



JEFFREY GIBSON

The Body Electric

February 3–April 23, 2023

Frist Art Museum

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Tennessee State Standards

Fine Arts Standards

By analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating artworks, students fulfill the Respond domain of Tennessee's Fine Arts Standards. Synthesizing information and contextualizing the works applies to the Connect domain. The Create domain includes the generation, conceptualization, development, and refinement of artistic work.

Language Arts Standards

L.VAU.6 Cornerstone: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the post-secondary and workforce level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

Math Standards

Understand and describe the effects of transformations on two dimensional figures and use informal arguments to establish facts about angles.

8.G.A.1: Verify experimentally the properties of rotations, reflections, and translations.

Reading Standards

R.IKI.7 Cornerstone: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Social Studies Standards

Social Studies Culture Overview: Students will explore how collaboration and respect for others is necessary to achieve and maintain a functioning society.

2.01: Identify various cultural groups within the U.S. and the students' community.

2.02: Compare and contrast the beliefs, customs, ceremonies, and traditions of the various cultures represented in the U.S.

2.03: Distinguish how people from various cultures in the community and nation share principles, goals, and traditions.

SSP.05: Develop historical awareness by:

Determining relationships among people, resources, and ideas based on geographic location (local, national, global) (Grades 3–5)

Analyzing the spatial relationships between people, circumstances, and resources (Grades 3–5)

Examining how geographic regions and perceptions of the regions change over time (Grades 3–5)

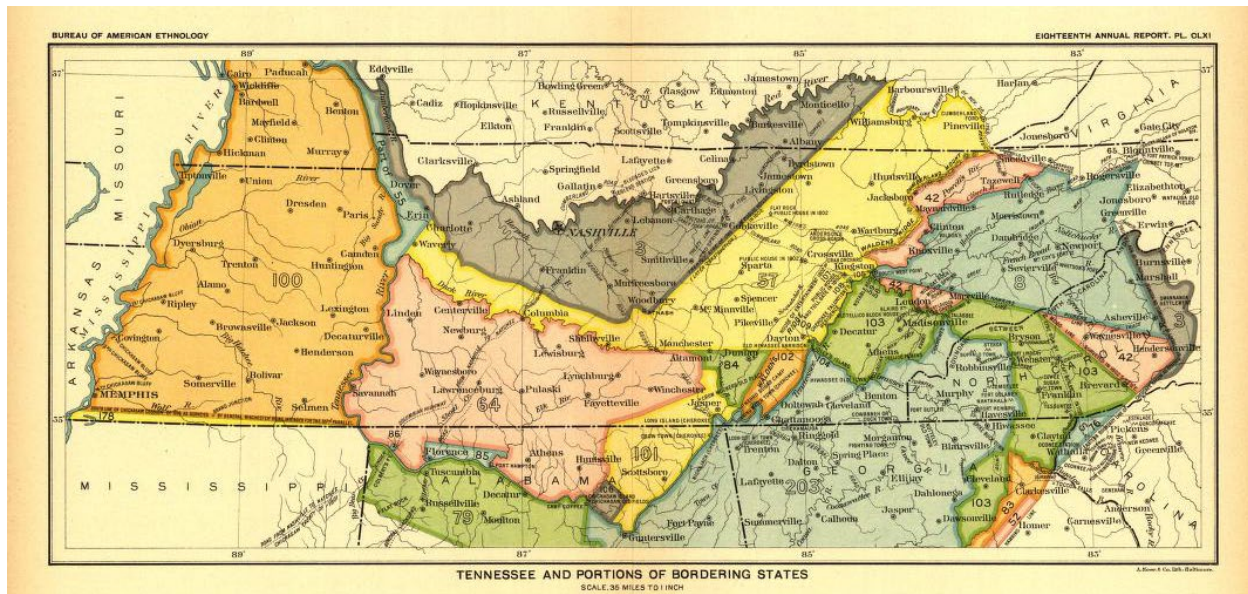
Examining how geographic regions and perceptions of regions are fluid across time and space (Grades 6–12)

Introduction

This major exhibition is devoted to one of today's leading artists whose multidisciplinary practice combines aspects of traditional Indigenous arts and cultures with a modernist visual vocabulary. Born in Colorado in 1972, Jeffrey Gibson is of Cherokee heritage and a member of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw. His vibrant work, which is represented in more than twenty permanent collections across the United States, is a call for Indigenous empowerment as well as queer visibility and environmental sustainability. *The Body Electric* presents his recent paintings, sculpture, video, and installations, along with a large site-specific mural. The exhibition's title is inspired by a song written for the 1980 musical *Fame*, which drew from Walt Whitman's poem "I Sing the Body Electric" from his 1855 collection, *Leaves of Grass*. The lyrics reverently acknowledge our place in the natural world while honoring the universality of endings and beginnings.

This educator guide will take us through a few of Gibson's artworks and explore each piece as a story of resistance and a conversation through time, culture, and artistic practice.

Section 1: Conversations Past and Present



Charles C. Royce and Cyrus Thomas. Tennessee and bordering States (detail), 1899. Law Library of Congress

Jeffrey Gibson creates much of his work by weaving together varying media, his lived experiences, and art-making practices that reflect his Indigenous heritage.

This section will briefly outline some of the history that underpins Gibson's style and work. To speak of Jeffrey Gibson without speaking of the Indigenous history of Tennessee would render an incomplete story, as two of the seven Indigenous tribes of Tennessee compose parts of Gibson's lineage—Cherokee and Choctaw. The other five tribes that called this land home were the Muscogee (Creek), Yuchi, Chickasaw, Shawnee, and the Seneca. While the present-day land situated bordered by Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Virginia is called Tennessee, an earlier name predates it and so too does a different geographical configuration.

The map above reflects the Indigenous lands ceded to the United States government to create the state of Tennessee in 1796 and further appropriated via the Indian Removal Act of 1830. This policy, enacted by President Andrew Jackson, authorized the president to grant lands west of the Mississippi in exchange for Indigenous lands within existing state borders. This policy of moving Indigenous people from their ancestral homes westward was often enacted by force, an oft-cited example being the Trail of Tears.

Today, of the many Indigenous voices past and present who call Tennessee home, only the Mississippi Band of Choctaw retains land within in the state.

While this map shows us shifting borders, Gibson's work exhibits the reclamation of space and narrative through artistic practice and representation.

Standard SSP.05 asks us to consider why geographies and histories might change over time. As you review this guide with students, reflect on what is added to a story with the addition of voices that have been obscured by our historical memory.



Jeffrey Gibson. *Boneta, Comanche*, 2021. Courtesy of the artist, Debbie Rechler, and Kavi Gupta, Chicago, IL. Image courtesy of Jeffrey Gibson Studio. Photo: Max Yawney



Elbridge Ayer Burbank. *Boneta, Comanche*, 1897. Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum, Friends of Southwestern Art Purchase

This painting offers a point of entry into Jeffrey Gibson's ongoing conversation about and rebuttal to the historical treatment and artistic representation of Indigenous people.

The painting here is actually Gibson's remake of an 1897 painting by Elbridge Ayer Burbank, also titled *Boneta, Comanche*. Separated by time and each artist's varying commitment to representation, the original and Gibson's revisioning illustrate how and why history changes.

The original work was created at a time when Indigenous portraits were often created through force. Burbank's work sits in this contested lineage. As a result, although it physically represents Boneta, the painting is devoid of the intimate details that create the narrative aspects of portraits. It is a stark, almost sterile study of the sitter that flattens the multidimensional personality this work could have captured.

In Gibson's version, we see a magnification of Boneta's face colorfully reproduced five times across the canvas. A central portrait incorporates beadwork around Boneta's head, cradling his visage and allowing us to see more of the person in the painting. Additionally, this act draws attention to the fact that this piece isn't a study that

"others" the sitter, but rather aims to highlight the Technicolor of identity. Using color, scale, and abstraction, Gibson inserts vitality into the artwork as a rebuttal to the solemn and contrived representations that have traditionally been prescribed to portraits of Indigenous people in American art.

This keen eye and care situate Gibson's practice, and in this nexus, historical narratives are changed.

"That's the trick with text, it promises understanding, but it's just as abstract as anything else."

—Jeffrey Gibson

Jeffrey Gibson's work also speaks to the present and to potential futures. In this piece, Gibson employs text, painting the words *THE FUTURE IS PRESENT*. This painting is again in conversation with America's colonial history and the resultant oppression of Indigenous people. This work asserts that Indigenous voices are present, though they are often positioned as voices that exist only in the historical past or somewhere else. Gibson's piece is a call to Indigenous representation in the here and now.

At the same time, this work draws a throughline from the past to present in the visual language Gibson is using to communicate his message. Look at the *tessellation*, or geometric patterning, of triangles. These stylistic elements are inspired by *parfleche*, folded rawhide carrying bags made by Indigenous people of the Great Plains region.

These containers, used to carry personal belongings and trade materials, are often covered in geometric abstractions that tell a story about the owner. The pigments used to paint the rawhide reflect the natural materials in the environment where the container was made and illustrate the artisan's relationship with the earth. The designs reveal information about the owner's identity, such as aspects of their spiritual life and their relationship with the cosmos. We often think of abstraction as something that doesn't portray identity. But in both Gibson's work and the artistry that inspired it, we can see how abstraction can create both intrigue and a distinct visual identity.



Jeffrey Gibson. *THE FUTURE IS PRESENT*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co. Image courtesy of Jeffrey Gibson Studio. Photo: Sikkema Jenkins & Co.



Jeffrey Gibson. *SHE KNOWS OTHER WORLDS*, 2019. Forge Project Collection, traditional lands of the Muh-he-con-ne-ok. Image courtesy of Jeffrey Gibson Studio. Photo: John Lusic

As you'll encounter throughout this exhibition, Gibson's pieces are often inspired by *identity*—who we express ourselves to be. While he centers Indigenous perspectives and artistic practices, another way he explores and reflects his identity is through music. This painting is inspired by the artist's time in Chicago and its unique house music scene. The repeated patterns and composition of this work create a musical rhythm and balance.

The layered nature of this composition reflects the way the way electronic music is layered through interwoven melodies, harmonies, beats. Through the graphic component of this piece, the text *SHE KNOWS OTHER WORLDS* speaks to the artist's desire for a future in which other ways of being, other ways of knowing and experiencing the world are validated and affirmed.

Chicago House

Chicago house is a subgenre of electronic dance music that first appeared there in the middle of the 1980s. It incorporates disco, European synth music, soul from the 1970s, and beats made by DJs using drum machines and synthesizers. A constant pulse (usually in a 4/4 time signature played at a speed of about 120 beats per minute) distinguishes house music and its many subgenres. This propulsive beat drives house songs forward and separates the syncopation of this type of music from the suppressed beat of classical and the swing of jazz traditions.

Try This Out

Grade Levels K–5

Google Arts and Culture Paint with Music:

<https://artsandculture.google.com/experiment/paint-with-music/YAGuJyDB-XbbWg?hl=en>

As Jeffrey Gibson blends visual arts with his identity as an avid music listener, he plays with color, shape, and scale in his pieces. This creates a rhythm and musicality in his work. Think with your students about what shapes complement different sounds, and vice versa. Linking your computer to a projector or larger classroom monitor, draw the shapes students discuss with you using the interactive link above and listen to what your composition sounds like.

Grade Levels 6–12

Google Arts and Culture AR Synth: <https://artsexperiments.withgoogle.com/ar-synth/>

Have older students create their own short musical compositions and discuss similarities between aural and visual artistry. How are compositions layered and given rhythm and balance? Talk through how they would visually represent their audio works. The creation portion of this activity is best done individually or in pairs but may be adapted to your individual classroom needs.

When we engage with art, we're often presented with the end product without being able to see the journey or the process that leads to a finished work. Here, Jeffrey Gibson lets us into an interior moment of change and uncertainty in his artistic path.

This work allows us to travel back to 2012, a moment in time when Gibson was reevaluating his art practice and considering whether he wanted to remain in the

field. In a cathartic exercise, he removed finished canvas paintings from their stretchers and took them to the laundromat, where he washed them. This is one such artwork.



Jeffrey Gibson. *Time Capsule (Pink Hole)*, 2011. Courtesy of Jeffrey Gibson Studio. Image courtesy of Jeffrey Gibson Studio. Photo: Brian Barlow

In the midst of this period, he received a grant that allowed him to travel across the US and connect with various Indigenous art practitioners. He had many conversations with other artists about art as a means to preserve culture, honor heritage, and dialogue with history. This was a transformative moment in Gibson's work, marking the point when he moved from his previous methods into the ones we see in this exhibition.

To your students, this piece can serve as an affirmation that it's all right to be unsatisfied with your work. It's an opportunity to question, grow, and change. Much like the artwork on the cover of this educator guide, art and artistic practice are a woven experiences that have infinite possibilities. You don't always have to be certain, and things don't always have to be perfect. Among the many things art can be, a few possibilities are:

- an exploratory place of wonder
- a journey in learning
- a communal practice that is strengthened by those around you

All of them are worthwhile!

Section 2: Beading as Resistance

Pictured here is a beaded bird sculpture inspired by turn-of-the-century Tuscarora whimsies. These sculptures were originally made in the Niagara Falls region of the US by the Tuscarora people. Whimsies combined Victorian iconography and Indigenous art practices together. What resulted was a hybrid aesthetic that was seen as neither Indigenous enough nor European enough to be of significant value among Victorian buyers. Because of this, the whimsy was relegated to kitsch.



In his current artistic practice, Gibson rethinks and reenvision the hybridity of the whimsy in multiple ways:

- As a representation of himself—Gibson has spoken about feeling pulled across the liminal space his different identities create.
- As an intertribal Indigenous conversation—Gibson employs different types of craft from various Indigenous cultures and spotlights them in his work. This spotlighting and preservation of Indigenous artistic techniques is an act of resistance.
- As a place to contest coloniality—these sculptures challenge prescribed beauty and are a place to use kitsch as resistance.

Jeffrey Gibson. *Firebelly*, 2021. Courtesy of the artist, Sundeep Mullangi, Trissa Babrowski, and Kavi Gupta, Chicago, IL. Image courtesy of Jeffrey Gibson Studio. Photo: Max Yawney

Technique Spotlight: Raised Beadwork

Beadwork is a large part of Jeffrey Gibson's art practice. We've seen this craft utilized in pieces shown earlier in this guide and will continue to see it employed in the following artworks. In the case of the whimsy, although Gibson uses looped beadwork, he was inspired by Tuscarora raised beadwork. *Raised beadwork* is distinguished by beading lines that arch above a fabric's surface, adding depth to the piece. We'll see this technique applied in subsequent artworks.

**"Complexity is an accumulation of simple acts."
—Jeffrey Gibson**

To unpack the quote above, we can look at the artwork pictured here. Thousands of beads are intricately strung together in Gibson's signature tessellated patterns on an Everlast punching bag. Bead by bead, Gibson supplants the traditional use of this object. Traditionally made to channel and withstand violent blows, this punching bag is transformed into an object of beauty and interrogation through Gibson's use of Indigenous beading techniques, abstract motifs, and text. Gibson's art practice changes the way that the punching bag can be interacted with and thus diffuses the violence surrounding it. By overlaying his voice and visual culture on the Everlast bag, he creates a hybrid space of representation, critically carrying the tradition of whimsies forward. His artistic practice, mediums, and message layer atop one another to transform the punching bag into a complex canvas, rendering Indigenous resistance in material form.



Jeffrey Gibson. *WAR IS NOT THE ANSWER FEEL SOMETHING REAL*, 2020. Gochman Family Collection. Image courtesy of Jeffrey Gibson Studio. Photo: Shayla Blatchford

Section 3: Fringe Ideas

"A person who is like a hammer is capable of building up and tearing down-
envisioning something different and making it happen."

—Jeffrey Gibson



Jeffrey Gibson. *LIKE A HAMMER*, 2016. Tia Collection, Santa Fe, NM. Image courtesy of the artist and Rogers Project, Los Angeles, California. Photo: Eric Swanson

LIKE A HAMMER draws inspiration from multiple sources. The title of this piece is taken from a song written by Pete Seeger and Lee Hays and popularized by Peter, Paul, and Mary: "If I Had a Hammer." The song expressly calls for justice and social change. It's also a nod to philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of "philosophizing with a hammer." In his book *The Twilight of Idols*, Nietzsche writes that truth-filled ideas will withstand the hammering of critical questioning, and that those ideas that do not should be torn down.

Let's shift our gaze from the ideas underpinning this piece to the artwork itself. The garment pictured above is inspired by Indigenous regalia worn at pow-wows. Here, Gibson employs clothing as a decolonizing force through which one can exert ownership over dress and self-identify. Many of the materials used in this piece are made specifically for pow-wow artisan markets and can only be found there. In this way, Gibson highlights self-determination via dress and the power of the pow-wow economy to sustain that act.

In the garment's construction, Gibson spotlights the fringe, giving it a larger aesthetic role than would normally be seen in this type of regalia. The fringe's magnification and centrality can be read as part of Gibson's ongoing work to critically read history and spotlight different voices, bringing "fringe," or marginalized, perspectives and topics to the center.

Part of a performance piece, Gibson wore this garment as he played the drum on view in this gallery. Gibson compares the repetitive rhythmic nature of beating a drum to the repetitive nature of hammering, likening the act to sustained social change. In this way, Gibson speaks to the necessity of continuously shaping and reshaping our present to aim toward different futures and better worlds.

Activity: Making an Abstract Landscape



Jeffrey Gibson. *THE LAND IS SPEAKING | ARE YOU LISTENING*, 2022. SITE Santa Fe Commission. Image courtesy of Jeffrey Gibson Studio and SITE Santa Fe. Photo: Shayla Blatchford

Painted directly on the wall, *THE LAND IS SPEAKING | ARE YOU LISTENING* depicts a landscape through bands of color and graphic text. The vibrant palette is inspired by both the southwestern skies of the work's commissioners, SITE Santa Fe in New Mexico, and the lush landscapes of the Northeast, where the artist lives with his family. Gibson's original text prompts us to consider how the earth communicates with us and expresses frustration with those who abuse, neglect, and exploit the land.

Questions

- Look closely and describe what you see in *THE LAND IS SPEAKING | ARE YOU LISTENING*. Identify colors and shapes—how do they come together to form a landscape?
- The text in the mural indicates that the land is speaking out of frustration and asks, "are you listening?" What do you think the land would have to say?
- Do you listen to the land and the environment around you? What is it telling you?

Objective

Participants will make colorful abstract landscapes composed of lines and geometric shapes.

Supplies

Cardstock

Ruler

Pencil

Colored adhesive tape

1. Encourage participants to think about what they see in the landscape around them or when they look at pictures of landscapes. Ask what colors, lines, and shapes they observe.
2. Have them consider a message they would like to share with others and how they will communicate that message through their landscapes.
3. Participants can start their landscapes by using a pencil and ruler to draw lines and simple geometric shapes on their cardstock. They should use basic shapes and not focus on fine details.
4. Have participants decide which colors they want to use. What natural elements are they depicting—sky, ground, water, hills, mountains? What time of day?
5. Have participants use pieces of colored tape to fill in the lines and shapes that they have sketched. They may cut, overlap, and layer pieces of tape to complete their landscapes.
6. Ask everyone to share their finished landscapes and talk about their design choices.

Organized by SITE Santa Fe and curated by Brandee Caoba

Jeffrey Gibson: The Body Electric is made possible through the generous support of the Carl & Marilyn Thoma Foundation.



This exhibition is part of the Tennessee Triennial for Contemporary Art, a program of Tri-Star Arts.



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