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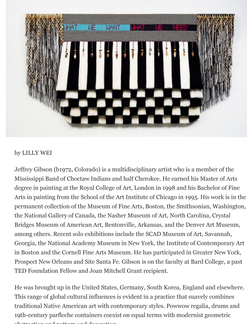
Jeffrey Gibson: 'I was so angry I washed my canvases in the laundromat'

The artist talks about being any angry young artist, his earlier determination not to be viewed as an American Indian artist, and the practice he has evolved over the years, which combines traditional Native American art with contemporary styles



by LILLY WEI

Jeffrey Gibson (b1972, Colorado) is a multidisciplinary artist who is a member of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and half Cherokee. He earned his Master of Art degree in painting at the Royal College of Art, London in 1998 and his Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1995. His work is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Smithsonian, Washington, the National Gallery of Canada, the Nasher Museum of Art, North Carolina, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas, and the Denver Art Museum, among others. Recent solo exhibitions include the SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, Georgia, the National Academy Museum in New York, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and the Cornell Fine Arts Museum. He has participated in Greater New York, Prospect New Orleans and Site Santa Fe. Gibson is on the faculty at Bard College, a past TED Foundation Fellow and Joan Mitchell Grant recipient.

He was brought up in the United States, Germany, South Korea, England and elsewhere. This range of global cultural influences is evident in a practice that suavely combines traditional Native American art with contemporary styles. Powwow regalia, drums and 19th-century pueblo containers coexist on equal terms with modernist geometric abstraction and pattern and decoration.

A Kind of Confession is the title of his current exhibition at the SCAD Art Museum in Savannah, which runs until 23 October. The title is a quote by African-American writer James Baldwin: "All art is a kind of confession, more or less oblique. All artists ... are forced, at last, to tell the whole story."

The following is an excerpt of an edited conversation between the artist and Lilly Wei in Savannah.

Lilly Wei: Would you consider that your exhibition is divided between two bodies of work – one abstract, the other figurative, or, perhaps, one painting, the other object-oriented, sculptural?

Jeffrey Gibson: I don't think about them as two bodies of work, but I understand what you mean. When I first came to New York in 2006, something about the stretcher bars was making me angry and something about my relationship to painting also. So, impulsively, I took the stretcher bars off and took the canvases to a laundromat, put them in the washer, washed them, then threw them into the dryer on high heat. It was very cathartic. When they came out, they looked almost like rawhide. They didn't look like a painted canvas any more. I took them to the studio and tossed them on to a pile, where they stayed for quite a while. But there was something about them; they had been transformed into what was basically a textile. And that I could work with: they now had a history and a personal meaning for me. My first few years, I struggled. I was not enjoying the process of being an artist in New York City. Those paintings represented failure and made me angry. Eventually, that led to thinking about paintings in relationship to textiles, up-art, pattern and decoration, and then to paintings seen through a decorative lens. What's the difference between a stretched piece of canvas with an image painted on it and a hand-painted textile? All those lines blurred and I worked from that blurred perspective. It was very clear that the beaded pieces in the show hanging on the wall were very much based on the format of tribal wearings that also hang on walls. Mine, however, were a modern representation of native tradition.

LW: Would you talk about the beading you use?

JG: I'm interested in how beads were used in trade and how, in the late 1700s, they predominantly came from Europe, but then became associated with Native American culture. I'm not hung up on what is and is not traditional. I understand that tradition is evolving, responding to contemporary circumstances. If I transformed a painted red triangle into a beaded red triangle, say, what it did for me was to reposition the viewer so the viewer had to think differently about what a red triangle is, and what it does. The most recent works are the three large paintings, the first I've done on canvas since 2010. It's because all the other mediums and formats I've been using really clarified my interest in formalism, in materials. Going back and forth for me is a comparative process.

LW: You mentioned rawhide before: you have some painted rawhide pieces here, very small. How do you associate them with Native American culture, about which there isn't much discussion in mainstream discourse, aside from a few stock images and assumptions?

JG: They originated from the pueblo containers made by the Nevada tribes of the Plains region. They used a full animal hide, placed their goods inside, folded it and loaded it on to a horse. The container would always be painted with geometric forms on the outside, although they wouldn't have referred to it as abstraction. Simple things like colours and shapes represented your tribe, your family and were designed to draw the protection of your ancestors around you. These designs were ceremonial, owned, and passed down, guarded by women, so it was very gendered. The actual objects used to paint them were also considered ceremonial and the images were created with very specific brushstrokes, very specific pigments, at least in the past. When they are photographed, they are always folded, two-dimensional like a painting, and I find it interesting to compare them to modernist paintings.

LW: But they are different from modernist paintings.

JG: Yes. A formal shape is radically different. If you believe that this red triangle was meant to identify you, to protect you and over here we are talking about something entirely different, that was interesting to me. When I began painting on hide, it was radically different from painting on canvas. Would it induce the viewer to read it from a non-western, specifically Native American point of view? The hide opened up my thinking about painting. Before that, I was always justifying my choices in painting through discussions around race and culture. Now, there is a clear difference. It is very clear what my inspirations are and also very clear why what I do is not ceremonial, not traditional, not sacred. I was drawn to modernism because someone drew my attention to an exhibition at [the Museum of Modern Art] MoMA in 1941 called American Indian Art in the United States. I had the opportunity to visit the archives and see the correspondence between the curators. Basically, they talked about the political climate of the period, of the cold war when, suddenly, American Indians living on reservations were too communist, too socialist. It was the moment when the US Congress decided to start relocation programmes to get Indians off reservations and into cities like Chicago, Los Angeles, St Louis. I see that as a major cultural interruption. What could have happened if they had not been relocated? What could have happened if that climate had not created this disjunction between personal and quasi-traditional American Indian life that had somewhat healed from the 1830 Removal Act that forced so many from their lands?

LW: So what particularly interested you about the MoMA show?

JG: The MoMA exhibition's basic premise was, if you wanted to look at these objects for ethnographic purposes, go to the natural history museums. There was a sign that actually said that. What they did was to install Native American objects under the title of modern living, or something like that, and placed them collectively with lots of space around them, in the same way they showed modern design, simply as objects without tribal affiliations. As problematic as that was in some ways, it wasn't necessarily better to show them classified incorrectly. That was what excited me about with that particular exhibition.

It made me believe in indirect rather than direct strategies without having to do cultural anthropology 101 – which is impossible due to the number of tribal nations out there. I'm from only one. So much Native American beadwork and design were categorised as decorative arts when, in fact, if you understand what you are looking at, they are masks, abstractions of landscapes, environments.

Decorative is last thing I would say about a chief's robe in a museum hung up like a painting. It is something that you wear that is transformative. When you put it on, you are someone different. The body is the garment. My figurative sculptures come from that. They are heavily adorned garments. The garments are based on those of the dancers of the powwow circuit.

LW: And your fabulous punching bags?

JG: The punching bags came at the same time; I made the first in 2010. I was angry and not sure I wanted to continue to be an artist. I started talking to a psychiatrist and it took a while to understand that the anger revolved around race, class, entitlement, and that my mind and body were split. My counsellor recommended that I work with a physical trainer who, in turn, introduced me to boxing and punching bags. I could personify and direct my anger at them. At the same time, I travelled and met Native American artists who made things for powwows. I would commission them to make parts of my sculptures because they had skills I did not. I would hear how beading saved their lives, how dancing, how drumming stopped them from doing drugs and alcohol. That kind of conviction and necessity was certainly not what I was hearing from artists in New York. When I came back, I realised the importance of what was worn and how it was worn, how much respect it commanded, and how it forced people to look at you in a certain way. I realised that by adorning the punching bags, suddenly there was a presence about it. There are 40 of them, very DIY, and there is a transition between the first and the last – the design and colour become more complicated, and text started on bag 28 or so, appropriated at first, then it became my own writing.

LW: Does your punching bag refer to empowerment through sports, in the way African Americans gain presence and power through sports? Although it's also a problematic issue.

JG: For me, it was about body. The relationship between African American and Native American history is interesting. Most of the experience couldn't be more different, although sports – basketball, running – has also been a way for Native Americans to excel also. But the presence in popular culture of Native American communities is much more minimal. I think this has to do with Native Americans being more linked to a notion of tradition that is staid and stubborn.

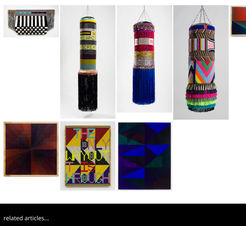
LW: And the materials that you use?

JG: They come from Poland, France, Germany, Taiwan, China and India. You can see a reflection of where our economy is in them. The metal cones I use a lot come from a man in Taiwan who makes them for the powwow circuit and has patented them, but historically, they were lids from snuff containers, traded to the Indians, and the women would curl them to adorn clothing. So the materials now come primarily from Asia, Southeast Asia and elsewhere, but represent American indigenous heritage, which is also not entirely true, since the heritage being represented is just what we popularly believe it to be.

LW: What do you think, then? Does your work reflect your Native American heritage or not?

JG: I think yes and no, at different times. When I was younger, my parents wanted me to be successful, mainstream and American. In my parent's generation, being a Native American equalled being an activist, jail and Alcatraz. They were very nervous about me becoming an artist. As a young person, I was determined not to be viewed as an American Indian artist. After a while, I realised that was almost impossible because I had brown skin and the question would always come up, what are you, where are you from? And then it would be conversations around race. I didn't want to get involved in that conversation. It distracted me from developing as a person and an artist. Stumbling into working with more recognisably Native American materials was for me about specificity. I could say what was going on in my mind. This comes exactly from a tribe, from a garment, from a powwow. It removed any pretence about what it was. But it opened up a lot of freedom for me so that people could comprehend what I was saying. Previously, I felt that while there were many people who loved what I was doing as a painter, they couldn't care less about the content of the work. For me, the satisfaction is that the content has an impact. Without that, I'm not interested.

• A Kind of Confession is at the SCAD Art Museum in Savannah, Georgia, until 23 October 2016.



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This exhibition of the art of the Plains Indians reminds us about the native US population's story of struggle and survival, as European conquerors took over their ancestral lands

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In 2005, two events coincided to provide us with the best opportunity to assess Walter Sickert's status since his death, at the age of 82, in 1942. The publication of Wendy Baron's superb biography by Manchan Magan, 3 and the second, the remarkable exhibition 'Degas, Sickert and Toulouse-Lautrec: London and Paris 1870-1910', currently at Tate Britain until 15 January 2006.

Changing Hands and Building Bridges: Tradition and Innovation in Native American Art

Changing Hands: Art Without Reservation 2 - Contemporary Native North American Art from the West, Northwest and Pacific' opened in September 2005 at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City. The exhibit is part of a series that showcases Native American artists whose work simultaneously reflects and transcends cultural identity, and places the contemporary dialogue in cultural and historical perspective. While 'Art Without Reservation 1' featured Native American artists living and working in the Southwest, the current exhibition features three regional groups: plateau, plateau and pacific north west, including Alaska and Hawaii.

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