



# BmoreArt



David-Jeremiah's Paradoxes of Power: American Flags, Cop Car Bumper Stickers, and Lamborghini Hoods

A conversation with the Dallas-based artist after his first series of shows on the East Coast in the Spring of 2021

Teri Henderson // 28 MAY 21

The works in David-Jeremiah's *I.A.H.Y.F.F.A.W.D. / N.F.D.B.J.W.B.D.* hummed fervently and presciently in place. I marveled at both their quietude and their power. Displayed in pairs on white walls and columns, the paintings are abstract riffs on the shape of Lamborghini hoods, etched with coded acronyms and standing in opposition and in alignment, interiors and exteriors.

Clothes hangers puncture the plywood surfaces, and three-dimensional embellishments adorn them like armor throughout the gallery. Like the letters, these shapes hold symbolic meaning too. In one pair of orange and black paintings, both take the same shape while different designs exist within their outlines: the top contains a group of letters, while its mirrored relative below features an orange-and-black swirl. The latter's design informed its neighbor's brown-and-black, raised shark-tooth-like pattern. This conversation between the works happens repeatedly within the gallery, creating a silent concert of symbols and meanings both hidden and revealed.

The artist refers to the top paintings that are inscribed with letters as "externalized" works, while those with shapes and absent letters are "internalized" works and are displayed below. He designed all of the internalized paintings as "plays towards the center" and describes them as imploding as they internalize their inverses, the "externalized" acronym paintings. The internalized paintings swallow the boldness of the acronyms' hidden meanings in order to ease tension and make the viewer more comfortable, an act David-Jeremiah calls "aesthetic code-switching." The externalized works feel revelatory while the internalized versions are more palatable and quiet, less anxiety-inducing. Each mark, color, etching, and carving is an attempt at this strategy of aesthetic code-switching: a clever move, inching toward the center and towards the checkmate, a subversive journey unbeknownst to a viewer skimming the paintings casually.

Embodied in various orientations and textures, sharp colors—neons and neutrals with lime green, stool brown, turquoise, hot pink, blood-red, and pure bellowing and boundless black—elegantly envelop the works. I walked through the show twice, alone and quietly standing before the displays. I thought about the artist using his hands to carve and manipulate paint and lumber, building these huge works that would render the gallery into a portal of transformational experiences. I learned later that some visitors chose not to participate in their quiet revelry and exuberant engagement.

On the night before the opening of *I.A.H.Y.F.F.A.W.D. / N.F.D.B.J.W.B.D.* at Von Ammon Co, in Washington, DC's Georgetown neighborhood, David-Jeremiah staged a game within the gallery, inviting the predominantly white audience to guess what the acronyms etched onto the paintings meant. The show's title comprises two acronyms, the first described in the curatorial statement as "the most toxic, hateful, and racist sentence [the artist] could get off [his] chest at the time towards white people," and the second with an identical meaning but transcribed in Dallas slang. Through this game, the Dallas-based artist gave participants an opportunity to confront their own inner demons and notions about race in a space seemingly without consequence. The game was met with disdain, however, and several of the white participants rushed out, upset that they were made uncomfortable. This game became an interactive performance piece that recreated a microcosm of the world at large: the evasive reactions of the audience echoed common sentiments of white attitudes toward racism.

*I.A.H.Y.F.F.A.W.D. / N.F.D.B.J.W.B.D.* featured 38 mixed-media plywood works displayed in pairs. With this show, which opened in March and closed in April, the artist manufactured space for confrontation, exposition, interrogation, and introspection, asking white viewers and patrons to confront their discomfort surrounding Blackness and asking all visitors to question the dynamics and paradoxes of racism, white supremacy, and power.

In the acronym series, the artist etched the letters into the wood jaggedly; the marks appear both intentional and haphazard. The acronyms' meaning will never be revealed, their words never decoded. I admire this act of the artist keeping this secret as a way for him to maintain agency, autonomy, and authority over his own work. As a Black man making art in a predominantly white and eurocentric art market, this act of silence and refusal to tell, when many have asked, allows him to reclaim power.

David-Jeremiah's work is full and ripe with symbolism and history, informed by his own experiences as a Texan, a formerly incarcerated person, a father, a partner, a conceptual artist, an actor, a person who is wholly himself, and a Black man who is subverting systems of bullshit and white supremacy. His understanding of both material and place seems to be something innately within him.

He refers to himself as a conceptual artist, working in painting, sculpture, performance, as well as video, including his "FOGA" series and "I ❤️ Micah," the latter most recently exhibited by Von Ammon Co on the DAATA art fair online platform. In 2019, David-Jeremiah created a series of stickers that read "I ❤️ Micah," mirroring the instantly recognizable "I ❤️ New York" slogan familiar on bumper stickers, keychains, and

T-shirts promoting tourism and allegiance to Americana. But David-Jeremiah's aim was different with his project. The "Micah" immortalized in this work was Micah Xavier Johnson, a Black man who was killed by a bomb delivered by a robot after he shot and killed five Dallas police officers in 2016. Johnson planned his attack for months and specifically targeted white cops; in all, he killed five officers and injured nine others. I remember my relatives calling me and texting me to watch the news when the spree began and again after Johnson was killed. I had already moved to Baltimore, and I watched the news accounts transfixed, the footage traveling and recording palpable terror throughout the city that I spent so much time in.

Enacting an extended performance on video, David-Jeremiah placed the stickers on cop cars across Dallas and then trailed them, shooting the footage on his iPhone. The grainy images displayed online made me nervous and filled me with dark anticipation. At first glance, the work felt familiar: "I ❤️ Micah" reminded me of so many dashcam videos I had seen, where moments later I saw a Black person die at the hands of police, black and white sirens of Black death. I found this work remarkable because I recognize how much cops in Texas abhor Black people, especially Black men. This act of physically touching a cop car, placing a bumper sticker on it, and filming it could have easily landed the artist either dead or in jail. A rebellious artist exploring his location and position through his necessary work, David-Jeremiah invites viewers to name their relationship to his America and their America as well.

His recent show at Anonymous Gallery in New York, *G'ordivante Fold*, centered around a singular object: an American flag. On one side lying prostrate, the traditional and familiar red, white, and blue side of the flag was hidden, while on the inverse side that you could actually see and walk on, were the familiar stars and stripes rendered in various shades of black. David-Jeremiah is familiar with juxtaposing the sacred and the profane, darkness and lightness, the artistic and the banal, and those gestures were all represented by a mixture of ground-up pig bones and dried ramen powder that enclosed the black flag like a chalk outline. As visitors stopped over those remains of pigs (a darkly humorous reference to policing), and the sodium-laced dust of ramen, they tracked vestiges of the powder onto the flag. Documentation of the exhibition shows white footprints marking the flag, an interesting flip that challenges and explores patriotism in an inverted way, a literal whitewashing of the black object by an external agent.

After a certain point, visitors to *G'ordivante Fold* at Anonymous Gallery were no longer allowed to take photographs. The artist insisted upon this aspect to represent the fact that the population of African Americans in the United States is 13.4%. He calculated that percentage into the timing of the 32-day exhibition and requested that at 102 hours, 54 minutes, and 43 seconds all cameras and documentation would be prohibited in the gallery. At this point, the artist again offered quiet moments where visitors were forced to be still, to reflect and lean into their uncomfortable feelings about America's racist past and present.

During an April interview, I talked with David-Jeremiah about his inspiration and his focus on rituals, and we riffed about our home state of Texas and what it means for him to make work at this time. We also spoke about how white people are made uneasy by the mention of race, and how that is a direct reflection of their own baggage, and yet so many Black women and men are forced to carry that weight. This interrogation of racism, and the question of whether Black people are even capable of being racist or enacting racism toward white people, is a core tenet that he frequently explores in his practice.

In the forced stillness of the pandemic, and in the wake of the grief and mourning of the extrajudicial murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, I have watched a pendulum swing. Institutions that were formerly silent about race were focusing their attention on advocating anti-racism through the purchase and promotion of artwork made by Black artists. At this moment there is a possibility in the pendulum's pivot. On opposite ends exist the past and the future, and work like David-Jeremiah's is the vehicle venturing between these institutions' belated expiation and their former apathy.

So often the art world is full of quixotic indulgence: We attend openings, we drink free wine, we chatter, and we mindlessly view works. I've often reflected on how wealthy white collectors buy artwork that centers Blackness, and how they might hang images of Black death and subjugation in their living rooms as prizes of their collection, trivializing the suffering depicted and the labor and weight of Black artists' work for their own aesthetic pleasure. Those gruesome acts are yet to be atoned for, and therefore irrevocably affect the life of every Black person who breathes and exists on this stolen land. The legacy of these histories plays out through David-Jeremiah's works, exhibited in galleries from Dallas to DC.

**Teri Henderson: It's been really neat to watch your career bloom over this past year and a half during COVID. When did you find out that you were going to have a solo show at Von Ammon Co?**

David-Jeremiah: I think about a year and a half ago.

**Damn, that long? COVID distorts time. Can you tell our audience in your words what the acronym paintings are about, and some of the concepts behind them?**

First let me preface it with this: They are all semi-abstract Lamborghini hoods. And I say “semi-abstract” because I drew them by hand from looking at the shape, so it wasn’t just an immediate transfer from a projection. They’re in three stages, a set of seven each. The first set of seven are bonafide, complete Lamborghini hood outlines. In the second set of seven, I started focusing on custom after-market hood shapes, in segments. And then the third set of seven, I started playing with the orientation, because then they get into the slang.

Lamborghini is one of my two main conceptual inspirations. It’s the most beautiful object, machine, body, however you want to categorize it—it’s just the most aesthetically pleasing thing that I’ve ever experienced. Since I was a little boy, since I was old enough to have a favorite, whatever, they just always been my thing. One thing that people don’t realize about Lamborghinis is that once they got past their numerical names, they started naming them after formidable fighting bulls.

Now we’re within this realm of ritualistic violence—that’s arguably one way that you can describe what bullfighting is. You have this perfect, beautiful machine that’s built for performance. Its essence is trapped within ritualistic violence. So if there’s another perfect, beautiful machine built for performance, that’s also trapped within ritualistic violence, it’s the human body, seeing how we can’t sit up here and get our act together and treat each other right.

So every time I use a Lamborghini, shout out or reference a color scheme, shape, whatever the fuck, that’s just me trying to tie that object to humanity, but in a very specific flesh-and-blood way, a visceral way, like fashionable gore, you know what I’m saying?

The acronym paintings represent the actual sentence that the acronym protects. The acronym represents the sentence that, at the time, was the most toxic, “racist,” like, just a dark, vile sentence that I could get off my chest toward white people in general. It’s founded on my belief that, technically, minorities can’t be racist toward white people.

**I agree.**

For two main reasons. When a white person is racist toward us, the outcome is so drastically and absurdly different than when we try to do it back. Hell, I believe we can be more technically racist towards each other. Then, secondly, I tell everybody—as petty as this may sound, and I don’t really give a fuck—they [white people] did it first. A reaction is never *the* action. If you go and punch somebody in their mouth and they punch you back, it might feel like the same thing. It might even feel worse because they might know what they are doing more than you do. But it’s not the same thing. You punched them. They are punching you back.

They want us to justify how they treat us. When you start learning how to leverage that and expose them, and then that feeling they feel being exposed, you can leverage that to your benefit. Then you can start playing, you know?

Because Black culture, Black identity nigga shit is something that’s apart from itself, it’s in the center, and Black people are approaching it, trying to get a part of it. It’s also leveraging the gore into this guessing game that we make okay to play. And now we’re setting up and playing around in inverted power dynamics and stuff like that because it’s many assumptions and definitions about who we are and our culture and what’s acceptable, for and about us, that white people make without our authorization.

**I heard a little bit about the game that you designed the night before your opening in DC and when I heard that people were upset I wasn’t surprised.**

That was such an interesting night. Let me tell you how that night went down. About twenty people were invited. I wanted it to be a mixture of regular white folks and also people who had some sort of standing in the art world. I definitely wanted it to be no recording, no audio recording. They were coming to play. I was adamant about it not being a kind of VIP preview. It was an inverted performance installation that an artist was conducting and you were being invited to participate.

The email was extremely clear about what was expected from people. We printed out these acronym guessing

game cards. The acronym itself evolved, in the third set of seven [paintings], into a slang version of the same sentence. It's the exact same sentence but it's as if a nigga from the hood said it.

We had the first version of the acronym on the top of the car, a little space, and the second version was displayed on the bottom. And each person was given three guesses. I walked around the gallery and was introduced and broke the concept down for them again.

The whole time I'm giving them rope. I said, "Hey, I don't know if any of y'all familiar with the very famous conversation between Nikki Giovanni and James Baldwin. In her opinion, the first step to loving white people is admitting that you hate them."

And then I gave them even more rope. I said, "I want y'all to understand that this sentence represents the most toxic, 'racist' sentence towards white people." I said, "No one in here should have to worry about me trying to trick y'all into saying 'nigga.'" This is not coming from a white person against a Black person. This is coming from us towards you. So I said, "You guys don't have to worry about saying the N word. What I'm going to do is give y'all 30 more minutes to engage with the pieces and make your guesses. If anybody wants to talk to me again and get a better understanding to educate your guesses and stuff like that, that's fine."

### **And get some context.**

Get some more context. We broke up 30 minutes later. The gallerist is like, "It's time to play, everybody." Everybody kinda forms this semi-circle in the center of the gallery.

So I said, "Thank y'all for participating. What I'm going to do is give you all five minutes for the first person to step to the center and read their guesses. And if we go past five minutes, I'm just going to walk up to people at random and ask you to do it. And if you're not [going to do it], you just need to get the fuck out."

*[Ed. Note: Only three people came forward to share their guesses.]*

I said, "Bro, are y'all really gon let me sit up here and work a year and a half on a 38-piece painting series that I made by fucking hand, just to find another inventive way to have this 500-year-old conversation? Just to show you how much I want to have this conversation and play this game, and you can't even get me like 10 minutes of your time to guess this shit."

I said, "This shit lame as fuck. Fuck this shit. Point proven." And then people started shuffling out. People trip me out when they categorize my art as angry or me as an angry person.

### **You know what? I've never thought that about your work.**

I did damn near four years in the pen. It ain't nothing but that super aggressive masculine shit. However you want to define it. They're confident. The only ones that aren't or the ones that don't deserve to even be in a conversation in the first place. So why am I sitting here trying to talk to you? And you're trying to sit up here and make me feel bad about the way that I communicate. It's the most giving way ever: I literally made you 38 paintings. I created this huge concept and game just to try to sit up here, maybe put you in a position where you have a realization. Why do I have to be angry? Why can't I just be passionate?

### **Right, why not enthusiastic or excited?**

Why does it have to be an act of anger? Why can't it be like an exhale? Art is some of the most indirect shit ever. I'm obviously trying to talk about these things. You see what I'm saying? I'm a 230-pound nigga, fool. I said, me being angry is not me cutting out some pieces of wood and pouring paint on it. I promise you that.

**I'm just thinking about the acronyms. When I went to the show, a few white people asked me if I knew what they meant. I told them that I didn't know and that I would never ask out of respect to you and your practice.**

I'll never tell. Just know that it is something racist and toxic about white people—which is impossible. It's a paradox. It's just as much of a paradox as them not understanding where the fuck we're coming from is a paradox.

**Are you going to continue making acronym paintings or are you done with that series? What are you working on now?**

They're done. I'm finishing working on "Hood Niggas Camping." I told myself that I would just use this month to relax as much as I could and focus on getting a larger studio space. "Hood Niggas Camping" is going to be a 21-piece series. The smallest one is ten-and-a-half feet tall, and about five-and-a-half feet wide. And then I have another 21-painting series called "supposed to do." It's narrative-based. I'm also in the process of fully editing "FOGA." There will be a full-scale installation in DC next Spring.

**Can you tell me a little bit about the show at Anonymous Gallery in New York? Those images were stunning.**

It was an authentic, traditional American flag purchased from this flag company—like, it could have hung over the fucking White House. I made it dual-sided. I kept the traditional red, white and blue side, and then I made a mirrored version on the other side, which was six different shades of black.

**And those were the images that people were walking on.**

Yes, [the black side] was the side that people were walking on. The side that was face-down ass-up was the red, white, and blue side.

Most rituals are about access and boundaries. In a lot of rituals in Africa, they use this ritualistic powder as a kind of a marker to create these boundaries. And it's usually composed of grain and bone, either human or animal. I felt like the weakest part of the concept for that show up there in New York with the flag was the chalk outline. The chalk outline, it's just so basic. I thought, How do I add some conceptual depth to it? I was like, let's make it an American ritualistic powder. So, chalk outline? It gets no more American than that for niggas.

I added specifically this one ground, powderized pig skull, and the pig/cop that it represents is Christopher Dorner. That's the only cop that I respect. He's the actual cop who went on a cop killing spree in California. That one pig head represents him. The grain element, the American version of the grain element, was just one 24-pack case of chicken-flavored ramen. I wanted to give the chalk outline the same ritualistic depth.

The finished product that you see, after the month-long duration of the show, is essentially whitewashed on the black side; it's folded up at a thirteen-fold Memorial triangle, and then I sealed it. It'll never be open, and you'll never be able to see that abstract painting that was created by the whitewashing—unless you fucking buy it and then rip it open and just completely disrespect what the fuck I want to happen to it, but you know, whatever. It's called *G'ordivante Fold*, and it's a play on the Gordian Knot story.

**I'm not familiar with that story.**

There was this huge knot, and all of these philosophers would just sit around it and try to think how it could be untied and shit like that. So, you know, all of these niggas are just sitting around—

**Philosophizing—**

*[Both laugh]* Yeah, just philosophizing, and all of sudden here comes Alexander the Great. There's a couple of versions of the story. The knot was tied around a wagon, and some people say he just took off one of the wheels, and then that made it able to be unraveled. And a lot of people say that he just pulled out a sword and cut that hoe.

So it's really kind of a parable about a situation or a problem that requires outside-of-the-box thinking or assertive action. I'm playing into the assertive action side of it. A huge part of the commentary about this show is about how white America is so masterful when it comes to leveraging its help and aid towards us. You have this red, white, and blue side, that's supposedly suffering this utter humiliation and abuse [as visitors walk over it].

**Yeah, like when people talk about the "desecration of the flag."**

The traditional flag in the show is "suffering for the greater cause," to uplift this beautiful black side [which] is being whitewashed within the overall institutional context. It ingests all of that energy and propping up that it "suffered" for the Black side and it folds it in on itself into this symbol. The name "G'ordivante" is intentionally this niggafied version of "Gordian," like "Deovonte."

The flag has to be unfolded from a place of outside-of-the-box thinking, like, that has to be included if you ever unfold it. It's sealed, so if you ever want to see it, you have to imagine it. And once you start imagining shit, you're automatically opening up your receptors of empathy. Or you just forcefully rip it open.

### **Damn, I appreciate you explaining to me the context behind the show.**

The stars are cut from real and fake Lamborghini floor mats. Again, anytime I make a Lamborghini reference or shout out, or use a Lamborghini color scheme, that is to connect the object to the body in a very visceral, flesh-and-blood way. The stars are real and fake, just like that eternal conversation within our community. There are only seven of them that are from real floor mats, and one of them comes from a Lamborghini Urus, and I specifically chose that because that's what all the niggas is rapping about right now.

This gallerist [at Anonymous Gallery] told me this story about this white couple who came in to see the show. One was wearing a "Black lives matter" face mask and memorabilia. And they literally got on their hands and knees and tried to brush the powder off of the stars. But here's the funny thing about it: the real Lamborghini floor mats wouldn't get clean.

### **How long have you been making artwork?**

Well, I've been creative my whole life. I turned into a conceptual artist in prison. Before that I was acting, I was doing local theater. I used to be in love with movies, but in prison I had this realization: we all act, we always act. Even when we are by ourselves, we are acting. So that's just what that is. But when I finally realized that my purest energy was creative, and this was the reason that I was just constantly getting into so much trouble, it was because my purest energy was basically fighting me back because I wasn't respecting it and I was wasting it. Being in prison, I realized just how much of that energy was being stripped from me and just raped by the fucking necessity of having to use it that way. Being a nigga from the hood, who didn't want to just end up being a nigga from the hood, who didn't want to just be the statistic that white America wanted me to be. My creative energy had a certain percentage of it being abused from the necessity of having to act and play roles to just not be a statistic. And then on top of that, I was using the rest of it to do even more acting in an artistic context.

I had that realization in prison and I've always wanted to be a contemporary artist. I've always had that pull and that draw. I always loved what I understood of that world, and just the seemingly limitless boundaries of expression in that. I've always been able to draw and shit like that. In prison, the largest object that I could make was the size of a poster board, and as you've gotten to see my work, my art is obviously way bigger than a poster board, not just scale, but the concepts of it.

### **Absolutely, yeah.**

In prison, the only way that I could make art was in my head, writing ideas down in these composition notebooks. That's what turned me into a conceptual artist. A lot of people think that I just came out and started making art out of nowhere. No, I sat in prison for four years on some evil villain shit, like, "I can't wait 'til they let me out."

And that's the thing: I know exactly how to execute everything I made so far because I thought about it, and rethought about it, and rethought about it, and imagined it, and lived it out, and fucking rethought about it, relived it out, died with it, brought it back to life all in my head for four years straight.

### **At Von Ammon Co, the gallerist, Todd Von Ammon, showed me some of the collages that you had made when you were in prison.**

I was making all of these conceptual projects in my head. I have emotional attachments to some of those works 'cuz that was all I got. It's crazy in there, that whole culture. But aside from my writings, those collages are like the only actual, physical objects that I made while I was in there. Those are the objects that I made in prison.

I don't know if you noticed, but a lot of my art is about ritual. When I was in prison, my mentor at the time created a correspondence course of multi-disciplinary art theory while I was in prison. I mean, the main shit that he sent me was books on anthropology.

That's what trips me out when people just lazily classify me as angry. I'm not just getting you in the corner and just beating you up. No, I'm giving you a chance of redemption because ritual is all about healing at the end. I'm giving you a chance at redemption, but I'm not going to fight. You have to go through it. I'm giving

you everything that I'm going to give you.

**You give the viewer a lot of space, which is what's kind of disappointing about the reactions that I heard about at the guessing game before your show.**

I don't make it easy, but I definitely don't make it as hard as it's been made for me to get it for myself. Stop being scary. Stop saying that I don't want to have a conversation just because I won't keep my voice at whatever decibel that makes you not expose how scared of me you really are.

*David-Jeremiah's 'I.A.H.Y.F.F.A.W.D. / N.F.D.B.J.W.B.D.' runs until April 25 2021*