



Jeffrey Gibson, installation view of "Jeffrey Gibson: This Is the Day," 2018. Photo: John Bentham, Courtesy the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY

Jeffrey Gibson

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Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College

Part pop/couture fashion, part field of crucifixes, Jeffrey Gibson's colorful, lavishly embellished, larger-than-life garments elicit an involuntary gasp. Suspended from the ceiling, with slender tipi poles inserted through their outstretched sleeves, the gowns freely interpret Native American ceremonial garb, but they also bear a striking resemblance to kimonos, Chinese imperial robes, papal robes, even Mormon dress, and other empowered and coded apparel. A magnificent prototype for these works dominates Gibson's *LIKE A HAMMER*, a mixed-media installation that also includes seven drawings, a video, and a rawhide drum; originally commissioned for the 2016 SITE Santa Fe Biennial, this work, also included here, emphasizes the forceful allusion to sacrifice.

A series of helmets—arguably even more extravagantly decked out—similarly conjure references across cultures and chronologies, threading together the politics, economics, and socio-religious rituals of dress, adornment, pattern, and decoration. They, and the other works in “This Is the Day” (from a Biblical psalm, hymn, and synth-pop song), activate and amplify its jurisdiction and readings, highlighting the imaginative force of Gibson’s deftly original interweaving of contemporary discourse with his Choctaw and Cherokee heritage.

The garments and helmets all have provocative titles such as *WITHOUT YOU I’M NOTHING*, *Tribes File Suit to Protect Bears Ears* (a monochromatic, magisterial work), and *A Wag, A Wit, A Witness* (a delicate, daintily colored chiffon and organza dress stitched with Seminole patchwork, a Japanese *obi*, beads, and acrylic paint). Gibson’s favorite ornamental flourishes, which appear throughout these works, include metal grommets and studs, ribbons, extra-long fringes, crystals, beads, tin jingles (and more tin jingles), and little reflective mirrors. The helmets—some weighing 50 pounds—are heaped with pointedly chosen tchotchkes from multiple cultures and time periods, bringing to mind Japanese or Mycenaean warrior helmets, papal crowns, and Native American headdresses. *Love* and *Death* cover the two most encompassing thematic bases. *Death’s* display of diminutive skulls recalls the late fashion designer Alexander McQueen, who used them as a personal attribute. An amethyst geode crowns *Love. Clown*, perhaps the most elaborate of the helmets, alludes to the ironic duality of the clown’s role as both buffoon and privileged observer, an outsider who functions as a witness and is permitted to tell the truth.

These works are the newest and perhaps most dazzling addition to a multidisciplinary practice characterized by dazzle. Gibson, to his credit, is courageous enough to reject aversion to the pursuit of beauty and to embrace speculation about subjects that range from the historical to the topical (from the 19th-century Ghost Dance movement to the Dakota Pipeline), from sexuality, race, and gender to power structures and community networks—all stirred into an even more intoxicating brew by a potent dose of pop/punk, as well as humor and irony. He incorporates various texts, including song lyrics, short admonitions, and adages, into much of his work, which is dense with interpretative implications. As Gibson says, “What connects every material and format I have chosen to use is their history.”

“This Is the Day” is one of his best shows to date. Curated by the Wellin Museum’s director, Tracy L. Adler, it offers a comprehensive survey of Gibson’s production from 2014 to the present. More than 50 well-chosen works include a number of remarkably beautiful geometric paintings, two of his signature embellished punching bags, beaded panels, elaborate weavings, and expressive, hand-size ceramics inspired by head pots from the Mississippian culture. A Wellin-commissioned film, *I Was Here*, featuring Macy, a transgender woman and member of the Choctaw Nation who works at a casino, uses a low-key documentary style to shift seamlessly from her daily routine into a spiritual and metaphysical realm that culminates in a purifying rite symbolizing rebirth and transformation.

“This Is the Day” is reversible as an experience—both exuberant and sobering, dark and festive. How could it not be, given the wretched treatment of Native Americans and immigrant peoples in what claims to be the most democratic country on earth? And the past is only made worse by an unsettling, dismaying present. Gibson takes fierce pride in cultural heritage, calling for recognition this day and in the days that follow. He, and perhaps all artists, believe that art can change society; let’s hope they’re right.

“This Is the Day” is on view at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, July 14 through September 29, 2019. Jeffrey Gibson is also a featured artist at the 2019 Whitney Biennial, which runs from May 17 through September 22, 2019.