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Indian Giver: Jeffrey Gibson's Absurdist Meta-Tribalism at Sala Diaz



Jeffrey Gibson
 "Nobody Said Anything (Outside Totem)"
 2009
 fiberglass and plastic planters (Made in China, India and USA), steel
 and wood
 approximately 12 feet high x 3 feet diameter

I saw Jeffrey Gibson's Sala Diaz show, "Totems," on the same night as the Alameda opening of "Caras Vemos, Corazones no Sabemos" and "Phantom Sightings" which I wrote about [here](#). "Totems" proved a thought-provoking counterpart to those shows, particularly "Phantom Sightings," which expands the genre of Chicano art from the traditional themes and media into a futurist stratosphere.

Jeffrey Gibson has some things in common with the "Phantom Sightings" artists; he's young, of color, and his multimedia work is informed by Postmodernism, Queer Theory, postcolonialism, post-consumerism; all those -isms that go rattling around the contemporary arts. And like many of the "Phantom Sightings" artists, he exemplifies a strong sexual hankering combined with a deep vein of humor.

Jeffrey Gibson is Native American; more specifically, he's Mississippi Choctaw and Cherokee. Born in Colorado, Gibson studied sculpture with New Mexico artist Ernest Mirabal, earned a BA from the Art

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Institute of Chicago and went on to garner a Master of Arts degree from the Royal College of Art, London. He's now based in Brooklyn. Gibson's exhibited widely, from The Bronx Museum of the Arts, to the National Museum of the American Indian, to the Kunstneres Hus in Oslo, Norway, and at the Hockney Gallery in London.

I'd be fascinated to see a collaboration or two-man show of Jeffrey Gibson and "Phantom Sightings" artist Jason Villegas. Villegas described, in the post-opening artists' roundtable discussion at the Alameda, how while growing up in Houston, he felt he didn't fit in anywhere; more Mexican than his white friends, more "white" in speech and interests than other Chicano kids, and with an acute awareness of his being gay, fashion-forward, and voraciously imaginative, an awareness and a set of preoccupations that he felt trumped the narrow confines of "traditional" Chicano art. In response to this perhaps-painful, but certainly-fruitful alienation, Villegas has developed an exuberant, liberated cosmology involving absurdist creatures from outer space cultures, a meta-narrative of limitless imagination and uninhibited sexuality that touches on fashion, body image, and the lawless and fantastic realms of desire.



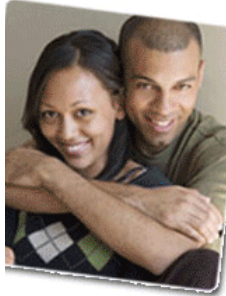
On Jason Villegas' [website](#), you can see some of the creature models he's crafted from fabric, Flickr pages devoted to past shows (2008's "Cosmic Slut" is particularly funny, and gorgeous), and even his YouTube channel of multimedia performances.

In the roundtable, Villegas (who's in his twenties, I think) spoke of being strongly apolitical, and of constructing this alternate universe to supplant the mundane one of here and now. I see some of the same impulse in Gibson's work; there's an another-galaxy feel to it. Here's his Sala Diaz print, containing elements from each of the other artworks on view:

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“Nobody Said Anything”

2009

Digital Pigment Print

29 x 19 inches

These photographed sculptures exist in our dimension, and in fact sit in Sala Diaz as I type this (well, the spray-painted plastic totem pole sits outside, actually; drive by and see!). But in this print, Gibson playfully locates them in a dreamy meta-universe, a cast of characters in some personal mythology that’s at once unsettling, erotic, and, well, totemic. They’re everywhere and nowhere, haunting the subconscious while participating in the material world.

This construction of an alternate universe, though, this peering into the cosmic as a foil to current reality, has been undertaken before—which observation is not intended to dilute or undercut the originality of neither Villegas nor Gibson originality as artmakers; in terms of each man’s handling of his materials, sly storytelling, and sheer visual poetry, they’re both inimitable. But in Villegas’ and Gibson’s gleeful and longing-infused appropriation of the future as where they belong, they remind me of the [Afro-Futurists](#), a strain of arts which includes the speculative fiction of Octavia Butler and Nalo Hopkinson, the music of Afrika Bambaataa, Sun Ra and Janelle Monáe, and the visual and performance arts of Rammellzee and, arguably, John Sayles’ film *The Brother From Another Planet*.

Here’s a good [website](#) with Afrofuturist resources, from bibliographies to manifestoes.

Anyway, back to Gibson’s “Totems.”



“This is Not a Plastic Bag” (installation view)

2009

Found and purchased objects, steel, mannequin, plaster, oil and spray paint

approximately 8 feet tall x 7 feet x 3 feet

Jeffrey Gibson built his “Totem” sculptures out of materials found in San Antonio. [Here](#) is his blog of that process. Who knew such figures were lurking in these ordinary, throwaway things? Gibson did, and set about bringing to eerie life these fantasy mannequins, meditations on the ideals and limitations of the body, and investigations into the human body on another plane, somehow. Post-gender, post-plausible. I got to talk to Gibson at the opening at Sala Diaz; he suggested, mischievously, that these figures are fantasy sex partners, objects of desire. This is sex freed of all its common features; there are no genitals, no faces per se, so poses of easily-recognizable titillation, and yet there they are, oozing a sort of shamanic erotic menace.

This one, in its narrow-hipped scale and ambiguous power, reminds me of one of Prince’s stage costumes I once saw. I think it’s those teeny hips and butt:



“Mushroom Head” installation view

2009

Found and purchased objects, steel, mannequin, human hair (from China), plaster, oil and spray paint
approximately 8 feet tall x 2.5 feet x 2.5 feet

I love that Gibson specifies that the human hair came from China.

Here’s a passage from Gibson’s artist statement from a 2006 show, [“Off the Map: landscape in the Native Imagination”](#), which I think is illustrative in “Totems,” too:

“Utopia was important for me to envision and relates to my being Native American and having grown up solely in a Western consumer culture. My desire to act out the role of an explorer depicting an inviting landscape, via painting and specimen retrieval, was a reaction to Native tribes’ being consistently described as part of a nostalgic and romantic vision of pre-colonized Indian life. The aesthetic of these paintings and sculptures came from turn-of-the-century Iroquois whimsies, contemporary and historic powwow regalia, cultural adornment of non-Western cultures, techno rave and club culture, and earlier utopian models.”

In “Totems,” Gibson’s “inviting landscape” is centered on the body, his “specimen retrieval” took place in thrift shops and .99 stores, and his nostalgia is for some fantasy of a utopian future.

You can check it out by calling (210) 852-4492 before the 12th, and asking Hills Snyder to let you in.

Posted by sarah fisch on 4/9/2009 4:04:51 PM

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