



Punching-bag sculptures (left to right): *American Girl*, 2013; *She Walks Lightly*, 2012; and *Cloudbuster*, 2013.

The day he started painting on animal skin rather than canvas, Jeffrey Gibson, an artist of Choctaw and Cherokee descent, made a key breakthrough. "Rawhide is leather in its rawest form. It dries hard and can form to any structure, but there are always reminders of where it comes from—holes in the hide, marks in the skin, hair follicles, and embedded thorns," Gibson explains. "It's a visceral material." His recent solo exhibition at New York's National Academy Museum featured bright constellations of jagged geometric patterns delineated on deer hide stretched over unusual supports such as ironing boards and swiveling antique mirrors. Parfleches, Native American containers made of animal skin and decorated with abstract shapes by women, are a major inspiration for these painting-sculpture hybrids. And modernist abstraction—which often borrowed tribal imagery—is turned inside out.

The cosmopolitan Gibson grew up in a military family stationed in Germany, South Korea, and the United States. Since earning a B.A. at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and an M.F.A. from the Royal College of Art, London, he has spent time working in France, New Mexico, and California. Now based in Hudson, New York, Gibson is represented by Marc Straus in New York City and Shoshana Wayne Gallery in Santa Monica, California, where his works sell for up to \$38,000. Through next November, he has several pieces spotlighted in the Denver Art Museum's American Indian art galleries.



Jeffrey Gibson.

Leather also appears in Gibson's series of light fixtures, arrangements of long cylindrical bulbs wrapped in colored gel and deer hide. "The lights refer to sculpture by Dan Flavin and the painted shapes refer to stylized tribal designs and to paintings by Ellsworth Kelly and 1960s Frank Stella," Gibson explains. "My recent work has developed over a long period of time looking at and considering work by such dominant artistic figures, and comparing it to objects made by artists who've been historically excluded from the mainstream canon."

Another body of work imbues punching bags with a strangely human presence. Some have long fringes that can flutter in the breeze, along with beads and jingles. "The adornment references subcultural fashion, not just Native American but also punk and queer—alternatives to mainstream that signal defiance and rejection of hetero-normative culture," Gibson says. Sexual mutability is implied in the female identities these ostensibly male objects take on. *She Walks Lightly* (2012), for example, could be an immobilized tribal dancer. Both the punching bags and the painted abstractions on flayed skin are suffused with potential violence, slightly twisting the inherent beauty of Gibson's work.

—Elisabeth Kley

Elisabeth Kley is an artist and writer in New York.