


Jeffrey Gibson's 'Nothing is Eternal' is Perfectly Chaotic

By Sarah Hotchkiss  Oct 30



Jeffrey Gibson, 'Nothing is Eternal,' 2020; installation view at the Tenderloin National Forest. (Joseph Sanders/CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts)

When I try to think past Nov. 3, my brain splits into possible futures like the chapters of a *Choose Your Own Adventure* paperback. Will the election go this way (turn to page 45) or *this* way (turn to page 46)? So much seems to hang in the balance and so much seems up in the air: affordable housing, voting rights, workers' rights, bodily autonomy, the very definition of American values.

But the thing is, all possible outcomes, to continue this potentially misguided metaphor, are part of the same book. (It could be called *Misadventures in Late Capitalism*.) And as much as we progress through its pages, there's always the potential of being forced back to another branch in the timeline, a present that more closely resembles a previous moment in this country's fraught and unequal history.

Jeffrey Gibson's *Nothing is Eternal*, an 18-minute video commissioned by the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art, distills these forking paths into a non-narrative, tripped-out, vaguely menacing yet routinely beautiful thing. First shown at the Tenderloin National Forest (an alleyway-turned-oasis off Ellis Street) on Oct. 22 with screenings online and at the Headlands scheduled for Oct. 30–Dec. 12, *Nothing is Eternal* meets the moment—not by being perfect, but by emphasizing the uncertainty present in all aspects of life, including our particular political arena.



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The video, curated by Kim Nguyen and organized by Diego Villalobos, begins with a light drumroll, atonal strings and a view through forest leaves that cross-dissolves into a waving American flag. (Were it not for the context of its conception and presentation, its first three-and-a-half minutes might be confused for right-wing political B-roll.) But at that 3:30-minute mark, the music shifts, the strings morph into synths, and close-ups of people's faces enter the frame. Images flicker; the cross-dissolves crowd up until three or four different scenes overlay each other. Face masks pinpoint the making of the video in the current pandemic, while other elements are timeless: a nighttime drive, a spider web, countless homes sporting miniature lawn flags or full-sized Stars and Stripes.

I can identify two recurring "characters" in *Nothing is Eternal*. One is a grounded, possibly injured black-feathered bird, the opposite of the soaring eagle we might expect to accompany flag images. The other is Celeste, a drag performer who appears only halfway through, along with the video's title, which flashes like a neon sign. Celeste dances before time-lapse clouds, lip syncing words to a song we cannot hear. The performer's expressive, beautifully made-up face conveys anguish, drama and the seductive power of pop. It's a bit of performance art, compelling even without context, bookended by what are essentially documentary-style images—despite their experimental trappings.

Nothing is Eternal accelerates as it progresses. Everything moves fast—too fast. The American flag, projected over people’s faces, turns toxic. The bird reappears, its breathing still labored. And then relief: the final two minutes point skyward, showing clouds forming and moving across a magnificently hued sunset sky. Despite their artificial speed, the clouds are calming as they fade to darkness, promising sleep and another try at this thing: a new day.



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I caught myself trying to divide the video into binaries (humans and nature, red and blue, militaristic drums and moaning synths, before and after), but *Nothing is Eternal* pushes against this impulse in its flickering, sometimes chaotic overlays. Its images are heterogeneous, though distinctly “not here” (the video was filmed in New York’s Hudson Valley, where Gibson lives). A random sampling of three stills might yield the underside of a lily pad, a rusting American flag decal and a smiling teenager in braces. In its unwillingness to be pinned down, I think *Nothing is Eternal* will exist after Nov. 3 very much the same way it does now. As will we all, at least in the immediate: expecting a momentous, life-changing “after” is a fallacy.

In its online description, the video offers up a kind of disclaimer that doubles as a manifesto of its making: “The work is as best a response that could be formed to address the violence of institutional timelines, of expectations that remain unreasonable and unsustainable, of a world in crisis, and of living in late capitalism, a train that continues to move with or without its passengers.”

Nothing is Eternal is not a hopeful vision of a future America, as many would wish to see right now, but a collapse of all the past, present and future timelines into one amorphous piece of sound and moving image. As such, it mirrors the uncertainty of these pre-election days as much as it does the uncertainty of the American project in a nation that is not so much divided as it is inchoate.



'Nothing is Eternal' is on view Oct. 30–Nov. 3 at ybca.org and robertsprojectsla.com; Oct. 30–Dec. 12 at wattis.org; and Dec. 3, 4, 10 and 11, 5–7pm outdoors at Headlands Center for the Arts. [Details here.](#)