

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Artforum
Jeffrey Gibson – The Newberry
Lori Waxman
November 2021

ARTFORUM

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Jeffrey Gibson's "Sweet Bitter Love" no doubt unsettled some viewers' preconceived notions about Native Americans. The show was part of "Toward Common Cause: Art, Social Change, and the MacArthur Fellows Program at 40," a multivenue citywide celebration of the anniversary of the "genius grant," which Gibson won in 2019 (the MacArthur Foundation is headquartered in Chicago). Visitors found a dozen small oil canvases from the Newberry Library's permanent collection, skill-fully painted between 1897 and 1901 by Elbridge Ayer Burbank, that portray indigenous Americans looking exactly as they are supposed to, according to national mythology: stoic, noble, grim, wrapped in blankets and other traditional garb, and adorned with feathers.

A series of illustrated accession cards borrowed from the department of ethnology at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History was arranged in a pair of vitrines. The cards listed the provenance of a can of Diet Pepsi, a package of Whoppers, a disposable diaper, a bar of Ivory soap, a tin of Copenhagen snuff, and other goods belonging to the Yupik people of Nelson Island, Alaska, who used them as gifts at a seal party. Since entering the museum's collection in 1990, these objects had never previously been put on view. Everything else in this exhibition similarly went against the grain of stereotype.

Gibson, who is a member of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and of Cherokee descent, showed these borrowed archival items along-side his own work in order to upend the authority long presumed by white institutions and white artists toward marginalized groups. What to do with the seal party sundries too confusingly common and contemporary to merit being exhibited at the Field Museum? Gibson covered an entire wall of the gallery with his Acc. 3784, 2021, a blazing neon wallpaper patterned with careful pencil drawings of those consumerist artifacts—copied from the reverse side of the borrowed accession cards—in a bold design too loud and proud to ignore. And how was one to handle those historicising, simplistic Burbank portraits? Gibson hung them in a row atop the wallpaper, the solemn renderings of Geronimo, Chief Pretty Eagle, and Burbank's other subjects clashing with the background's pulsing life force. The juxtaposition offered a confrontation but also a complication: The yellow of Chief Red Cloud's blanket edge gave the wallpaper background its colour; the blue of Chief Joseph's sleeve decoration matched its bars of soap.



Image: Jeffrey Gibson, Christian Naiche, 2021, ink-jet print, acrylic, vintage beaded picture frame, vintage pin, vintage beaded barrette, vintage beaded belt buckle, vintage beaded whimsy, glass beads, and nylon thread on paper, 64 × 48".

A half dozen large paintings on paper by Gibson completed the show. These were a whirlwind array of colours, geometric patterns, paint treatments, collage, found objects, and beading. All incorporated ink-jet reproductions—enlarged, multiplied, cut up—of an individual Burbank portrait, including three that, tellingly, were really not in good enough condition to be put on display. Some juxtapositions felt uncanny: Would Pahl-lee, a young Hopi woman who sat for Burbank in 1898, have liked the beaded floral purse Gibson affixed near the top of her image? What would Christian Naiche, a leader of the Chiricahua and son of the warrior Cochise, who spent twenty-seven years as a prisoner of the US government, think of the phrase i'm entitled blazoned on a vintage button pinned to the centre of a work bearing five sets of his eyes? Was the red splattered around a picture of Chief Black Coyote war paint or blood (and if the latter, whose)? Regardless of whatever else was going on in each of Gibson's compositions—and they were a dizzying, allover, idiosyncratic lot—each featured a hand-beaded frame surrounding the appropriated imagery, ensuring that the sitters finally got the care they are due.

Gibson's paintings hung inside a wall-length vitrine directly oppo-site the original portraits. The effect was less face-off than truth telling, as if Gibson were holding up six fantastical mirrors to Burbank, the Newberry, the Field, and every other US institution that has perpetuated essentialist notions about Native Americans. In

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between them, everything got layered in the glass's reflection: the wallpaper, the Burbanks, the Gibsons, and you. There was no way to look without being implicated.