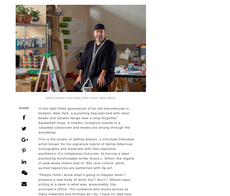
People

Ten Years Ago, Artist Jeffrey Gibson Almost Quit the Art World in Frustration. Here's How He Found the Strength to Keep Striving

Instead of quitting his practice, he bought a sprawling former schoolhouse and transformed it into a massive studio.

Tess Dafoe, March 24, 2021



Jeffrey Gibson in his studio. Photo: Taylor Dafoe.

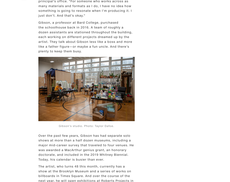
SHARE

In the tight-lipped gamescape of an old schoolhouse in Hudson, New York, a punching bag adorned with neon beads and tassels hangs near a long forgotten chalkboard. Nearby, a mannequin stands in a carpeted classroom and masks are strung through the woodshop.

This is the studio of Jeffrey Gibson, a Choctaw-Cherokee artist known for his signature hybrid of Native American and Western imagery, and a DIY, maximalist aesthetic. It's indigenous futurism, to borrow a term pioneered by Anishinaabe writer Grace L. Dillon. He starts his artworks with a base of Native American, Western, and quilted tapestries are patterned with flip art.

"People think I know what's going to happen when I make a piece," he said, standing in front of a large work, sitting at a desk in what was, presumably, the principal's office. "For someone who works across so many materials and formats as I do, I have no idea how it's going to come together until I'm producing it. I just don't, that's what's okay."

Gibson, a professor at Bard College, purchased the schoolhouse back in 2016. A team of roughly a dozen people helped him transform the 19th-century work warehouse into a massive studio. Some of the work starting on different projects dreamed up by the artist. They talk about Gibson lens like a boss and more than a few people have worked for him since. Now there's plenty to keep them busy.



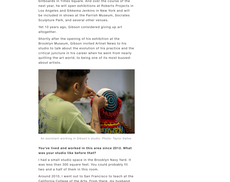
Gibson's studio. Photo: Taylor Dafoe.

Over the past few years, Gibson has had separate solo shows at more than a half dozen museums, including a major show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, and was awarded a MacArthur genius grant, an honorary doctorate, and included in the 2019 Whitney Biennial. Today, his calendar is busier than ever.

The artist, who turns 48 this month, currently has a solo show at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, exhibitions in Tokyo Square, And over the course of the next year, he will open exhibitions at Roberts Projects in Los Angeles, Kavi Gupta in Chicago, Ceysson & Bénétière in Luxembourg, and a show at the Parrish Museum, Southern Sculpture Park, and several other venues.

Yet 10 years ago, Gibson considered giving up art altogether.

Shortly after the opening of his exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, Gibson moved Artnet News to his studio to talk about the evolution of his practice and the lessons he learned along the way. He talked about quitting the art world, its being one of his most focused about artists.



An installation underway in Gibson's studio. Photo: Taylor Dafoe.

You've lived and worked in this area since 2010. What was your studio like before that?

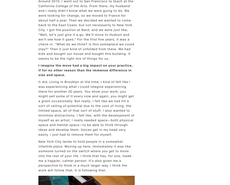
I had a small studio space in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. It was a little bigger than this bedroom, and probably 15 feet and a half of three in this room.

Around 2010, I went out to San Francisco to teach at the California College of the Arts. I'from there, my teacher friend Ron Nagle said, "Why don't you come here? We were looking for change, so we moved to Francisco. I loved that a year. Then we decided we wanted to come back to the East Coast, but not necessarily to New York City. We were looking for a place to raise our kids. "Well, let's just give it a try. We'll move to Hudson and we'll see how it goes." For the first five years, it was a lot of work. We had to fix the roof and the plumbing and stuff. Then it just kind of became home. We had kids and bought our house and bought this building. It was a place to raise our family.

I imagine the move had a big impact on your practice, if for no other reason than the immense difference in size and space.

It did. Living in Brooklyn at the time, I kind of felt like I was underwater. I felt like I was just treading water. I there for another 20 years. You show your work, you might sell some of it every one and again, you might get a review or something. But it felt like I was just in the surf of coming of potential due to the cost of living, the limited space, all of that sort of stuff. I also wanted to be a parent. I felt like I was, I'm a very ambitious person myself as an artist, I really needed space—both physical space and mental space—to be able to think through what I wanted to make and how I wanted to make it exactly. I just had to remove them for myself.

New York City tends to hold people in a somewhat infantile place. Moving up here, immediately it was like someone turned on the switch where you get to move in, you get to make a mess, you get to make a lot of work, you get to make a lot of mistakes, you get to have a perspective to throw in a much larger way. I think the work was fantastic. It's, "Welcome to Hudson."



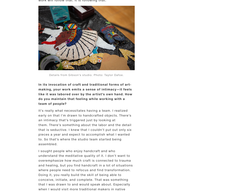
Jeffrey Gibson in his studio. Photo: Taylor Dafoe.

In the invocation of craft and traditional forms of art-making, your work emits a sense of intimacy—it feels like it was labored over by the artist's own hand. How do you imagine people feeling while working with a piece of yours?

It's really what necessitates having a team. I realized that I can't do all of this by myself anymore. There's an intimacy that's triggered by contact by someone. There's something about the labor and the detail that necessitates that. I'm interested in how that allows people a pain and leaves to accomplishment what I aspire to. So that's where the studio team started being assembled.

I sought people who enjoy handcraft and who understand that I'm interested in that. I don't want to overemphasize how much craft is connected to trauma and healing, but you find handcraft in a lot of situations where people are using it as a kind of contemplative doing is, you really build the skill of being able to concern, initiate, and complete. That was something I felt I was lacking in my practice and I felt like I could learn when I would end most traditional makers in native communities, people's attachment to sewing, beading, and quilting is not just about the fact that it's a meditative cathartic process of making something. I wouldn't say that's necessarily the whole, but it was at the beginning of my learning. I felt I was missing something. I didn't know I think about concepts now. I think about form of concepts.

When I first started assembling the team of people who work here, I talked to them very clearly about the goals. I'm very interested in, I'm very ambitious. I'm very, I'm very doing bookwork work anyone because I want to be able to do research and experiment. I need to be able to do that. I need to be able to make very skilled and our communication is remarkably fluid.



Jeffrey Gibson in his studio. Photo: Taylor Dafoe.

There was a time when you considered giving up your practice altogether, right?

Yes, in 2015 and '16. I was trying to decide if I wanted to continue being an artist. I was just fed up. When we moved to Hudson, I was, I'm a very, very, very, very, very, very not alone studio visits. I was really trying to discipline myself not to consider what the art world wanted but consider what I felt I needed to make work about myself. What was in that I thought was important to assert.

I was traveling in Europe, I got a call from Lisa Phillips saying I'm curating the Whitney Biennial. It was a brilliant space and that she is amazing. And I said to myself, "If I was ever going to do a solo show, that's the place I would like to do it." I felt like I'm not, I don't, I'm not, I'd like to do something together. I was thinking, Matthew Dupuis, who then was a space called American Contemporary, I'm friends with Matthew. I'm friends with Lisa. Doing two shows that opened on the same night in early 2019. It really was the first time, in my opinion, the work was, I felt like I was, I felt like I was, I felt like I was, I felt like I felt like I felt like