



# The Dallas Morning News



## Dallas artist David-Jeremiah prefers to let his work do the talking, but his story is worth hearing

Inside the timeless fury and creative mind of David Jeremiah.

BY CHRISTOPHER MOSLEY IN VISUAL ARTS | 02 OCT 20

Artist David-Jeremiah has just had his work stolen. The interactive works he premiered in early July included stacks of cash donated by the public, placed in a series of offering plates. Jeremiah, seated on the patio of Ten Bells Tavern in Oak Cliff, entertains guesses about who could have taken the money.

“Somebody took a car payment out that [expletive],” he says. “I wish it had been me.”

His solo show, “Offerings,” is on view 24 hours a day, seven days a week at the Janette Kennedy Gallery in the South Side on Lamar complex in the Cedars. Six lead plates are laid out in ceremonial fashion akin to a tithing request. Each is marked with a word that creates the phrase, “Pay Us to Stay Us.”

Five of the plates represent a slain law enforcement officer from the events of July 7, 2016. A sixth wordless plate — punctuated by a period — represents shooter Micah Xavier Johnson, a military veteran who was killed by a police robot detonating a bomb, considered the first killing of its kind. The underground art gallery sits across from the Dallas Police Department’s Jack Evans Headquarters.

The money in each plate was to be donated to the families of the deceased when the show ends. Jeremiah says he found out about the stolen money from a text from the gallerist. All of the plates in the exhibition had money taken from them. In the wake of recent Black Lives Matter protests over police brutality, Johnson’s plate had been receiving the most donations from attendees prior to the theft.

“Micah Xavier’s altar was boiled down to a sack of shillings,” Jeremiah says. “Literally. A [expletive] coin bag of

shillings. And a Wild Detectives gift card.” When it’s suggested that the donations could be taken online instead, Jeremiah is adamant that such an action would miss the point.

“I don’t care about that,” Jeremiah says. “It’s about church. No, church is church.”

Actual daily gallery hours as opposed to the 24/7 model could be a solution. Jeremiah scoffs at the suggestion, and at the notion that he was the victim.

“I didn’t get robbed,” he says. “The families got robbed.”

Just a year and a half into a shift from the performing arts to visual art, Jeremiah is on the rise. He’s still in the early stages of completing work for an exhibit that is scheduled to debut in the spring of 2021 at Von Ammon Co., an art gallery based in Washington, D.C.. This show in D.C.’s Georgetown district will put the artist front and center in what may become one of the country’s newest hot spots for art collecting.

### **Oak Cliff roots**

Jeremiah was born at Methodist Hospital and grew up in Oak Cliff, bouncing between his grandmother’s house and his mother’s home several streets away. Early on a Sunday morning, he is walking the boarded-up property that was his grandmother’s house. He recently had to kick out someone living in the residence for pushing drugs. He then saved his grandmother’s antique piano from the home.

“I’m like, ‘Bro, You’re really sitting up here trapping out of my dead granny’s house?’” Jeremiah says. “The house I grew up in?” I said, ‘Bro, I ain’t even tripping. We literally grew up together. Be careful.’”

He credits his grandmother with being an early decrier of Oak Cliff’s impending development. “You know Oak Cliff used to be a white suburb, and then white flight happened and they [expletive] all moved from here up to Richardson,” Jeremiah says. “My granny would always say that: They’re gonna take it back.”

Jeremiah was estranged from his grandmother and three years into a prison stint when she died. “See, me and my granny — we weren’t good, fool,” Jeremiah says. “I still haven’t seen her grave.”

He then sums up the relationship with a quote that he took from her: “A grudge was made to be held.”

But life philosophies are not all that Jeremiah inherited from his grandmother. A stop by his mother’s home nearby reveals a small collection of paintings by his grandmother and at least one acrylic landscape that Jeremiah painted when he was 8 or 9 years old.

“So my granny started painting,” Jeremiah says. “I think that’s what really [got] me into the creative side of my brain. She was always watching Bob Ross, and then she bought all of the Jerry Yarnell sets and videos.”

Upon leaving his mother’s home, we tour other significant spots from his childhood: Headliners Barbershop. Faith Family Academy Charter School, where he graduated. DART’s Morrell Station.

“The train station was the club for [expletive] that wasn’t old enough to get into the club,” Jeremiah says. He says he and his friends never ventured north of Deep Ellum.

### **Surrounded by violence**

Out of high school, Jeremiah got into a considerable amount of trouble. We drive past a 7-Eleven he is never allowed to return to for a crime he committed just after graduating. He does not say much about the crime other than it was an attempted robbery. He adds that nobody was injured.

Court and police records back up Jeremiah’s description. He was arrested for aggravated robbery on Jan. 22, 2004, and later pleaded guilty to the charge. It was his first offense, but he was sentenced to 10 years, initially on deferred adjudication probation.

Jeremiah says he could discuss the violence in which he grew up in greater detail, but he doesn’t feel it’s necessary. As he lists several incidents, they become more and more personal and bleak. He has signed on his artworks the names of two friends who were murdered.

He doesn’t feel his stories will necessarily elicit empathy. He’s concerned that publishing more intimate details of his life will just elicit gawking and appeal to the change in mood and culture that has happened across all facets of American life in recent months.

Now, he says, everybody wants a Black person “in the museum.”

Much of Jeremiah’s work has focused on his lived experiences. He once spent three weeks in a gallery he reworked as a prison cell in a solo exhibition titled “The Lookout.” His art often touches on the topic of police brutality and the failings of the criminal justice system, but his work does not attempt to provide easy answers to these issues.

Later that morning, we have breakfast at Mama’s Daughters’ Diner on Irving Boulevard. He orders six eggs, six pieces of bacon, two orders of sourdough toast and mashed potatoes with brown gravy.

He remarks about how collectors praise him in a way he finds exploitative and condescending. He shares a mocking impression of what he believes a cynical art collector sounds like: “You know what you have? You have a great story. [Take] Mark Bradford: hairdresser. You’ve been to prison! People can connect to that narrative. They can be like, ‘Look at this guy — he’s overcome so much.’”

Jeremiah is not buying it.

### **‘Vivrant Thang’**

Jeremiah was part of a group show titled “Vivrant Thang” that ran Aug. 15 to Sept. 13 at the newly reopened 500X Gallery. His “FOGA” series was included in the exhibition. The work centers on the subject of convicted felons partaking in yoga and the idea of putting energy into a nonviolent activity while feeling consumed with rage.

Curator Ciara Elle Bryant, a Dallas-based artist, met Jeremiah at a Southern Methodist University graduate thesis show with artist Lauren Woods in 2019. She shared some insight on the inclusion of Jeremiah’s work.

“Making space for David in ‘Vivrant Thang’ was important to me,” Bryant said. “David has a perspective that is different from a lot of people, but it’s meaningful to understand how he is living, surviving his life right now. Having ‘FOGA’ in ‘Vivrant Thang’ shows that different side of living.” In getting ready for larger events, including the exhibit in D.C., Jeremiah has spent weeks at 500X following the closing of “Vivrant Thang.” He’s installing the largest pieces he’s ever created — sculptures made of 4-by-8 pieces of wood painted black and fashioned into the shape of Lamborghini hoods — that are only on display for private viewings.

Prior to the Black Lives Matter movement’s rise to the top of the news cycle and the subsequent months of protests in every major city in the country, there was an ongoing debate in the art world about whether work that addresses social justice issues is simply a trend. The topic is less up for debate now.

What is becoming clear — with Jeremiah’s art as just one example — is that such work is timeless.

*David Jeremiah’s ‘Offerings’ at Janette Kennedy Gallery, Dallas, Texas, runs 07 July - 03 October 2020.*