

MARC STRAUS

HYPERALLERGIC

Native American Iconography Meets Modernist Aesthetic and Material
by Joan Waltemath on December 11, 2012



Installation view of Jeffrey Gibson at Marc Straus (Photo courtesy Marc Straus)

My first impression coming into Jeffrey Gibson's solo exhibition at Marc Straus in the Lower East Side was one of a refined sensual pleasure with a complex edge. Vibrant color painted in geometric shapes on animal hide stretched over trapezoidal forms and ironing boards is the initial entree to an imminent encounter with the unanticipated.

The evening before Gibson's show opened, I'd been at lighting designer Linnaea Tillet's lecture at the Museum of the City of New York and was still thinking about how countenance is affected by the quality of light falling on a well-articulated surface. I wondered at the kind of lighting we have embraced in the name of efficiency, and how it has begun to effect the way we move and think and breathe. A moment in Gibson's exhibition began to rescind my generalized lament. His resistance is palpable in his aesthetic sensibility.



Jeffrey Gibson, "Constellation No. 8" (Photo by author for Hyperallergic)

The generous yet restrained surfaces of his reflective acrylic paintings are framed with a glimpse into the deep and sonorous smooth matte of an animal hide. The pairing appears so perfectly attenuated that it is impossible to separate them, therefore impossible to bring a politically correct fur coat-animal cruelty discourse to them. In the hands of this artist another, deeper character emerges, something beyond the reach of contemporary issues.

Yet Gibson's work is also firmly tied to cultural politics. As a member of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and half Cherokee, the artist draws on his heritage of Native American iconography for his work, which also takes equally from the history of modernism.

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On the ground floor gallery, a series of ironing boards stretched over with deer hides runs along one wall. The pieces feel like they might be shields, yet the combination of referent and form spin an uncanny web around their interpretation and land us in the lap of the female form — a virtual terra incognita.



Installation view of Jeffrey Gibson at Marc Straus (Photo by author for Hyperallergic)

The ironing boards' upright stance sets up a bodily relationship as one approaches, the interior play of triangles runs both alongside and beyond cubism in search of a dimensional construct to challenge their relative flatness as objects. Divided into three bands, their depths open up slowly in relationship to the time it takes to register their evolving complexity. They point and dance all over the place, exciting just long enough for the subtext to emerge and ground Gibson's endeavor in seriousness.

Two decorated punching bags of the kind used for training boxers, hang from the ceiling in the main room of the gallery. Their evocations stem from the dark side of the American heartland. Perhaps they work best in the gallery context as an expression of cultural memory, an attitude that permeates the exhibition as a whole. Their tin jingles and beadwork bring to mind Gibson's Native American ancestry, while the symbolism of the Everlast bag conjures images of power, perhaps of America's colonial settlers decimating the land's original occupants.



Jeffrey Gibson, "Rawhide Painting 6" (Photo by author for Hyperallergic)

On the opposite wall a series of small and delicate trapezoidal paintings on goat hide bend and torque within their odd shaped frames. Closer in one sees sparkles and how the hides are sometimes nailed together. The variety in Gibson's surface, its re-workings and localized painterly effects are enriching, but it's really through color that he makes himself known. Upbeat and vibrant, the palette ranges around the wheel.

Upstairs, a group of silk-screened paintings on deer hide hone in on Gibson's eye for color. Through a three- or four-color process, the variety of visual relationships expands exponentially. Simple combinations of overlaid triangles both multiply and diminish the original forms — the results are unexpected in their depth, variation, and luminosity.

Gibson articulates truth through his materials, which, as Wittgenstein's dictum states, shows what cannot be said. In Gibson's case, his message is a deep emotional truth, born of history and memory, made present through the motion of his own hands.

Jeffrey Gibson's work is on view at Marc Straus Gallery (299 Grand Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through December 23.