

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

Damn Magazine  
Time Won't Give Me Time  
Marcus Civin  
November 2021

## DAMN°

### Time Won't Give Me Time



Image: Jeffrey Gibson's Studio, photo Brian Bralow

In a time that will be remembered as one of intense divisions and animosity, artist Jeffrey Gibson is activating history, addressing audiences in accessible language, and thinking deeply about empathy and different kinds of time. This summer, Marcus civic visited Gibson's bustling studio, a former rural schoolhouse near Hudson, New York. All around were artworks coming to life, from costumes, quilts, and life-size sculptures to grids of paintings.



Image: Jeffrey Gibson's Studio, photo Brian Bralow.

Marcus Civin: Jeffrey, you're a member of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. Would you mind telling me about the Mississippian culture?

Jeffrey Gibson: The Mississippian culture is the pre-Columbian civilization that existed in the area of the American South, where the Choctaws emerged. The Mississippian culture was a fully realized civilization. There were aqueducts. There was a government. There were cities. There are records of what the culture was like. I think archaeologists agree that the Mississippian culture was a fully realized civilization, but it hasn't been included in history books. People see it as controversial even to acknowledge it. Really acknowledging this civilization would permanently change the narrative that someone discovered America.

MC: One of the things that I think is going on today is that people are trying to reckon with history and its exclusions. What do you think is important that we reckon with?

JG: Go back to the Dawes Act of 1887. Up to the early 1900s, the U.S. government issued rolls. If you were on the rolls determining tribal citizenship in the eyes of the U.S. government, you were allotted land. My great-grandfather's name was Willie Guess. He was on the rolls in Oklahoma at ten years old, and he was given forty acres. It was 1904. When he was young, he was working on putting train lines through what is now Oklahoma. The way that the government established the West was to get the Indians to give up their land, denying their collective relationship to the land. The government made the Indians individual landowners, bought them out, encouraged white settlement, and ran train lines all the way through, ultimately connecting the coasts. Some people received more than forty acres, but my grandfather was very young, so he received forty acres.

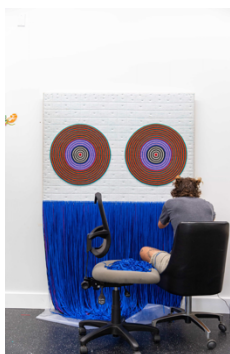


Image: Jeffrey Gibson's Studio, photo Brian Bralow. Artworks: Sentinel (2020)

MC: It sounds like this was a calculated, unscrupulous colonial strategy. I suppose the U.S. government wanted to break up tribal lands and Indigenous ways of being. I guess they decided they could give land that wasn't theirs to your great-grandfather, and they gave him land thinking that he would sell it?

JG: Yes, but we still have it in our family. He didn't sell.

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MC: Incredible. I wonder, do you ever think about time travel? I think about: could we go back to 1887 somehow, stop time, and intervene in that history? If you could go to any time, future or past, where would you go?

JG: I might want to go to the future. None of the options are great, to be honest. If I went to the future, I would be looking for change, and who knows, I could be horribly disappointed. Then, if I went into the past, I think it might be just awful, especially being gay and not being able to have my family. If I was going to go to the past, I think I would want to go back five hundred years. Maybe for like an hour. Could I just go back for an hour?

One thing I think about a lot is what it would be like to wake up in a different person's life, to have a different present tense. I used to want to wake up as Michael Jackson. Did he brush his teeth like everyone else? Did he get himself a glass of water? How did that work? Lately, I imagine what it would be like to wake up as a conservative Republican.

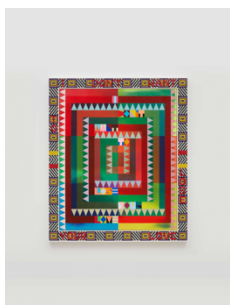


Image: Jeffrey Gibson, I Don't Want To Lose Your Love (2021). Photo Sillema Jenkins & Co. Courtesy of Jeffrey Gibson Studio

MC: You would wake up as a Trump supporter storming the U.S. Capitol Building?

JG: Could you imagine? To feel that kind of entitlement! If anything, these past five years have made me realize civility is a choice. It's a choice I have made. If people disagree with me in any way, I believe that the right thing is to give them space to express themselves and disagree with me. Can you imagine waking up as Trump? In my mind, from where I'm sitting now, I think I would feel tremendous anxiety, but maybe he doesn't.

I maintain friendships and relationships with people across the spectrum of activism, from radical activists to people who are working within institutions and believe in making change from the inside out. If I followed some of the forms of radical activism, I would tell you to get out of here because this isn't your land, and you have no right to buy it; you have no right to own it; you have no right to mark it. But, you know what's really radical is going through that and coming back around and finding a way to continue to want to find empathy for everybody and try to create shared social spaces. Not as if I didn't come through the anger part, but I hope that everybody can see themselves as working together, that we're all working on ways to bring about change in our circumstances.

I'm not that excited about everything that's happening now. American culture seems to thrive by responding to sensationalized trauma. Larger systemic problems of equity tend only to be addressed on a national level when things come to a head and people begin to fear for their own safety. In terms of indigenous issues, I feel that we must create systems and communities that support and manage our own well-being rather than depending heavily on resources managed by individuals who are not personally familiar with these communities and their specific needs.

In my studio, I am interested in supporting a diverse team. Initially, I don't think I thought about it that much, and then I realized one day that most of the staff identify as queer.



Image: Jeffrey Gibson, I Can't Take My Eyes Off You (2015). Photo Peter Mauney. Courtesy of Jeffrey Gibson Studio

MC: I think your work and the way you create builds shared social space. You are seriously invested in materials and ideas, in queer identity, and Indigenous issues. And, your work is a lot of fun. How do you make sure to keep it accessible?

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JG: I use pop lyrics because they're already a combination of words that people have gravitated to and held on to. I'm using a language that people already understand and feel confident with. I made a large figure that has a text across the shoulders that says, 'Can't Take My Eyes Off of You,' which is the title of a Frankie Valli song. The Crewe Foundation acquired a different figure and promised it to the Portland Museum of Art in Maine. Dan and Bob Crewe ran a record company. Dan has a house in Maine though Bob passed away. I did a slide lecture at the museum, where I included an image including the figure with the text 'Can't Take My Eyes of You.' Dan came up to me afterward and told me he wanted to tell me something about the song, but first, he asked me, "What do those words mean to you?"

I said, to me, they were about ancestors always watching over me. He said, "I don't know if you know this, but my brother wrote that song." I thought he was going to say, "You owe us money," or something like that, but he said his brother was closeted for much of his life. They had so much money, they had a six-story townhouse in Manhattan. At the top of the townhouse, there was a beautiful bedroom with a huge window overlooking Central Park, and all this sunlight would flood in, in the morning. Bob had a boyfriend who was this young, beautiful man. Bob came in one morning, and his boyfriend was lying naked with his butt up in the air and the sun shining across his butt. He thought, "You're just too good to be true, can't take my eyes off of you." Then he sat down and wrote the song. It's a queer song. Isn't that wild?

MC: It is! A single song exists across time. There is the time the songwriter wrote it. There is the time you first hear it, or listen to it again, or hear it covered, or sampled. In a similar way, in your work, I can feel the contemporary moment, but also the complexities of history and hopes for the future. And you work with a team of about twelve, in part because beading and sewing take so much time and the scale of your work demands time. What does time mean to you?



Image: Jeffrey Gibson's Studio, photo Brian Bralow.

JG: Time has become a really abstract concept to me. There is the way of marking and calculating time that I have learned since I was a child, and time as I have been taught with regards to history, but as I get older, I feel like I experience infinite and different kinds of time. I'm most interested in how they cross over each other. Histories and historical moments linger. They are never truly over; their residue is evident in the present. We can all create inflection points in how time is unfolding and generate new trajectories and possibilities for how the future will happen. It's fascinating. People are vehicles for time. We carry our ancestors with us; their experiences reside in our DNA. They are not relegated solely to the past. In my work, I try to force these histories to crossover and merge into new forms.

The time and labor involved in my work are a huge benefit. Time allows for process and the ability to make changes while something is becoming. Nothing happens abruptly, and my decisions can remain completely intentional. All of the works come to fruition in this way, and I do consider my studio team as bringing their own energies into the making. To me, it is important who they are and that they value and believe in the labor required and the slowness that this process requires.

MC: I want to ask you about your incredible video 'One Becomes the Other' (2014–2018) filmed in the Native American archives and object storage at the Denver Art Museum. At the end of the video, we hear a rendition of the song 'Time' (Clock of the Heart), the 1982 hit by the British New Wave band Culture Club, here sung by Lee Plenty Wolf while watching Virginia Allrunner, a Cheyenne elder, dancing slowly through the collections. The singer invokes the continuity and cruelty of time. The past is still here with us in the present, but time is also unforgiving. It wants to move quickly. It can hold us together, help us understand how we are connected in certain moments and across time, but ultimately it is a construction. One time becomes another time. The song lyrics go, "Time is precious, this is known/ Time has nothing to show/ Because time won't give me time/ And time makes lovers feel like they have something real/ You and me know, we ain't got nothing but time." How did this beautiful poetic passage in your video come about?

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JG: The song in the video is the lead singer of Plenty Wolf Singers practicing. Luckily we were recording. In the context of pow wow, there are songs called forty-nine songs. They can be playful, and this is where singers can bring in lyrics from pop songs and personal lyrics. The songs are often about relationships. I asked a drum group to craft a version of 'Time' (Clock of the Heart) as a soundtrack to this video. I felt like the words expressed the right sentiment. The Museum connected me with the Plenty Wolf Singers. I proposed it to them, and they were immediately on board. The entire drum group is featured in the video. In making 'One Becomes the Other', I realized that my concept of video is heavily influenced by watching music videos growing up. Music and sound continue to play a big role in the nonlinear narratives of the videos I make. I like when I am able to shift the emotive quality and content of pop lyrics. In 'One Becomes the Other', I think those words draw out both the hopeful and melancholic circumstances of Indigenous people and our relationships to institutions.