



JEFFREY GIBSON: POST-CONTACT

by Jenelle Porter

Consider the punching bag. Scaled to the human body, it's got some give to its skin and insides but is otherwise stolid and heavy. Everlast. The symbolism is lost on no one, whether one might consider the punching bag the recipient of relentless and brutal contact, a projection of anger or frustration, or a symbol of enduring resistance.

Jeffrey Gibson's series of punching bag sculptures celebrates this multifaceted potency with colorful beads, painted surfaces, shiny metal jingles, and other adornments. He first incorporated a punching bag in a sculpture in 2011, and it took over a year to make as he taught himself to sew and bead. His most recent bag, more refined and precise in its facture, is titled *POWER POWER POWER* (2017). The patterned beading incorporates text reading from the top down: "POWER POWER POWER WHITE POWER BLACK POWER RED POWER BLUE POWER PURPLE POWER PINK POWER GREEN POWER YELLOW POWER POWER POWER POWER." The colors and text praise racial, sexual, and gender acceptance, and are the artist's response to the recent social

and political threats to these triumphs. For Gibson, one way to counter attacks on civil liberties is to celebrate color, to respond with a kind of chant or song, to install a punching bag shaped LGBTQ flag in a bid to "queer up" the mechanisms.

For some years now, Gibson has been jamming up the mechanisms, making art that epitomizes his formative experiences, both on the margins of his own heritage and as a participant in marginal subcultures, such as club music. Because his father was in the military, Gibson grew up in the United States, Korea, and Germany. He is **Choctaw/Cherokee**. He locates much of his work to a profound period in the early and mid-1990s while an art student at the **School of The Art Institute of Chicago**, when he worked as an intern at **The Field Museum of Natural History** assisting visiting tribal delegations in their research of ethnographic objects. There, he learned about sacred objects firsthand from tribal elders. But it was his interaction with objects considered culturally indeterminate, for example scraps of cloth with unidentifiable patterns or beaded "whimsies" made for tourists,

that was particularly significant. “These [objects] were the most interesting to me as an artist,” Gibson said, “because they defied the didactic descriptions used by institutions to identify cultures with definitive borders. Because of the way I grew up ... I knew I inherently defied the collective language that was used to describe any one component of myself.”¹

During and after graduate school, he began combining his heritage with his painting, extrapolating from postmodernism, club music, and then ubiquitous identity politics, all of which engendered radical mixing in all areas of cultural production from highbrow to low. Gibson envisioned a nonlinear path for his work. He could paint on canvas or hide or an army blanket, use

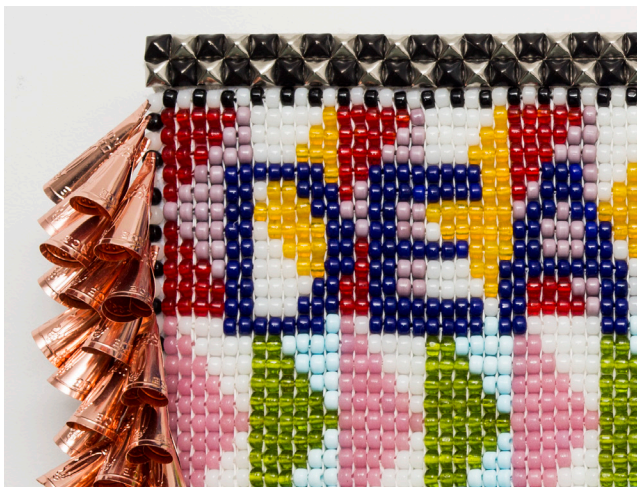
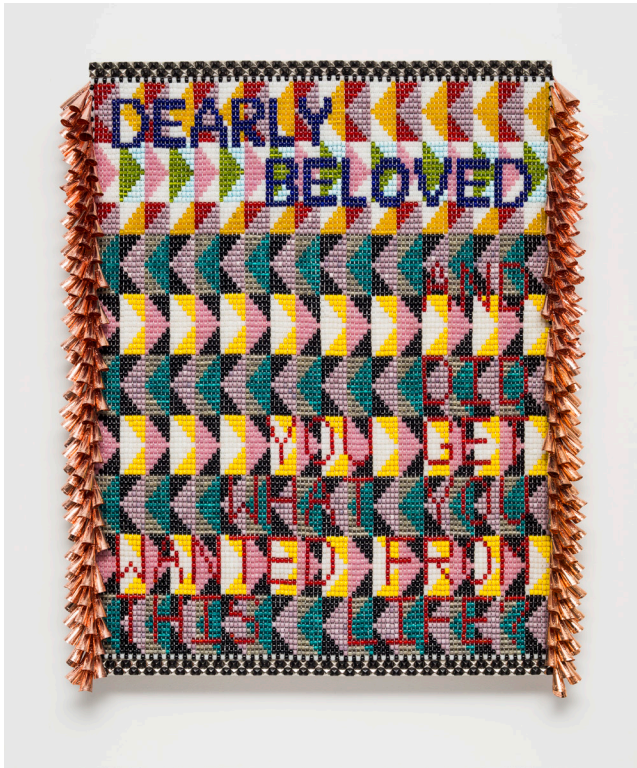


Left page: **Jeffrey Gibson** *WHAT DO YOU WANT? WHEN DO YOU WANT IT?* (detail) 2016, driftwood, hardware, wool, canvas, glass beads, Artist’s own repurposed painting, artificial sinew, metal jingles, metal studs, nylon fringe, nylon ric rac, high fire glazed ceramic, 92½" x 39" x 64". Photo: Peter Mauney. Courtesy of the artist.

Left: **Jeffrey Gibson** *POWER POWER POWER* 2017, repurposed vinyl punching bag, glass beads, artificial sinew, acrylic felt, 51" x 12". Photos: Peter Mauney. Courtesy of the artist and Roberts & Tilton, Los Angeles, CA. Detail bottom right.

Top right: Portrait of Jeffrey Gibson. Photo: Kevin Miyazak. Courtesy of the artist, 2017.

Much of his work draws on the ways individuals and communities describe themselves with and through materials.



Jeffrey Gibson *DEARLY BELOVED...AND DID YOU GET WHAT YOU WANTED FROM THIS LIFE?* 2017, glass beads, artificial sinew, metal studs, copper jingles, acrylic felt, over wood panel, 42" x 31½". Photo: Peter Mauney. Courtesy of the artist and Roberts & Tilton, Los Angeles, CA. Detail bottom.

decorative strategies, cover an object in beads and jingles. The result is a body of work at once formalist and decorative, abstract and narrative, traditional and experimental. Color, pattern, text, and material reference many things, from Powwow regalia to checkerboard-patterned Vans, from rave culture adornment to Mississippian effigy pots. Gibson adopts and adapts material culture, especially that which is specific to himself and his Native American heritage, whether jingles and beads, tanned hides, a song lyric, fancy dancer costumes, the global market for recycled glass, or a button from a favorite shirt. In other words, much of his work draws on the ways individuals and communities describe themselves with and through materials. He appropriates disparate cultural references to amplify or eradicate specificity, gauging a work's success by its ability to communicate beyond its particular materiality—beyond the history of a bead, a pattern, a color, or a word.

Gibson's artwork grapples with the ambiguities of history. For example, Powwow is a relatively modern tradition devised to bring tribes together after the tumultuous forced removal from their ancestral lands. Jingles were originally made from repurposed tobacco or snuff tins. Such traditions and objects are post-contact. Now, Gibson orders jingles by the thousands from a man who patented and produces them in Taiwan in varying metals, stamped with an image of a feather and the word "Missouri." How very "global." He uses such materials in his work precisely because public knowledge of them is limited, because the materials teach us things about ourselves. So, while Gibson uses materials that signify Native American culture, his work deconstructs stereotypes and lazy characterizations.

Gibson introduced text into his work because he desired an increasingly direct form of communication. He looked to artists like **Sister Corita Kent**, who used word as image and spiritual belief for social change, as well as musicians and writers. *DEARLY BELOVED* (2017) pays homage to the 1984 **Prince** song "Let's Go Crazy" and American author **Raymond Carver's** poem "Late Fragment" written shortly before his death in 1988. Of his use of text, Gibson says, "You are playing with little bombs. No matter where you place them, they begin to construct meaning."² Figurative "bomb fragments" appear in much of his recent work, on punching bag sculptures, figures, beaded panels, and textile wall hangings. He has begun to trust that words are as elastic as material, that the meaning of a word is contingent on who said it, who heard it, and the context in which it was exchanged. Though the texts he selects often derive from personal memory and experience, the current political chaos has motivated Gibson to adopt increasingly overt language: revolution, power, believe.

Gibson's commitment to community extends to his studio. Since 2012, he has worked and lived in upstate New York.



Top: Installation view of the artist's solo exhibition *Jeffrey Gibson, A Kind of Confession* at SCAD Museum of Art (June 23–October 23, 2016). Courtesy of the artist and SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, GA.



Bottom: **Jeffrey Gibson** *WHAT DO YOU WANT? WHEN DO YOU WANT IT?* 2016, driftwood, hardware, wool, canvas, glass beads, Artist's own repurposed painting, artificial sinew, metal jingles, metal studs, nylon fringe, nylon ric rac, high fire glazed ceramic, 92½" x 39" x 64". Photos: Peter Maoney. Courtesy of the artist. Details right.



"I make my work with respect for tradition, but in no way do I claim that what I'm doing is traditional."



In 2016, he moved his studio into a 1906 schoolhouse in Claverack, a Hudson River town near his home. The spacious property has allowed him to make ambitiously scaled artworks with a paid staff of young artists who assist with everything from sewing beads onto a punching bag to stretching hides. They are also learning firsthand the day-to-day job of being a visual artist. Gibson's desire to share his knowledge continues a long but often neglected history of the artist's atelier, where artists learn how to be artists and not just how to make art. Running a fully staffed studio, with assistants helping to make his work, has given Gibson time to experiment with new ideas and materials.

One material that allows endless experimentation is clay, which Gibson began using a few years ago to make heads for his figurative sculptures. The heads are rough and deliberately inelegant, glaze is painterly and energetic, a counterpoint to the laborious and precise craft required of much of his work. Clay is one of civilization's timekeepers and, like textile, essential to material culture. Gibson's small sculptural heads are inspired by ancient Native American Mississippian culture, a geographically vast and culturally advanced society still largely unacknowledged as a pre-contact civilization. Their effigy head pots, thought to be funerary objects, have surfaces that show incisions, tattoos, and adornments. Still, much of the artifact imagery of these mound-building communities remains unknown, and Gibson finds in this void the same productive indeterminacy that has charged his work since the mid 1990s. The absence of historical consensus allows an open door for artistic interpretation. "I make my work with respect for tradition," Gibson says, "but in no way do I claim that what I'm doing is traditional."

¹ Jeffrey Gibson in "Jeffrey Gibson in conversation with Jenelle Porter," Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, May 1–July 14, 2013 (exhibition brochure).

² Jeffrey Gibson, panel discussion at Hammer Museum, February 2017.

Jeffrey Gibson's debut solo exhibition *In Such Times* is on display at Roberts & Tilton gallery in Culver City, CA (through October 14, 2017). robertsandtilton.com

Upcoming solo shows include his mid-career retrospective *Like a Hammer* at the Denver Art Museum in Denver, CO (May 2018), and *This is the Day* at The Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art in Clinton, NY (September 2018). jeffreygibson.net

—Jenelle Porter is a curator in Los Angeles, CA. From 2011–2015, she was Senior Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston where she organized the touring thematic exhibition *Fiber: Sculpture 1960–present*.



Left page, top: **Jeffrey Gibson *IN SUCH TIMES CLOWNS BECOME WITNESSES* 2017**, glass beads, artificial sinew, metal studs, acrylic felt, over wood panel, 40" x 30". Photo: Peter Mauney. Courtesy of the artist and Roberts & Tilton, Los Angeles, CA.

Left page, bottom: **Jeffrey Gibson *TO MY NATION* 2017**, glass beads, artificial sinew, trading post weaving, metal studs, copper and tin jingles, nylon fringe, acrylic felt, canvas, wood, 70" x 91". Photo: Peter Mauney. Courtesy of the artist and Roberts & Tilton, Los Angeles, CA.

Above: **Jeffrey Gibson *LOVE IS THE DRUG* 2017**, repurposed vinyl punching bag, glass beads, found and collected mixed metal charms, cotton, artificial sinew, tin jingles, acrylic felt, 55" x 13". Photo: Peter Mauney. Courtesy of the artist and Roberts & Tilton, Los Angeles, CA.