

Jeremy Dennis Makes a Farce of White Guilt

Dennis's exaggerated scenarios compel non-Indigenous viewers to confront racial dynamics that many people in the images choose not to see.



Louis Bury November 22, 2023



Jeremy Dennis, "Nothing Happened Here #2" (2016), metal print, 40 x 60 inches (all photos Louis Bury/Hyperallergic)

The irony in Jeremy Dennis's [*Open Conflict*](#) at Aicon Contemporary is that the conflicts between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are staged to be conspicuous yet their White-presenting subjects barely notice them. In one metal-print photograph, "Nothing Happened Here #2" (2016), the White subject stands before a red-painted wooden lodge, impaled by a dozen arrows; an expression of subdued pain betrays a stoic body. In another, "Wake" (from the *Rise* series) (2019), a White figure with a quizzical expression stands in a canoe, encircled by over a dozen Native American swimmers (each a photoshopped image of Dennis himself, who is an enrolled Tribal Member of the Shinnecock Indian Nation).

The exhibition gathers together several of the artist's photographic series, most made before 2020 and all portraying scenarios regarding US colonialist legacies so theatrical that they verge on farce. The most memorable among them is *Nothing Happened Here*, whose title and contents convey the absurd degree of repression among White settlers and their descendants. In "Nothing Happened Here #21" (2018), a White woman rests her arms on an ironing board, seemingly lost in thought; 10 arrows pierce her neck and torso, leaving large blood spots staining her patterned dress. Likewise, in "Nothing Happened Here #3" (2017), a bearded White man wearing a plaid shirt strikes a pensive pose on a footbridge in the woods. The folksy image would feel at home in an L.L. Bean catalogue, except for the half dozen arrows lodged in his torso.



Jeremy Dennis, "We Are Still Here," detail (2016), metal print, 40 x 60 inches

Dennis is not going for subtlety, and his approach works best when he commits to a provocative, well-executed conceit. "We Are Still Here" (2016), for example, depicts a Native American man standing in the doorway of a vacant Main Street-style rental space, painted white, with "RETAIL SPACE AVAILABLE" signs in its windows. The man wears traditional Native American clothing and holds a sign that reads, "WE ARE STILL HERE," playing on assumptions based on colonialist narratives about Indigenous identity and assimilation, presence and absence. "Dream of a New World" (2019), on the other hand, in which a White man in a suit crawls on a rocky beach as a shirtless Native American man looms behind him, lacks the same visual and conceptual punch.

The press release describes the *Nothing Happened Here* series as symbolic representations of White guilt but that doesn't quite capture the scenes. The impaled subjects, who resemble dartboards with the darts stuck in them, don't manifest feelings of shame or remorse. Instead, they remain oblivious to their bizarre, lingering injuries as they go about their quotidian lives with the dim awareness that something's not right. The conflicts in all of Dennis's series take place as much within their subjects' psyches as they do between Indigenous and White people. His exaggerated scenarios compel non-Indigenous viewers to confront racial dynamics that many people in the images choose not to see.



Jeremy Dennis, "Nothing Happened Here #21" (2018), metal print, 8 x 12 inches



Jeremy Dennis, "Wake" from *Rise* series, detail (2019), metal print, 30 x 40 inches



Jeremy Dennis, "Dream of a New World," detail (2019), metal print, 20 x 40 inches



Jeremy Dennis, "Ghost of the White Deer" (2016), metal print, 30 x 30 inches

Jeremy Dennis: Open Conflict *continues at Aicon Contemporary (35 Great Jones Street, Noho, Manhattan) through Dec. 2. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*

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