THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

JEFFREY GIBSON with Nick Bennett

Photography of models wearing sculptural garment by Jeffrey Gibson, created for the catalogue of the Wellin Museum of Art exhibition *Jeffrey Gibson: This Is the Day*, September 2018. Photo © Caitlin Mitchell. Courtesy the artist and the Wellin Museum of Art.

At the moment, Jeffrey Gibson is a very busy artist. With two traveling museum exhibitions, *Like a Hammer* (the Denver Art Museum earlier this year, the Mississippi Museum of Art through January 2019, the Seattle Art Museum opening in February 2019, and the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art in Wisconsin opening June 2019) and *This is the Day* (the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY through December 9, 2018 and the Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX opening July 2019), as well as two recent exhibitions *I AM A RAINBOW TOO* at Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York (October 18 – November 21, 2018), and *DON'T MAKE ME OVER* at the Maria & Alberto de la Cruz Art Gallery, Washington, D.C. (September 27 – November 18, 2018), he still found time to invite me to his studio in Hudson, New York.

Jeffrey Gibson (b. 1972) is a gay Native American who grew up in a military family. In his youth he lived in the United States, Germany, and South Korea. Currently, Gibson resides in a converted schoolhouse where the former gymnasium now functions as the artist's studio. On a recent fall day we spoke for a few hours about Gibson's incredible and diverse body of work, and in the edited conversation that follows we touch on the deep and shifting influence of one's identity, and for Gibson, what it means to reimagine the objects and rituals surrounding powwows within Native history, indulging in kitsch and camp as strategies of protection for queer people, and allowing the complications of reality to be present and to confront binary systems.

Nick Bennett (Rail): How did constant moving and travelling affect you during formative times in your life?

Jeffrey Gibson: I realized the effects as an adult. Moving and traveling so much required me to quickly form attachments and then detach relatively easily, which I found is disturbing to a lot of people in relationships as an adult. People respond differently, of course, but I was someone who would land somewhere and rapidly absorb where I was at, what was going on, and where I fit in. I was initially very excited to be in a new and different place, but wanted to feel grounded as fast as I possibly could. More than anything else, I felt I could ground myself with having a sort of unique social currency having just moved from another place.

Rail: That currency is so important as a teenager, even as an adult. Where were you living as a teenager?

Gibson: South Korea. I remember landing, going to the hotel, and staring out the window at the street market below and trying to summon up the courage to go down.

Jeffrey Gibson, *BECAUSE ONCE YOU ENTER MY HOUSE IT BECOMES OUR HOUSE*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, glass beads, and artificial sinew inset into wood frame, 82 × 74 × 2.5 inches. © Jeffrey Gibson, courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; Kavi Gupta, Chicago; and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles.

Rail: Being in a culture as different as South Korea, did detachment play a part in grounding yourself there?

Gibson: In ways, yes. I can only speak for myself, but I learned to override the mechanism of attachment in order to be present in a new experience. I could move relatively quickly because I was not forming emotional attachments, you know? Everything fell under a present moment experience, whether it was food or sound or interacting with somebody. It felt almost as if I could enter any new space because I knew that I didn't have to commit to anything.

Rail: Your Cherokee and Choctaw heritage is commonly known, but I read that your grandparents on both sides of your families were also Southern Baptist ministers. That's a fascinating confluence of religious ideas and belief systems.

Gibson: Yes, that is true. Their stories are very similar and happened at similar times. They were both living in Indian communities off of the reservation. My mother's father, Tim Wilson, was part of a community called Briggs Community, about fifteen minutes outside of Tahlequah, Oklahoma, which was a rural area of mostly Native families. My grandfather struggled with alcoholism in an impoverished place where many other people had also experienced a lot of pain and trauma. He stopped drinking at the same time that he found God. His first steps were to gather all of his money, buy a car, and travel the country roads to people's homes to minister to various families. He became a missionary and eventually began to minister at the Cedar Tree Indian Church. It was a Cherokee church, and all of the hymn books and Bibles were printed in Cherokee. I don't speak Cherokee, but I would go as a child, and I remember him preaching and the congregation speaking and singing in a hybrid Cherokee-English language.

My father's father, Homer Gibson, lived in a Choctaw community named Conehatta, Mississippi. He was a sharecropper early in life and also struggled with alcoholism. He also had epilepsy. He was ill for nearly eight years at one point, and the story is that he was visited by a bird, and he envisioned that this bird was God. He prayed and asked this bird to make him well and that he would go on to become a minister and would preach the word of God. He went on to help rebuild the Bogue Chitto Indian Baptist Church on the reservation and became a minister at this church. My father saw what his father did as a way of socially organizing people who had been torn apart. That's how religion was taught to me, as a way to bring people together and organize community.

Rail: How did being young and gay shape your interactions within these communities of hybrid beliefs?

Gibson: I was unaware of an historical acceptance of anything outside of firm male/female gender roles within the tribes until my early twenties when I began meeting other gay Native men who identified as two-spirit and introduced me to that community. When I would visit my families in Mississippi and Oklahoma, I did not see or know any other gay people there and was very self-conscious about being gay. I would not say that I hid the fact, but just was not fully myself in that environment. I did always feel welcomed and loved there.

These experiences sparked my interest in the hybridity of language. My grandfathers would teach me some words and I would practice them. Then I really liked hearing both Choctaw and Cherokee, mixed with English, being spoken in the churches and in their homes. I would ask why it was mixed and they

would explain that sometimes there was not a word in their language for some things or that it was just easier. Both languages are very descriptive languages and might have one word for something that would be a combination of a few words in English.

Rail: How did this hybridity inform the way you approached making art?

Gibson: I spent a lot of time during my teenage years trying to explain or represent who Cherokee and Choctaw people were relative to popular images of "The American Indian." For example, the spectacular images and exhibitions of the tribes from the Plains region, in full warrior headdresses that many non-Native people are familiar with. If I looked for Cherokee or Choctaw objects in a museum, I would generally find baskets and visually simple clothing. And I would think, "How can we compete with these amazing warrior shirts and fully beaded dresses?"

I started to find inspiration in researching the Southeastern tribes and began to find more that described specific craft and materials used by these tribes. The men in particular were incredibly flamboyant, with plumes, turbans, piercings, facial tattoos, and the use of fabrics coming from all around the world, like velvets, cottons and calicos. I learned about most of this while working at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago in my early twenties.

Rail: I can see how in your work these textiles and this sense of adornment relates to contemporary powwow events, and by extension, the extravagance of dress in gay and drag culture. But you mention the Field Museum in Chicago; I want talk about that and come back to powwows, raves, gay clubs, and everything else in a moment.

Gibson: I don't think that sentence has ever been said: "I want to come back to powwows, raves, gay clubs, and everything." [*Laughter*.]

Rail: There's a first sentence for everything. [*Laughter*] What items or stories from the experience at the Field Museum still resonate with you?

Gibson: I was at the Field Museum for about three and a half years, and at the same time going to classes at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In some ways, the classes at the Art Institute were too theoretical and paled in comparison to my experiences at the Field Museum, where what I was doing felt so real. There were so many layers to my time spent at the Field Museum. For example, it was important to many of the tribal delegations that the person handling these objects was, one, Native American, and two, male. The terms "sacred" and "ceremonial" were often used but their definitions were not always shared between the tribal delegations and the Museum. It was clear to me these were incredibly charged

and personal words. Often the tribal delegations would describe incredibly powerful objects with the ability to bring misfortune and illness—I was told that some objects had the ability to kill you if you handled or even looked at them. What do you do with that when your job is to handle and look at things? Sometimes there would be cleansing ceremonies where people would pray over me to do this work, and I obliged because although I wasn't entirely aware of what I was doing, I knew that doing it was important. Some of the confusion was in considering all of these different levels of meaning and potential meaning. Do you have to choose one, or do they all exist?

Rail: That must have opened up possibilities that counter the procedural perceptions of museum work.

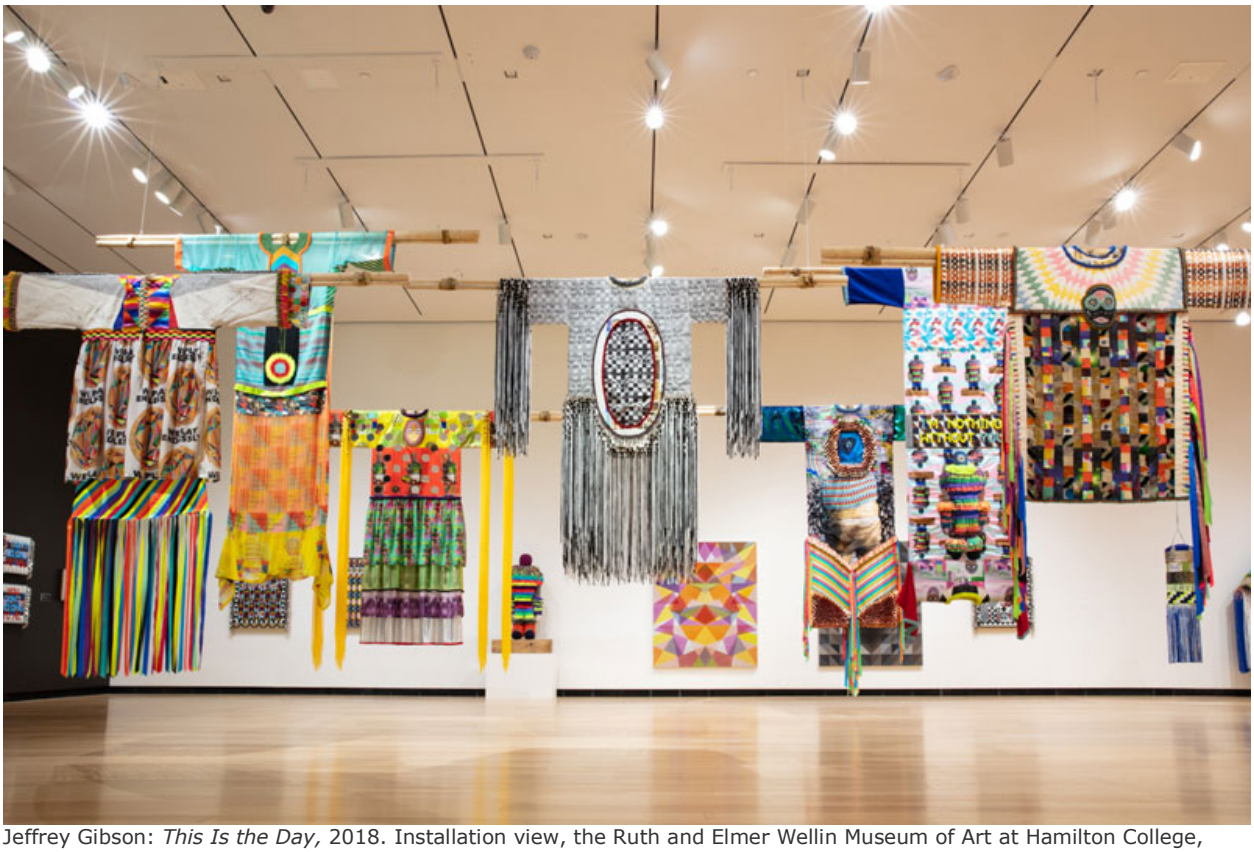
Gibson: Yes. I had a couple of mentors at the museum who encouraged me to talk to the objects, introduce myself and explain to them what I was doing. So I would walk down an aisle in the collection and say things like, "Hello. My name is Jeffrey Gibson, I'm an artist" and "I'm not here to do anything harmful." There was one time I went to retrieve a pair of moccasins, and I picked up a Plexiglas container from a shelf, and something rolled around inside of it. So I brought it down and opened it, and inside was a human skull. Human remains are individuals—they're ancestors—so without question they are meant to be repatriated according to NAGPRA [Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act]. I suddenly felt really tired, slightly nauseous and thought "This wasn't supposed to happen," and felt that I was involved in something that was too much for me to handle or comprehend. I laid down on the ground and thought to myself, "Okay, I am going to let myself fall asleep and if I don't wake up then I don't wake up, and if I wake up, then I will take it as a sign that I'm meant to be doing this and it's okay that I continue doing this work." Luckily, I woke up. I sincerely believed that there was a possibility of me not waking up because, by that point, my perspective had radically shifted and I no longer viewed these objects as inanimate but saw them all as having their own individual life forces and personal histories that I could not ignore.

Rail: Like in your 2015/16 video, *One Becomes the Other*, where the young woman, Sarah Ortegon, is talking to a beaded belt in the museum's collection and says, "I wonder who wore you [. . .] I want to thank you for still existing. You've gone through history, you've lived with somebody, and now you're here in front of me."

Gibson: I do believe that every single thing has a history that brought it into production, brought it to fruition. I'm not sure if I would even clearly distinguish between a life force and a history—I don't think there's a difference between the two. Even contemporary objects, like an object made using child labor in a remote village has a life force. It has a kind of karmic energy that has accumulated in the process of being conceived of and in being made.

Rail: That makes me wonder if objects have that force inherently or if it is imparted by human contact.

Gibson: It's a combination of both. For instance, right now, we're surrounded by drums [in the studio], which are made of deer hide. So essentially there are multiple animals in the room. I'm going to paint on them or they'll become sculptures, but the time I spend with them or the time someone would spend using the drum, you begin to integrate with it, which allows it to transform and to continue to produce. I always think about that. The garment sculptures I made for *This Is the Day* at the Wellin Museum incorporate printed fabrics designed using imagery from my own personal iconography sampled from the past fifteen years of my artwork. But those printed fabrics wouldn't exist without the garments, and the garments wouldn't exist without all the experiences that led me to making them. It's all a very continuous process.



Jeffrey Gibson: *This Is the Day,* 2018. Installation view, the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY. Courtesy the artist and the Wellin Museum of Art. Photo: John Bentham.

Rail: I read that the exhibition *Indian Art of the United States* at MoMA (1941) was life-changing for you. There are exhibitions that can change an artist's vision, or a writer's curiosity, and so on. Are there other historical or contemporary exhibitions that were life-changing for you?

Gibson: *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* at the Whitney Museum in 2002 – 03. Seeing the Gee's Bend show totally shifted the way I looked at textiles. There was a personal resonance because both of my grandmothers made quilts, crafts, and sewed their own clothes. These quilts are a combination of making something representative of someone or something, but also making the most of what you've got. Some are about community building and gathering, but others are very personal, for instance, like Missouri Pettway making a quilt from her husband's work clothes after he passed so she could "cover up under it for love." The history of quilts and blankets can be seen as cliché, so I tried to resist it, but that show inspired me to begin a current series of quilts.

Discovering *Indian Art of the United States* was revelatory. It suddenly filled in a gap of Native American art history that was missing for me. Bill Anthes, a professor at Pitzer College, wrote a book called *Native Moderns: American Indian Painting, 1940 – 1960* that refers to this exhibition. I was drawn to the fact that it was Native American and MoMA, two things that I had never seen paired at that level. I contacted MoMA and found out that The Denver Art Museum was the primary lender, really to almost any 20th century Native American exhibition, so I went to Denver to research the archive and I found the handwritten correspondence between the curators at MoMA and Denver the most interesting, because leading up to World War II, museum programming in the United States was very promising, and really celebrated a melting pot mentality of the United States. *Indian Art of the United States* was one of the last in a series of culturally diverse and progressive exhibitions at MoMA at the time. It represents a pre-war cultural consciousness that was cut short, and it made me think of other questions. Why did that suddenly happen? Why did this exhibition not stem into a really interesting parallel and grander artistic trajectory for Native artists of the time?

Rail: Those questions were the impetus of your work exhibited at PARTICIPANT INC. and American Contemporary in New York City in 2012, that consisted of acrylic paintings and sculptures utilizing rawhide and other materials, like for example *Drum Column* (2012).

Jeffrey Gibson, *Drum Column*, 2012. Acrylic paint, elk hide, drums made by Jesse McMann-Sparvier, rawhide lacing, and artificial sinew, 120 × 28 × 5 inches. Installation view: *One becomes the other*, PARTICIPANT Inc., New York, 2012. Photo: Etienne Frossard. © Jeffrey Gibson, courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; Kavi Gupta, Chicago; and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles.

Gibson: Yes. The idea was to consider what it would look like today had that parallel trajectory happened. There is not much documented history that includes modern Native artists participating in a broader art history. They existed but their work was difficult to categorize and often was disregarded and not included in post-war art history. Native artists have been included in modern histories of anthropology and their works have been described relative to archeology, but rarely in a purely contemporary artistic context. So for the work in the Participant show, I worked with a number of traditional Native artists and asked them about their motivation for making things. Most people did not define themselves as fine artists but instead were making things for their communities, to be used for cultural practice. People were designing things for purpose and use, sometimes for spiritual practice, for dance and for music. Ultimately, I commissioned pieces from a number of people, including quilts, silver work, drums, and beadwork, to be incorporated into larger sculptures that I assembled in Participant's space during four weeks leading up to the opening.

Rail: Your paintings are on deer hide and canvas. How do you decide to paint on one material or the other, and how has your approach to painting changed over the years?

Gibson: My practice expanded greatly over the last decade, partially because I felt like I had to create a context for viewers to understand my paintings within. I started making the work that I wanted to see in existence. For some time, people couldn't see my intentions or my references to things like eye dazzler weavings, geometric abstraction made by Native people, parfleche bags, or color combinations representative of different tribal aesthetics across North America. The lack of awareness of tribal aesthetics and Native American tribal histories was frustrating. The Participant show was when I felt like I was really heard for the first time. The visitors could see all of this articulation, and I didn't have to fight for it, it was already in the work.

I have continued to think about my practice as encompassing the past and present while considering the future. My first love is painting, whether it be on rawhide or on canvas. The rawhide places the viewer and demands that the actual painting be considered from a perspective other than Western or European art histories. Canvas invokes other painting histories that I have grown up looking at and learned from. I can also work large and engage the viewer in different ways. I love to have other mediums shown alongside the paintings. I love the materiality of everything else, and when I can look at that garment up against that painting and they don't feel dissimilar.

Rail: When considering the breadth of your work, including your abstract paintings, the beaded and textile works, including your punching bags and newer sculptures, there are lot of binary structures inherent and projected on to your work: there's Native American tradition and Modern abstraction;

there's fine art and craft; there are connotations of masculine and feminine in who makes what and who uses what. How do you see binaries both in your work and in viewing your practice?

Gibson: It requires a great deal of energy to maintain binary systems that do not truly reflect the nuances of reality. Binary systems are used to provide us with some seemingly fixed points to place ourselves, but we actually all exist in between these points. The challenge is not only about creating a new system but also allowing the complications of reality to be present and to confront the current binary systems. My work acknowledges that we all exist at a crossroads of races, genders, cultures, politics, and philosophies among many other things. Someone asked me the other day about this notion of specificity versus universality, and I generally respond negatively to the idea of universality because it seems to want to level everyone's experience as similar. But specificity confuses that because of everyone's unique experiences and circumstances being so layered and different. I am drawn to learning about individual people's experiences and how they relate to the larger world and explore the often complicated and specific place that they occupy amidst all of these binaries.

Rail: It's like an elementary sort of navigation system with the goal of getting somewhere else.

Gibson: Right. It's a very different kind of energy to stop performing, to let self-consciousness fall aside, and to allow you to see who I am. In the beginning, that was frightening to me. I think of the years of being an artist in New York, when you're trying to figure out, "What are the things that I have to do for this to happen?" But that frustration subsided when I made the decision that I needed to be content and to find ways to live with myself. I let go of my perceptions of what being an artist was, if I'm seen as a craftsperson, if I were to become a traditionalist, if I'm an educator [. . .] start living your life in a way that makes you happy and start making the things that you want to see exist in the world. And then just trust that it will find its way.

Jeffrey Gibson, *Like a Hammer* (still), 2016. Video, 27:11 minutes. © Jeffrey Gibson, courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; Kavi Gupta, Chicago; and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles.

Rail: Relating to the two traveling museum shows *Like a Hammer* and *This is the Day*, can you talk about how powwow culture informs the garment sculptures and helmet sculptures made for *This Is the Day*?

Gibson: Originally, I thought of powwows as something that I grew up occasionally attending, where I would see family and friends. It was always a place to reconnect and to be surrounded by other Native people. Since then I have begun to think about powwow as a modern invention. The modern powwow evolved from the earlier Grass Dance Societies and developed in response to the Removal Act as a way to bring people from various tribes together. I define modernism as innovation or an invention responding to drastic changes in circumstances and environment, and powwow is one of those things; it evolved as a way to bring people back together. The inter-tribal aesthetic of powwow, the dances, the music—people consider it to be traditional, but it's not only that, it is also a place of innovation and invention. It has evolved to respond to contemporary times.

Rail: As communal site, it serves a purpose of bringing people together with a commonality, to feel a form of acceptance—whether that's a powwow, a Baptist church, or a gay bar. And in addition to this coming together, it's interesting to think all of these sites are accompanied by music and repetition.

Gibson: And powwows are competitive, there's big prize money that brings out the best dancers and the best drum groups. There's humor with the MC. It's a circuit, it's underground, and there's also some

humor of the "powwow hook-up." There are powwow babies. [*Laughter*.] Once I began to see the powwow as modern, then I began to reconsider other Native cultural movements as modern. Ghost Dance is another interesting movement, still practiced by some today. The pacifist movement was led by the vision of a Northern Paiute spiritual leader named Wovoka in the late 19th century. Followers would dance, sing songs, pray, and seek new visions that would restore the strength, peace, and unity of the tribes, and also make the white colonists leave. The ghost shirts were made by the followers and they were believed to "repel the bullets of the white man." These shirts inspired the garment sculptures for *This Is the Day*. The sculptures are made from a very simple oversized t-shirt pattern that's scaled to be oversized on me, and then I work with additional adornment and custom printed fabrics to individuate each garment. The garments are very process oriented, much like the paintings. I realized that the subject of these works is not the Ghost Dance Movement itself, but rather is about a garment that is symbolic of faith, so by extension, papal vestments and other kinds of clothing expresses one's identity and faith. There's also reason to believe that Wovoka was inspired by Mormon protective undergarments, and this intercultural cross-referencing is something else that I look for when I'm looking at historical specificity in what we consider Native American traditions.

Rail: You also made a video for *This Is the Day* about a Choctaw trans woman named Macy living on the reservation, titled *I Was Here* (2018). The first part is a simple, domestic view of a person preparing themselves for the day. This made me think of garments in a different way, where garments as self-expression are an act of survival and self-preservation for a trans person, to be able to be seen the way in which they identify. But the second half is more symbolic, and involves Macy wearing—in separate shots—a red, white, and black garment, and then submerging herself in a lake. It was interesting to see this self-baptism, and then I thought of your family background. How did you connect with the script and with those specific colors?

Gibson: I don't identify as trans—it's not my story—but I think about being "other" in terms of gender and sexuality in that kind of conservative environment. She embodies that for me and allowed me to represent her body and her narrative. Macy is sort of a surrogate for my fears, for my own body. I was often afraid of the landscape in Mississippi. It's difficult to acknowledge all of the horrific things that have happened on that land: death, the physical violence of segregation, substance abuse, domestic abuse—it's traumatized land. I have grown up also being afraid of those deep woods, swamps, and lakes, so the scene where Macy submerges herself in the lake was more about confronting a personal fear.

But whether or not it's seen as a baptism, the act of submerging oneself in water acts as a symbol of rebirth. And in *I Was Here*, Macy is allowing the land to reclaim her. This is personal to me because I grew up rejecting nature and instead choosing to identify more with urban life. I saw it as a kind of

acculturation, as a way to prove that you were not from the reservation, as a way to show that you were equal to other people, especially “white” people. Now it’s like a reverse privilege to embrace the landscape, and even indulge in it by appointing the land the power of redemption.

Jeffrey Gibson, *SAY MY NAME*, 2018. Glass beads, copper and tin jingles, steel and brass studs, and artificial sinew on repurposed trading post weaving and acrylic felt, mounted on canvas, 69 × 41.5 × 3 inches. © Jeffrey Gibson. Courtesy the artist; Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; Kavi Gupta, Chicago; and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles.

Rail: You wrote the script for the film, and I read that when you were at the Art Institute of Chicago you took two semesters of writing. In relation to your text works, you intermix your own words with texts from writers such as James Baldwin, Raymond Carver, and many different popular songs. Do you find it difficult to have the voice of the author?

Gibson: Yes, it's awful. There's a different weight if you're appropriating a lyric from a pop song as opposed to authoring a set of words that you're wholly responsible for. When you're writing, like anything else, you have influences, whether it's the way someone speaks or the way they articulate things. The hardest thing to do is to get away from that.

When I was in college and taking short story writing classes, I was studying Raymond Carver, so my goal was to write evocative, vulnerable, personal, brief narratives. Now when I write, if it's not an essay, it's a brief series of words that allow for multiple perspectives on a subject, to allow for your own subjectivity as a reader and also as a listener. It's difficult for me to map out what I want the words to do, and then my work does not offer a lot of physical space for the words. I imagine that if I ever write a traditional text that it will be more of an essay format rather than something poetic.

Rail: Is that something you're working towards?

Gibson: It's been in my brain for a long time. I would be open to it but can see that it would take many years in order to produce something I would be proud of.

Rail: In your recent show at Sikkema & Jenkins Co., the textile work *Say My Name* stuck out to me. It's Destiny's Child bringing me back to 1999; it's respect for non-binary and gender non-confirming people; it's Sandra Bland and the many others identified by #sayhername that have been murdered by police in acts of gendered violence. I love this work because it interweaves, literally, many stories with a simple statement.

Jeffrey Gibson, *I AM A RAINBOW TOO*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, glass beads, and artificial sinew inset into wood frame, 7 parts, 21.5 × 19 inches. © Jeffrey Gibson. Courtesy the artist; Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; Kavi Gupta, Chicago; and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles.

Gibson: Originally it was going to be a list of the names of the women in my family and then I made the decision to broaden it to address something more urgent. The piece that you see when you first walk in says "I Am A Rainbow Too," which is a seven-panel piece and it's the first piece that I completed for the show. This is a lyric from Bob Marley's song "Sun is Shining," one of my favorite tracks of all time. In response to our current political state, I wanted to use the LGBTQ rainbow symbol as a starting point to consider color, community, inclusivity, and diversity.

Rail: Your new paintings included in the show have a deeper sense of dimensionality. The foreground includes this alphabet of reductive, stylized letters, and are fun to decipher. The background contains various fields of abstract patterns going on, where you can see your continual play with Native designs and modernist abstraction. But more than anything, your language of color is incredibly vibrant in this show. I think this play with color and text also shows the influence of Corita Kent.

Gibson: I continue to be blown away by how sharp Corita Kent is. Zach Feuer did an exhibition of her serigraphs called *Sister Corita* in 2009. I own a four-panel print that says "DAMN EVERYTHING BUT THE CIRCUS," and the second panel has the word "EVERYTHING" in a shade of olive green and then in bright green she's highlighted "VERY" "IN." I thought that was brilliant to play with the text so that I read

multiple layers and meanings to the word “everything.” Her work continues to be relevant and applicable to contemporary times whether she uses a proverb, a quote, or a biblical text.

I used a similar strategy in the painting *I DO NOT WANT WHAT I HAVEN’T GOT* (2018), from which you can pull out “I WANT WHAT I HAVE.” I also recently designed a billboard for the For Freedoms Project, using an image of Macy from the video *I Was Here* and placed my interpretation of Nina Simone’s “Mississippi Goddam” lyrics on top. The original lyrics read “This is a show tune. But the show hasn’t been written for it, yet.” My version reads, “THIS STORY HASN’T BEEN WRITTEN YET” and from that I’ve highlighted “HIS STORY HAS BEEN WRITTEN.”

Jeffrey Gibson, I DO NOT WANT WHAT I HAVEN’T GOT, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, glass beads and artificial sinew inset into wood frame, 82 × 74 × 2.5 inches. © Jeffrey Gibson. Courtesy of the artist; Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; Kavi Gupta, Chicago; and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles.

Rail: You are also influenced by the work of Jimmie Durham, Edgar Heap of Birds, and also Hélène Cixous, but what and who else are have influenced your work?

Gibson: House music! There are lots of fashion references when it comes to the garments, including John Galliano, Rei Kawakubo, Alexander McQueen, Leigh Bowery, and there was a Cherokee designer named Lloyd Kiva New who successfully designed clothing in the ’40s and ’50s. He continued as a designer and co-founded the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe in 1962. Another big inspiration has been We’wha, who was a Zuni weaver and is identified as two-spirit. There is a Zuni word, lhamana, which describes an individual with both masculine and feminine qualities, someone who exists between the binary gender roles.

Rail: You have so many things going on right now, you must be constantly thinking of the next group of work.

Gibson: This past summer I made a video in Jackson, Mississippi. I wanted to work with the LGBTQ community there. I worked with eight individuals: someone living with HIV, someone who does drag for a living, someone who identifies as trans, an educator, an artist, a LGBTQ advocate, an actor, and a survivor of sexual trauma.

To work with the LGBTQ communities in Mississippi as opposed to New York City was very empowering for me, especially at this time. One night they took me out to a club called WonderLust, maybe the only gay bar in Jackson. It is that classic bar in a small town—*the* gay bar. And it was not separatist in any way. There’s something beautiful, endearing, and community building about those kinds of spaces.

Rail: Looking back to your garment and helmet sculptures for *This is The Day*, and speaking of gay bars, in an (an)aesthetic strategy for someone like Leigh Bowery, part of this dress as identity is a representation of outrageousness, where ambiguous identity is a sense of empowerment.

Gibson: Yes, especially for the helmets in *This Is the Day*. I wanted to indulge in kitsch and camp as strategies of protection for queer people. I think of it as an internal language, it’s a way we communicate and bond with each other. I think even when it is seen as frivolous and crass, it remains an empowering mechanism. I was thinking about when I was an outsider teenager and felt a tremendous amount of pride and empowerment because I was different. And since then it seems like all of outsider

strategies have been co-opted as branding mechanisms, so it's difficult. But I come from a generation where I was taught to always look for the in-between spaces, between these binary points, because until its occupied by capitalism and consumerism, you can have some freedom for a minute. But it will eventually be occupied and I will move on.

Rail: Right, it feels that regardless of what kind of outsider culture, there's the dichotomy of wanting to assimilate, to be accepted, but at the same time wanting to express a sense individuality from it. For the performance *Like A Hammer* (2016), you wore one of these garments. Can you talk about that performance?

Jeffrey Gibson. *Love*, 2018. Epoxy clay with glass beads, metal, resin, and plastic heart charms, amethyst geode, steel wire, nylon thread, and pigmented acrylic gel medium, 25 ½ x 14 ×15 ¾ in.
Courtesy the artist; Roberts Projects, Los Angeles; Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; and Kavi Gupta, Chicago. © Jeffrey Gibson. Photo: John Bentham.

Gibson: *Like A Hammer* was the first garment performance that I made. It was made before any of the other garments and I wanted it to be physically heavy and force me to be conscious of my own movements. There's something about connecting, feeling pressure against your body when you're determined to move. *Like A Hammer* uses the movements of different animals to counter feelings of invisibility, lack of acknowledgement, disallowance, of being uninvited—these feelings condition the body to move in certain ways over time. I am aware that I am not the only Indigenous artist working in performance, at all, but very happy to be a new kind of body inserting themselves into another history where we are not often represented

Rail: The dynamism of your work is really complimented by your studio practice. There is a strong theme of community and collaboration in your work, where you find a way to be an author of these various layers, in these in-between points.

Gibson: I feel very fortunate for the team of people that help me in the studio. I don't think I could have planned for the way the studio currently exists. I have used studio assistants for many years but the idea of employing someone for a long-term position is relatively new for me. Part of it comes from the years of me trying to figure out how to sustain a practice as an artist. I wanted to share this with younger artists and allow them to see an example of how one artist's studio works. Some people have been with me for five to six years and they are extremely knowledgeable about the making of the work. Ultimately, the relationship is about trust for me. The studio is an extension of my personal life and I need to feel at total ease with anyone in my space. We share a lot. It's a bit familial at times.

CONTRIBUTOR

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