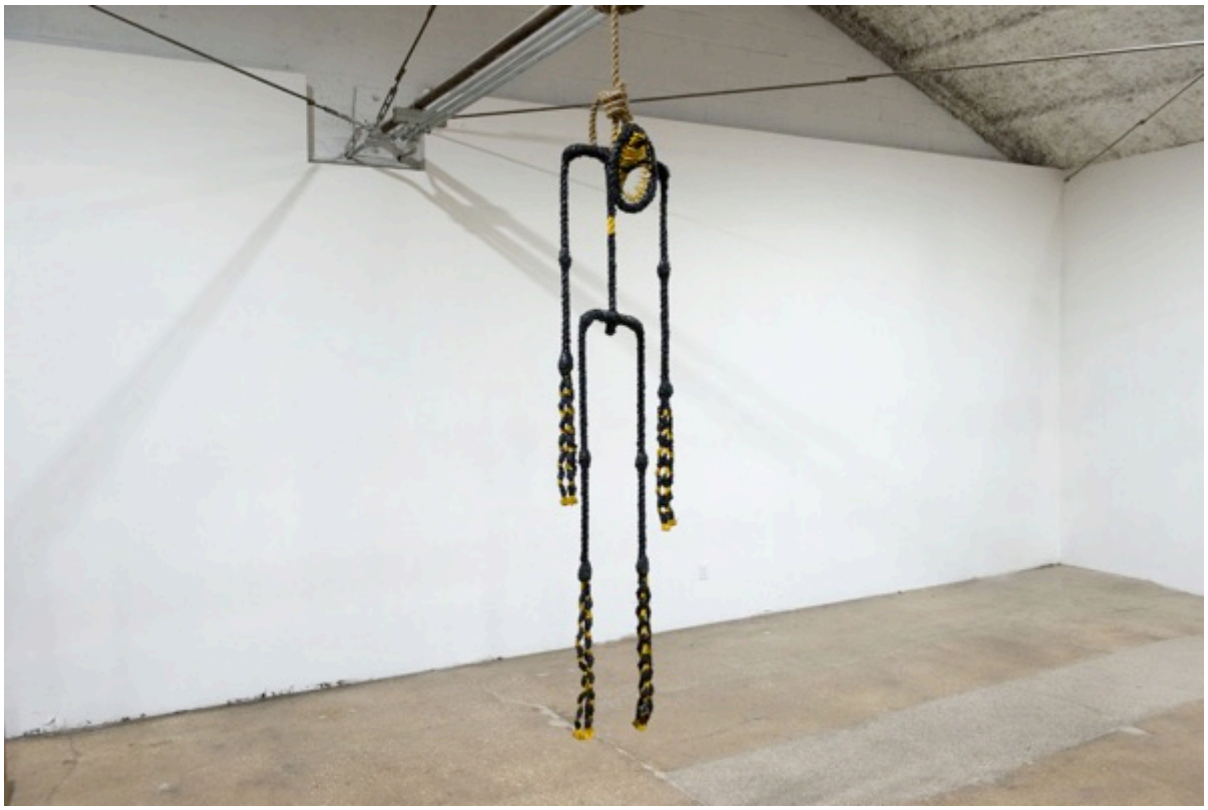
PATRON
ART / CULTURE / DESIGN

David Jeremiah Has A Lot To Say

June 4, 2020

David Jeremiah has a lot of tattoos. He has a lot of conversations too. And through his practice the Dallas-based artist wants you to have them with you.

Jeremiah made headlines last fall with his in-your-face installation *The Lookout,* in which he locked himself in a cell of his own making and invited viewers, one by one, to don a Ku Klux Klan mask. For most viewers, that in and of itself was uncomfortable. But then the participant was further tasked to fill in the outline of a KKK mask on Jeremiah's tattooed body with a needle dipped in white ink while he lay on a self-made concrete bed. It spoke to a familiar American refrain—a black man is in a prison cell.



Jeremiah felt his own discomfort, and more importantly the viewer's, would lead to challenging discussions: "*The Lookout* was about having a conversation in a realer way—the goer putting on a KKK mask and putting a tattoo on my body. If I could make myself uncomfortable by putting a KKK mask on

my body and you putting a KKK mask on, it makes a double negative become a positive." The artist, who has served time in prison, lived inside *The Lookout* for three weeks, equipped with food rations.

Without question, the self-taught artist's work addresses centuries of racism and police brutality. "There's a difference between saying something real and saying something real in a different way," he explains. While his practice could certainly address the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of police, his oeuvre has always been rooted in the history of violence toward African Americans, especially men. It's through this lens he posits the hard questions: "Why has this s*** been going on for so long? The absurdity of having this much longevity...it can't be pure. Is it just something to do now? Do you need to attach yourself to something? Is it something to do at the end of the day? Is it a competition? It's completely absurd. It's boring. But it has brought about some iconic characters: Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks... It's a platform." These names would not be known, he affirms, if the atrocities did not exist. "It's complex, to say the least."

Regarding the recent protests, he says he is concerned that the burden of the conversation falls on black Americans. "Why are the minorities obligated to give the most to this conversation? I feel like the first group that needs to be marching is the police if they want to salvage their purpose of serving and protecting. Secondly, white people should be

marching. Our ancestors [black people] have already been marching."

In fact he says, "Policemen are public servants. Your main job is to sacrifice your life for me. You are paid to do a job and that is to serve and protect. Everything is so punitive... It's so indignant. It's horrible customer service. I feel like being a cop should be harder than being the president. They [the police] are essentially being paid to punish us.

"Knowing that someone can physically do that to you... It's so unforgiveable what these cops are doing because when you kill someone, you have taken everything. But what is still left is that energy from that act."

He recognizes that protests accelerating into violence is part of the problem. “The people who are having the conversation are in the way of it. I’m blessed enough to be artistic. There are mother******** out there that are just as mad as I am, but they don’t have ways to express their anger, so it spills over in a less conventional way.”

Things Done Changed, was a solo show earlier this year at The Public Trust. Artist, writer, curator, and activist Darryl Rattcliff described a single-channel video in that show thus: “In his piece *I Love Micah,* Jeremiah imagines a world where the Dallas Police Department learned powerful and pivotal lessons after the July 7, 2016 police shootings by Micah Xavier Johnson. In this alternate future, the police force had a reckoning after the shootings and realized that they had gone too far in their treatment of communities of color. They view the shootings as a memento mori and start a small, internal movement, where they put *I Heart Micah* bumper stickers on their squad cars. In this vision, Jeremiah imagines a redemptive quality to the shootings as a catalyst that improves police and community relations and sparks people to have real conversations in real ways.”

The artist also has a playful side, and he speaks of his 10-month-old son often. He got hooked on Dragon Ball Z in prison, and he loves Lamborghinis. He takes his inspiration from Superman comics in his newest work, a sculpture series of the same name that examines issues of agency, justice, punishment, and cycles of violence as described in his artist statement:

“In a time not so long ago, an alien spaceship crashed onto the planet Earth. The crew, upon coming into direct contact with the Earth’s atmosphere, turned into an inanimate object—a piece of manila rope. Over time, Manilla is coerced and framed to commit crimes against black people—mainly in the form of lynching throughout the South. Manila can’t speak, has no agency and becomes a literal tool for white supremacy. Hundreds of years later, representatives from Manila’s

home planet discover his atrocities and put him on trial. The alien justice system motto is “everything must be judged,” and even though Manila is an inanimate object who can’t defend himself and is innocent of the crimes he is accused of, the aliens declare him guilty and sentence him to death by hanging with manila rope.”

Jeremiah’s new work *I.A.H.Y.F.F.A.W.D. (Externalized/Internalized, 2020)* makes use of the iconic shape of a Lamborghini hood and employs a concealed acronym that describes, in Jeremiah’s words, “the most toxic, hateful and disgusting sentence I could get off my chest at the time towards white people.” *Externalized/Internalized,* a bifurcated yet cohesive series meant to be exhibited as a diptych on opposite walls, explores the personal and collective psyches around what lives “under the hood” of systemic racism. The work considers the positioning of these effects on the self, the body, the collective. The artist won’t reveal what the acronym stands for. “It will forever remain a secret because I am trying to explore the admittance and the proof.” The acronym is growing out of the hood, trying to claim space.” I am shooting a slug at the inconsistencies and loopholes of our legal system.”

The artist’s use of the Lamborghini here and in other bodies of work is drawn from the Italian manufacturer’s practice of naming models after bull breeds. “I’m obsessed with Lamborghinis. They are the most beautiful physical body I’ve ever seen and named after formidable fighting bulls, which is ritualistic violence. If there’s another beautiful, perfect body that’s rooted in ritualistic violence, it’s the human body” he says.

In portraying this inner shadow via exploration of the interior and exterior shape, form, and body of this symbol, this object of desire—therein lies trickster energy. The engine of a Lamborghini is housed within the trunk positioning as opposed to the hood; thus the viewer is likely to look in the wrong place to fix or tame the beast. In this

way, Jeremiah says, the series is “a platform for my belief that contemporary minorities can’t be racist towards whites. We can be spiteful and hateful sure…even racist towards ourselves. But not towards whites. In my opinion, all modern, ‘negative’ minority dynamic towards whites can only be classified as retaliatory. White people did it first. A copy is still a copy…”

Utilizing symbolism and his signature mix of sculpture and painting, the artist explores what there is to be fixed in a rigged system when the surgical and diagnostic under-the-hood mentality is misplaced. When is a symbol deployed for show? When is it truly embodied, understood?

And David Jeremiah has more to say: “As bleak as things are, they’ve been worse. I have high hopes. I think s***’s going to get better. And I need to start taking voting seriously.”