

Press Release

Brooklyn Museum



Jeffrey Gibson (American, born 1972). *WHEN FIRE IS APPLIED TO A STONE IT CRACKS*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, glass beads and artificial snow inset into custom wood frame, 78 x 78 in. (198 x 198 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta, Chicago. © Jeffrey Gibson. (Photo: John Lusia)

The Brooklyn Museum Presents *Jeffrey Gibson: When Fire Is Applied to a Stone It Cracks*

On view February 14, 2020–January 10, 2021

More than two years ago, the Brooklyn Museum invited artist Jeffrey Gibson (b. 1972) to create an exhibition of Native American objects chosen from the Museum's extensive collection. Gibson, an artist of Choctaw and Cherokee descent, spent months diving into and researching the Museum's collections and archives. The resulting installation, which spans three galleries in the Arts of the Americas wing, challenges long-held representations that have stereotyped Indigenous peoples and Native American art, thereby offering a more joyous narrative of survival and self-determination. *Jeffrey Gibson: When Fire Is Applied to a Stone It Cracks* pairs recent works by the artist, including two large-scale murals created specifically for this exhibition, with collection objects such as moccasins, headdresses, ceramics, and beadwork, as well as rarely exhibited materials drawn from the Museum's Archives and Library Special Collections. The exhibition provides a contemporary mirror through which to reconsider Native American culture and identity.

On view from February 14, 2020, to January 10, 2021, the exhibition is organized by Jeffrey Gibson and curatorial advisor Christian Ayne Crouch, Associate Professor of History, Bard College, with Eugenie Tsai, John and Barbara Vogelstein Senior Curator, Contemporary Art, and Erika Umali, Assistant Curator of Collections, with support from

Nancy Rosoff, Andrew W. Mellon Senior Curator, Arts of the Americas, and Molly Seegers, Museum Archivist, Brooklyn Museum.

“Jeffrey Gibson’s exhibition is a thrilling addition to a season in which the Museum explores and reassesses the dominant narratives in art history, making room to present misrepresented and overlooked voices,” says Anne Pasternak, Shelby White and Leon Levy Director of the Brooklyn Museum. “With this exhibition in particular, we aim to reflect on the complexities of American history with greater truth and balanced with joy.”

Gibson was born in Colorado in 1972 and is a multimedia artist whose approach to art-making can be characterized as hybrid and cosmopolitan, informed by his upbringing in the United States, Europe, and Asia. He often employs traditional Indigenous crafts and techniques, combining textiles, embroidery, and beadwork to create brightly colored paintings, sculptures, and garments. Resisting the fixed, preconceived notions of any singular Native American identity, Gibson sees himself on a continuum of Indigenous art, a category he regards as contemporary, innovative, and global—a living culture reflected in vibrant communities active across the continent.

“When fire is applied to a stone it cracks . . . describes my interest in providing a different perspective for viewers when looking at historical objects within an institutional setting,” explains Gibson of the exhibition’s title. “I read ‘fire’ in this quote to describe the innovative making, use of materials, transformative techniques, and survivalist ethic of Indigenous peoples. Our use of new and different materials to make things that support ourselves and our communities is the ‘fire’ that continues to break open the static and antiquated ideas regarding who we are and what we are capable of.”

The exhibition is presented in three parts. The entrance gallery features various representations of Native Americans by non-Native artists, drawn from the Museum’s collection and juxtaposed with Gibson’s own work, including a vibrant wall mural. The focal point of the space is Charles Cary Rumsey’s *Dying Indian* (1900s), which portrays a slouched Native American man seated atop a starving horse. This and other similar depictions of Native peoples produced by non-Native makers reinforce an idealized image of Native Americans that was common during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period marked by the broadly held notion that Native communities were in decline and the essentialist objectification of Native subjects. Also in the entrance gallery, Gibson adds a pair of custom beaded moccasins, created in collaboration with artist John Murie, to Rumsey’s sculpture. The moccasins bear the words “I’m Gonna Run with Every Minute I Can Borrow,” which are modified lyrics from the song “See You Then,” by Roberta Flack, from the album *Quiet Fire* (1971). The contemporary addition of the moccasins and text transforms the unnamed figure in the Rumsey sculpture into one with agency and individualism, bringing the figure’s narrative into the present.

The main gallery features new and existing works by Gibson, along with other works made by Native artists from the Museum’s collection that demonstrate several Indigenous techniques and materials that are also present in Gibson’s own practice. Collection objects highlighted in this gallery include examples of headdresses by Tsimshian and Sioux or Cheyenne artists, beaded caps and decorative objects by Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) artists, and ornate patchwork or appliqué designs by Seminole artists. Complementing these objects are Gibson’s oversized garments, which are suspended from the ceiling, helmets and headpieces, paintings on canvas and hide, and sculptures. Serving as the backdrop to the main gallery is a new, large-scale multicolored mural, designed by Gibson and covering the entire space in striking bold,

vertical strips of color. The richness and vibrancy of the colors celebrate and honor the makers featured in the exhibition.

The focus of the third gallery is a selection of material from the Museum's Archives that sheds light on the formation of the Native American collection in the early twentieth century by Stewart Culin, the institution's Curator of Ethnology from 1903 to 1929. The material in this gallery includes photographs, paintings by Herbert B. Tschudy (the Museum artist who painted the people and landscapes he encountered during expeditions with Culin during his tenure), historical maps, and vocabulary cards. The presentation returns the focus to Native peoples represented in the Archives who, in going about their daily lives, projected distinct representations of themselves that reverse widespread stereotypes derived from photographs of posed, static Indigenous figures by artists such as Edward Curtis, one of Culin's contemporaries.

Texts from Christian Ayne Crouch accompany a number of rarely exhibited archival objects, including an important sixteenth-century engraving by Theodor de Bry, whose bound colored manuscript *America or the New World: A Discovery of the Continent in 346 Engravings* helped disseminate captivating but unrealistic representations of Indigenous peoples of the Americas throughout Europe. Having never visited America himself, De Bry's depictions, similar to others of his time, exemplify problematic portrayals of Indigenous peoples by non-Indigenous artists. These portrayals continue to permeate mainstream views of Indigenous peoples and provide a reference point from which to view all of the archival materials in the exhibition. By acknowledging the erasure of Native peoples' personal identity, Gibson offers the possibility of recovering the voices of those whose presence in the archival record has been previously overlooked or controlled, thereby challenging viewers to question their assumptions about Native cultures.

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