

# Meliksetian MB Briggs



David Jeremiah in his Tin District studio with *The Coward El Cobarde* and select *I Drive Thee*. All 2021, mixed media, mahila rope, spray paint and oil-based enamel on wood panel, 60 x 60 in.

## STEP INTO THIS RING

DAVID-JEREMIAH'S TUSSELE WITH THE INTENSITY OF RITUAL AND DISPLAY.

BY BRANDON KENNEDY  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LUIS MARTINEZ

A few years ago I heard the rumblings of provocation from a few people who took part in an intimate—yet intense—performance by a relative newcomer to the Dallas art scene: David Jeremiah. I had yet to see images or any work and, to be perfectly honest, from what I had heard, I had exactly zero interest in donning a Klan hood to enter a room to tattoo the same image on said artist I hadn't even met yet. The duration of the performance was three weeks in

a makeshift cell of the artist's own device. Rather than focus on the visual component or the duration, I was mostly taken by the Black artist's sincere attempt at actual dialogue with a traditionally white audience issued with zero apologies for the subject matter or his direct methodology.

Soon thereafter I made a visit to David Jeremiah's house studio in West Dallas, near Ex Ovo, Sweet Pass Sculpture Park, and 500X. He had several bodies of work in process then and more plans

# Meliksetian MB Briggs

## STUDIO

for diverse conceptual projects in the future. On occasion I had difficulty finding resolution in the formal aspects of his conceptual practice, eventually realizing by his *Things Done Changed* exhibition in 2020, at the now-defunct The Public Trust, that he was pushing work out fast, with too many ideas at hand. A frenzy of intensity and dialogue was happening as intended, but he and the work needed to slow down and expand the room a bit. The exhibition was curated but presented almost as a group show, visually dense yet also conceptually complex, with charged subject matter as well.

During the last few years, following his initial public offering, David-Jeremiah has had solo exhibitions at Halsey McKay Gallery in East Hampton, Von Ammon Co. in Washington DC, anonymous gallery in New York, and Janette Kennedy Gallery in Dallas. He was also awarded a Nasher Artist Grant in 2020 and has an upcoming Artist Rounds exhibition at Project Row Houses in Houston in late March. While happy to have and work hard for these opportunities, David-Jeremiah always reminds me that he “won’t be content until my first museum acquisition occurs in my hometown. Dallas is all I know.”

For his inaugural exhibition, *I Drive Thee*, opening with Dallas’ Gallery 12.26, David-Jeremiah has refined his flow into a suite of eight bold tondos, each measuring five feet in diameter. Presented as a grouping in the front room, six of the series are rendered in a sticky red hue, mimicking pooled blood, with other corporeal signifiers mirrored in a rough symmetry. In the back gallery, a solo yellow and a black example idly laze just outside of the chaos and finality of the outcomes that initially greet the gallery visitor.

When I sat down with the artist early this past December in his temporary industrial studio in West Dallas, he explained the gestation of this body of work as an investigation into the history and rituals of bullfighting. Focused on the three blood sport players—bull, matador, horse—David-Jeremiah pulls visual signifiers from each and layers them into eight newly condensed and visually rich compositions.

While it can appear as if you’re simply peering into the cross-section of a major artery, the media and techniques that David-Jeremiah employs allow for a visual inventiveness and subtle discoveries by the viewer. Flowers, collarbones, and horns slowly emerge in outline or form, rendered in oil-based enamel and spray paint, manila rope, and sawdust. Clawing textures from forks evoke both the pawing threat of the horned beast and either animal’s potential final commute to the dinner plate.

Surrounded by the victims of our need for bloodlust, ceremony, and entertainment, one may at least find some solace in the flowers that befall the victor at the close of the day’s event. Rather than rely on a simple stemmed bouquet, David-Jeremiah awards the skill, grace, strength, and artistry of the moment with the symmetrical, feminine lines of orchids, appearing in almost all the gored, expired beasts and the lone black example yet to enter the ring.

All works share the same title as the exhibition, *I Drive Thee*, save for *El Cobarde* (The Coward), the lone yellowbelly that hangs in the back with the black rookie yet to see any action. These two disparate examples speak to color-coded markers of unbeknownst futures, rendering the emptiness within the *amarillo* hue as blissful ignorance and the complex matte, textured vortex of the darkest hue, holding only a single flower before his eventual call to the arena.

Back in the former industrial carpet warehouse that functioned as David-Jeremiah’s second studio in West Dallas, the majority of the walls are hung with a series of works entitled *Hood Niggas Camping*, 2020-21. It is composed of 21 three-panel stacked forms (each panel resembling a car hood) to be installed in the round; David-Jeremiah insists that the viewer therefore perform the role of the campfire, a reverse panopticon of shadows and scale.

Their overall scale averages nearly ten feet tall, every hood

design repeated in three standard sizes for 21 figural variations, each mounted flush with the wall and a foot off the ground. Their surfaces are gesturally clawed downward with black pigment and mixed mediums, creating looming figures that are somehow absurd yet also haunting as only a car-parts-attended campfire scenario could be, especially given the comical wordplay nudge in the work’s allusive title—humor used both to disarm and to question.

According to the Dallas born-and-raised, self-taught artist these 21 “Hoods” are all actual Lamborghini-model hood outlines and their subsequent variations. The first series of seven are “bona fide, semi-abstract, factory” while the latter two sets are “segments, shapes, later models, aftermarket, and prototypes.” The Italian luxury car manufacturer’s logo is a bull, with models both named after celebrated animals and also taking formal cues from their bodies. David-Jeremiah was raised by his Italian grandmother which, he reasoned, quickened his adoption of the formal and language cues often referenced in his conceptual practice.

A few evenings ago, I called the artist to fact check, clear up a few details, and inquire about a seductive yet thorny black-and-white photo of him I had seen online in which he is reclining in a cotton field, bared chest emblazoned with tattoos, a knowing swagger smile catching the rays of a setting sun. He assured me that he was just returning from his first trip to Marfa with his girl, and as he drove past a reminder of a former life, he pulled over and got out of the car to commemorate the moment with a casual, yet quite complex, loaded snapshot. I couldn’t tell if he was putting me on or not, but I believed both to be true.

I decided to offer up in conversation *The Story of Ferdinand*, the biggest bull around, but also a gentle animal that wants to avoid conflict. Ferdinand smells the flowers all day until he is stung by a bee, is recruited to fight, and has to enter the ring. Nevertheless, he pays no mind to those wanting to provoke him in the arena and lies down in the center of the ring among the flowers thrown by adoring ladies.

I ask David-Jeremiah if he is familiar with the children’s story, and he feigns little interest in a subject that basks idly in lieu of achieving something significant. He didn’t have to remind me of his persistence and dedication to be collected institutionally in Dallas for me to think about it again just then as well, to which I thought to myself, “A Ferdinand he ain’t.” Bet. **P**



David-Jeremiah, *I Drive Thee*, 2021, mixed media, manila rope, spray paint, and oil-based enamel on wood panel, 60 x 60 in.