

The Artist Jimmie Durham: A Long Time Gone, but Welcomed Back

By JORI FINKEL MARCH 10, 2017



Jimmie Durham in his studio in Naples, Italy. This 76-year-old American artist has his first solo show in the United States in 22 years, at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.

Giulio Piscitelli for The New York Times

LOS ANGELES — It was a big night for the 76-year-old American artist Jimmie Durham. That evening, Jan. 28, was the opening of his retrospective at the [Hammer Museum](#) here, eagerly anticipated because he has not had a solo show in the United States in 22 years.

Along with collectors and curators, dozens of artists came to see the works firsthand: Charles Gaines, Liz Glynn, Tacita Dean and Andrea Fraser included. Crowds surrounded a small army of gangly, totemic wood sculptures enlivened with clothing, animal skulls and paint. They lined up to see an equally unruly life-size self-portrait — a funky assemblage that parodied a “job wanted” ad, with handwritten notes on a canvas body promoting the artist’s attributes. The words “useless nipple,” “12 hobbies!” and “I am basically lighthearted” ran across his chest. The work had a shell for an ear and a turquoise stone for an eye. But viewers had to make do with the self-portrait, because the artist with bright blue eyes and a wry, self-deprecating sense of humor was nowhere to be seen. Mr. Durham, a Cherokee Indian, has not stepped foot in the United States since 1995, the year of his last New York gallery show, at Nicole Klagsbrun. Given his history as an activist critical of the United States government, dating to his [leadership in the American Indian Movement](#) in the 1970s, published reports have said he was living in a self-imposed exile in Europe.

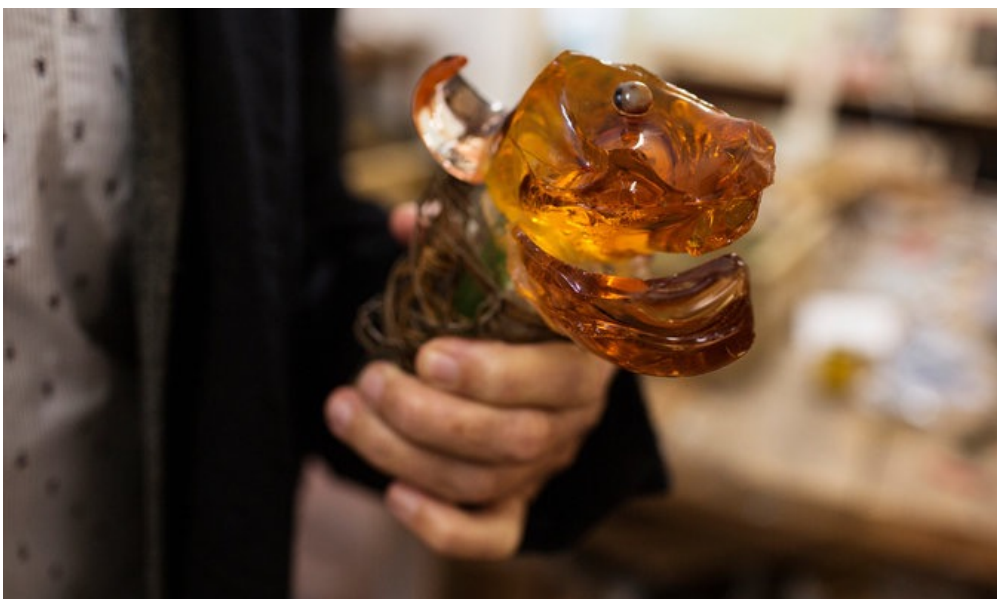


"Head," from 2006. Jimmie Durham/Fondazione Morra Greco, Naples, Italy, via Kurimanzutto, Mexico City

"That's not really the case," Mr. Durham explained in a rare interview, conducted over three Skype video calls from Naples, Italy, where he and his partner, the artist Maria Thereza Alves, have turned a 12th-century convent, more recently used as a leather factory, into a studio with living quarters. He said he couldn't visit Los Angeles this year on doctor's orders.

"I wish I could have come for the show," he said. "I have had many stupid problems over the last three years: strokes and broken bones and this and that. And I'm not quite over them."

Still, he acknowledged that he stopped living in New York in the 1980s — and gave up having a gallery there soon after, just as he was gaining a foothold in the market — in large part out of frustration with the art world's increasing commercialization. "I guess you could call leaving New York a statement or position in that I didn't want to be judged by my monetary success. I didn't want to be a part of the American dream."



Mr. Durham holding one of his works. Giulio Piscitelli for The New York Times

Mr. Durham also has a growing fan base among artists. “Instead of overinflated, overhyped, oversized installations passing as art, Jimmie Durham’s work is authentic, modest and funny,” Judy Chicago noted after seeing the show. “Plus he has the most uncanny sensitivity to materials.” She was particularly moved by a recent assemblage that combines found objects and Murano glass “in an amazing way to express the vulnerability of the body that comes with aging.”

Born to a Cherokee family in rural Arkansas, the fourth of five children, Mr. Durham was resourceful from an early age. His father was a construction worker who made his own furniture. His children followed him into the tool shed.

“As a child, I didn’t do art, but I made many things — every kind of toy, every kind of tool,” he said, mentioning wood slingshots and small animal traps. During our conversation, he retrieved some small carving knives made by his father and held them in front of the computer screen.



Some of the tools Mr. Durham uses. Giulio Piscitelli for The New York Times

“He was absolutely fanatic about his tools,” Mr. Durham said. “He didn’t approve of the way I worked. He wanted things to be nicely finished, which I don’t like necessarily. And I don’t mind using the tools badly or in ways you shouldn’t,” like hitting an ax head with a hammer to shave off a layer of wood.

Wood and stone have long been the mainstays of his sculpture. Found animal skulls, painted in bright colors or encrusted with beads or stones, prove another important medium, with the skulls of an armadillo, skunk, dog and moose appearing in the Hammer show.

He dates this interest to a visit to the Coushatta reservation in East Texas as a teenager. He spotted a deer skull, painted blue and mounted to a tree: “I was just astounded by it,” he said. “I felt it was part of something extremely serious and special.”



"The Forest and Brancusi," from 2012.

Jimmie Durham, via Kurimanzutto, Mexico City

After enrolling at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Geneva in 1970, he began incorporating the skulls into art. He remembers finding a dead badger on the side of a road leading to France. "I went back home and got my good knife and skinned the badger," he said. "I took the head off, boiled the meat, made something out of the skin and made an artwork out of the skull. I used everything."

In 1974, he became the director of the International Indian Treaty Council, an organization founded during an American Indian Movement meeting at Standing Rock, N.D., to promote the sovereignty and rights of "native nations" across the world. He resigned five years later, citing leadership problems. (As for current Standing Rock protests against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, he said he wished he could do something concrete to help: "I have friends there, and I think the last thing they need is my words.")

As he began showing his artwork more frequently in New York, he struggled with its reception. One series from 1982, canvas paintings incorporating documentary photographs of Indian hardships, proved too popular with a mainly white audience — "too easy, too entertaining," he said. "The paintings were always semiabstract, and the photos were always horrible things happening on or around Indian reservations."



Pieces of Murano glass used by Mr. Durham. Giulio Piscitelli for The New York Times

His work began to confront Native American stereotypes. In 1985, he built museum-like displays of faux-Indian specimens. One was a handprint on paper made with red paint and his blood; another was “Pocahontas underwear,” a garment he made of dyed-red chicken feathers and beads, putting Native American craft materials to startling use.

But Mr. Durham grew frustrated by the general tendency, especially during the heyday of multiculturalism, to read his art biographically. Recent work — including photographs, drawings, vitrines and video — tends to be more enigmatic or abstract, with a 2012 series combining carved wood blocks and metal machine parts found in his studio into dynamic forms that resemble Brancusi columns out of whack.

Mr. Durham first met Ms. Ellegood in 2006. She was a curator at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and had the idea of pairing him with the artist Sam Durant to represent the United States at its Venice Biennale pavilion. But when questions arose about the fact that Mr. Durham is not registered as a citizen with the Cherokee Nation, he withdrew from the project.



"Tlunh Datsi," a work from 1984
by Mr. Durham. Jimmie Durham

His lack of registration also fueled an allegation by a retired Cherokee judge, cited on Mr. Durham's Wikipedia page, that he is a "poser" and not really Cherokee. Mr. Durham pointed out that "many Cherokees are not registered. My family didn't even think about registering." He criticized tribal enrollment efforts, originally backed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, as a "tool of apartheid."

Mr. Durham continued to show in Europe while Ms. Ellegood pursued a new idea: an American retrospective. Three years ago, he finally agreed. "She wore me down," he said, laughing.

She took the title of the current show from a long-running series by Mr. Durham highlighting the absurdity of any nation's or culture's claims of superiority. For years, he has been making poles "to mark the center of the world" and placing them in odd spots in the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Belgium, France, Germany, South Korea and even Siberia.

As seen at the entrance of the Hammer show, the lightweight poles typically consist of a single piece of carved wood, with a hand mirror attached. One interpretation is that the mirror implicates the viewer as complicit in a classic power play of defining who is insider and who is outsider. But Mr. Durham had a more lighthearted take. It's natural to be a touch vain, he suggested: "You want to be able to look your best when you're at the center of the world."

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