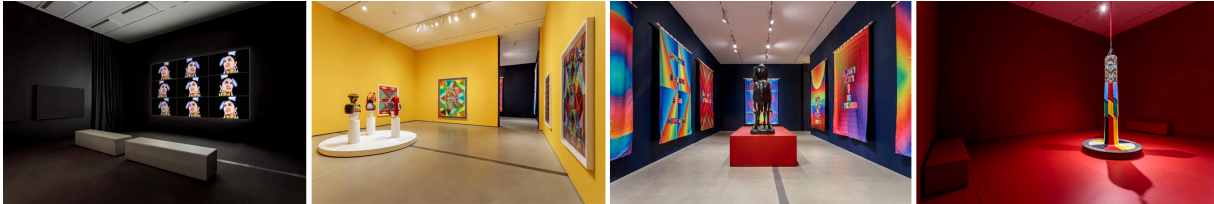


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Jeffrey Gibson, *The Space In Which To Place Me*
Celebrating and Acknowledging His Ancestors and Predecessors
The Broad
May 10 – September 28, 2025

by Jody Zellen



Jeffrey Gibson was selected to represent the United States in the 2024 Venice Biennale. He was the first Native American artist to receive this tremendous honor. His ambitious exhibition, *The Space In Which To Place Me* was on view from April 20 – November 24, 2024. Exhibits curated and designed for the U.S. Pavilion rarely travel, so only those who make it to Venice, Italy can see them. Gibson's exhibition is one of the exceptions and is now on view in Los Angeles at The Broad Museum from May 10 – September 28, its only U.S. venue.

Gibson, a 2019 MacArthur Fellow, makes work that is both beautiful and politically powerful. It is poetic, graphically complex and challenging, as well as confrontational. But it is never didactic. Gibson works in a range of media. This installation includes sculpture, fabric banners, site specific murals, paintings with and without collaged elements, and video. At The Broad, viewers are immediately drawn by the sound emanating from a darkened room where the video *She Never Dances Alone* (2019) is being projected. The hypnotic and pulsating music from this short continuous looping work bleeds into all the spaces of the exhibition, its score echoing throughout the galleries. *She Never Dances Alone* was originally presented in Times Square as part of the "Midnight Moment" series, a digital public art program presented during the midnight hours by Times Square Arts, where it filled sixty screens. Its multiple depictions of Sarah Ortegon HighWalking performing the "jingle dress dance" that originated with the Ojibwea tribe and is traditionally performed by women to call upon ancestors for strength, healing, and protection, illuminated Times Square. The video transitions from full screen images of Ortegon dancing to kaleidoscopic patterns that become colorful abstractions in perfect sync to the beat. While it was conceived for the outdoor electronic billboards in Times Square, it also resonates at The Broad as a nine-channel work.

The shifting of shapes and patterns created within the video resonate throughout the exhibition. Although Gibson explores themes of injustice and violence in his nuanced and layered works, his pieces can be appreciated first and foremost on a formal level. After emerging from a few cycles of *She Never Dances Alone* (unconsciously still feeling the beat), one enters a room with golden yellow walls (each gallery has been painted a different color), and is immediately taken by three beaded busts, each sitting on top of a white marble column. The three decorative figures, *Treat Me Right*, *Be Some Body*, *I'M A NATURAL MAN* (all works 2024) are covered in colored beads that define abstracted facial features and the upper torsos.

These colorful, mask-like entities appear glamorous and super-human. Gibson's intricate and over the top use of beading repurposes a traditional craft and material used by Native Americans into something unexpected. Each sculpture is titled after a "vintage" button pinned to its body that calls attention to both empowerment and past discrimination. The sculptures are on a platform toward the back of the room which leaves ample space for Gibson's paintings.

Gibson's paintings, banners and murals use the motif of the LGBTQ flag as a point of departure. Comprised of overlapping circles, stripes, squares and rectangles in rainbow colors, they are visually powerful designs that immediately draw viewers toward them.

In works like *THE RETURNED MALE STUDENT FAR TOO FREQUENTLY GOES BACK TO THE RESERVATION AND FALLS INTO THE OLD CUSTOM OF LETTING HIS HAIR GROW LONG* and *WE WILL BE KNOWN FOREVER BY THE TRACKS WE LEAVE*, the title is painted in the center of the piece, in multi-colored block letters that are often hard to read. The text in ... *THE RETURNED MALE STUDENT* ... is set in a rectangle that is surrounded by triangles and other geometric shapes that point toward the edges of the canvas stemming from the central rectangle. The source for the text is a 1902 document written by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs urging Native school children to cut their hair. Gibson often draws from historical records and documents, political speeches, as well as from pop songs, and surrounds these words in painted arrays akin to kaleidoscopic patterns. Sometimes he includes found objects as in *WE WILL BE KNOWN FOREVER BY THE TRACKS WE LEAVE*, where he attaches pieces of Native American beadwork to the surface. In this image, which is titled after a Dakota proverb, the pattern, objects and text work together to connect past and present.

Complementing the paintings are a series of fabric banners or flags with oscillating patterns and texts. These large-scale pieces hang from large dowels that are suspended from the ceiling, filling the deep blue room. Each work consists of a different rainbow-colored pattern, and includes a different fragment of appropriated text. Phrases such as: *Past Future Present*; *One Becomes the Other*; *More Colors Than The Eye Can See*; *Everybody is Sacred*; and *Pray, Rejoice, Dance, Sing*, confront the viewer. Centered in this room is Charles Cary Rumsey's Beaux-Arts sculpture *The Dying Indian* that features a slumped Native American man on a horse. Gibson's addition to the sculpture is a pair of beaded leather moccasins created by Pawnee-Cree artist John Little Sun Murie and inscribed with a line from a Roberta Flack song that states "I'm gonna run with every minute I can borrow." Seen together the works in the room speak to past despair as well as future empowerment.

Alone in the center of a dimly lit room, painted a deep red, is Gibson's *WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS TO BE SELF-EVIDENT*. Viewers are invited to sit on one of two the benches to regard the work. The top portion of the sculpture is made from a found punching bag covered with colored beads combined in geometric patterns. Embedded within that surface are words that spell out the phrase from the Declaration of Independence: *We Hold These Truths to Be Self Evident*. Long clusters of strands of beads: red and cyan, then yellow and green and finally red, black, yellow and white cascade to the floor forming a circle that references a tribal medicine wheel. Dramatically lit, the space becomes a chamber of contemplation. Here, Gibson transforms a throwaway item into a delicate and intricate work, at once fragile and heroic. While Gibson's sexual orientation, Native American heritage and politics are at the core of his explorations, the works never read prescriptively.

Rather, he weaves together historical and contemporary materials to create evocative and thoughtful pieces. Embedded within the works are the ongoing struggles — civil rights, racism, slavery, queer and Native American histories — yet while these issues may be subsumed, they are never muted by Gibson's aesthetics. The bombastic colors, jazzy patterns and geometric designs coexist with the content of the appropriated historical documents. Stating, "the show is about turning margin and center inside out, putting topics and people who have been pushed aside in the spotlight," Gibson celebrates and acknowledges his ancestors and predecessors.

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