



BY WILLIAM F. FELICE
Guest Columnist

Would Florida schools even allow this spectacular art exhibit?

In Italy, queer Choctaw and Cherokee artist Jeffrey Gibson uses his art to critically examine some myths of American nationhood.



Native American artist Jeffrey Gibson creates vibrant and colorful objects that incorporate fundamental American ideals, yet question their status for Indigenous peoples and other groups. For example, a work titled “We want to be free” is found in beadwork on a large figure with a striking body of rainbow fringe. In addition to the 1866 Civil Rights Act, Gibson also includes references to the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 that finally granted U.S. citizenship to Native Americans. [Courtesy of William F. Felice]

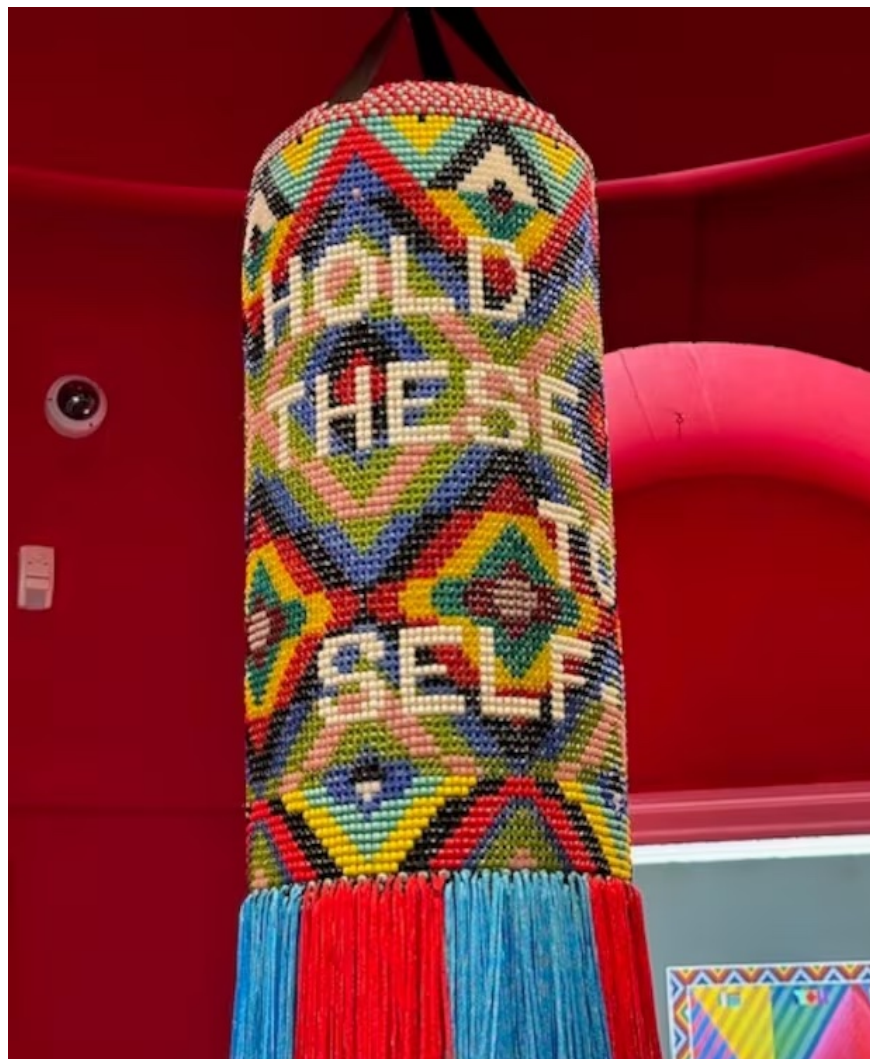
From April to November, Venice once again is at the vanguard of the global arts scene, hosting the 60th International Art Exhibition titled “Stranieri Ovunque — Foreigners Everywhere.” The Venice Biennale creates a multicultural, multinational dialogue through art that provokes, inspires and, hopefully, unites.

Upon arrival at the Venice Biennale recently, I was struck by the buzz about the American Pavilion circulating among the exhibition’s global visitors. The Italians and Germans I engaged with that first day, for example, described the U.S. exhibit as moving, powerful, vibrant and the most important presentation at the Biennale. These anecdotal comments made me eager to see the U.S. exhibition and proud that an American artist had created such glowing reactions.

After finally making it to the U.S. Pavilion, I saw clearly why these global visitors were so magnanimous in their praise. The American building is filled with the euphoric art of queer Choctaw and Cherokee artist Jeffrey Gibson, who titled his installation “the space in which to place me.” Gibson’s spectacular art incorporates intricate beadwork, an intoxicating vibrant use of color and flourishing geometric patterns. His pieces are filled with poignant text and political references to Indigenous history. Gibson is the first Native American artist to represent the U.S. with a solo show in the 94 years the country has had a pavilion in Venice.

Gibson uses his art to critically examine some myths of American nationhood. To create his Venice exhibit, he examined the country’s founding documents, constitutional amendments and social and political movements. He told *The New York Times*: “I wanted to map out some moments in American history when there is this real promise of equality, liberty and justice and then think about what those terms mean.”

Multiple vibrant and colorful objects incorporate these fundamental American ideals, yet question their status for Indigenous peoples and other groups. For example, the stock phrase “We hold these truths to be self-evident” is on an object that appears to be a punching bag. The phrase “We want to be free” is found in beadwork on a large figure with a striking body of rainbow fringe. Gibson also includes references to the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 that finally granted U.S. citizenship to Native Americans.



Native American artist Jeffrey Gibson includes the stock phrase “We hold these truths to be self-evident” on an object that appears to be a punching bag. [Courtesy of William F. Felice]

To all of this, Gibson adds beaded native objects atop geometric patterns referencing Indigenous perceptions and culture. In addition to the struggles of Native peoples, Gibson’s art also addresses other marginalized communities. For example, his work titled “The Enforcer” references the Enforcement Acts of 1870 and 1871 intended to protect Black Americans’ right to vote, hold office and receive equal protection under the law. All this work is done in a boisterous dazzling use of color. The exhibit concludes with an infectious video of Native American women engaged in energetic traditional cultural dances. The installation is an artistic, intellectual and political triumph.

Yet, it's doubtful that Gibson's exhibit would even be allowed in Florida's schools. Florida's Individual Freedom Act, also known as Florida's Stop Woke Act, is intended to prevent discussions of the ways in which racism is ingrained in America's laws and power structures. The law effectively bans classroom examinations of institutional or structural racism. Professors are prohibited from making students feel guilt for past discrimination.

State funding will be cut to those colleges that refuse to cancel courses that deal with racial inequality and systemic racism. Florida leaders don't want students to question a version of American history filled with romantic notions of our country's past. The law prohibits "teaching certain topics or presenting information in specified ways" and bans teaching that "systemic racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege are inherent in the institutions of the United States." The law is being challenged in courts. Yet, the legislation has already succeeded in chilling and limiting the free exchange of ideas at colleges throughout Florida.

Gibson's art forces viewers to grapple with darker aspects of our country's history, including the genocide of Native peoples and the enslavement of Blacks beginning in 1619. After experiencing Gibson's pavilion, I did feel alarmed by the historical violence and discrimination that created the ongoing privileges that I continue to benefit from as a white American. But, my overwhelming feeling after experiencing the American exhibit was not "guilt" about my country's dark history, but one of pride. I was filled with pride that my country, the U.S., was willing to openly grapple and learn from our painful history. Florida's current laws restricting how race is taught in our schools must be overcome. Our young students deserve the opportunity to gain a full understanding of our past and a new pride in America.



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