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Forbes

Artist Jeffrey Gibson Explores Complexities in Human Movement in New Show at Marc Straus Gallery

BY ADAM LEHRER | OCTOBER 29, 2015

It's hard to find an article about Hudson, New York-based artist [Jeffrey Gibson](#) that doesn't immediately reference the artist's Choctaw-Cherokee heritage (and yes, I recognize the irony in the fact that I just referenced this myself). While Gibson's Native American heritage is certainly relevant when discussing his work, it would be reductive to not discuss the plethora of cultures and sub-cultures that he filters into his paintings, sculptures, and more recently, his performances. Gibson references club culture, fashion, music (ranging from jazz to punk to East Indian drumming), politics, literature, abstract art, and so much more in his work.



Jeffrey Gibson, photo courtesy of Michael Wiltbank

MARC STRAUS

But inevitably, the label of “Native American artist” comes up, and Gibson has grown more comfortable with that fact. “I used to worry about the label being limiting,” says Gibson. “But then you realize that the label isn’t going anywhere and if we are going to describe each other in this way; you’re whatever and I’m Native American; then I’d rather proactively use it strategically.”

As he’s grown more comfortable with the label, his work has grown all the more fascinating. While Gibson is Native American by heritage, he wasn’t raised traditionally. This creates a magnificent tension in the work. Many of Gibson’s paintings come across as powerful and striking totems, or as symbols. Gibson recognizes the inherent importance of symbols, and that being a Native American working in the contemporary art world is symbolic, as is being an openly gay Native American man.



Jeffrey Gibson, 'American History,' all installation and work images courtesy of Marc Straus Gallery

Ultimately, Gibson explores the notion of “outsider-ness” and the ways in which we rectify our differences. Everyone is an outsider to something; whether it be racially, sexually, culturally, or otherwise. Gibson, through his interest in human movement and travel, seeks to identify the ways in which we bridge the gaps that separate us. He is not interested in a “post-racial world,” he is instead interested in people being able to acknowledge one another in their totalities and pushing forward.

Gibson is the subject of an exhibit at [Marc Straus Gallery](#) that collects much of the artist’s recent work. In a marvelously curated setup, there is a range of 38 embroidered punching bags that all make use of Gibson’s literary use of text. Each punching bag represents a perceived “outsider,”

MARC STRAUS

ranging from goths to rockers. In addition, beaded wall hangings referencing textiles and blankets traditionally worn as robes are emblazoned with politically-charged statements. It is a physically assaulting show idling towards Gibson's interest in the ritual of movement and its ability to make a person shed his/herself of self-consciousness and make a statement.

Gibson and I sat down in the middle of his exhibit to discuss race in contemporary art, the jubilee of dancing, the idiosyncrasies of communication, and (fashion nerds that we are) how fashion is bleeding into his new work.



Jeffrey Gibson at Marc Straus installation show

Forbes: What do you find so magnetic about the ritual of dance?

Jeffrey Gibson: My dad was a government civil engineer and I grew up in Germany, South Korea, and the U.S. I started going to nightclubs when I was only 13 in Korea.

When I came back to the U.S. it was about the late '80s. I was probably 16 at the time, and it was the first time that I was too young to get into bars and clubs. I've never particularly been committed to any one type of music so then my friends and I would end up going to hardcore shows out in the country. Finally I went to a club in D.C. called Trax, it was this huge warehouse with house music and drag queens.

Forbes: Like a *Party Monster* type scenario?

JG: Yeah. I remember feeling that the whole house music scene was so promising and tribal before drugs came in and ruined everything. It felt like you had power to make change and do things.

Forbes: And you had cousins that were on pow wow circuits?

JG: Pop wow dancing has been in my life forever. What drew me to the pow wow was that people were young and it's the one place where you could be of the native tradition but innovation and drawing attention to oneself was actually celebrated. To me the idea of tradition

MARC STRAUS

has always felt like a weight, because I didn't grow up traditional. But going to grad school and going to New York, this idea of the relationship between the mind and the body grew increasingly important to me.

Forbes: And now it's a huge part of your work?

JG: I'm actually developing some performances. The ones I've done at this point have been experiments, but I got funds this year to produce an actual performance. Meaning it has a beginning and an end. There's this cloak that's being made for me that is equipped with all of these metal cones. A lot of the performance will come out of me trying to move in this heavy cloak. My relationship to club culture is something that people still have trouble understanding. I feel like people who lived through that period get it.



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MARC STRAUS

Forbes: Or maybe even just people who like to dance; the physical act of forgetting what's going on in your head and moving to music is elating in a way that few things are.

JG: There's also this consciousness shift that happens when you are dancing and if you're trying to explain it to people it sounds like you're describing a dream: you lose your self consciousness and you enjoy being hot and sweaty.

Forbes: And in your own body.

JG: Yeah and then there's this collective energy that happens when people are feeling it. I'm trying to channel that into something that's performative.

Forbes: I read in the [New York Times](#) that you weren't always comfortable with the inevitable label of "Native American artist," how did you gain that comfort?

JG: if you have any sort of public presence, how people see you is totally out of your control. I think there's shame attached to being a part of a minority culture, and there's this desire to assimilate. I don't want to expel who I am because I'm not ashamed of it. The other thing that people talk about in the art world is the idea of "post-race." I've never understood that as a goal because I think it's impossible and I have no desire to be post-race.

Forbes: I think it's worse than that. When people say they don't see race or that they are post-race they are denying someone's culture.

JG: And despite coming from a desire to be inclusive and liberal, in a weird way you're denying someone's identity.

Forbes: It's a manifestation of guilt, almost.

JG: Totally. My hope is that we can get over the hump of whatever makes us uncomfortable talking about race.



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MARC STRAUS

Forbes: It seems like a true post-race world would be one in which we acknowledge our cultural and racial differences, try and understand them, and learn from them.

JG: It's almost about amplifying your differences. If I recognize all of who you are in your totality and if you recognize who I am in all of my totality, then it will get complicated and messy. But that's the reality of it.



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Forbes: You've achieved a lot of success over the last few years, why do you think it took the art world some time to catch on?

JG: The biggest criticism of my work over the last 20 years has been that there are too many things going on. In 2007, someone who was a few years younger than me said to me, "Don't get frustrated and hang in there a few more years. The people who are going to understand your work aren't in a place to do anything for you right now, but they're coming up."

Like clockwork, when I turned 40 I started getting calls from people that had been following my work for a few years and are now curators.

I think that it goes towards an idea of that physical and visceral experience before an intellectual one. Suddenly my generation understood the excitement and the need to construct. There's a physical engagement here and then there's an intellectual engagement over here.

Forbes: I think the people that might be appreciating your work are those that grew up getting used to being inundated with imagery.

JG: Totally.

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Forbes: It's crazy how much people know these days: the entire history of cinema, the entire history of pop music, and the entire history of fashion. They don't shut down at a certain level of sensory.

JG: At the same time, attention is a learned skill that we just don't learn anymore.

Forbes: You're a self-described nomad. I was curious if when you're traveling you're looking at things as an artist to find influence, or if you just see things that end up influencing you?

JG: I try to pay attention to what I'm already paying attention to. I was kind of getting freaked out earlier this week because I don't know what work I should do next. But then I took out these sketches and I wanted to take things that I've done and start wearing them. So, we're going to make garments. We're starting with the questions: can a garment be a statement? Can a garment be a sculpture? Can a garment be political?



Jeffrey Gibson, 'The Only Way Out is Through'

Forbes: I think so.

JG: Yeah. So All I've been doing since New York Fashion Week is watching videos of the runway shows. I've been looking for the moments that ask, "what are the mechanisms at work? What makes us want to buy this? What makes us think it's pretty. What makes us think it's challenging?" Did you see [Rick Owens SS 2016](#)?

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Forbes: Of course, man. Models wearing models. Amazing.

JG: I love that Rick did something that nobody had ever thought of.

Forbes: He's genius and he's hilarious.

JG: That show made me think of Leigh Bowery, and I know all the big designers in the '90s like Galliano and McQueen were going to Leigh Bowery shows.

But a person recently asked if my garments would be commercial and I said probably not. It goes back to engaging the body.

Forbes: Do you feel that different cultures have regional movements? Like someone in Columbia might have characteristic movements different than someone in India?

JG: It's not something I'm particularly interested in, but I would say yes. They do. I guess what I'm interested in is the question, "How much space is considered appropriate?" Or what is the appropriate amount of time that you look someone directly in the eye? How do those things challenge notions of gender and what we consider as being sexual versus intimate? I think we're in a place where we are getting increasingly afraid of our bodies in their original states. There's something about necessary movement that I'm interested in.

Forbes: I love the punching bags as manifestations for "outsider-ness," but someone less in tune with contemporary art might see your punching bags and just think about Floyd Mayweather Do you worry about your work being misinterpreted.

JG: No, you can't control that. I just let it go. When you're an artist in your studio there are all these strategies to help produce and make. One of my strategies is to not over-think anything. It's ok to make work that doesn't resonate as much as other work. I know the strength of every piece: text, design, scale, and color. I need to respond differently to each piece, especially because they are all punching bags. I have to make each one different. Also, I can't make 40 punching bags a year. I'm at 38 now and that's taken a few years. So each piece needs to exist by itself as much as it does as part of a collective. Same thing with the garments: I'll need 40 people wearing them for it to make sense as a show.

Forbes: When you know a piece isn't your best work, do you ever regret making it?

JG: Honestly, I have no regrets about art. I know when you're a young artist and people tell you not to rush and that things come in their own time, the young artist doesn't want to hear that. Most of my career existed in non-profit spaces at museums until I was in my late thirties. I'm glad, because before that I didn't have an understanding of the complexity of experience. As an artist, I get to indulge that. How many adults get to stop eating for three days to see what it does to their thoughts? Then watch fashion shows for a few days to see if that changes how I look at something? You get to construct these bizarre scenarios.

MARC STRAUS

Forbes: The text in your work is poignant and even literary; did you ever have aspirations of being a writer?

JG: I did. When I was at the Art Institute of Chicago I studied short story writing and wrote two short stories. I think that finding a voice is really tough, but words are as slippery as anything else. I've always been really into my titles. I love giving abstract paintings elaborate titles, and people wouldn't know how the titles reflected the work, and I'd say because I'm giving image to these words.

Forbes: You've done work that examines Native American influences on the masters like Rauschenberg and others, as you've grown more comfortable with the title of Native American artist, have you grown to feel more responsible to show people the influence Native American art has had?

JG: Yes. But I still don't think I've fully realized what is possible when you actually have a platform. I love the fact that someone in Arizona, Mississippi, or wherever has awareness of my work. Even if this person might not understand the context of the contemporary art world that I exist in, there's more power to it being an image. Native American artists, and non-Native American artists, have been more important to me as images. It's different when you get to know someone and they turn out to be...

Forbes: A flawed human being.

JG: Yeah. I think it's important that I identify as Native American for them. It's important that I identify as queer for them. Is it important that they know me? No.

Forbes: You've said you like the idea of traditional art as a form of resistance; do you still feel that energy of resistance?

JG: Yeah, the weird thing that I think is cool, is that Native American art and the intellectual discussion that has always surrounded it, is exclusive. Oddly enough that inclusivity can be resistance to exclusivity. Someone asked me what my dream world would be. And honestly, it would be Hansel's loft on *Zoolander*.

Forbes: (laughs)

JG: (Laughs) Just amazing people hanging out and there's a skate ramp and someone baking bread. Maybe you think that's light or silly, but it's not.

Jeffrey Gibson's exhibit is on view at Marc Straus Gallery until December 13

Source: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/adamlehrer/2015/10/29/artist-jeffrey-gibson-explores-complexities-in-human-movement-in-new-show-at-marc-straus-gallery/5/>