The Many Fibers of Being

With massive garments and technicolor paintings, artist Jeffrey Gibson rejoices in merging his queer and Native American identities.

By Coco Romack

What We Wear has always served as a means to wield power. With wigs and makeup, drag queens summon larger-than-life alter egos; with a colored handkerchief tucked in the back pocket of his Levi’s, a gay man can broadcast his sexual appetites; and with studs, nose rings, and leather jackets, punks can call out to members of their subculture while also fending off anyone they may want out of their path. Through the ritual of getting dressed, we are transformed, by visual language, into someone entirely new—identified and differentiated by our chosen armor.

This notion was the launching point for Jeffrey Gibson’s exhibition “This Is the Day” at the Wellin Museum in Clinton, N.Y., one of four solo shows now on view from the 46-year-old artist. In addition to more than 50 works of sculpture, painting, and video, there are five helmets decadently adorned with found objects, and seven glorious large-scale tunics hung from tepee poles. A gay man and a Native American of Choctaw and Cherokee heritage, Gibson has woven his own multifaceted identity within the fibrous layers of these tunics, which reference traditional shirts associated with the Ghost Dance movement, originating with the Paiute in the late 19th century.

“You would make these shirts, and then you would dance in them,” says Gibson, who spent much of his youth moving around with his family. (His father, a civil engineer with the United States government, brought him from Germany to New Jersey to Korea and finally to Maryland.) Gibson notes that while he attended powwows, he wasn’t raised in a traditional Native American environment. He did, however, absorb the philosophies behind the fashions. “The idea was that [the dance] would bring unity and prosperity...”
and strength back to the tribe, but at the same
time, the shirt would protect you from what was
called the white man’s bullet.”

For the makers of these ceremonial shirts, and
for the artisans who keep these traditions alive,
there is spirituality in both the process and the
performance—a spirituality Gibson adopts
in his own art-making. “There’s a tremendous
amount of faith in the practice of these artisanal
techniques,” he says, “which are really about
strengthening and continuing cultures that might
otherwise not survive. I began to understand
that it was a real form of resistance for
people to continue to create and to pass
down their dance regalia within their
communities.”

The garments and helmets Gibson
has created are an amalgam of far-
flung references mined from aspects of
his own history as well as pop culture
and contemporary political issues.
Incorporating a variety of materials
(from beads and vintage quilts to chiffon
and silk that are digitally printed with
Gibson’s writing and photos from the
Dakota Access Pipeline protests), they
are at once a comment on race and
religion and an indulgent ode to the
richness of identity—dripping with
fringe ribbons. Exaggerated in size
and incredibly heavy, the garments are
more sculpture than practical garb. They also
serve as a nod to the subversive, over-
the-top humor that has occasionally left
viewers dismissing Gibson’s work, even
if that type of humor has long been a
source of parody in the queer
community. “Kitsch and camp, when
they occurred initially, were really
survival tools,” the artist says. “I wanted
to embrace that because for a long time,
I kind of rejected it...like, ‘No, I’m not
that kind of gay.’ I finally gave in to the

glittery, shiny excess.”

Gibson, who attended the Art Institute of
Chicago in the early ’90s, began his career as a
painter. His signature style is identified by
exuberant, technicolor geometric abstractions,
a technique he’s also applied to his garments. “I
think about everything from a painting
perspective,” he says. By which he
means, in two dimensions. “Even when
I make a three-dimensional object or
garment, I think about multiple two-
dimensional surfaces coming together.
So you really end up with a front and
a back, and when the garments are on
somebody, you’re getting an image.”

Another just-opened exhibition, “I
Am a Rainbow Too” at Sikkema Jenkins
Gallery in New York City, shines a
light on Gibson’s painting since 2010,
showcasing a series of compositions in
which, for the central imagery, he has
lifted lyrics from ’80s and ’90s club hits,
along with melancholy words from Nina
Simone, one of his lifetime inspirations.

“I remember going to nightclubs
in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s and just
feeling like, within the club, there was a
kind of tribal feel of unity, and feeling
like there was family,” says Gibson, who
relates to the celebratory themes in his
work to the microcosms of the powwow
and the gay club. “I know there was a lot
of pain. There were a lot of people dying
at that time. There were a lot of people
mourning. But somehow, at a club, you
were united in celebration.”