This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website.

Accept

BOMB

Innovation and Tradition: Jeffrey Gibson Interviewed by Emily Zimmerman

Working between mediums.

May 6, 2019

Interview
Art

Read also:

Indigeneity in the Present Tense: Pacha, Llaqta, Wasichay at the Whitney by Kaitlyn A. Kramer

Sponsored by
MFA Programs
Discover MFA Programs in Art and Writing

Jeffrey Gibson, *Thinking of You*, 2015. Graphite and acrylic paint on rawhide over wood panel. 18 × 32 × 2.5 inches. Private collection. Courtesy of Marc Straus Gallery, New York. Image courtesy of Jeffrey Gibson Studio and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California. Photograph by Peter Mauney.

Jeffrey Gibson's expansive exhibition *Like a Hammer* offers celebration, nuanced formalism, and incisive critique in the service of a vision in which indigenous material culture can occupy the same space as lyrics from a 1960s folk song and abstract painting. Gibson's practice crosses over genres and cultural references in a way that echoes a democratic relationship to community. Originally curated by John Lukavic, Curator of Native Arts for the Denver Art Museum, *Like a Hammer* includes sixty-five pieces created since 2011 that reference the histories of specific cultural artifacts drawing upon Gibson's Choctaw and Cherokee heritage and mythologies of pop culture, while at the same time encouraging a critical approach to the construction of narrative through museum collections. This confluence of traditions within Gibson's artwork allows for the emergence of new readings and invites a set of new methodologies for display.

—Emily Zimmerman

Emily Zimmerman
Can we start with the title, *Like a Hammer*?

Jeffery Gibson
Like a Hammer refers to the Peter, Paul and Mary song "If I Had a Hammer." I was born in 1972 and have been looking back at that period of the civil rights movement and thinking about these moments in history when people really believed the future was going to be significantly different: more ethical, more representative of contemporary, progressive ideas. I started looking at the language of different sorts of movements—everything from punk rock, to Mod culture, to queer culture, to the feminist movement—and tried to pay attention to whether this change has happened. What allowed folk songs to make people feel empowered? *Like a Hammer* also couples with different sorts of philosophies about deconstruction and reconstruction and, in particular, the hammer as a symbol of change.

EZ
There's a horizontality in your work that cuts across media and cultural references. What are the politics of that horizontal positioning as opposed to a vertical positioning that reflects a narrow focus on a single medium?

JG
In indirect ways, I'm always looking to metaphorically describe community, to describe egalitarian politics, and to disassemble the hierarchy of the mediums. Between what's identified as craft and painting, I began thinking about the craft of painting and began comparing that to anything—from the craft of weaving to the craft of beadwork.

When I began working with the punching bags, it was at a period when I was questioning whether I really wanted to be an artist. What I came to was that I needed to let go of whether I was an artist or not, and I needed to pursue the things that I want to see existing in the world that don't exist. What are the things that would leverage this world that didn't meet my expectations? That's really the impetus of where the works and their individuality come from.

I refer to historical formats, oftentimes. For instance, the travois that you see when you first walk into the Seattle Art Museum is a historical format. The only thing I've changed about it is the scale of the trunk—you would never encounter a rawhide trunk that large historically. People who are aware of what a travois is in its historical context would recognize that. And if you don't, it could easily be mistaken as just a reproduction of something from the past. When it was shown there was a critique written that asked, "How is this different than what I would find in the Natural History Museum?" And I thought, really? This was in *The New York Times*. I was horrified.

At the same time, I thought, this is exactly what needs to happen. Someone needs to complicate the incredibly narrow understanding of indigenous aesthetic and material histories. People are unaware of the depth of indigenous material cultures, so people may not recognize the difference. That it's not actually made for practical use; it's made for conceptual purpose. To look through historical-material culture and realize how rich, and in many ways how untapped, many things are for their conceptual purpose in contemporary terms is really exciting. And that guided the way that I was looking at collections and personal, familial material culture. Everything shifted very quickly.

Jeffrey Gibson, *AMERICAN HISTORY (JB)*, 2015. Wool, steel studs, glass beads, artificial sinew, metal jingles, acrylic yarn, nylon fringe, and canvas. 89 × 66 × 5 inches. Lent by the Lewis Family. Image courtesy of the Jeffrey Gibson Studio and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California. Photograph by Peter Mauney.

EZ
One of your pieces, *American History (JB)* (2015), contains the statement: "American history is longer, larger, more beautiful and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it." You've said that pieces like *American History* are collections in and of themselves. Can you talk about how a critique of museum collections and the narratives they present function in your work?

JG
Early in my twenties I worked as a research intern for three years at the Field Museum in Chicago. People see my work now and think there is a sense of optimism, that there's hope, there's beauty. I think people mistakenly think that somehow that means I'm not angry or frustrated. I experienced intense anger and frustration in my early twenties. There was literal shock at, "Oh, this is why people look at me the way they do. Because this is what they think they know about me."

I could see at that time how debilitating it was for many Native people to not even be able to be in the museums. I remember a period when I felt like I couldn't turn in any direction and not feel this tremendous anger and frustration. This was happening at the same time that I was studying art, theory, criticism, and painting at the Art Institute of Chicago. So at the same time as being frustrated, I was being asked to channel that. It was equally frustrating to be told that I needed to let my anger go in order to learn how to paint when this was the subject I was most interested in.

Jeffrey Gibson, *Like A Hammer*, 2014. Elk hide, glass beads, artificial sinew, wool blanket, metal studs, steel, found pinewood block, and fur. 56 × 24 × 11 inches. Collection of Tracy Richelle High and Roman Johnson. Courtesy of Marc Straus Gallery, New York. Image courtesy of Jeffrey Gibson Studio and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California. Photograph by Peter Mauney.

EZ
Your work mobilizes objects that carry a multi-faceted history. How did you arrive at the jingle?

JG
I arrived at the jingle initially because of my interest in powwow culture and the memory of going to powwows growing up. Within powwow culture you feel a sense of collectivity and community, but you also get to be an individual, and you get to see other people expressing themselves as individuals. It's a really unique social space.

I began paying attention to regalia that mixed parts handed down from previous generations with new materials that defied what most people would consider "Native American." The color palettes included mirrored, metallic, fluorescent, and iridescent fabrics. The more eye-catching it was, it seemed like anything, literally anything, could go. Witnessing these garments freed me and allowed me to experiment with these materials to find my own use and visual language with those materials.

When I came across the jingle, I knew that they were originally the lids of tobacco and snuff containers. I was always excited by that. I remember thinking this is the tremendous strength of indigenous people, when something from outside of the culture comes in, to immediately transform it, and turn it into something that supports one's needs. And that idea, for me, is a traditional strength of indigenous communities.

Years later, I encountered Oswald de Andrade's "Anthropophagic Manifesto," which was written by a group of Brazilian artists and poets in 1928. It was completely about the maintaining of traditional Brazilian culture through this metaphorical devouring of another culture. Anthropophagy, referring to cannibalism but in an artistic sense, is the metaphor for consumption of other cultures and then turning it back out in support of yourselves.

Within the powwow context, the jingle is gendered; it's female. You won't really see men using jingles. For me to use it as an artist is not to decontextualize it so much as to expand the context of it. It's also to acknowledge that they are now commercially made specifically for the powwow dancers, which is a niche market. To me as an artist, this circulation of ideas into product, into distribution, into a market that is so specific is completely fascinating. That shifted the way that I look at every single material: Where did it come from? Where was it traded from? Where were those metals coming from? It complicates the idea of what is perceived of as being traditional.

I give in to the idea that there's a continuum for what I've chosen to do. The meaning of my artworks will develop from now and into the future through things like this interview, through exhibitions, through writing. I hope people experience my work in a similar way to when I discovered artworks as a teenager and I felt like, "Oh, wow. That's really me, that really represents me." That's the best I can hope for.

Jeffrey Gibson, *ONE BECOMES THE OTHER*, 2015. Repurposed wool army blanket, repurposed punching bag, glass beads, plastic beads, steel studs, artificial sinew, quartz crystals, copper cones, nylon fringe, steel, and acrylic paint. 73 × 16½ × 16½ inches. Private collection. Courtesy of Marc Straus Gallery, New York. Image courtesy of Jeffrey Gibson Studio and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California. Photograph by Peter Mauney.

EZ
That's the possibility of exhibition making—world building. You're putting forth a different model of how things might be.

JG
I know how much it worked for me growing up. As a young teenager or even as an elementary school kid, I remember feeling excited when I would go to a museum and I saw everything, including Matisse paintings or Warhol paintings, and thinking, "Oh, that's where I need to be. That's the place where I will be accepted, that's the place where I will be heard." Now I think that's what I hope happens when people see a work or experience an exhibition of mine.

EZ
That is a beautiful, hopeful vision to put forward. And I think it's one of the things that the art world can do if it chooses to.

JG
Totally. I completely agree with that.

Jeffrey Gibson: Like a Hammer *is on view at the Seattle Art Museum until May 12.*

Emily Zimmerman is a curator and writer based in Seattle, WA. Her research interests bring together embodied learning, media theory, and existential philosophy. Zimmerman is the Director of the Jacob Lawrence Gallery at the University of Washington's School of Art + Art History + Design.

sculpture installations Indigenous peoples

Related

Embodied Practice: Christine Howard Sandoval Interviewed by Louis Bury

Art that addresses colonial legacies.
Art
Interview

Studio Visit: Woomin Kim by Louis Bury

The difference between studio materials and life materials.
Art
Essay

Unattainable Models and Personal Utopias: Zuzanna Czebatul Interviewed by Isabel Parkes

Shaping space and architecture.
Art
Interview

I believe that each of us is given one sentence at birth, and we spend the rest of our life trying to read that sentence and make sense of it.

— Li Young Lee

More
Interview First Proof Portfolio Review Essay

Discover
Artist-In-Residence Programs MFA Programs

BOMB Magazine has been publishing conversations between artists of all disciplines since 1981. BOMB's founders—New York City artists and writers—decided to publish dialogues that reflected the way practitioners spoke about their work among themselves. Today, BOMB is a nonprofit, multi-platform publishing house that creates, disseminates, and preserves artist-generated content from interviews to artists' essays to new literature. BOMB includes a quarterly print magazine, a daily online publication, and a digital archive of its previously published content from 1981 onward.

Annually, BOMB serves 1.5 million online readers—44% of whom are under 30 years of age—through its free and searchable archive and BOMB Daily, a virtual hub where a diverse cohort of artists and writers explore the creative process within a community of their peers and mentors. BOMB's Oral History Project is dedicated to collecting, documenting, and preserving the stories of distinguished visual artists of the African Diaspora.

Join our newsletter for a weekly update of recent highlights and upcoming events.

Email address

 All content © 2021