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Stars Down to Earth: An Interview with Artist DAVID-JEREMIAH

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Once you enter a space that houses the work of Texas artist David-Jeremiah, there is no opting out. His installations and performances often implicate their

Meliksetian MB Briggs

audience at the point of engagement. Visitors to “G’ordiavonte Fold,” his exhibition at anonymous gallery in New York this past spring, entered a room to behold a giant black American flag constructed out of various materials – most notably Lamborghini floor mats. Surrounding the flag was a white powder boundary made of crushed chalk, chicken-flavored ramen noodles, and pig skull. A perfectly small amount of space around the work allowed visitors to navigate the room without stepping in the powder and tracking it onto the black mats. The installation presented viewers with a choice: to tip toe around the piece, or to walk freely within the gallery, their footprints contributing to the “whitewashing” of the black flag in its center. It’s a simple conceit, one that positions neutrality in the face of systemic racism as more than an insidious force, but an impossibility, a myth. K.O. Nnamdie/Restaurant Projects invited

Meliksetian MB Briggs

me to speak to David-Jeremiah about this work and others as his show at anonymous gallery was coming to a close, and as his exhibition at von ammon co in Washington, D.C., was getting underway.

Gideon Jacobs: Let's talk about the materials you used in the piece for anonymous gallery. You constructed the American flag, a sacred symbol of nationalism, out of products that some probably wouldn't think of as sacred—dry ramen, Lamborghini floor mats. For the record, I personally consider ramen more sacred than the American flag.

David-Jeremiah: First off, the Lamborghini is one of my two main conceptual inspirations. Body, machine, object – however you want to categorize it – Lamborghinis are the most aesthetically pleasing things I've ever seen. But the company got past their numerical names – they started coining them hoes after formidable fighting bulls. So, you have this perfect, beautiful, futuristically aggressive machine/body, built for performance, whose essence is trapped in ritualistic violence. Ritualistic violence is definitely one way you could describe bullfighting. If there's another perfect, beautiful body built for performance – one that's also trapped in the mix of ritualistic violence – it's the human body. Obviously, since we can't stop doing each other dirty. So any time I make a Lambo reference – using shape, a color scheme, or a shout-out – it's just me connecting the object to humanity in a very specific, flesh-and-blood visceral way, a gore that stays desirable while performing itself.

A lot of ritual is about boundary and passage: inviting in and closing off, and vice versa. A huge element of that dynamic – especially in Africa – is ritualistic powder. It's usually made of grains and ground animal or human bone. In America, it might as well be a chalk outline. I let the chalk stay

Meliksetian MB Briggs

itself, because it's the most American element: here, we act like we change, so I decided to force self-respect by keeping that material what it really is. The grain relates more to the personal side of interpretation: I had a nearly four-year "staycation" – and even alien niggas on other planets know what's up with ramen in the American penal system. Finally, the ground bone had to be pig bones – on some fuck-the-laws type shit, but at the same time on some respect-that-it-is-what-it-is-when-it-has-to-be type shit. The one ground pig head represents one very specific dead pig, the only one a nigga can think of to respect: [Christopher Dorner](#). The head turns shit into a trophy, because smoking Dorner had to be the ultimate trophy for the other cops who finally dropped him.

The flag is double-sided, with the traditional tri-color side lying prostrate as if it's enduring the ultimate disrespect to support the all-black nigga side – not only by touching the ground but tooted face-down, ass-up in this hoe while everybody applies more and more pressure on it by reclaiming the negative of a chalk outline into a positive. The outline literally goes from being something that needs to have something inside it in order to be whole, to something that's full when it's transferred in the form of a footprint – all with the nigga side's "permission." They love to label that kind of shit as empowerment, but at the end of the day, it just gets whitewashed in the most mutually disrespectful way possible, and the white savior/institution gets to save the day while tricking the niggas into internalizing it all just enough for them to save face and run the next play – some Prince Harry type shit.

The different fabrics, textures, and hues on the nigga side represent different types of niggas. And the fake and real Lambo floor mats I used to make the stars play into the degrees of real versus fake within all these roles – tactics all niggas have to use, because the realest done been the fakest and the fakest done been the realest at least once.

Meliksetian MB Briggs



Let's talk about the performative element of the piece, or more specifically about how you envisioned the system of viewing that the audience has to navigate. There's this perfectly measured amount of space that makes it sort of possible to not get the chalk on your shoes if you really, really try not to. But in all likelihood, if you view the piece, you are going to get chalk on your shoes, and possibly on the flag as well. Can you tell me about the way you imagined and designed this experience?

I've been calling concepts like this "inverted performance installations" for a minute now. I'm trying to finesse a dynamic that gets rid of all the loopholes and tactics motherfuckers leverage in a conversation just not to be wrong, to stay right, to keep you from being right, yadda yadda whoop whoop. Everybody's entitled to have their own personal truth if

Meliksetian MB Briggs

that's the game they want to play with their time, but that don't make the truth less real. And there is a "the truth," nigga. Facts are everybody's. They're not just for one person or side to abuse or hide behind on the Left, on the Right, or on whichever side you can still bust back from. Just because we only know 60% of the truth doesn't mean we get to disrespect that 60% for not knowing the remaining 40%. That's our fault, not the truth's fault. Real shit, homie. Niggas ain't just making this shit up about white people and this country. Shit on paper, not just in a nigga mind. Not just my feelings or my personal "truth." Fuck all that shit. ... The fact that niggas have been having the same conversation in this country for over 400 years means somebody ain't having this bitch right. That's the truth. Fuck how you feel about it. Who the fuck do you know who's interesting, cool, or bearable enough to sit in a room and talk to about the same shit for 400 years straight?

Niggas love to talk about the humor in my work, how it balances shit out... Bro, this shit ain't me making the work funny – I'm funny, but not that funny. It's the truth doing that shit. How can it not be, after 400 years? So, what I try to do with these inverted performance installations is to create a conversation with the goer, where the other side has already said every- and anything they're going to say before, during, and after the goer even starts conversing with the work. ... The goer, in my mind, is conversing with something that has been and will continue to be present once they leave. Four hundred years is a lot of energy packed into one thing. At this point, the conversation has enough energy to have itself. And a huge part of its longevity is that we keep getting in the way of where it's trying to go. So, if you want to come to the show and look silly AF trying to scoot against the wall and walk like a newborn calf just to not be part of something that's obviously more powerful than you, then do just that: look silly AF scooting against the wall and walk like a fucking newborn calf. Give it that respect. That experience undoubtedly knows something you've been knowing all along.

There is a disclaimer when you walk into the gallery that no visual documentation of the show will occur after 13.4% of the exhibition time has elapsed. It explains that 13.4 is the percentage of America's

Meliksetian MB Briggs

population that is Black. Can you unpack this element of the show for me a bit?

This question just plays back into the exploitation and leveraging of aid and inclusivity. There is a shitload of oppression and wrongs that niggas go through every day. We'll never hear about or see those via the mainstream. There is no particular narrative that projects higher or as high a yield. That's why it's so important to go hard, bro: because everybody ain't able. I know that on-the-dead-homies type shit is a cliché by now, but that shit is real though. Somewhat of the same-difference when white niggas be like: "Well it's not my fault I was born white." Okay. It's not my fault I can't dig up and bring back to life your old great grandpappy and make him feel it instead. ... This war isn't linear.



Meliksetian MB Briggs

You called your exhibition at von ammon co in Washington, D.C., “I.A.H.Y.F.F.A.W.D. / N.F.D.B.J.W.B.D.” The acronyms will never be deciphered, according to the press release, but you are quoted saying that it is “hateful, toxic,” and directed toward white people. The description poses the question: “If racism is a construct undergirded by white supremacy, can people outside this group participate?” Can you talk a little about how you arrived at this structure of messaging, using encrypted code?

I don't think minorities can be legitimately or technically racist towards white people in this country. Hell, we can be legitimately or technically racist towards ourselves before we could ever be that towards them. Firstly, when we attempt to be racist towards a white person the outcome is so drastically different from when they're racist towards us that it doesn't count. Secondly—a nigga could give a fuck how petty this may sound— but they did it first. If you punch somebody in the face and they punch you back it might *feel* like they did the same thing to you ... but they didn't. You punched them. They punched you *back*. Feeling the same thing doesn't matter. Yeah, we can hate them, be spiteful towards them, we can even be their favorite word: “angry.” These are extremely acceptable states of being in the correct context, but more than that, they're human. There's nothing wrong with being human. I heard Nikki Giovanni say that admitting you hate white people is the first step to eventually loving them.

Meliksetian MB Briggs



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