000.

"It's apparently the first show to be fully funded a year in advance," Abioto said. "For me it's just about investment in Black artists."

Hidden Histories

The inaugural purchase in Abioto's personal collection of Black artists was a piece by Ray Eaglin, a college football player who was also an artist, writer, painter and poet who became known, Abioto said, as the "underground general" of the local Black Panther party. When he graduated from the University of Oregon in 1969, contemporaneous newspaper coverage noted he stepped up to the mic to speak about human rights, civil rights and ending the Vietnam War.

A man both of and ahead of his time, Eaglin's portraits lean modernist, impressively bold and experimental. Abioto acquired one of Eaglin's paintings online for $77. In a subsequent interview with his daughter, Abioto learned Eaglin had likely produced about a thousand pieces during his lifetime -- work that in the seventies could be found displayed around Portland, sold to support the Urban League and Eritrean Community Center.

> "The presence of Black artists has not been valued here," Abioto said.

"Rather, Black people have always valued it. But in the wider culture of institutions – our work has not been well represented or taken care of. For me that was a spark. This was there, this is just one piece."

She added, “There are so many other pieces out there that need care and they need to be seen, or they want to be seen.”

‘An Act Of Faith’

Davis has a similar philosophy in his work.

“My subjects come to me based off a curiosity,” he said. “In my research, if I’m building a body of work and I come across a name or somebody from history that’s less familiar to me that feels like they shouldn’t have been less familiar to me – based off what they’ve done in their life – and if it sounds like a person that seems like they should’ve been way more influential on Black culture and Black history, I’ll gravitate towards those. Because of my lack of knowledge, I always feel like there’s probably other people like me that haven’t encountered these people.”

Davis creates portraits with a “pointillistic and pixelation” technique, often using old photos as a point of reference.

“My subjects are based off of me trying to kind of do an ‘each one teach one’ thing, where I’m learning, myself, about these people, but at the same time, when I exhibit the paintings, the viewers of the paintings are going to get that same curiosity I have if I’m placing the right amount of respect on the image.”

Featured artist Adriene Cruz will contribute a colorful, tactile offering to the exhibit. Working largely in textiles, Cruz has been a part of the Portland art community for 40 years and has had her work shown at the Smithsonian.

Although she began her time in art school studying stone and wood sculpture, she found she was much more attracted to working with softer media.

Abioto requested some of Cruz’s early work from the eighties, when she focused on crochet. She supplied some of those pieces, and will display more recent work.

“I wanted to share my tribute to my mom,” Cruz said. “I started it two weeks after she left – she died Nov. 12, 2022. I knew I was blue and I wanted to do a blue piece, and I’ve pretty much been working on that off and on all year. It’s all about her.”

It is a fitting inclusion, since Cruz’s early pivot in medium was heavily inspired by her mother’s own joy at creating tactile pieces.

> “I see it as feeding your spirit,” Cruz said of the artistic process.

“Does it make you happy? Does your heart sing? Do I feel that connection of spirit guiding me? I might have an idea, but I really do not know what any piece is going to look like, once it’s developed. It’s an act of faith, really.”

For more information about the Black Artists of Oregon exhibit, visit portlandartmuseum.org/exhibitions/black-artists-of-oregon.

black-artists Saundra Sorenson HPfeature

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.

JUNE 20, 2023 | **LAUREL REED PAVIC**

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.

THE Skanner
CHALLENGING PEOPLE TO SHAPE A BETTER FUTURE NOW

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.

Saundra Sorenson
Published: 17 May 2023

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.

Salem REPORTER
Local News That Matters

An 1880s image of the Bush House, where businessman Asahel Bush lived. The Bush House Museumwill unveil portraits Saturday of two Black pioneers who made an impact on Oregon (Salem Public Library photo)

COMMUNITY, SALEM EVENTS

Bush House Museum to unveil portraits of two Oregon Black pioneers on Saturday

by Kevin Opsahl on February 10, 2023

For Portland artist Jeremy O. Davis, the Bush House Museum in Salem is a beautiful property despite its "tainted history."

The grounds belonged to the late Asahel Bush, who acquired it in 1860. Bush was founding editor of the Oregon Statesman newspaper, which he often used to express his cultural views, and co-founder Salem's Ladd and Bush Bank.

But now, the museum, with the help of the Salem Art Association, looks to reimagine itself with the help of Davis, who completed portraits of two Black pioneers who lived in Oregon.

“They’re trying to change the context of the house and invite … more dynamic stories to be told through the house that was once, without mincing words, the home of a racist,” Davis said of the museum efforts.

A reception is scheduled from 4-6 p.m., Saturday, Feb. 11, to unveil the portraits depicting Ben Johnson and Beatrice Morrow Cannady.

“Initially I want people to appreciate the art. I spend a lot of time trying to make good paintings,” Davis said. “In realizing these are really good paintings, they move closer and start to investigate. I want people’s curiosity to be sparked.”

Matthew Boulay, executive director of the Salem Art Association and Bush House Museum, noted Davis and the exhibit’s curator, Tammy Jo Wilson, will be on hand at the Saturday reception.

“Please come meet the artist, meet the curator and, most importantly, see the art,” Boulay said. “These are extraordinary portraits that tell really important stories of two Oregonians. But they’re just also visually stunning. They bring you in and you want to spend time with these two.”

Oregon pioneer Ben Johnson as portrayed by Portland artist Jeremy O. Davis. The artwork will be added to the Bush House Museum in Salem.

Oregon pioneer Beatrice Morrow Cannady as portrayed by Portland artist Jeremy O. Davis. The artwork will be added to the Bush House Museum in Salem.

In choosing Johnson and Cannady as his portrait subjects, Davis noted there are few Black pioneers in Oregon.

He had heard of the story of how Ben Johnson Mountain — near the Jackson County, Oregon town of Ruch — was renamed in 2020 to replace the racial epithet that was long associated with it.

“That story was really impactful to me,” Davis said.

But it was Johnson’s life that also appealed to the Portland artist.Johnson was born in the South in 1834 before settling in Southern Oregon where worked as a blacksmith. Ben Johnson Mountain near the Jackson County town of Ruch, was named after him.

The story of Johnson appealed to Davis when he considered portraits for the museum.

“The idea that this guy was a worker, a blacksmith; (he was) respected, had property — a house — (and) a wife,” Davis said. “His story sounded like the American dream.”

Davis' portrait shows Johnson dressed in a nineteenth century suit. The word "Blacksmith" is painted in the lower right hand corner.

"He just looked so proper," Davis said. "I loved his face. There was a sympathy, like vulnerability in his eyes. He had been through it, but he still was sitting up strong."

In painting Johnson, Davis had envisioned a portrait of a woman as a sort of counterpoint to the blacksmith.

Cannady "was a nice balance," Davis said. "In two pieces, it told a full story."

Davis said part of his inspiration to paint Cannady came about when he heard news reports of a former Portland home of hers up for sale.

Davis' portrait of Cannady is, like Johnson's, framed shoulders and above, with the civil rights pioneer wearing a plain red shirt and necklace. Streaks of gray peak out through Cannady's black hair — a detail Davis thought was key.

"In looking at her in that image, it felt like a life had been lived. Her eyes seemed really vulnerable and powerful at the same time," Davis said. "The image spoke to me."

Cannady, born in Texas in 1890, moved to Portland in 1910. It was then that she met her first husband, Edward Daniel Cannady, the editor and co-founder of the Advocate, Portland's only African American newspaper at the time. The fact that Cannady's life in newspapers shared a similarity with Bush was not lost on Davis when he selected her as his second portrait subject.

But he wanted to highlight Cannady's ties to the civil rights movement involving her help to establish the Portland chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Cannady also became chief editor and owner of the Advocate, writing editorials criticizing how African Americans were routinely discriminated against in Portland. Cannady later graduated from Northwestern School of Law, using her education to help write Oregon's first civil rights legislation.

Cannady died in 1974.Beatrice Morrow Cannady Elementary in Happy Valley was named after her.

The portraits of Johnson and Cannady tell a "full story," Davis said, but he is also mindful of the fact that his 1901 death is not that far off from her 1890 birth.

"It's almost like the passing of the torch in a way, without really knowing it," Davis said.

Boulay applauded Davis' work for the Salem Art Association and the museum, which has been trying to "reimagine" itself after being approached by a group called Oregon Black Pioneers.

"They said that in fact that Bush was a terribly flawed person, he was an advocate for the exclusionary laws, he was deeply racist — and we needed to tell that story more openly and fully," said Boulay, who noted the group's approach occurred before he started working for the museum. "The idea is to hold ourselves more accountable to the history and story of Bush … But really, more importantly, to be more open and inclusive to the community."

To do that, the art association and museum have sponsored artwork and events around African Americans. Tammy Jo Wilson has since been hired as the museum's director of programming and introduced officials to Davis.

"His artistic practice centers on creating portraits of historical Black figures and reinterpreting them in a contemporary style," Boulay said. "The idea of creating a series of early Oregon Black pioneers seemed to be a perfect fit."

Boulay believes Davis' two portraits fall in line with the museum's efforts to change.

"These are people who Bush probably would not have invited into his house, given what we know of his views on people of color," Boulay said. "We're inviting them into the house, so to speak, and telling their story through these portraits in a way that challenges the way the house might have been run 150 years ago."

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artnet news

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.

THE Skanner
CHALLENGING PEOPLE TO SHAPE A BETTER FUTURE NOW

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 Preuitt, 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

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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 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
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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

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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 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

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.

Jeremy

Photo by: Brittany Barkdull

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."

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 mar- keting 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 sketch-book 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.


EP I

The influence of the Abstract Expressionists on your paintings comes through clearly--Robert Rauschen- burg, 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 Expres- sionists 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, Pol- lock, 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 mor- phed 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 young-
er 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 nat- ural 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 show- ing. 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.

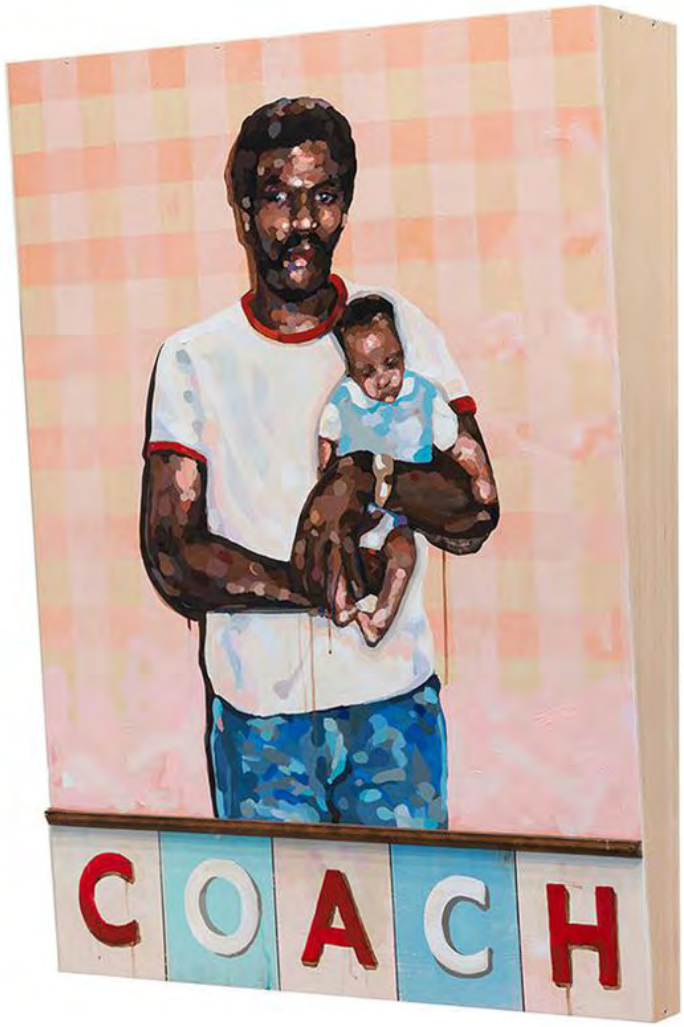
Ornette," Jeremy Okai Davis, 2019.

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

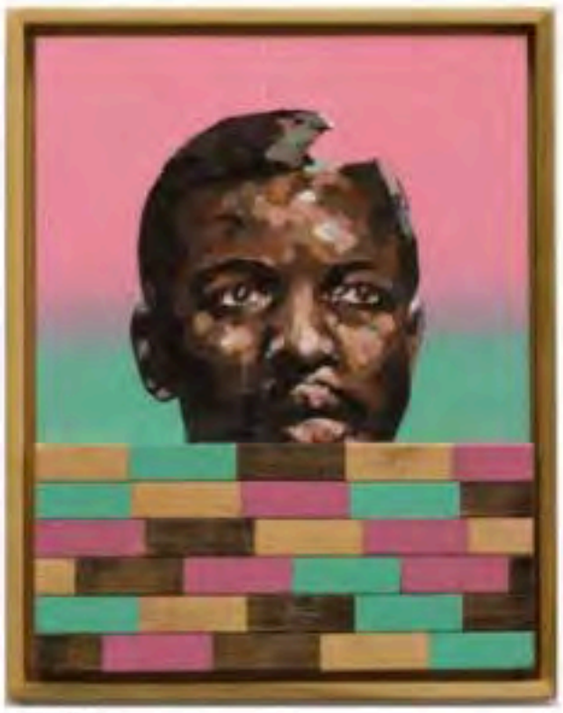
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Brother II

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

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.

STUMPTOWN
COFFEE ROASTERS

Stumptown Artist Fellowship: Jeremy Okai Davis
Nov 08, 2019

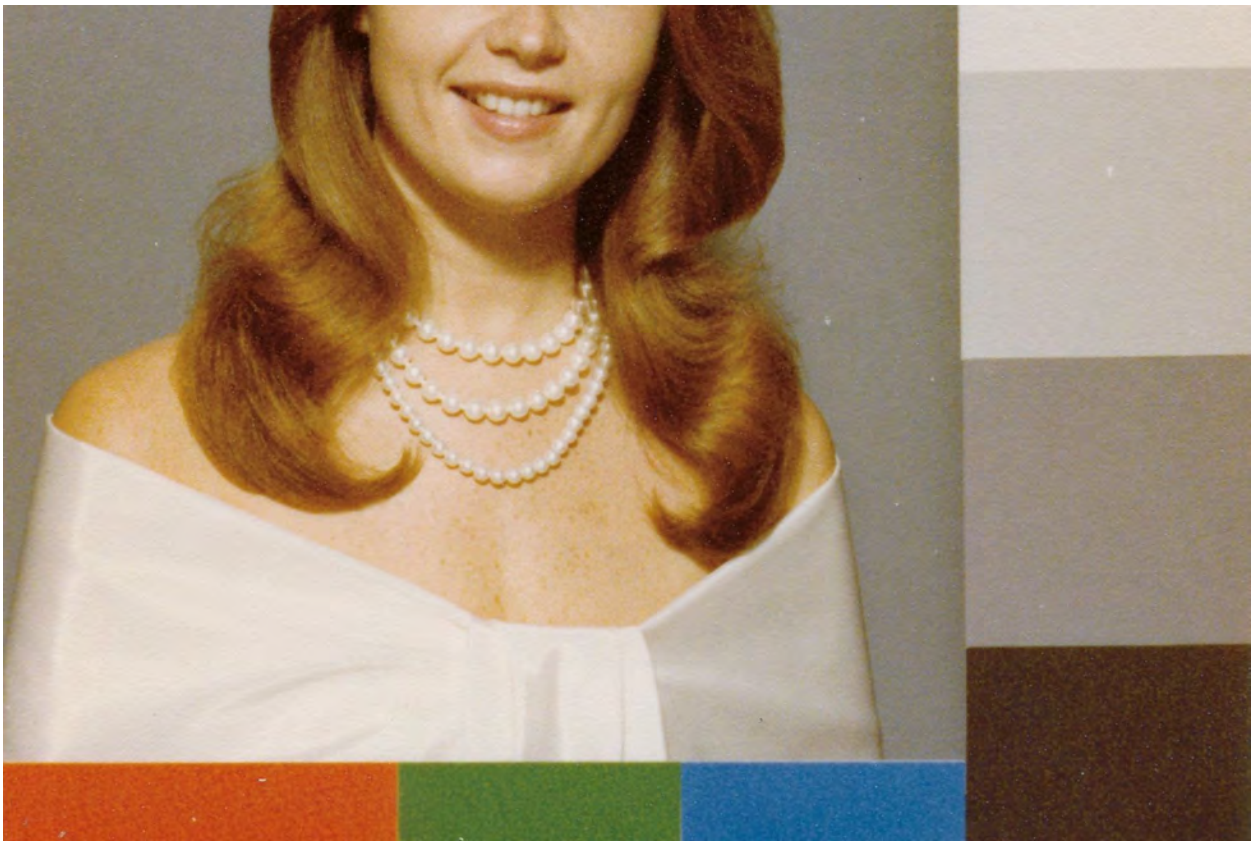
Jeremy Okai Davis is the latest recipient of the Stumptown Artist Fellowship program. Davis's solo exhibition, *The Presence of Color*, is on view at the Downtown Portland café from September 12th through November 13th, 2019.

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!

OREGONLIVE
The Oregonian

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"

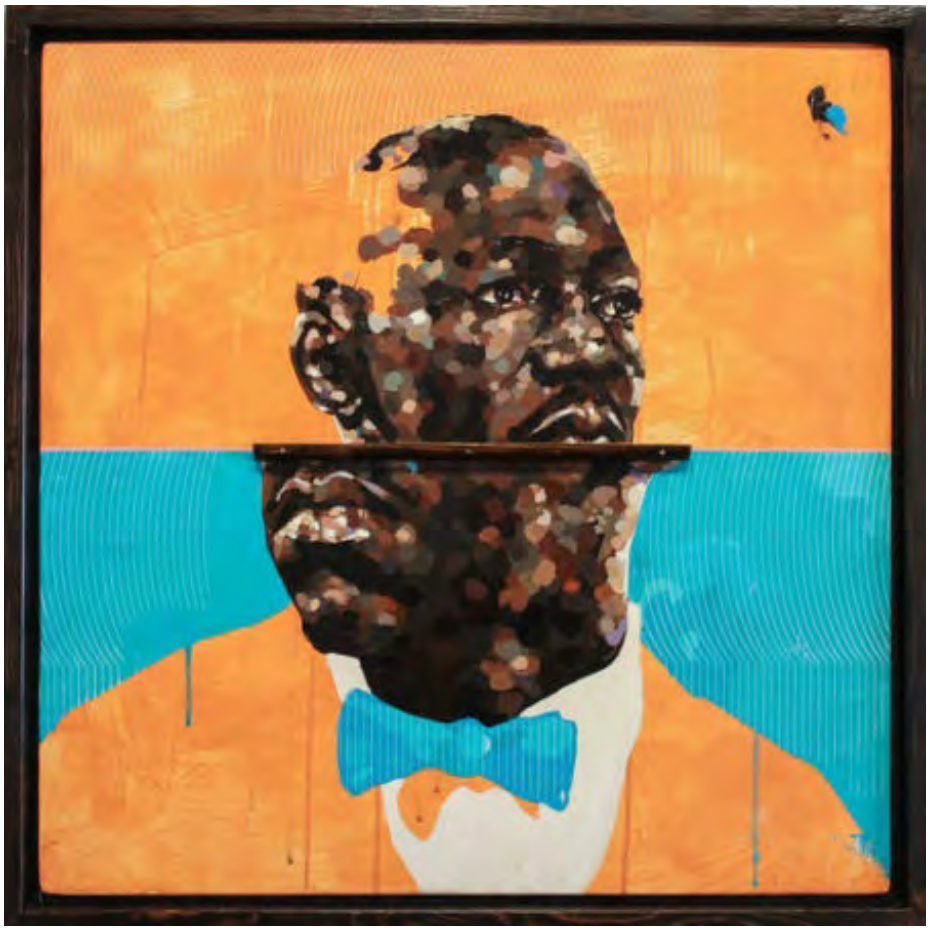
For a solo show as part of the Stumptown Artist Fellowship program, Jeremy Okai Davis is preparing six large-scale paintings that take Kodak's Shirley cards as visual inspiration. The cards, which depicted white models next to color bars, were used to calibrate film processing machines starting in the 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

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 – Helday 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.

PDXART
PORT OF PORTLAND

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.

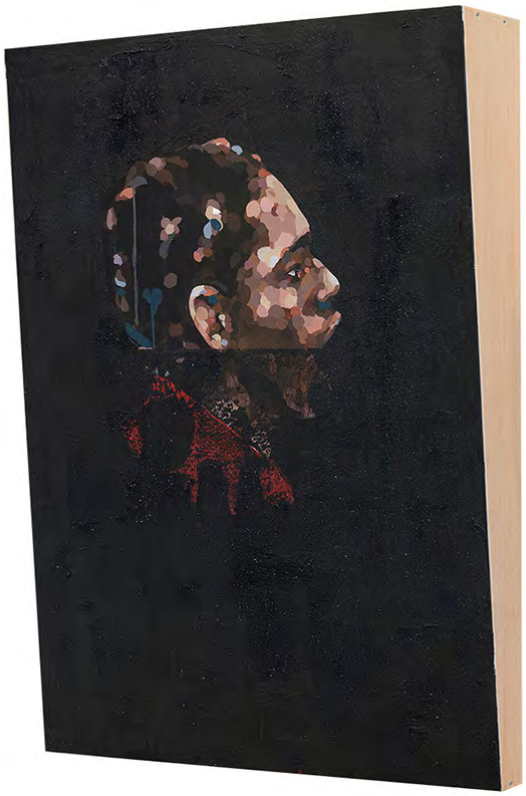


Image Left - *Untitled (Black)*, 2017, Acrylic and pumice on panel, 40 x 30 inches

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

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 aldvocated, “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.

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