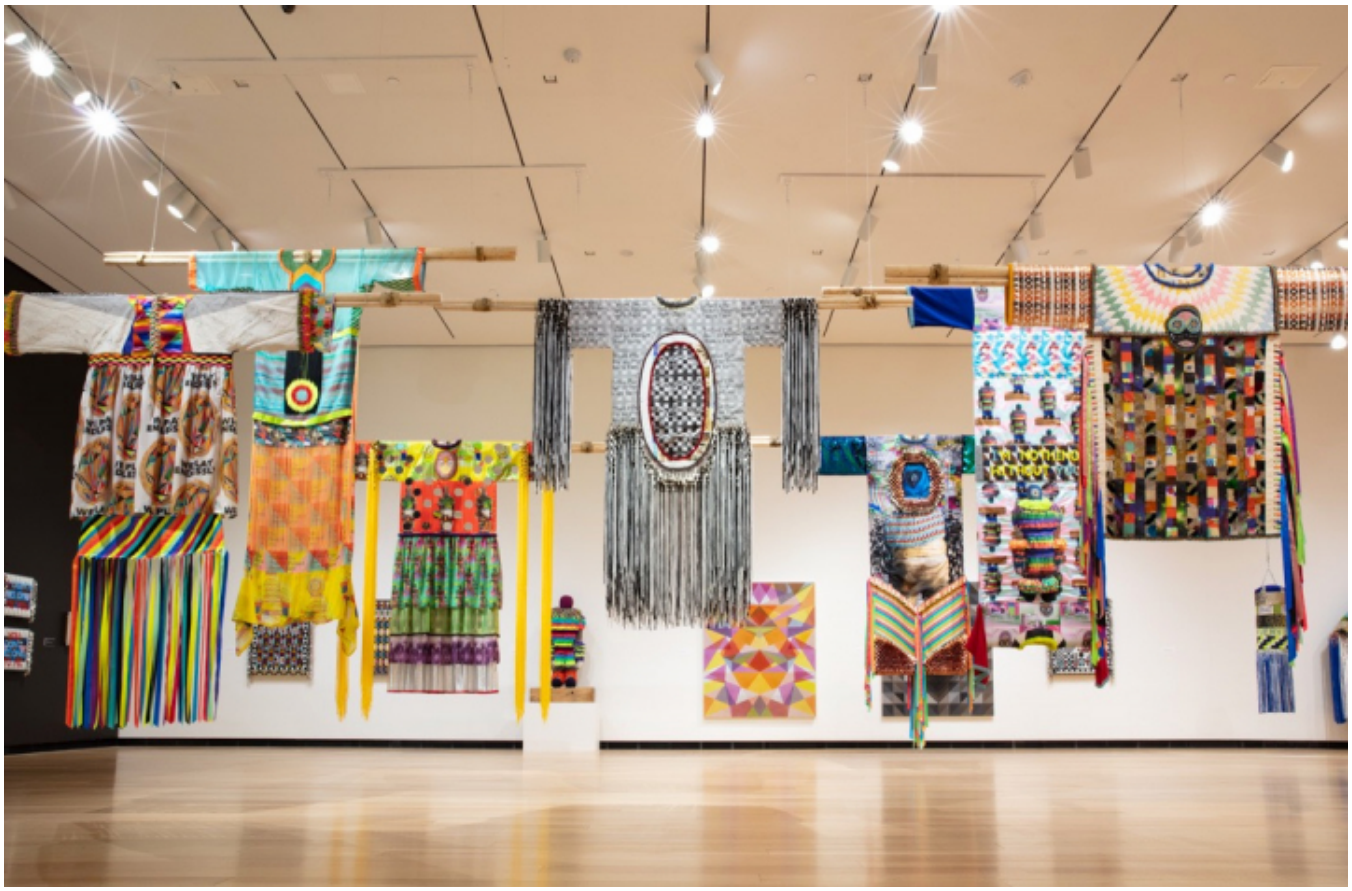
HYPERALLERGIC

Jeffrey Gibson's Futurist Gaze

In a word, Gibson's work is anticipatory — imagining who we humans might become when we truly begin to fill out the contours of our expansive humanity.

Seph Rodney | December 4, 2018



Installation view of *Jeffrey Gibson: This Is the Day* at the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY (image courtesy of the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art, photograph by John Bentham)

CLINTON, NY — What if an artist made work for a people not yet born? A visitor to Jeffrey Gibson's exhibition *This Is the Day* at the Wellin Museum might recognize this invocation. There are hints and clues, and there are subtle signs easily mistaken for wonders. Walking into the central gallery you will encounter a sky full of oversize garments made up of magpie colors and fabrics, draped over tipi poles, and you might think, as I did: "What kind of being could inhabit these clothes?"

Hung from the ceiling are dazzling tunic pieces made up of beads, jingles, ribbons, laces, sequins, repurposed materials, and printed newspaper headlines — but alongside their chockablock aesthetic one notices the garments are huge. For example, there is the eight-feet long "Watchtower" tunic (all pieces are from 2018 unless otherwise indicated) made of polyester satin and chiffon with mirrors creating a polka-dot pattern over the torso; a beaded throat and waist; a long curtain with tiered images of mannequin dolls, organized protests, and the words "don't make me over"; a skirt which is a cascade of translucent hues; and a long, trailing, golden nylon fringe. Another piece, "A Wag A Wit A Witness," hangs about 10 feet long and is just as complicated a construction, with Seminole patchwork and Japanese sash all revolving around colors that devolve from a primary yellow into secondary hues of orange and green.

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Aside from the seven new garments mounted here for this show, Gibson also fashioned five gregariously ornamented helmets that are thematic (for example there is a "Oceana" mask and a "Death" mask) and bedecked with so many tchotchkes and keepsakes that they weigh between 35 and 55 pounds. (The average weight of a human head is 10 to 11 pounds.) The "Peace" mask is even decorated with imitation revolvers, and the "Love" mask has an amethyst geode protruding from the

crown. What warrior priest could wear any one of these for a significant amount of time? Gibson stands at over six feet tall and of substantial girth and even these wearable artworks would exhaust him in the wearing. In fact, Gibson's installation piece, "Like a Hammer" (2016), contains a video depicting him struggling with the weight of one of his performance tunics as he wore it a few years ago to enact some self-devised ritual.

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The exhibition's curator (and the director of the Wellin) Tracy Adler gets at the meaning of the clothing pieces. In her introductory catalogue essay, she writes: "they evoke a celebration that has yet to be enacted." This celebration has yet to be manifested because the people who would inaugurate and enshrine it in the culture's memory are not here yet. Gibson, she tells me, is careful not to use clothing that has actually been used in Native American ceremonies; rather, he only alludes to their persuasive powers (such as the legendary spiritual power of the Lakota tribes's ghost shirts, which were imagined to be bulletproof) and relies on kitschy diasporic glam to complete the work. For example, the copper and chrome jingles that show up in the garments and tapestries were once made from the lids of tobacco cans, but now come to the artist from Taiwan.

The materials in this show — ceramics, paintings, punching bags, beaded tapestries, wearable garments, narrative video, cloaks, masks, and figurines — are geographically eclectic, from China,

India, African and elsewhere. Gibson has long conversed with cultural heterogeneity: Because his father was a civil engineer of the US Department of Defense, Gibson grew up in urban hubs around the US, Korea, Germany, and England. In the same vein, the people that Gibson foresees are geographically fluid, and fluid in the other key valences of being: gender, sexuality, body shape and skin tone, in personae, emotional compass, and experiential range.

Installation view of Jeffrey Gibson: This Is the Day at the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY (image courtesy of the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art, photograph by John Bentham)

In a word, Gibson's work is anticipatory — imagining who we humans *might* become when we truly begin to fill out the contours of our expansive humanity. As he says in conversation with Adler for her introductory essay: "I am trying to make the world that I envision." The text pieces are exhortations of this vision. "I Know You Have a Lot of Strength Left" (2017) is made up of a field of blue and green triangles on which floats the title, spelled in darker blue and red letters. All of these colors and shapes swim within a pool of copper, nickel, steel, and brass tacks, like the interior of a conjured lake. The "Alive!" (2016) tapestry tells the viewer "I am Alive," "You are Alive," "We are Living," as if to impel the viewer to recognize that to be alive is to exist in a state of inheriting all the opportunities that reside in our imagination's well, to be ladled out moment by moment, for ourselves and for others, by our capable hands.

Jeffrey Gibson, "ALIVE!", (2016) glass beads, tin jingles, steel and brass studs, nylon fringe, and artificial sinew on acrylic felt, mounted on canvas, 100 x 61 ¼ in. (254 x 155.6 cm), courtesy the artist; Roberts Projects, Los Angeles; Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; and Kavi Gupta, Chicago (© Jeffrey Gibson, photograph by Pete Mauney)

In her preface to the catalogue, Adler also divulges that Gibson's 2015 heavy-bag piece "A Very Easy Death" — which the Wellin acquired in 2016 — gave her the idea for the exhibition. The piece's title alludes to Simone de Beauvoir's 1964 memoir of the same name which chronicles the last few months leading up to her mother's death. I recall reading de Beauvoir in my undergraduate years. One sentence from her book *The Second Sex* impressed itself on me and has stayed since then: "There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future." I think what the existentialist philosopher and feminist referred to is an ethos that underlies Gibson's exhibition and the majority of his practice: that the most potent feature of being alive is one's ability to see beyond one's immediate circumstances. And the other key feature is mobilizing the inventiveness to alter these circumstances. Both lay at the root of Gibson's futurist gaze.

Jeffrey Gibson, “LOVE IS THE DRUG” (2017) glass beads, tin jingles, metal charms, and artificial sinew on cotton and acrylic felt, mounted on repurposed vinyl punching bag with steel chain, 55 x 13 x 13 in. (139.7 x 33.0 cm) courtesy the artist; Roberts Projects, Los Angeles; Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; and Kavi Gupta, Chicago (© Jeffrey Gibson, photograph by Pete Mauney)

This is the Day is a kind of summons, a kind of incantation, a throaty invocation for a people who are animated by love and curiosity and do not fear death — those who are yet to be. It is an ultimately hopeful imagining that the most beautiful versions of ourselves are not yet born, but here, in this work, might be glimpsed and might indeed one day come to be.

This is the Day *continues at the Wellin Museum (on the campus of Hamilton College, 198 College Hill Road, Clinton, New York) through December 9.*