Welcome to "The First Twenty."

I'm James King.

In this episode, we meet Jeremy Dennis, a contemporary fine art photographer and member of the Shinnecock Indian Nation, whose work explores indigenous identity, assimilation, and tradition.

In addition to discussing the evolution of Native American art, Jeremy shares the inspiration for Ma's House & BIPOC Art Studio, an artists' retreat and communal art space on the Shinnecock Indian Reservation.
in Southampton, New York,

that will provide a safe space
for free creativity and healing.

We hope you enjoy
this intimate look

at the intersection of visual
art and social justice.

Dennis:
When I create my visual art,

I often think of the future

because, especially
as an indigenous artist,

you're constantly trying
to place yourself in history,

in time and space,

and you're often trying to work
against the prejudices

of people that are
approaching your work.
I think that, when people hear you're going to go see a show by a Native artist or indigenous artist, they probably think it's about the past. They probably think it's about events that happened hundreds of years ago.

But, in my work, knowing that, I try to create work that blends different time periods together. I try to appreciate the past and incorporate it in different ways, but I think that people need to recognize indigenous people as a changing and dynamic culture that we can just be ourselves.
without actually having
to appeal

01:02:24:16 01:02:27:18
to tropes and stereotypes.

01:02:27:18 01:02:31:01
And so I wanted to look
at social issues,

01:02:31:01 01:02:34:03
look at education,
look at history,

01:02:34:03 01:02:37:00
and try to figure out how,
as an artist,

01:02:37:00 01:02:40:19
you can approach these topics
and educate through your work.

01:02:40:19 01:02:42:15
♪♪

01:02:42:15 01:02:44:22
People just know so little
about you

01:02:44:22 01:02:46:21
that they don't even know
that you exist

01:02:46:21 01:02:49:01
as a people and as a community.

01:02:49:01 01:02:52:16
Just the fact that you have
some sort of medium --

01:02:52:16 01:02:55:02
in my case,
digital photography --

01:02:55:02 01:02:58:17
and you're able to generate,
from almost scratch,

01:02:58:17 01:03:01:06
these pictures
that tell a story,
that give people a chance
to have a conversation
and really, for me, it's
about celebrating my ancestry
and sharing it
with a wider audience.

♫ ♪

For the past year,
I've been working
on a communal art space
called Ma's House.

Ma's House is an indigenous-led
art communal space
on the Shinnecock Indian
Reservation
in Southampton, New York.

We're a very small community
of about 600 tribal members
who live on the territory
and the territory itself is
about 800 square acres of land.

If you look at it on satellite,
north to south, it's probably one mile in length.

When you approach Ma's House, you see this very beautiful facade that [ Laughs ] represents a barn, in most people's eyes.

There's a plan to make it into a museum, a gallery space, general communal art space for people of color, especially the Shinnecock community.

And it's really a beautiful space that will support, primarily, artists of color through different art exhibitions, through artist residencies, and just different programming around bringing different people together and, hopefully, foster the next generation of artists.
in this local community.

I decided to call the project Ma's House because, when I was growing up in this house,

my grandmother was always around the house.

She had a beloved nickname, "Ma,"

but her birth name was Loretta Silva.

When she was towards the end of her life,

my mom asked my grandmother,

"What should we do with the house?"

This family house on the reservation.

And, eventually, see answered,

"Let's just make it into a museum
to honor our family history,"
along with that of Shinnecock history."

She thought it would be a good idea because both parents thought it was always important for all their children to learn about our culture and just be invested in it. You know, who we were, our identity, and just to highlight it at Ma's house, so, that's what she meant by making it into a museum.

Dennis: Just that, alone, is really inspiring to me, to honor her legacy through this gesture of fostering this art communal space.

This house represents family. It represents community and opportunity.
Ma's House is actually a house

that was just down the road
from my family's home,

and it was actually the home
that my uncle

was going to retire in.

And so I spoke with him, at first.

I was just giving him
general questions like,

"How much money
would it probably take?"

And he actually said $50,000
would probably be pretty ideal

for the investment,
to get it into a livable state.

I knew that the plumbing
needed to be replaced.

Most of the electricity
was sort of improvised

and so I thought maybe,
in my mind,

[ Laughs ]

$50,000 was doable.
I didn't really have that general understanding.

just the plumbing alone, that was nearly $50,000.

It's just been ever-growing.

The thing that's been good, however,

is the generosity of people who learned about the project and share the project.

And I think that, if it weren't for that generosity of those individuals,

many of whom are my friends and family,

I probably wouldn't even be able to start this project.

I remember one --

[ Laughs ]

well, it's actually two things that were really surprising.

There are these 700-pound furnace in the basement
that was totally detached from any plumbing

and, somehow, we had to carry that out of the basement, up two flights of stairs.

We had different community members come down and we could barely get it, with probably seven of us.

My uncle, for some reason, stored an old Harley Davidson motorcycle in the basement and so [ Laughs ] that was just really a headache, to even try to get out of the basement.

I don't even know why you would store it in such a humid and dark place, but, I think that was just --

I think those two were just different signs that this project, possible, is going to be difficult,
but, I think, in the end, it was really worth it.

And it's hard to believe, going down there in the basement again, what it looks like today, versus what we started with.

One of the big difficulties of renovating Ma's House was the fact that you can't even get a bank mortgage or grant of any kind for housing on the reservation. The reason for that is the fact that, if you have to default on your loan or you can't pay your bills, the bank can't take your land, they can't take your home, especially on indigenous tribal territory.
I guess that makes sense on their end,

for their liabilities, but, on my end,

it kind of felt discriminatory.

It felt like, "Well, how am I supposed to build a house?"

Especially those who don't even have a house or a frame to begin with.

Are they supposed to just save up tens of thousands of dollars before they even start anything?

All of this excitement from my family came out, in terms of helping to finance,

trying to rescue the house,

just in terms of volunteering time to come down and do house improvement jobs.
And I really remember,
when my mom walked down one day,

she was just so delighted
to know the fact that

this house that, really,
all of us grew up in,

my mom included,

was finally being restored
to its former glory.

Out of the pandemic,
a silver lining was

the rebirth of Ma's house again

because it was, you know,
just a matrilineal place

of love and laughter
and fun in a safe house, so,

that's going to be
something to share.

We've actually already
had one program

with Shinnecock Artist
Andrina Smith.

It feels really great to be

in a space where I get
to share a meal

and some of my work with people.

I think one of those things that has been lost most during this time, is community,

and to be able to reignite all of those familiar community elements again,

starting with a hearty meal with a good group of people,

is a really fun way to kind of reenter this process, you know?

To me, that was just such a relief,

to have so many people in one room at a time,

especially with COVID-19 still lingering in the background,

along with the fact that this is such an old house that needed so much work.

With Ma's House
and this collaboration
with indigenous artists,

I'm really trying
to foster dialogue

between our local community
and Southampton and more abroad.

"We were here
for thousands
and thousands of years
before the first
white settlers arrived
in 1640,
she tells us,

as we stroll the rock-
and shell-strung shore

of Shinnecock Bay,
[indistinct]

a beautiful early
summer afternoon."

And so that was just
really proof

of what's possible
and what the future holds.

We're really excited to work
on the process
of becoming a nonprofit.

We really want to have our mission of supporting artists of color happen through donations and grants, rather than being more of a commercial space.

And the other major thing that we're working on is just the artist residency program.

Huang: I'm Yanyan Huang. I'm an artist and I work primarily in painting and drawing, as well as ceramics and textiles.

This is my first official residency.

I am living at Ma's House
and, so far, I've made these two large paintings.

So, this painting is based on the outline of the Shinnecock ancestral land,

Long Island, North Fork and South Fork,

and then, I blended my own gestural abstract style.

I have not worked in a house like this.

It feels a lot different from commercial contemporary art spaces that I've worked with before because working within the commercial gallery system is an entirely different beast. [ Laughs ]

So my research began with these pamphlets from powwows on Shinnecock land
and it's been really lovely,

go through the history,

seeing the close-knit community.

I had hung a banner
from a painting that I made

and part of the idea was

that I would put it
on a flagpole here,

near the water,

so that it would look
like sails coming.

[ Laughs ]

And, now, it's standing here,
right outside,

and it feels like a great honor.

I covered it with blue
because I wanted to

overlay the mythology of --
It is a huge honor to be here and come to terms with issues that have plagued me and resonated with me throughout my life, through learning about the history of America and what it purports to be, versus the reality of its history. So I've just been gathering bits and pieces and adding to my knowledge and drawing inspiration upon that. I feel like this is more of a partnership, where both sides have a lot to learn from each other and It's more of a cultural blending, rather than a business partnership. If artists can work and create
and share their work,

then they're going to be able to share

the cultural experience with other people

and that'll lead to more understanding

and respect for each other, and so forth, so.

But I really enjoy the idea of the collective nature

of having space to work and present.

David Bunn Martine is a Shinnecock artist.

He's still based here on the Shinnecock Reservation

and he does a lot of portraiture and landscape

and historical reenactment type of painting.

Native American cultures, as a whole,
you know, percentage-wise,
we have so many artists.

It's a very powerful quality
that Native American
people have.

It's a creative quality,
you know,

whether it's traditional work
or any of the
contemporary practices

that we have going today.

I enjoy painting narrative
scenes of Native American life,
specializing
in Northeastern Woodland tribes,

Long Island Native Americans --
Shinnecock and Montauk.

A lot of it is based
on research,
some of what I know,
my own personal research,
rather than academic learning
and books or whatever.
And then, I always try to get into a lot of detail, accurate detail, of our unique cultures, what made us unique, you know, among tribal peoples here, our connection to the sea, the whaling and sea life, and also our connection to the natural surroundings we have. You know, since the late '60s and '70s, and so forth, there was a strong renewal, or revitalization, of traditional culture. At one point, Many of the tribes, especially in powwows and different events, would enjoy emulating more of the Plains Indian cultural traditions, such as the headdress, the war bonnet, as they call it,
or the lifestyle --

living in the teepees
and following the buffalo herds,

which was sort of a generic
Native American kind of thing

that was popularized
in the mass media,

Hollywood, and television.

And many of the tribes way back
for a while were into that.

That was the thing.
And I thought it would be nice

to try to show what was unique,
in terms of our dress,

how it was different
from the Plains Indian

or the Native American
that was more popularly seen

in movies, TV, and the media.

Later on,
many of the tribes began

to adopt more of their
original traditional styles.
You no longer see the Plains Indian headdress as much.

Usually, it's only used by veterans today, for example.

Many of the Native peoples are more interested in what made them unique, as opposed to any other tribal tradition or custom.

Today, there are more opportunities for contemporary Native American art, I think, because people are more open-minded to seeing that Native American art could be almost anything today.

If the artist is Native, it's Native American art.

It doesn't have to look a certain way.
Usually, the work has some connection to the culture the artist is representing, whether it's symbols, story, some design elements, color -- whatever it might be.

The Native part is in there sometimes, but it's more subtle.

Here at Shinnecock, we have artists who are doing portraiture and representational work.

We have other artists who are using our traditional medium of wampum and beadwork and jewelry.

And so we do represent so many different forms of expression and storytelling in the way that we approach art.
for studio art, mostly painting.

Today, she actually has her own studio here on the Shinnecock Reservation.

She painted it purple, in honor of the traditional medium wampum.

When I was raised with my parents and my older siblings, we were taught a lot about our history, going to powwows and even hosting our own little powwows on Shinnecock.

My mom helped me and showed me how to do the beadwork, the floral design,

so she was really my first teacher of beadwork and then, I learned more through the Shinnecock Native American
Cultural Coalition

01:18:35:15 01:18:37:24
on Shinnecock,
and that was to teach culture

01:18:37:24 01:18:41:09
and have classes
on beadwork and history.

01:18:41:09 01:18:44:13
But I did study formally
at Hamilton College,

01:18:44:13 01:18:45:22
with studio art,

01:18:45:22 01:18:48:09
did a lot of paintings
during that time,

01:18:48:09 01:18:51:01
and my professor said,

01:18:51:01 01:18:53:12
"Oh, well, if you're
from Southampton,

01:18:53:12 01:18:56:07
you know, that's known
as an artist's colony

01:18:56:07 01:18:58:13
and you're going to be
famous there one day."

01:18:58:13 01:19:01:07
[ Laughing ] But that
really never materialized

01:19:01:07 01:19:05:12
because more people were
more interested in my beadwork

01:19:05:12 01:19:08:03
than my actual paintings.

01:19:08:03 01:19:09:23
A lot of the beadwork
that you see
takes weeks and months to create,

depending on the size and details

and how intricate and unique the design is.

Just a section, like maybe this part,

this will take you about a week to do.

I like to use like different types of seed beads,

just to make it more interesting, you know,

and what will fit.

And then, on the seal of our flag, the whales are much smaller on the actual seal

and I still -- I wanted to give them plenty of room

because they are, you know, a mainstay for Shinnecock.

We first taught the colonists
how to whale.

I guess, when I got out of college,

it seemed like it was harder then

because there was no Internet,

so there's no way to really get your information out there.

I remember, once, this woman who owned an art gallery --

I believe it was on Main Street, right in Southampton --

so we had made arrangements that a couple of my beadwork pieces,

I think maybe two or three,

would be in a jewelry case kind of table display.

And then, the night before the opening of the show,

which I had shared the information with postcards

for the advertisement with relatives in the city

and different friends
and family,

so we were all going to go to the opening,

and she called and said, "Um, well, I'm sorry to say,

but, other people have come in.

You know, now it's closer to the season

when all these different people come out

from New York City for the summer.

I have these other people,

other artists from New York City who are coming out,

so we're going to have to bump you.

You know, you won't be in the opening.

It's not going to happen."

So then, I said to her,
You know, you're telling me this the night before.

When it came time for the opening,

my mother and my sister and I went to the gallery

and we showed up in our full regalia

and we shared the story of how I was just bumped

and it was just going to be here,

you know, for that one night

and then I have to remove my things.

So all her patrons actually learned of that mistreatment

and I actually sold a couple of pieces

and then I had like a little bit of a following, then.

But it's just that whole thing of getting your story out.

And, you know, I've learned the term --
it's a microaggression when people do, you know, things like that.

It could be perceived that way.

In these past 20 years, I really noticed a big shift, in terms of indigenous representation and just opportunities for indigenous people working creatively. Different cultural institutions have been more receptive to artists of color and indigenous artists. There's always been indigenous artists. Here on Long Island, we had been known for our wampum jewelry and we still have artists that continue that practice.
Tohanash Tarrant is a Shinnecock artist who creates work around beadwork and jewelry.

Tarrant: I did spend time here as a young child. I would come over and visit and I remember the house being filled with laughter and love and it just felt really comfortable.

Every year, every summer, my parents would take my family -- I'm one of six siblings -- to powwows across the country and we would visit with other tribes and we would dance with them. And, in order to dance, we would have to prepare and one of those things is making our own regalias --
the outfits
that we wear to dance.

So that was really my focus
when I was a teenager

because I wanted
to get out there

and I wanted to dance

and I wanted my stuff
to look beautiful.

So I spent a lot of time focused
on my own dance regalia

and now I have two children
that I get to dress

and make things for,
as well as nieces and nephews,

and I've been focusing more

on things that contribute
to my community,

ways that I can bring the beauty
of our culture back

into our day-to-day lives.

That's why you'll see items
that I have here,
such as a graduation cap,

and this one is for my bachelor's in Early Childhood.

So, I spent a lot of time decorating it

and it's something that I hold very dear

and something I will always have

and pass down, hopefully, to my children as well.

Something like this would take me a good two weeks.

It's not something you can do full-time

because it's very hard to sew through the cardboard,

but it's something that, also, you put a lot of thought into.

These are epoxy cabs.

They're made with Native prints on the inside.

And I also have some with our Nation seal,
the Shinnecock seal.

01:24:26:03 01:24:30:00
This is Pueblo-style
inlay earrings,

01:24:30:00 01:24:33:00
surrounded by beadwork
and rhinestones.

01:24:33:00 01:24:38:00
And these are rather large
and sparkly or blingy earrings.

01:24:38:03 01:24:39:24
These are very popular,
these days.

01:24:39:24 01:24:42:02
So it incorporates
the seed beads

01:24:42:02 01:24:44:23
that I've been using
for the last 20 years,

01:24:44:23 01:24:48:11
as well as new inlays,
which reflect

01:24:48:11 01:24:53:06
my Pueblo background,
my Hopi traditions,

01:24:53:06 01:24:56:12
as well as making
contemporary style.

01:24:56:12 01:24:59:19
So I brought with me regalia
that I've been working on.

01:24:59:19 01:25:03:18
This is a woman's
fancy shawl regalia.

01:25:03:18 01:25:06:06
These are the leggings.

01:25:06:06 01:25:10:01
And the significance
of the flowers are beauty.

01:25:10:01 01:25:13:13
And the dance is
a butterfly dance,

01:25:13:13 01:25:18:08
so butterflies and flowers
kind of go together very nicely.

01:25:18:08 01:25:21:24
I have blue in here
for the ocean,

and the yellow is like the sun
or the back of our our flag,

01:25:26:23 01:25:29:01
the Shinnecock Nation flag.

01:25:29:01 01:25:33:00
And the seal,
I beaded in size 13 beads.

01:25:33:00 01:25:38:00
And this is the seal that's
on our flag.

01:25:38:03 01:25:41:14
With Ma's House developing,
I hope to include Tohanash

01:25:41:14 01:25:44:14
as a featured artist
in different programs,

01:25:44:14 01:25:47:12
maybe workshops
on some of her skills

01:25:47:12 01:25:49:05
and just having
her work featured

01:25:49:05 01:25:51:19
for the public to enjoy.

01:25:51:19 01:25:56:11
Art is something that is living, that is part of our culture, and I'm so happy to be able to share it.

♪♪

Silva-Dennis: People want to know, "Well, how can I help, you know?"

I wasn't there during slavery times.

I wasn't there when Native Americans were being assimilated or the children were being taken away.

But I live now, so what can I do?"

So, what can you do?

You can help to, you know, lift up, you know, different artists who are trying to tell the story of what happened because, that way, we can all move forward
as a society
and just really heal.

People really want
to have an opportunity
to visit Shinnecock
and engage with our community
and support our artists,
but people are really trying
to figure out a way
to do that,
to facilitate visitation
without intruding
or trespassing.
Ma's House is filling that gap
on a very intimate,
one-on-one level,
and just do a tour of what's
going on at Ma's House,
whether that's the garden,
whether that's a program similar
to that of Andrina Smith.
I was talking to him
and like --
I think that we're just part of a longer narrative of what art can do, what art is, and this indigenous art world.

Even though Ma's House today is getting so much support and attention, it's also important to recognize those who came before us because, without them, we probably wouldn't be able to express a lot of what we're expressing today.

My hope for Ma's House is to invite indigenous artists nationwide to tell their story, share their experiences, just amplify their voice because, even though we've been here at Shinnecock
for more than 10,000 years,

something, the dynamic
with our neighbors

is that we don't even exist.

By inviting artists
to come collaborate,

whether that's hosting them
for a couple of months

or allowing them to use
the space to share their art,

I think that we can
really facilitate

a type of collaboration
that will help our Nation

and their Nation as well
to rise up

and be recognized
for all that we represent.