



Title

Jeffrey Gibson: THIS BURNING WORLD

Author(s)

Grace Linden

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About the author(s)

is an art historian and writer based in London.

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Jeffrey Gibson: THIS BURNING WORLD

by Grace Linden • 08.03.2023

This is an era marked by environmental catastrophe: firestorms in California, floods in Pakistan, bomb cyclones, dirty air and dirty water. Although it is long past the point where our extractive, parasitic relationship with land can be redeemed, it is necessary not only to reconceive how we use the earth but also how we view it. Such ideas are the starting point for *THIS BURNING WORLD* by Jeffrey Gibson (b.1972), the inaugural exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco (ICA SF), a new non-collecting contemporary art museum in the city's Dogpatch area. Land and location are central to Gibson's multifaceted practice, in which he often draws upon the traditions of his Cherokee and Choctaw heritage. Both peoples traditionally inhabited the Southeastern Woodlands, an area that now encompasses Alabama, Louisiana, Georgia and part of Florida. Despite his close analysis of land, Gibson's work is not necessarily site-specific; instead, he produces affinities between patterns, colours and materials found in Native American art with those of Western Modernism.

Gibson's exhibition begins before the visitor enters the ICA SF building: a former children's gymnasium that the artist has covered in vinyl in dizzying, bright colours **FIG.1**. These two works are simultaneously garish and unobtrusive, equally noticeable and easily missed, installed on either side of the entrance. One on side, the vinyl reads 'THE TREES ARE WITNESSES' and on the other, 'SPEAKING TO THE SKY AND KISSING THE GROUND' **FIG.2**. When seen up close, the letters pulsate like television static or retinal afterimages. Although they appear joyful, the signs are a precursor to what follows in the exhibition, an early nod to the importance of caretaking and what will be destroyed if we fail to embrace new ways of being.



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Jeffrey Gibson: THIS BURNING WORLD* at the Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco, 2022. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Impart Photography; exh. Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco).

Inside, *THIS BURNING WORLD* is installed across two rooms, which are unified by a soundtrack composed by Joan Henry, a *dekanogisgi* (traditional song-carrier), *hahesh'kah* (lead drummer) and a Native Women's Traditional dancer, who speaks and sings to the land. In the larger of the two galleries, a multi-channel video installation lines both walls **FIG.3**. The footage, shot mostly in the Hudson Valley, New York, over a ten-month period, shows the seasonal changes. These images are kaleidoscopic in their presentation, with geometric patterns superimposed onto collages of rushing rivers, a clutch of daisies, barren trees and endless sky **FIG.4**. Sun-dappled trees are overlaid with triangles of flowers; light and water glint; the images suggest flux and change in flickering, quilt-like mosaics **FIG.5**.



Fig. 2 *SPEAKING TO THE SKY AND KISSING THE GROUND*, by Jeffrey Gibson. 2022. Vinyl, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist and Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco; photograph Impart Photography; exh. Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco).

Henry's voice swells in the second, smaller room. Here, Gibson has covered the window with the same multicoloured vinyl, through which light streams, producing a stained-glass-like effect **FIG.6**. Instead of an altar, however, a red maple tree is suspended from the ceiling **FIG.7**. The greying, pallid bark appears petrified; a sign informs the visitor that the tree originates from the East Bay, where it was uprooted after being hit by a drunk driver. The spiky horizontality of the trunk recalls the series of 'stripped' tree sculptures which Giuseppe Penone (b.1947) began making in 1969.

Beginning with felled trees that have been turned into beams, Penone scrapes away the wood to reveal the knots where branches once grew, thus reinstating the original form of the tree. As such, Penone produces self-reflexive objects that, eschewing 'pre-existing culture', express their own creation.¹ Unlike Penone, Gibson chooses not to break from or intervene with what came before: pre-existing culture is key to understanding his work and his interpretations of the world.

As Alison Gass, the Founding Director of ICA SF, states in the exhibition text, *THIS BURNING WORLD* considers the 'urgency and importance of our collective relationship to the planet'. This is explicitly referenced in the long rectangles that have been incised directly into the museum floor at the base of the video installation, revealing the soil beneath. Soil carries with it a powerful smell; it is also easily scattered and messy, which is likely why visitors are instructed only to look. There are, perhaps, other reasons: Dogpatch was once home to much of the city's industrial production and the likelihood of environmental contamination remains.² Gass has outlined the strict regulations concerning how much ground could be uncovered in the museum, considering the possible toxicity of the soil.³ Gibson's intervention in the museum space is especially significant in a city so acutely aware of its own topography. In addition to the forty-two hills San Francisco is built upon, there is the Pacific Ocean to the west, the Bay to the east and a 1,500-acre National Park contained within the boundaries of the city, not to mention coyotes, wild parrots and a rookery of seals. The identity of San Francisco is tied to environmentalism, where composting is not just expected but mandated, and succulents run wild. But slashed into the floor is a reminder of damage wrought, much of which has yet to be redressed.

The exhibition text states that these openings are an opportunity for the earth to 'breathe and serve as a portal for us to speak, give thanks, and apologize to the land'. They also highlight the museum's connection to this particular ground, once the homeland of the Ramaytush Ohlone, the original inhabitants of San Francisco, whose population was decimated in the wake of the arrival of the Europeans and the establishment of Mission Dolores in 1776. This is referenced in a land acknowledgement on the gallery wall, next to the exhibition text. Although the old mission still stands, a larger basilica was built in 1918 in the elaborate California Churrigueresque style. The site is just over two miles from ICA SF and in-between resides the heart of the city's Latinx neighbourhood, a community that has been directly affected by widespread gentrification wrought by the tech industry. Gibson himself is familiar with the city, its history and its evolving populations. In 2010 he moved, with his husband, to San Francisco to teach at the California College of the Arts (CCA) and was also artist in residence at the Headlands Center for the Arts, Marin County. In 2020, in conjunction with CCA Wattis Institute for

Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, the Headlands Center exhibited Gibson's video *Nothing is Eternal*, a meditation on nature, the aesthetic and material histories of Indigenous cultures and growing unrest and division in the United States.

Questions of land stewardship are unavoidable in *THIS BURNING WORLD*. Proponents of more symbiotic ways of living have long suggested working with the earth's landforms and cycles, citing the philosophies and built architecture of Indigenous communities as models for the future. Gibson's show may lack concrete solutions, but it does propose gentleness: we could be gentler with the world, more sensitive to this great phenomenon of ocean, air and trees that Gibson films so eloquently. It is hard to leave unmoved.



Fig. 3 *THIS BURNING WORLD*, by Jeffrey Gibson. 2022. Multi-channel video installation, duration 20 minutes. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Impart Photography; exh. Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco).



Fig. 4 Detail from *THIS BURNING WORLD*, by Jeffrey Gibson. 2022. Multi-channel video, duration 20 minutes. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Impart Photography)

Photography; exh. Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco).



Fig. 5 Detail from *THIS BURNING WORLD*, by Jeffrey Gibson. 2022. Multi-channel video installation, duration 20 minutes. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Impart Photography; exh. Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco).



Fig. 6 *THE FUTURE IS PRESENT*, by Jeffrey Gibson. 2011–22. Red maple tree, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Impart Photography; exh. Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco).



Fig. 7 Detail from *THE FUTURE IS PRESENT*, by Jeffrey Gibson. 2011–22. Red Maple tree. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Impart Photography; exh. Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco).

Exhibition details

Jeffrey Gibson: THIS BURNING WORLD

Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco

1st October 2022–26th March 2023

Footnotes

- 1** Giuseppe Penone quoted in M. Gibson: 'Cutting to the heart of things', *The New York Times* (12th June 2004), available at www.nytimes.com/2004/06/12/style/cutting-to-the-heart-of-things.html, accessed 7th March 2023.
- 2** See J. Griffin: 'Native American artist Jeffrey Gibson is reuniting land, people and song', *The Financial Times* (24th October 2022), available at www.ft.com/content/be5e9698-43fb-4314-8766-454701392076, accessed 7th March 2023.
- 3** *Ibid.*

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