

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Upstart Diary
Jeffrey Gibson mixes it up
Daniel Fuller
September 2021

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25–28 Old Burlington Street London W1S 3AN
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their drums, quilts, beadwork, engravings and personal accounts were often left out of "Fine Arts" discussions and were instead seen as anthropological artifacts from our deepest history. Now and forever, those artists from 2012 and the dancers wearing the garments in 2020, are all members of Gibson's extended community.

Full circle, Jeffrey Gibson is an artist based in upstate, NY, who fuses influences from pop music, fashion, literature, material culture, history and his own heritage of being a member of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, and of Cherokee descent. His work is frequently about reevaluating modernist artistic strategies, finding the balance between deeply rooted worlds: art and craft and commercial commodities, art and anthropological artifact, visible and invisible, kitsch and pop, male and female, simultaneously considering traditional techniques and references to form works today that confront the absences of those left behind—all so we can get to the innovations and new iterations of those traditions for tomorrow.

For The Hudson Eye, 2021, a public exhibition at various sites around Hudson, NY, Gibson will be waving a new flag, high above the town. The wide-open views of the Hudson River from the Promenade Hill Park embody all the sublime beauty, all the romanticism, of a Thomas Cole painting. Throughout the fall of 2021, the park's flagpole will host Gibson's creation: vibrant colors, geometric patterning, and an illusionary, pulsating text that reads, The Spirits Are Laughing. Flags are about claiming what's ours, Gibson says the spirits are laughing because "We think we're important. We're continuing to place ourselves, humans, at the center, as if we are what matters in this, whether it's our comfort or sustainability. I've thought the planet will be much better without us. It's like, if we weren't here, the planet would be fine. It will take care of itself." The spirits are laughing, indeed. The spirits are crying.

Last summer, many artwork conversations around Black Lives Matter shifted to make room for Native and Indigenous artists like Wendy Red Star, Sky Hopinka, Raven Chacon, Postcommodity, Rose B. Simpson, Ishi Glinisky, New Red Order, and others, who are joining Gibson as big artwork stars. But that list is so small and severely incomplete. It's hard enough to make it to the table as an artist, to be seen, and the artwork, like the larger one, is full of confusion and inequity. My words do not fit my admiration for Gibson's new book project, which is entirely self-initiated and self-published. As he phrased it, "Ultimately, it's on us to make sure that we remain present. I don't think there's any historical proof that, if we leave it up to other people, we will continue to be included. So, we're asking everybody within these smaller communities to name those we should be looking for: How do we expand this list?" ■

*Gibson's To Feel Myself Beloved On The Earth is on view Sept. 11, '21 – Jan. 2, '22, at Artoni.org. Daniel Fuller is a curator and writer based in Atlanta, Georgia. @fuller315
Carlton Davis is a regular contributor to UD and is represented by CLM-Agency.com @carltond*

It must be exhausting to have to continually reintroduce yourself, to explain who you are, your history, where you come from, your desire to be free and feel safe. I keep thinking of this desire, this need to kick and scream, to stop and breathe, as I watch a loop of Jeffrey Gibson's video *To Feel Myself Beloved on the Earth*, 2020. There is visceral energy as six performers, some trained and others not, move to a procession of throbbing percussions. The first scene shows a drummer dragging his fingers across the head of a drum, pulling out a tormented droning sound. The utilitarian drum is a deer hide stretched out over a bucket and painted with a bright eight-pointed star pattern containing a blocky-lettered proclamation: Time for Change.

Shot during last summer's racial civil unrest, the film was mainly taken at the rural sculpture sanctuary Art Omi, where it will be exhibited in fall 2021. The woods, the water, the downed trees and the tall grass feel as though they are worlds away, yet you can still hear the rumbles from the drums and the megaphone mumbles from the protests. The dancers are cloaked in garments constructed of offcut fragments of Gibson's old text pieces. Putting on these heavy pieces is transformative, but it's also a double-edged sword. The boldness of the text makes their attire feel almost armor-like, protecting them yet also weighing them down, restricting the dancers' total freedom of movement: their second skin as another constraint. The end credits reveal that additional audio was recorded at the Black Trans Lives March, NYC, in September 2020. There is something compelling about the movement in Gibson's film in that, in each performance, the dancer takes a dramatic pause as their arms and hands briefly frame their face. The sentiment is palpable: it is a silent shout imploring that we stop and acknowledge the violence inflicted on trans and non-binary people.

The exhibition will also feature two large-scale quilt works. Historically, quilts were conceived out of necessity. Quilts provide warmth, community gathering and family stories added to and passed down through generations. Both of Gibson's grandmothers were quilters. He has sewn some form of textile since his teenage years, yet he never found fabric that was personal to him. But on seeing the seminal exhibition *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, in 2002, he took notice that they were cutting up old clothing and other readily available fabrics. As part of a 2018 commission by the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, he wrote 50 texts that were printed onto fabric and then made into garments. Making the most of the offcuts and fabric scraps from that production, each revealing past moments from his practice, he thought, "Now I have a fabric that is truly mine." Born anew as quilts, these stitched assemblages represent fifteen years of his own personal iconography. They rejoice in their timelessness and represent the power of the community of collaborators that gave them life.

These works exemplify much of Gibson's practice, where he so often acts as a platform, a covey, a loudspeaker for many other voices. For one of his first NYC solo exhibitions at PARTICIPANT INC., in 2012, he commissioned several traditional Indigenous artists to incorporate their work into his own sculpture and collage. Despite the craftsmanship,



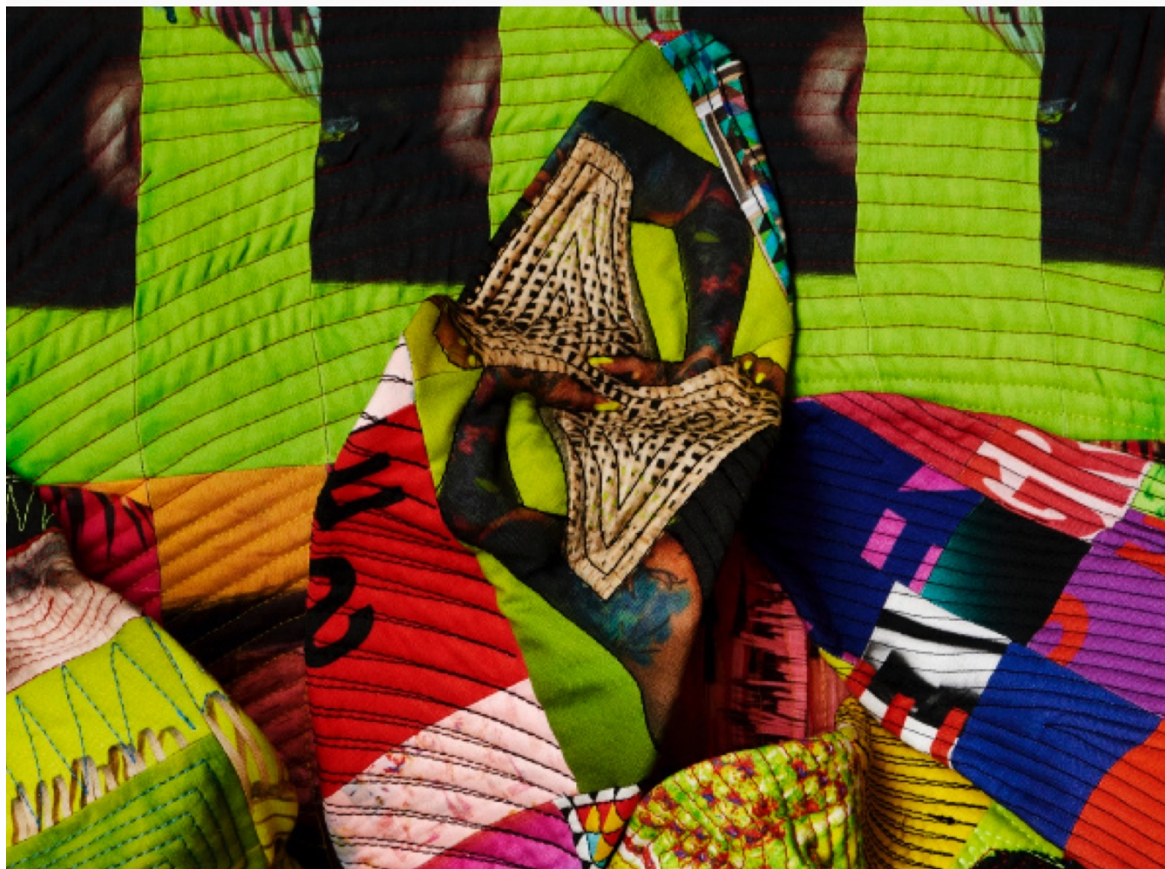
Gibson wrapped up in his love is Deep, 2021.

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Opposite Page: Detail of quilted, artist-designed fabric, a work in progress by Jeffrey Gibson. **This page:** Sculpture in progress. Acrylic, felt, steel armature, artificial sinew, glass beads and nylon fringe.



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