THE EXHIBITION

*Like A Hammer* is a major museum exhibition presenting artwork by contemporary artist Jeffrey Gibson. Gibson’s complex work reflects varied influences, including fashion and design, abstract painting, queer identity, popular music, and materials and aesthetics of Native American cultures. This exhibition brings together a selection of more than 65 of the artist’s works created since 2011, including geometric paintings on rawhide and canvas, beaded and intricately altered punching bags, sculptures, wall hangings, videos, and a new multimedia installation.

THE ARTIST

“It’s always been about using my personal narrative to complicate the popular notions of being queer, being gay, being Native American—any of these singular adjectives.”


Jeffrey Gibson was born in 1972 in Colorado Springs, CO, and is of Cherokee heritage and a citizen of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. He grew up in major urban centers in the United States, Germany, South Korea, and England. As a young man questioning simple labels and concepts of identity, he found a love of music and dance clubs, where he felt free to express himself. His experiences had a large impact on his life and art. Drawing on influences from his Indigenous heritage, queer culture, punk aesthetics, club culture, geometric abstraction, and popular music, his work reflects his own multi-faceted identity. Using bold patterns, bright colors, painstaking detail, and a wide variety of materials, Gibson creates a unique visual vocabulary in his art, which includes sculptures and abstract paintings. Gibson is currently a faculty member at Bard College and lives and works in New York.

*Definitions of bolded words can be found at the end of the guide in the glossary.*

All SAM Resource Guides and materials are copyright protected and can be used for educational purposes only.
ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide explores four works of art from *Like A Hammer* followed by a related activity. Students and educators can use this guide in the classroom or during a visit to the Seattle Art Museum. Each activity starts with looking questions and background information about the work. A blank activity sheet is included for you at the end to select additional works of art from the exhibition to explore with your students.

Information in this guide is adapted from the exhibition catalogue *Jeffrey Gibson: Like a Hammer* by John P. Lukavic, et al. (2018). We would like to thank our Advisor Jarrod S. Da’ (San Ildefonso Pueblo), Artist, Education Manager Snoqualmie Indian Tribe, for his work on this guide.

Support for K-12 programs during the 2018-2019 school year is provided by The Foster Foundation, The Freeman Foundation, Nordstrom, Seattle Art Museum Supporters (SAMS), and Sound Credit Union.
COMPLEX CONVERSATIONS

Before leading conversations with your students, reflect on your own identity and be aware of how that identity shapes your personal perspective and biases, then encourage your students to do the same. Model self-reflection for your students and consider specific pieces of your own identity, such as race or gender, and how they have affected your life, worldviews, and interactions with others. Aim to create an open and safe environment with your students by sharing your experiences and why these experiences are important.

Prepare your students for these conversations with the following techniques, which are adapted from The Studio Museum in Harlem.

1. At the beginning of the discussion or visit, set group expectations of a respectful dialogue.
2. Use “I” statements to honor individual experiences and avoid stereotyping.
3. When possible, begin with less controversial information and build to more complex topics.
4. Encourage students to step up and step back—create space for those to speak who do not normally do so and encourage thoughtful listening.
5. If a student says something concerning, try to ask for more information to find an underlying issue. Create an environment in which the group can unpack the statement, to take the spotlight off the student who voiced this and help others who may feel similarly to process.
6. Allow time for quiet reflection and check in with students after difficult conversations.
PREPARING FOR THE EXHIBITION

PRE-VISIT

When using this guide to prepare for a visit to the museum, use one or all of the enclosed images and activities so your students will be ready to explore the themes of the exhibition.

AT THE MUSEUM

During your visit, this guide will give you an overview of the art you will see in Jeffrey Gibson: Like A Hammer. Expand your experience to explore works in SAM’s Collections* with our audio tours.

Visit the Ann P. Wyckoff Education Resource Center on the second floor of the Seattle Art Museum for more resources on the exhibition and SAM’s collection. You can also browse resources online.

POST-VISIT

Continue your discussion with additional resources.

- Listen to some of the music that inspired Jeffrey Gibson’s work on this playlist, created by the artist.
- Discuss tribal sovereignty and history with your students using the curriculum Since Time Immemorial: Tribal Sovereignty in Washington State for K–12 students and Since Time Immemorial: Early Learning Curriculum for younger students.
- Focus on traditional and contemporary Native American art in our Values to Live By: Northwest Coast Native American Art and Culture Outreach Suitcase.
- Explore contemporary sculpture in your classroom with our Places, Spaces, and Faces: Modern and Contemporary Sculpture Outreach Suitcase.
- Dive into more contemporary art exploring themes such as identity, performance, and use of materials with our Nick Cave: Educator Resource Guide.

*Hyperlinked URLs can be found in the glossary. All SAM Resource Guides and materials are copyright protected and can be used for educational purposes only.
**IMAGINING: LOOKING QUESTIONS**

*Like A Hammer, 2014, Jeffrey Gibson, Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians/Cherokee, b. 1972, elk hide, glass beads, artificial sinew, wool blanket, metal studs, steel, found pinewood block, and fur, 56 × 24 × 11 in., Collection of Tracy Richelle High and Roman Johnson, courtesy of Marc Straus Gallery, New York, image courtesy of Jeffrey Gibson Studio and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California, photo: Peter Mauney.*

**GETTING STARTED**

What’s going on here? What do you see that makes you say that?

What is this made of? How can you tell?

How many different **textures** can you see in this artwork? What do you imagine they feel like?

Do any of the materials make sounds? If so, what do they sound like?

If you are in the exhibition, look around. Do you see any other figures like this one? How are they similar? How are they different?

**DIVING DEEPER**

Why do you think the artist chose these materials? Where have you seen or used these materials in your own life?

Why do you think this figure does not have a face?

If this figure could talk, what would it say? How would you describe its personality?

Would you consider this figure male, female, both, or neither? What makes you say that? Does it matter if this figure has a gender?

What types of clothing and materials are used in dances and events in your community? If you could create an artwork inspired by these events, what materials would you use?
“To me, 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, 2018

**INFORMATION**

Jeffrey Gibson’s series of medium-sized figures are visions of possible futures. Influenced by figurative sculptures from around the world as well as subcultures like club kids and punk rockers, Gibson considers how we imagine the human body and choose to present our identities. His figures are genderless and abstract, exploring different ways to express identity. They are covered in materials such as intricate beadwork, studs, hide, reproduction jingle cones inspired by Plains and Great Lakes Native Jingle Dance dresses, and other materials important to different Native communities. Gibson repurposes traditional knowledge and art making to create something that speaks from his own unique voice. His material choices are deliberate and frequently draw on inspiration from dance clothing he sees at intertribal powwows.

**ACTIVITY**

For this artwork, Gibson creates a powerful figure out of materials that are meaningful, inspired by guardian figures throughout the world and his own complex identity. Think about objects or symbols that are important to you or your family. How do these objects inspire you?

Imagine if these objects were used to create a superhero. What would they look like? How would they express their identity? Sketch your superhero. How does the superhero you created reflect your family’s culture and background? How would they create change?

**SCALE COMPARISON**

48” tall 56” tall
STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS: ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening
Presentation of Knowledge and Idea
4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Anchor Standards for Language
Vocabulary Acquisition and Use
5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

CREATING
Anchor Standard 1
Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 2
Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

PRESENTING
Anchor Standard 6
Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.

RESPONDING
Anchor Standard 8
Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

CONNECTING
Anchor Standard 11
Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.
EMPOWERING: LOOKING QUESTIONS

GETTING STARTED

What is going on here? What do you see that makes you say that?

Do these objects remind you of anything?

DIVING DEEPER

How do you think incorporating text into the art affects the work? How would the artwork be different without the text?

How do punching bags add meaning to this artwork? How would this artwork change if punching bags weren’t used to make it?

Who do you think Gibson is speaking to with the title, OUR FREEDOM IS WORTH MORE THAN OUR PAIN? What do these words mean to you?

OUR FREEDOM IS WORTH MORE THAN OUR PAIN, 2017, Jeffrey Gibson, Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians/Cherokee, b. 1972, repurposed punching bags, glass beads, artificial sinew, acrylic felt, steel, and brass, 114 × 71 × 42 in., Collection of Vicki and Kent Logan, image courtesy of Jeffrey Gibson Studio and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California, photo: Peter Mauney.
INFORMATION

Punching bags are frequently seen in Gibson’s work, and OUR FREEDOM IS WORTH MORE THAN OUR PAIN continues to use this powerful symbol. Made to withstand heavy, repeated impact, they are used for training, exercise, or outlets for aggression. They may also represent a way to turn negative feelings into something empowering. Gibson has shared about his own positive experience with boxing and the benefit of reconnecting the mind and body. Once transformed by the artist with beads, tassels, embedded text, and other alterations, the punching bags keep their connection to their original purpose, while also taking on greater meaning.

This work takes Gibson’s familiar form of the punching bag and incorporates it into the symbol of the scales of justice, weighing the concepts of freedom and pain. It does not ignore the injustice and pain of the past and present, but lifts up the concept of freedom as something to fight for, declaring that it is “worth more than our pain.” He challenges viewers to move beyond the worldview they have been taught, and instead, to deconstruct harmful worldviews and put them back together to create the future they want.

ACTIVITY

Think about difficulties you face in your own life. While acknowledging that these issues are challenging and often painful, consider what you would like the future to look like. How do you want things to change? What can you do to make this change a reality? Write a short story or poem about these empowering ideas.

Extend the activity by creating a drawing or sculpture inspired by your words and Gibson’s piece. How does your understanding of Gibson’s work change when you view it through the lens of your own words?
EMPOWERING: ABOUT THE WORK

SCALE COMPARISON

48” tall

114” tall
EMPOWERING: ABOUT THE WORK

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS: ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Anchor Standard for Writing
Text Types and Purposes
3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

Production and Distribution of Writing
4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Anchor Standard for Language
Knowledge of Language
3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use
4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

PRESENTING
Anchor Standard 6
Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.

RESPONDING
Anchor Standard 8
Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

CONNECTING
Anchor Standard 10
Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

Anchor Standard 11
Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historic context to deepen understandings.
BECOMING: LOOKING QUESTIONS

Head On, 2013, Jeffrey Gibson, Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians/Cherokee, b. 1972, antique shaving mirror, deer hide, artificial sinew, and acrylic paint, 20 1/4 × 12 1/2 × 8in., Collection of Frank Liu, Courtesy of Marc Straus Gallery, New York, image courtesy Jeffrey Gibson Studio and National Academy Museum, photo: Glenn Castellano.

GETTING STARTED

What is going on here? What do you see that makes you say that?

What colors and shapes can you see? How do they make you feel? How would different colors change how the work feels?

DIVING DEEPER

This work was made using a mirror frame. Does replacing the mirror with deer hide change the way you see the object?

Why do you think Gibson chose to use deer hide and paint as his materials? How would it be different if he had painted on canvas instead of deer hide?

How does transforming an object like a vintage mirror into artwork help to tell a story?
“We are stuck in a present and past written and defined by non-Native people. I want to make work that makes the marginalized feel central. I want us to be entitled to all that surrounds us, and responsible—even if we didn’t solely create our current circumstances, we can feel empowered to author our own future.”

- Jeffrey Gibson, Jeffrey Gibson: Like A Hammer, 2018, p. 122

**INFORMATION**

Mirrors are frequently used to think about identity, and in *Head On*, Gibson complicates this theme by replacing the reflective surface of an antique shaving mirror with deer hide. By covering a colonial object with hide, he *Indigenizes* the object and places control back into his own hands. Like many of his works, Gibson confronts issues of race, power, control, stereotypes, and *colonialization* through altering the mirror’s reflection; no matter who looks into the mirror, the reflection is Indigenous.

Gibson felt limited by the stereotypical and static way that non-Native modern and contemporary art show Native identity as something that is left in the past. Native artists continue to innovate and create; however, Native art and history is often left out of the conversation when discussing *modernism* or contemporary art in the United States. Gibson began to wonder what Native American art would have become had it been included all along. This led him to create his own idea of what this version of art history would be like, blending concepts from traditional Native art with other twentieth-century art movements.

**ACTIVITY**

Take some time to reflect on your identity. What makes you who you are? What do you see when you look in a mirror? How do others see you?

Draw a circle or oval on a piece of paper to represent a mirror. Brainstorm a list of things that make up different parts of your identity (gender, race, culture, team member, family member, student, etc.). Cut out pieces from magazines, abstract shapes in colored paper, or create your own drawings that speak to these parts of your identity, and cover your “mirror” with these objects. How do these images, colors, and shapes represent who you are? How don’t they?

**SCALE COMPARISON**

48” tall

20 1/4” tall
BECOMING: ABOUT THE WORK

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS: ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Anchor Standard for Speaking and Listening
Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas
4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Anchor Standard for Writing
Production and Distribution of Writing
4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

CREATING
Anchor Standard 1
Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

PRESENTING
Anchor Standard 6
Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.

RESPONDING
Anchor Standard 8
Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

CONNECTING
Anchor Standard 10
Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

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Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historic context to deepen understandings.
TRANSFORMING: LOOKING QUESTIONS

AMERICAN HISTORY (JB), 2015, Jeffrey Gibson, Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians/Cherokee, b. 1972, wool, steel studs, glass beads, artificial sinew, metal jingles, acrylic yarn, nylon fringe, and canvas, 89 × 66 × 5 in., Lent by the Lewis Family, image courtesy of Jeffrey Gibson Studio and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California, photo: Peter Mauney.

GETTING STARTED

What is going on here? What do you see that makes you say that?

What is the first thing you notice about this piece? Why do you think that stood out to you?

What do you think this piece is made of? Why do you think that is important?

This artwork is hung on a wall. What would change if it was laid out on the floor or worn as clothing?

DIVING DEEPER

Look closely at the text on this piece. Why do you think the artist chose to use this quote?

What impact do the colors, patterns, and materials have on the quote?

The “JB” in the title of this piece stands for James Baldwin (1924-1987), an American writer and social critic during the Civil Rights Movement. How does your understanding of the work change when you know this?

Where else have you seen text used in art? How is that similar or different from Gibson’s work? How does it compare to words you see on clothing or in advertising every day?
“When I appropriate language in my art—song lyrics, poetry—these borrowed words give me confidence to articulate something that I did not have words for in my own life experience at the time—they spoke to me and for me.”
- Jeffrey Gibson, *Jeffrey Gibson: Like A Hammer*, 2018, p. 120

**INFORMATION**

Words play an important role in Gibson’s work, and he frequently uses lines from poems, song lyrics, and quotes from literature directly in his art, where they take on new meaning. The words on this wall hanging are an edited quote from James Baldwin, a writer who explored themes such as race, gender, and class during the mid-late 1900s. This quote is from a speech Baldwin gave to educators in 1963 titled “A Talk to Teachers” and addresses the complicated and devastating history of the United States. By using Baldwin’s quote in *American History (JB)*, Gibson calls attention to the injustice and colonization of people all over the world and the painful experiences of Native American people past and present.

One of Gibson’s inspirations for his beaded wall hangings comes from how he has seen museums display everything from rugs to ceremonial robes as wall hangings, colonizing and decontextualizing them from their use. By hanging this work on a wall, he creates a connection with other famous works in museums and galleries while also drawing attention to this decontextualization that is common in museums.

**ACTIVITY**

**Step One** In *American History (JB)*, Gibson includes an iconic quote from James Baldwin. Ask students to think about words that are important to them. Are they a song lyric? A poem? A quote from a book? A story told by your family? Spend some time making a list of words and phrases that have had an impact on them.

**Step Two** As a class or in small groups, discuss some of the quotes they chose. Why are they important to you? Try to unpack some of the meaning of the words together. Encourage students to consider how words have power.

**Step Three** Tape large sheets of paper or poster boards to the wall and have each student write down their chosen words. Take a moment to look at the words on the wall. Does it change how you feel about the words to see them written out and hung up? Do they have more or less of an impact?

**Step Four** Ask students to consider what the words mean to them personally. Using colored pencils, markers, paint, and/or colored paper, have students add color, shapes, and patterns to the words. How do the colors, patterns, shapes, and images express how the words make you feel? If available, consider using additional found materials such as fabric or thread.

**Step Five** When everyone is finished, share the final works with the class and have students think about each other’s pieces. How does the work make them feel? What do they think the meaning of the quotes are now that they have been turned into a new piece of art? Did the meaning change?
TRANSFORMING: ABOUT THE WORK

SCALE COMPARISON

48” tall

89” tall
TRANSFORMING: ABOUT THE WORK

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS: ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Anchor Standard for Writing
Text Types and Purposes
2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Production and Distribution of Writing
5: Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

6: Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.

9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Anchor Standard for Speaking and Listening
Comprehension and Collaboration
1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Anchor Standard for Language
Knowledge of Language
3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use
4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.
TRANSFORMING: ABOUT THE WORK

STANDARDS

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

CREATING
Anchor Standard 1
Generates and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

RESPONDING
Anchor Standard 8
Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

CONNECTING
Anchor Standard 10
Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

Anchor Standard 11
Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historic context to deepen understandings.
**GLOSSARY**

**Abstract & Abstracted:** A work that is non-representational and emphasizes the use of line, shape, and color in loose or defined ways. Not photographic or realistic.

**Club Culture:** The subculture and community surrounding dance clubs and nightclubs, often characterized by music, dancing, and innovative fashion.

**Colonialization:** The process of forcing one's own culture on another by means of subjugation and exploitation, involving theft of Indigenous territories and resources, banning of cultural practices, and killing and relocating Ingenious peoples. It continues to leave a legacy of oppression that affects Native peoples today.

**Decontextualize:** To remove something from its original background, purpose, and place.

**Figurative:** Art that clearly represents real-world objects, people, or scenes.

**Geometric Abstraction:** A type of abstract art that is based in geometric shapes. A geometric shape is a form that has clear edges and borders. Many have straight lines such as a triangle and squares, but this also includes circles and ovals.

**Identity:** How a person views themself, how others perceive you, and how a society as a whole defines groups of people.

**Indigenize:** To make something Indigenous, and bring it back under the control or influence of the people native to an area.

**Indigenous:** Any ethnic group that inhabits a geographic region with which they have the earliest historical connection. Can also refer to something that originates naturally in a specific region.

**James Baldwin (1924–1987):** An American essayist, novelist, playwright, and social critic who discussed themes such as race, gender, and class during the mid-late 1900s. He was an important voice during the Civil Rights Movement.

**Modernism:** A period and attitude from the early to the mid-20th century characterized by experimentation, abstraction, a desire to provoke, and a belief in progress.

**Powwow:** A cultural event celebrated by many Native peoples from different tribes and groups that features dancing, singing, and community.

**Texture:** The way that the surface of something physically feels. Texture can be real, as in when you touch something they feel rough or smooth, or visual, as in they look one way and might feel another.

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*These definitions are adapted from Art21’s Educator Guides

**Links**

Page 5:  [http://art.seattleartmuseum.org/collections](http://art.seattleartmuseum.org/collections)
[seattleartmuseum.org/erc](seattleartmuseum.org/erc)
[https://spoti.fi/2zQb0J8](https://spoti.fi/2zQb0J8)

(Activity)

Work of Art

Sketch the Work

Look Closely

What do you see?

What do you think about that?

What does it make you wonder?
Like A Hammer, 2014, Jeffrey Gibson, Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians/Cherokee, b. 1972, elk hide, glass beads, artificial sinew, wool blanket, metal studs, steel, found pinewood block, and fur, 56 × 24 × 11 in., Collection of Tracy Richelle High and Roman Johnson, courtesy of Marc Straus Gallery, New York, image courtesy of Jeffrey Gibson Studio and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California, photo: Peter Mauney.
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