



have histories attached to them. I hope that when people view my work, they begin to understand how these histories overlap and have led us collectively to the present. I believe we all share more in common than our differences.

**Your recent work included in the solo show at Marc Straus involves the decoration of Everlast punching bags. What initially drew you to these hanging objects? Was there a specific moment when you knew what you would use them for?**

The first adorned punching bag was made in 2011 and took about a year to complete because I was travelling and making my decisions very carefully. I was dealing with some personal issues and questioning the future of my career as an artist. This time of personal introspection led me to working with a physical trainer who introduced boxing as a way to release energy and process emotions. I immediately fell in love with the process of having my wrists wrapped and gloves put on, then punching this “inanimate” stuffed bag. Over a few months the bag became a metaphor for any challenge I wanted to deal with. I also liked the way it hung from the ceiling and dangled like a very heavy ornament. The bag made me think of a few things including Louise Bourgeois’ figures made from fabric and these small objects called “whimsies” made by the Iroquois in the Niagara Falls area at the turn of the century. The figures made immediate sense because the punching bags can easily take on a figural presence and the whimsies made sense to me because they are these densely beaded objects that incorporated both traditional raised beadwork and an attempt to appeal to Victorian tastes of the time. The result was a newly created aesthetic and objects that fell somewhere in between culturally different aesthetics and popular tastes. One day it occurred to me to take on the metaphorical challenge that the punching bags had come to represent using more traditionally Native American materials and aesthetics and transforming the punching bag into a valuable object through it’s adornment.



The Everlast punching bags are complex and wrestle with a multitude of identity cross-sections. It's been said that the "beads, jingles and metal studs," allude to the Native American practice of adorning souvenirs for non-indigenous peoples. Can you speak to this?

The use of beads, jingles and metal studs began with me thinking about the Iroquois beaded whimsies, but eventually led to me looking at ways that personal adornment is represented in contemporary Native American pow wow culture. At pow wows, dancers wear outfits that reflect contemporary aesthetics combined with traditional aesthetics. I am really fascinated how, in this context, the dancer can remain an integral part of a collective culture while still excelling as an individual. This can be seen in the amount of care, time and beauty reflected in each dancer's outfit. I am also drawn to these materials because they acknowledge the large global world. Historically the beads often come from Italy, Czech Republic or Poland, and contemporary beads can also come from India, China and Japan. The jingles originated as the lids of tobacco and snuff tins, turned and used to adorn dresses, but now they are commercially made in places such as Taiwan. The metal studs also have trade references and originally may have come from the Spanish but also have modern references to punk and DIY culture. It's a continual mash-up.

Were you exposed to Native American oral storytelling as a child? Do you have a favorite allegory you can share?

I remember stories that my uncles would tell me about their childhood, or hearing them make jokes amongst each other. For me, this is storytelling. One of my favorite stories was told to me by my uncle Tim, about him playing with old toy cars in the driveway of the house where he and my mother grew up. He would spend part of the evening collecting fireflies and put them into a jar, then get out his cars and squish the fireflies

onto the car where the headlights would be, to see them glow for a second. I'm not sure why that sticks with me and it is not really a complete story. It conjures an image in my head that it really representative of the larger story of my mother's family.



**You often use treated animal hide as canvas. What physical qualities draw you to this material?**

I originally began painting on rawhide while preparing for an exhibition in 2012. I had met a young woman in Winnipeg, Canada, named Jesse McMann Sparvier, who made a series of drums for me to paint on. When they arrived and were sitting in the studio, they would make sounds due to the shifting of the hide on the frames. I called Jesse and she told me that they are not like canvas and have to be cared for, they have to be played, kept out of the sunlight and given some moisture. I like the idea of having to care for something and that each hide is unique unto itself. There are marks in the hide from the life of the animal but also from the processing of the hide. And then when I painted on it, I was hooked. It is the most beautiful surface to paint on. It is smooth and completely unlike mass produced canvas that is the same ubiquitous material used by artists around the world.

**Many people associate geometric abstraction to Malevich or Mondrian, but it also has its roots in Native American art. Can you talk about this?**

I would definitely count Malevich and Mondrian, as influences in my painting practice, amongst many other Western and European painters working with geometric abstraction. I began comparing the work of these painters with work of American modernists and the work geometric abstraction found painted on historic Native American objects. I have long been aware of the paintings found on parfleche bags used by tribes of the plains region, but really began to research them about three years ago, and began to view them as

paintings onto themselves. Parfleche bags are made from the hide of an animal. They would have been used by nomadic tribes to store things and to move their belongings from one location to the next. The painted designs on the exterior were done by women and were made for specific individuals. The designs and color choices have meaning and can represent the cultural identity of the owner.

**Is there a research aspect to your practice? How does a work or project begin?**

There is. It can be hard to carve out the time for research beyond reading and looking at images in books, but I feel it is so important to involve people and to learn from them. I will travel and organize workshops as part of my research. I travelled to meet with many more traditional Indigenous artists in 2011, organized a class on sustainability in New Mexico in 2010, and just recently returned from The Denver March Pow Wow, where I met with some pow wow dancers and drum groups for an upcoming video project, and worked with students at Arizona State University making outfits and choreographing basic movements. It is important to be out in the world, to talk to people and allow other perspectives to influence the work.

I try to begin each new body of work with a month of just experimentation, with no end product in mind. This is crucial and allows for the processing of previous bodies of work but also opens up new directions for current and upcoming projects.



**You were recently asked to guide visitors in an “Artists on Artworks” tour through the exhibition *The American West in Bronze 1850—1925* that is currently on display at the Metropolitan Museum. What were some interesting things you learned through close proximity with this selection of works?**

It was really interesting to spend time with the sculptures in this exhibition. It forced me to form an opinion about them and what they represent. First of all, the sculptures are formally really fantastic and create such amazing movement and engagement with the space around them. I was impressed with how the artists really considered the visual interest of all sides of the sculptures. Then of course I had to confront that these sculptures were made at a time when the American Indian was viewed as having become or was becoming a thing of the past, often times being depicted as “uncivilized”, and as tribal cultures were often viewed as obstacles to the expansion of the United States. These sculptures were made during a traumatic time for all Indigenous people and we are all still recovering from the traumas inflicted during this period in history. The sculptures, especially those that use representations of American Indians, attempt to honor and respect Native people but the actuality of history is very dark and emotionally difficult for many Indigenous people. Spending time with the works in this exhibition made me realize the early roots of many challenges that Indigenous people face today.

**What are you currently working on?**

The past two years have been incredibly busy and now I feel like I need to replenish my mind and really

delve into some projects working with other people. In the studio, I am continuing to develop new sculptures and paintings that incorporate references to different aesthetic movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I am really into the linear sculptures of David Smith, petroglyphs, the graphic works of Sister Corita Kent, 80's and 90's rave culture, house music and contemporary pow wows. These will influence the work in the studio, but I am also in the beginning stages of developing a major video project hosted by The Denver Art Museum collaborating with local dancers and drum groups. I have also completed a couple of performances during the past year and will continue to develop the performance ideas to involve more people, sound and music. I'm having a blast and am enjoying being able to realize things that I have imagined for most of my life. It's exciting.

Learn more about Jeffrey Gibson below.

<http://www.jeffreygibson.net/>

<http://www.jeffgibsonstudio.com/>

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