

MARC STRAUS

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Jeffrey Gibson

By Claire Barliant

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Remember cultural hybridity? From the late '80s to the mid-'90s, it was all the rage. Work by artists such as Edgar Heap of Birds, Jimmie Durham and David Hammons (categorized as "multicultural") combined ethnic motifs with a contemporary visual vocabulary. Jeffrey Gibson, who is half Cherokee and a member of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, reached back to this era and beyond with a strong new body of work in this two-gallery show.

Gibson's departure point is 1941, when the Museum of Modern Art in New York mounted "Indian Art of the United States"-a show whose progressive curatorial mission was to include Native American art within an expanded definition of modernism. Enthusiasm for this agenda subsequently waned; postwar Native American art continued to evolve on a separate and marginalized track, isolated from the dominant art historical discourse. Imagining what might have been had it continued to be absorbed by mainstream culture, Gibson collaborated with Native American artists specializing in traditional art forms such as beadwork, drum-making and the like. The result was a group of intriguing sculptures that often refer to the body with understated wit.

One standout piece at Participant consisted of a large forked tree branch, which was propped upright on the floor, and a Cherokee Booger mask (a type of grotesque mask made to represent an enemy) with a phallic nose. The upper section of the branch, sheathed in animal hide as if in a condom, seemed to lunge at the mask, which was mounted on the wall atop a vertical strip of black-and-white photos of the mask. The interaction between the two parts was dynamic and vaguely sinister.

The exhibition at American Contemporary was a collection of more formal pieces—a series of deer-hide-covered cinder blocks, their sides painted with rectangles of flat color, that referenced Mark Rothko and Donald Judd; a wool blanket (laid on a low platform on the floor) embellished with a vibrant, Kandinsky-like abstraction. Subtly erotic touches appeared throughout. In *Hide 2 (Micaceous and Pink)*, 2012, Gibson took one of his earlier abstract paintings and wrapped it in a goat hide, which he covered with a dark glittery finish (possibly alluding to Tewa pottery) and stitched up with sinew. An oval cutout in the hide reveals a bit of the pink paint underneath, as if to expose unconscious impulses bound by the constrictions of social identity.

Both shows address a difficult conundrum for Native Americans—wishing to be integrated within the national dialogue, both culturally and politically, while simultaneously desiring greater autonomy. How to reconcile these contradictory goals? The answer to this question is not easy, and as Gibson's work illustrates, demands a hard look at history—not just the 1980s and '90s, or the 1940s, but the past three centuries, during which Native Americans were sundered from their homeland and deprived of their voice.



Jeffrey Gibson: *Booger 1*, 2012. Booger mask by Roger Cain, Black Locust tree, goat hide, digital C-prints and mixed mediums; at Participant.