

Jimmie Durham  
Installation view



Photo: Brian Forrest

Jimmie Durham  
"At the Center of the World"  
Hammer Museum  
29.1. – 7.5.2017

"A matter of life and death and singing" is exactly right. Jimmie Durham, a "cold-blooded Cherokee" in the words of Comanche writer Paul Chaat Smith and planetary wanderer, is a distant hero to many in North America, where the Arkansas-born artist rarely exhibits the concoctions and dreams, huddlings and stories, actions and words that he's been assembling with wry humor and acerbic, political insight for half a century. The quote comes from the name of the title of one of Durham's solo exhibitions in the 1980s (and served as the marquee for a previous retrospective), but it carries the kind of poetry that's almost like a prayer.

"Prayer" is one of those words, like "spirit", that settlers sometimes paste onto the indigenous. Having lost all their spirituality, America's cowboys have sometimes tried to mine the souls of other cultures, but I hope that Durham will forgive my use of "prayer" here and take it as something like the bitter, saintly laugh of a Leonard Cohen song. All the clichés and prejudices about who and what makes an Indigenous human in North America, Durham crackles them to pieces, ramshackles the debris together with a poem, spit-shines the result with the settlers' crocodile tears, and then – with a humor that feels downright graceful – let's us in on the results. Durham does what only the best artists can: he makes art look fun without being facile, it is a kind of art that gives permission to be angry and funny and thoughtful all at the same time; it is intellectual without being pretentious, politically trenchant without being self-serious. In looking at the sculptures and actions, portraits and totems he's put together for his first North American survey in over twenty years, Durham has pulled off a difficult doubling. The sculptures mock settler-culture preconceptions about what and who an "Indian" is, whilst simultaneously clearly asserting who he is as an artist, a man, a poet, an activist, a

chuckling ontologist, a student of obscure physics (and dozens of other things too numerous to list) – and also a Native American of Cherokee descent. But Durham is so much more than even the assembly of those parts, just as his sculptures are more than the animal skulls and mufflers, scrap wood and dented refrigerators, feathers and stones that make up his work.

One piece, *Self-Portrait* (1986), reveals a whole. Penned over an effigy cut out of board and amended with a face, cock, and heart, here Jimmie Durham introduces himself, the hand-written words penned along the shape of the body.

“Hello! I’m Jimmie Durham. I want to explain a few basic things about myself. In 1986 I was 46 years old. As an artist I am confused about many things, but basically my health is good and I am willing and able to do a wide-variety of jobs. I am actively seeking employment. [...] Mr. Durham has stated he believes he has an addiction to alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, and does not sleep well. [...] Useless Nipple ↴ [...] I am basically light hearted [...] I have 12 hobbies! 11 house plants! People like my poems. [...] His abdominal muscle protrude approx. 3 to 12 inches [...] Appendix scar ↗ [...] Hands are small, sensitive. [...] Indian penises are unusually large and colorful [...] I have a crooked back [...] My skin is not really this dark, but I’m sure many Indians have coppery skin.”

The clinical third-person asides, the open-hearted self-assessment, the comic exclamations, the dark joke about euro-colonial obsessions with the sexy parts of indigenous peoples, the whole sculpture in its appearance a kind of caricature of what an “Indian” should look like, the words belying that image with subtlety and wit. The layers of his intelligence and the seemingly direct simplicity of its making coalesce into an object and extend outwards into the whole exhibition, some two hundred objects that make Durham’s work imminently approachable and deeply satisfying, and, for me, leave no doubt he’s one of the most important artists around.

Andrew Berardini



*Fleur de Pas Mal*, 2005  
Digital video, color, sound  
00:28 min



*Head*, 2006  
Wood, papier-mâché, hair,  
seashell, turquoise, metal tray  
25 x 40 x 40 cm



Installation view

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*La Poursuite du Bonheur*  
[The Pursuit of Happiness], 2003  
35mm film  
transferred to DVD, color,  
sound, 13:00 min



*Self-portrait*, 1986  
Mixed media  
198 x 76 x 23 cm



*Tlunh Datsi*, 1984  
Mixed media  
103 x 91 x 81 cm



*Various Elements from the Actual World*,  
2009, mixed media, 250 x 300 cm



*Malinche*,  
1988–92  
Mixed media  
177 x 60 x 89 cm

