

Jeff Gibson Countertypes

9 June - 27 August 2022

Jeff Gibson: Countertypes considers one of Australian art's most significant voices in contemporary art. Jeff Gibson (b.1958) is a Brisbane-born, New York-based artist who has worked in a variety of media and contexts—photography, video, prints, posters, banners, and books for galleries and public spaces.

Shaped by his upbringing amidst punk and new wave culture in Brisbane and Toowoomba in the late 1970s, via poster-making and the language of appropriation in public space, Gibson's 40-year career has contributed to an international shift in the way photographic imagery is engaged with as art, and in the integral role of text. A former editor of *Art & Text* magazine, Gibson moved to New York in 1998 to work for *Artforum*, where he is currently managing editor.

Helping to forge what is known today as 'image-based art', Gibson is a leading exponent of work that incorporates and analyses mass-media imagery, elevating appropriation, quotation, excerptation, juxtaposition and staging as crucial artistic strategies.

Such treatments have their roots in postmodern 'Pictures' art, but they remain integral today for any artist interested in examining the influence of social media and internet culture.

Much of Gibson's work follows a collage logic whereby two or more dislocated things are meant to resonate with one another. His work aligns with the concept of the countertype: iconic signs that, depending on context, can be read as either sympathetic or antagonistic to other iconic signs. For Gibson, compositional relations and artwork-viewer relations are part of the same nexus of affective and discursive experience. Instead of settling arguments, for Gibson, art starts conversations, suggesting that to dissect cultural typologies is to attest to how one gets made through them.

Curators:
Wes Hill and Angela Goddard

Cross Examination 1980

Synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Griffith University Art Collection. Purchased 1980

The earliest work in the exhibition, *Cross Examination*, anticipates Gibson's future interests in seriality, screenprinting, and compositional layering. This painting was purchased by the institution now known as Griffith University Art Museum, at the tail end of the artist's time in Queensland, when more conceptual terrain was beckoning. Months after making his first experiments with collaged images and participating in a performance art piece at Griffith University with the Australian video art pioneer John Gillies, Gibson moved from Brisbane to Sydney in 1981 to help found—with a cohort of former Toowoombaites—the artist-run gallery Art/Empire/Industry, whose program Gillies contributed to.

Impostor 1987

Screenprints

Collection: Elaine Baker and John Cruthers, Sydney

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, in between teaching at Sydney College of the Arts, writing art criticism, and working for *Art & Text* magazine, Gibson became more interested in the pop-psychological associations of archetypal imagery, and in the self-image as a public object. For the series 'Impostor' (1987), he made posters of himself posed as various types of unprincipled shysters appearing in public spaces around Sydney.

This series, coincidentally, was made around the same time as Jeff Koons's *Baptism* (1987) was featured in the pages of *Artforum*, comprising multiple, full-page presentations of a smirking Koons accompanied by assorted religious and royal tchotchkes, inflated Romantic sentiments, and, finally, the phrase "CRITICALITY GONE" next to a Capodimonte porcelain vase being hit with a hammer.

Produced in the year of a global stock market collapse, both projects suggest that the undependability of the artist is a positive effect of the viewer's empowerment: viewers are the ultimate makers of meaning.

disENGAGE 1986
disORIENTATE 1986
disLOCATE 1986
disINHERIT 1986
disPOSSESS 1986
Screenprints

Griffith University Art Collection. Purchased 1986

A self-confessed television addict since childhood, Gibson moved naturally from abstraction to mass-media appropriation, mining images he felt seduced by but also ambivalent about. He and many artists of his generation breathed new life into Warhol's legacy, whose work anticipated both the hybridisation of artistic mediums and the transposition of artists and audiences. While completing a Graduate Diploma at the Sydney College of the Arts in 1984, he was co-managing another artist-run gallery (Union Street) and making photographic screenprints and Xerox poster collages that revolved around combinations of image and text. 'Trigger Happy' (1985) and 'DisPOSTERS' (1986) effectively indicate the start of Gibson's "Pictures-aligned" career. The images in both series might span the 1950s to 1980s, but, above all, they signal a media-space vocabulary: they combine the 'no place whatsoever' of film noir with the makeshift, impositional style of collage familiar to punk and underground zines.

Trigger Happy c.1985/2012

Digital print on wallpaper (adapted from c.1985 posters)

Courtesy of the artist

In contrast with the American artist Barbara Kruger, whose well-known work *Untitled (Money can buy you love)* (1985) dates from this same period, Gibson's motives in 'Trigger Happy' and 'DisPOSTERS' are less obviously political, but arguably no less pointed. Both series emphasise relationality ('trigger' is a reaction, 'dis' a negation) and position art as a game of call and response, tasking viewers with the identification of types and countertypes, poetic affinities and critical negations. Gibson seems to be asking himself: "How do I put image and text together without the images illustrating the text, and without the text explaining the images?" This rather modest, semantic line of inquiry does not, as in Kruger's work, implicate a viewer who is deafened by the perpetual communication of mass culture. Instead, Gibson inspires a response, perhaps even encouraging us to search for critical subject matter that he hasn't even put there.

Frustration-aggression hypothesis

Ego failure

Human nature

Organ inferiority

from the 'Screwballs' series 1992

Screenprints

Griffith University Art Collection. Purchased 1992

'Screwballs' stemmed from Gibson's experiments with painting, which saw him juxtaposing goofy-looking cartoon heads (anticipated in the facial contortions of 'Impostor') with dry, pithy accounts of their psychological states of mind.

Their psychologies centre on failure, repression and, following on from 'Skin Deep', the pathologies of what we might call 'thin-skinned men'. Cartoon male portraits soon made way for these chubby cartoon penises, accompanied by clinical definitions of terms such as 'human nature', 'ego failure', and 'organ inferiority'.

The series became a street art project, presented as anonymous posters in public spaces. According to Susan Best, in an article from 1993, 'Screwballs' serves as an "exemplary model" of masculinity deconstruction in which men "reflect upon themselves and the sexual nature of their knowledge", in the context of the implied democracy and neutrality of public space.

Power cuts 1994

from Artrage: the compilation video

Digital video transferred from VHS, colour, sound, 2:15 minutes

Griffith University Art Collection. Purchased with assistance from the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body, 1995

Since Gibson's move to New York in 1998, editing has been at the fore of his work, making explicit a taxonomic impulse, and, more literally, building on his mid-1990s' experiments in video art, one of which, *Power Cuts* (1994; curated by Kim Machan), was created as part of an art project broadcast on the early morning ABC TV video music program *Rage*.

Untitled 1–10 1987

Gelatin silver photographs and screenprints on paper

Collection of The University of Queensland. Purchased 2012

In deploying colour, form, text and visual content as relational signifiers, Gibson made art a matter of constructed ambience, in which denotation, connotation and evasion operate together with consequence. Tellingly, when he returned to abstract painting in the series 'Untitled 1–10' (1987), it was now for its 'second-degree' status, as a transitive code among many others, rather than an ordinary, physical, painterly presence.

Untitled

Untitled

from the 'Skin Deep' series 1990-91

Direct positive colour photograph

Purchased 1991. John Darnell Bequest

Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art

Discovering in portraiture a process akin to psychological modelling, in 'Skin Deep' (1990–91) Gibson shifted from staging himself (the artist) as a fraud to dealing in archetypes of counterfeit masculinity. 'Skin Deep' consists of appropriated portraits of has-been male celebrities—mostly B-grade matinee idols such as Fess Parker and Robert Stack—that Gibson has overlaid with translucent abstract surfaces, making their dated personae appear decayed and diseased. It instigated a number of works that attended to both the corrosion of masculine ideals and to their morphological persistence, even in a contemporary art world that had purportedly absorbed the era's feminist values. In a key article from the first issue of *Art & Text*, Paul Taylor noted that younger artists were now "directing our attention to the question of Modernism's decline". However, in the 'Skin Deep' and 'Screwballs' series, Gibson seems to have been suggesting that this modernist past was enduring, pointing to an old-school 'toxic masculinity' that was well and truly alive.

Pictopoesis 2022

Digital print on wallpaper

Adapted from @pictopoesis Instagram feed

Courtesy of the artist

'Pictopoesis' is an ongoing Instagram art project comprising assorted commercial products that have been sourced online and lightly Photoshopped on empty white backgrounds in arrangements of four. Gibson posts one of these four-part compositions to his @pictopoesis account each week, and, after nine weeks, he posts them together as a cluster of 36 image products in total. In *Countertypes*, Gibson has translated these compositions into wallpaper for the first time, expanding on his previous use of appropriated product imagery in prints, A-frame signs, and billboards. Like an imagined photographic taxonomy of the Amazon.com database, the taxonomies draw on the archive-based conceptual photography of artists such as Bernd and Hilla Becher and Douglas Huebler, whose works display a mechanical obsession with verifying 'types' but also the fraught human element motivating such classificatory zeal.

The small poetic pauses generated by 'Pictopoesis' and 'You might also like ...' (seen elsewhere in the exhibition) are sometimes like Internet versions of a 'punctum', a term used by Roland Barthes in his account of (analogue) photographs, whereby a seemingly inconsequential element "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me".

Scrolling through Gibson's @pictopoesis account, we aren't likely to be moved in the 'bruising' Barthesian sense, but the bemused jolt we often experience does have a similar, accidental sense of poignancy.

Dupe 2017

HD video, colour, sound, 9:09 minutes

Courtesy of the artist

'Dupe' (2000–17) is both a series of text works and a time-based digital compilation of them, paired with calming, schmaltzy, 1950s'-era orchestral Muzak. Following the taxonomic psychologies of 'Screwballs', this series pinpoints psychosocial dispositions, though not of a particularly 'masculine' order. Each text starts with a short poetic 'diagnosis' of human behaviour, followed by an explanation.

Gibson has stated that he wrote almost all of the 'Dupe' texts in response to specific individual behaviours. This might sound somewhat sinister, but perhaps it's his artful way of coping with a professional life engaged with passionate, distinctive, creative egos. Tellingly, passive psychological inventories are outnumbered by apoplectic-sounding ones. Although text works, their photographic equivalents might be Cindy Sherman's series 'Society Portraits' (2008), which skewers art-world collector types, but with such poise that we can also detect a reluctant affection for them.

You might also like ... 2017

4K video, colour, sound, 14 minutes

Courtesy of the artist

Colloquially, Gibson refers to 'Dupe' (seen elsewhere in the exhibition) as his "definitions", and to his later digital image-based work 'You might also like ...' (2017) as "taxonomies"— in other words, "defs and taxes". These two forms were brought together as *Metapoetaestheticism* (2014) for the 2014 Whitney Biennial, and are representative of his post-2000s' aesthetic sensibility of deadpan precision.

Various ephemera from Jeff Gibson's archive 1980s

Photographs, preparatory artwork

Courtesy of the artist

Untitled (Green Acres) 2021

Untitled (Kay Sage) 2021

Untitled (Elon Musk) 2021

Untitled (Frog) 2021

Decoupage on wood panel

Courtesy of the artist

Untitled (JFK) 2021

Untitled (Wake in Fright) 2021

Untitled (Anatomy) 2021

Untitled (Doogie Howser) 2020

Decoupage on wood panel

Courtesy of the artist

In early 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a resurgence in home crafts, Gibson began turning his hand to decoupage, cutting and gluing paper images onto square wooden panels, partly as a break from the computer screen.

These works continue the intuitive editorial aspects of 'Pictopoesis' but, here, commercial product images are now buried in a sea of encyclopaedic references, alongside images of art, film, architecture, comics, and medical diagrams.

Harking back to Gibson's first experiments with collage and Xeroxing in the early 1980s, these works nonetheless also absorb his experience of roughly two decades of making art by digital means.