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ARTFORUM



View of "David-Jeremiah," 2022. From left: *I Drive Thee*, 2021; *El Cobarde*, 2021; *I Drive Thee*, 2021.

David-Jeremiah

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In David-Jeremiah's new series of paintings, "I Drive Thee," 2021–22, diagrammatic depictions of collarbones and orchid blossoms, framed by an allusion to the ludicrously expensive Lamborghini sports car, form the basis for a layered rumination on Black masculinity. The project gives unexpected visual form to the violence and trauma inflicted via racial stereotyping. Yet there is a therapeutic element here as well, as the artist argues that the visualization of these toxic markers of identity is part of the process to comprehend and counter the corrosive effects of racism on identity formation. It is an ambitious agenda, made all the more challenging by the artist's inventive use of abstraction to convey the theme.

"I Drive Thee" comprises eight monochromatic tondos, each of which displays an intricate, symmetrical decorative pattern showing an arrangement of the principal visual elements: the bone and the blossom. These forms, rendered more or less figuratively as bas-reliefs, are made directly on the panel, for the most part, with lengths of manila rope and adhesive. The rawness of the embossed effect is softened somewhat by the monochromatic treatment of the piece. The colors are symbolic, indicating the particular psychological or ethical content that each work intends to convey—red for violence and bloodshed, yellow for reticence, and black for purity and integrity. The circular format lends a maplike appearance to the pattern, suggesting a microcosm of pain, trauma, and possibly redemption.

David-Jeremiah has been shrewdly employing the Lamborghini as a signifier for most of his career in an attempt to anchor his reflections on the Black male experience. He transforms the "Lambo" into something more than a convenient cliché for gangsta status by meshing the image of the sports car with the flamboyant and repellent culture of the *corrida de toros*. But just when you think you are on all-too-familiar thematic ground, David-Jeremiah's nuanced reinterpretation of the trials and tribulations of Black masculinity might cause you to pause and reconsider the

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hackneyed connections that presume to link affect, agency, and social justice. “I Drive Thee” offers a powerful argument about the instrumentalizing potential of art. But this series also reminds us that art is but one link in a chain of mediating factors affecting social and political change. In David-Jeremiah’s hands, art is indeed a tool for transformation, but one that cleverly conceals its agenda beneath a layer of seductive aesthetics. As anthropologist Alfred Gell notes, we often overlook captivation, which he identified as the “primordial kind of artistic agency.” Indeed, the syntax that David-Jeremiah has invented to wrangle the iconography of these works is visually stunning and absorbing, like an apotropaic pattern. That is, the pieces perhaps function as involuted designs fashioned in service of a ritualized banishment of evil spirits. They direct us to the pursuit of a communal good, to the act of setting off for war, or to the celebration of victory.

Thus, the artist’s tondos might be viewed as unquiet totems, insofar as the icons are meant to picture Black masculinity in conflict with a range of imposed and internalized identities, none of which satisfy the artist’s definition of personhood. David-Jeremiah is keenly aware that the history of white supremacy forces Black male subjectivity into a corner. In the process, he seems to be saying, no person can escape what can only be described as a corrosion of selfhood. “I Drive Thee” is hardly a self-sufficient instrument—though of course, what artwork ever could be? The series doesn’t propose to treat all aspects of Black masculinity, or claim that it’s a blueprint for social change. Nevertheless, this project is not without agency. The depth and authority of David-Jeremiah’s entire practice stems from its origins in lived experience, in a lifeworld ingeniously portrayed through a sensitive and resourceful intertwining of medium and content. This show presented a persuasive argument for a reconsideration of art’s aesthetic and political capacities.

— *Michael Corris*