

## CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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ARTSEEN | JUNE 2024 | VENICE

# National Pavilions: Jeffrey Gibson and Manal Aldowayan

By Amanda Millet-Sorsa

The 60th Venice Biennale, curated by Adriano Pederosa, is responding to an ever present and urgent acknowledgement that visual art has often excluded certain demographics of artists from its main stages. How do we as a global multi-cultural society come to terms with a post-colonial world where

the residue of former imperialist power structures is still felt in existent social structures across the globe? And how do audiences craving culture and art flocking to Venice, find work in these pavilions that transcend overt socio-political questions to, rather, be moved by our senses and imagination, into the realm of poetry? The Biennale is defined by country pavilions and has for its many decades of existence been a multicultural, global platform where artists and curators show work that most represent their nation.



Jeffrey Gibson, *the space in which to place me*, Pavilion of United States of America, 2024. 60th International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia. Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia. Photo: Matteo de Mayda.

Jeffrey Gibson (USA) and Manal AlDowayan (Saudi Arabia) present work that speaks to strong roots in materiality, stretching beyond the researched content and political dialogue of most artworks on view. Jeffrey Gibson's pavilion for the USA is undeniably a moment where politics and art collide, provoke, and present a cornucopia of color and geometry, deeply engrained in his Native American heritage. He is reclaiming monuments and statues that have traditionally symbolized Western Eurocentric power, encouraging us to enter an alternate state of mind as if through psychedelics, with the transformation of the neo-classical White-House-esque architecture of the USA Pavilion, now covered in geometric multi-colored triangle shapes reminiscent of abstract motifs found in First Nation textiles and totems.

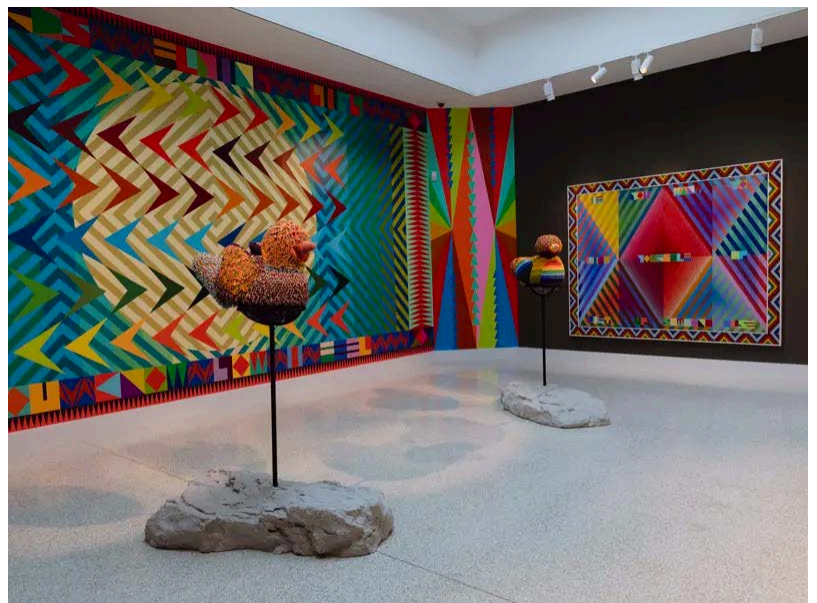
At front, the stacked stage-like red pedestals, where inter-tribal indigenous performers shared their jingle dance and visitors climb to take memorable selfies, is also an enlarged monument poking fun at these institutional symbols. Inside, we see neo-classical busts, but instead of the usual man carved from white marble, as is the case for memorializing men of power through this form, we have a refashioning of these busts as a head made of color beads and braids

for long hair. Color here has become more than a symbol representing the four seasons or other culturally meaningful associations within indigenous culture, as the entire rainbow has taken over and made itself known in place of the whiteness of gallery walls and the equally white marble often associated with political power (even though in ancient Greece and Rome those same statues were in fact brightly painted.)

The work is rich in multitudes of formats as much as the diversity of vivid flat colors from monument to pedestal sculpture, to video, performance, beads and ribbons, painting, to works on paper all deep in its critique of institutional symbols through a lens of humor, craft, memorabilia, abstract geometries, color, and text. Gibson is well versed in reconsidering monuments and has covered every inch of wall and made statue-totems that are taller than any human so that we could feel the might and presence of such imagined idols, open mouthed, multi-eyed spirits incarnated with bird-like characteristics. The arms with organized ribbons hanging vertically, materials sourced from indigenous craft stores, a



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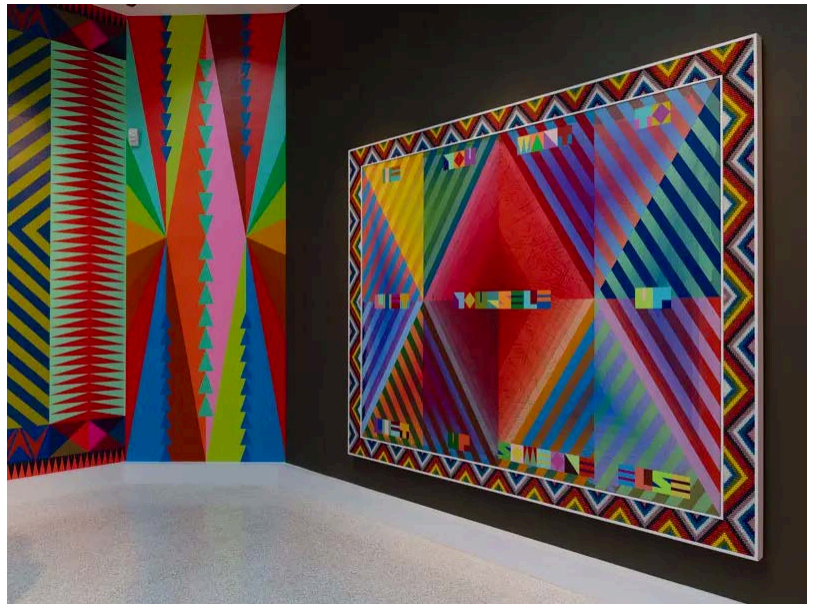




mixture of feathers that may flap in the wind, arms to the sides in v-shapes, standing straight, stoic, motionless, and tall like a monument. To stand tall and straight and erect, is a testament to power or an ascending spirit pole like a totem, perpendicular to our flat land like a scarecrow in the cornfield. Color as joy, color as kitsch, color as symbol, color as the means to attract, to addict, to transport into the altered state, into kaleidoscopic feelings, as a signifier of armature or in mating rituals, as erotic and the senses, as carnival and as a mask, essentially the opposite of everything that the first pilgrims with Puritan values colonizing North America brought with them as the first settlers and eventual ruling class. All of this combined comes to the surface in this multi-sensory experience, which is meant to engage, be loud, because this is an entrance, and the means to bring a seat and make space for one's self at the table.

Venice is itself an exuberant, Baroque, Gothic, Byzantine,

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Moorish, colorful and opulent boutique city, calling on the riches and fantasies of its past globetrotter merchants who had predilections for luxury, and such an audacious installation is very American, indeed. There is no question about the importance of representation, visibility, and recognition that standing behind and making space for this work by institutions for a First Nation artist, is where we can feel a conscious momentum and shift towards more inclusion and healing from a violent history and treatment of its indigenous people. Though a number of political barriers were broken with this pavilion, I was left to wonder about the stillness felt in the work. A part of me wanted the artworks to go further and liberate the forms from their neoclassical structures, which are embedded in early art history in the USA, before the postwar artists elevated the USA into a cultural beacon on the level of its neighboring pavilions. This kind of liberation through movement was mostly felt in the jingle dance and the movements of the body both present in the video and in the live performances. The video work embodied a sense of repetition, voices as a calling or mantra, a playfulness with a simple traditional dance, and modernizing it into an active geometric and psychedelic video piece, which could also be a critique towards our very American tendencies to fall into the easy addictive potential of the moving screen. Come hither, it seems to say, but also be wary, don't stay and get sucked in. Dance, and keep moving.

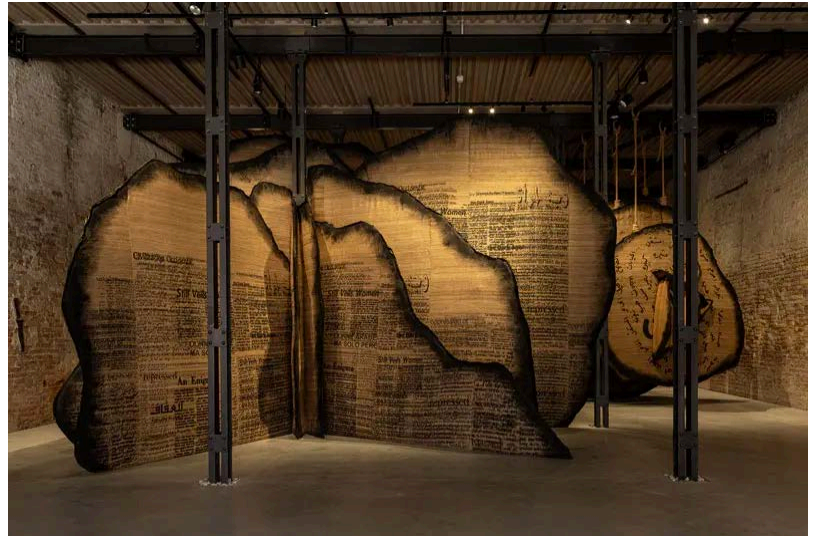


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Manal AlDowayan's installation *Shifting Sands: A Battle Song* is a call towards the desert where the monumental scale of soft, slim, irregular disk shapes with rough outer edges and sizes layered in rows made of raw tussar off-white silk recall the eroded crystal formations known as desert roses. We're immediately transported into the neutral hues of vast arid lands of the Middle East, but

specifically Saudi Arabia. On these round shapes we can observe excerpts of text from global newspapers printed in black ink from different languages, juxtaposed together, a composition that is repeated across the silk surfaces, as if blown in the wind. The phrases and excerpts focus on perceptions of Saudi women: “repressed”, “still veils women”, “viewed as man’s property”...

At the forefront of this work are questions of who gives voice to, how does one’s voice get heard, and how can one empower one’s voice, but specifically applied to Saudi women in this case, how they are perceived, and othered. The more casual and handwritten excerpts of script in both English and Arabic, accompanied by amateur representational drawings of women and trees, are selected from research groups led by the artist to ask Saudi women this very question about where do they find their power? How do they view themselves if not by these words from journalists? This is especially prescient in a country that is undergoing a cultural shift where the restrictions on women are changing so their participation in society is increased and there is a move towards more autonomy. Walking through these dominoes of silky material, feeling the weight of these sculptures hanging from thick rope, one can feel the weight of the text, but also the latent sensuality in the materials. The luscious black ink, akin to the smoky, oily, thick eyeliner of women’s eyes or of the oil that runs deep beneath their land, beneath the trees and their roots, the source of their economic power.



Manal Al Dowayan, *Shifting Sands: A Battle Song*. Pavilion of Saudi Arabia, 2024. 60th International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia. Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia. Photo: Andrea Avezzi.

The silk surfaces also have handwritten excerpts mostly in Arabic or English, compiled by



AlDowayan as research material gathered when bringing Saudi women together and asking them how they define their sense of empowerment within their communities. These translate as words of affirmation or empowerment and drawings as if from a teenager's journal, of veiled women, a fist raised up in power, a blooming tree, where nature stands in as a place where these women gain their strength and whose voices continue to battle and build their collective song. We can also hear a sound installation coming from speakers on the sides inside of the pavilion where their group singing has been recorded. Ardah is a traditional ceremony in Saudi Arabia where men partake together with their voices and swords forming a ring and chanting together. As a poet in the middle leads everyone into song and dance, a kind of battle song that serves to unify its members together. The roots of this dance ceremony take hold in the practices of nomadic tribes for the first Bedouins in the desert. The artist noted that petroglyphs of such dances, found in their country in the Southern Najran region, include a plethora of depictions of women. The Saudi Arabian desert holds one of the world's greatest collection of petroglyphs, dating back as early as the Neolithic period.

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Though we are given insights into the ways Saudi women feel empowered, it seems these collective thoughts remain largely present in an interior space, and that is an essential place for one's inner voice to be

heard. When empowerment is felt in the public sphere, it is then that its meaning really starts to take shape. Journalism in the public sphere has a power that has served a double-edged sword where on one hand, it can inform, recount, give voice to those who can't speak, and light to subjects that otherwise might be swept under a carpet, and on the other hand the media can hype-up, distort, exaggerate, and shape our ideas into narratives that amplify our biases. *Shifting Sands: A Battle Song* could have us imagine what it would be like for women to experience growth as a collective community in Saudi Arabia, to lift up this sword as they too could sing and dance like the images of their ancestors carved into the pre-historic stones that show women with disheveled hair dancing in the wind among their tribes.

There is definitely a thirst, a need, and a duty for art that echoes the cultural shifts taking place in different countries as a result of activism. What I ask myself when encountering work is where is the search in materiality present, the



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inventiveness of form, the transcendence of subject to the universal, beyond borders and nation states and local cultures, isn't art about the resistance to being labeled, to express freely and to touch those still standing a two hundred years from now, and to be free from the forces that want to weigh us down?

Where is the poetry in the work that moves us, so as to stop in our tracks hundreds of years from now, like we are with the

Titian and Tintoretto cycles in the churches, also in Venice? Because if we aren't making art that is timeless and thought provoking and relevant for future generations, then what are we doing?



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