

Art & Design



“Malinche,” by Jimmie Durham, at the Whitney Museum, for his show, “At the Center of the World.” The sculpture’s title refers to the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés’s slave, translator and mistress.

VINCENT TULLO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Coming Face to Face With Jimmie Durham

The sculptor’s retrospective at the Whitney Museum is a “brilliant, half-century-long act of politically driven self-invention,” our critic writes.

By HOLLAND COTTER NOVEMBER 2, 2017

“I feel fairly sure that I could address the entire world if only I had a place to stand,” the peripatetic American artist Jimmie Durham said in the 1980s. Now he has that place: the fifth floor of the Whitney Museum of American Art, where his magnetic traveling [retrospective](#) has arrived with a comet trail of controversy.

The controversy, like many attached to art are these days, is about identity and ownership: who has the right to do and say what. Mr. Durham, 77, is widely perceived as a Native American artist, maybe *the* Native American artist. He has often spoken of himself as Cherokee; his work has made frequent references to indigenous culture.

But when the retrospective, “Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World,” moved from its originating institution, [the Hammer Museum](#) in Los Angeles, to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, several historians raised objections to his ethnic claims, asserting that there’s no evidence that he is Indian at all.

Accusations that he misrepresents himself have been voiced in the past, but were now amplified by social media. This gave a sense that the show of some 120 works was ethically tainted and would, at best, limp into New York. Now that it’s here, what do we get? A review of the recent dissension on the [museum’s website](#), and the exhilarating sight in the galleries of his singular, cantankerous, container-resistant career.

True, some fact-checking has happened en route. Where the Hammer catalog followed Mr. Durham’s lead in giving his 1940 birthplace as Washington, Ark., the Whitney has changed it to Houston, Tex. And if the status of Mr. Durham’s Native American DNA is left inconclusive, that is clearly the heritage with which he self-identified from an early point.



Jimmie Durham in his video “Smashing” (2004), from the show at the Whitney Museum.

Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

This was, presumably, what prompted him to join the American Indian Movement as a [full-time organizer](#) in 1973, inspired by the group's 71-day occupation of Wounded Knee, S.D., on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, with members of the Oglala Lakota tribe. A year later, he became executive director of its International Indian Treaty Council, which campaigned for United Nations recognition of Native sovereignty. He left the job after five years, partly because of disagreements with the movement, but also to turn his energies to making art.



Clockwise from top left: "Cortez," "Choose Any Three," "Self-portrait," "Jesus (Es geht um die Wurst)," "New Clear Family" and "Wahya." Mr. Durham assembled works from New York street finds to which he added "Indian" touches: beading, seashell inlay and feathers.

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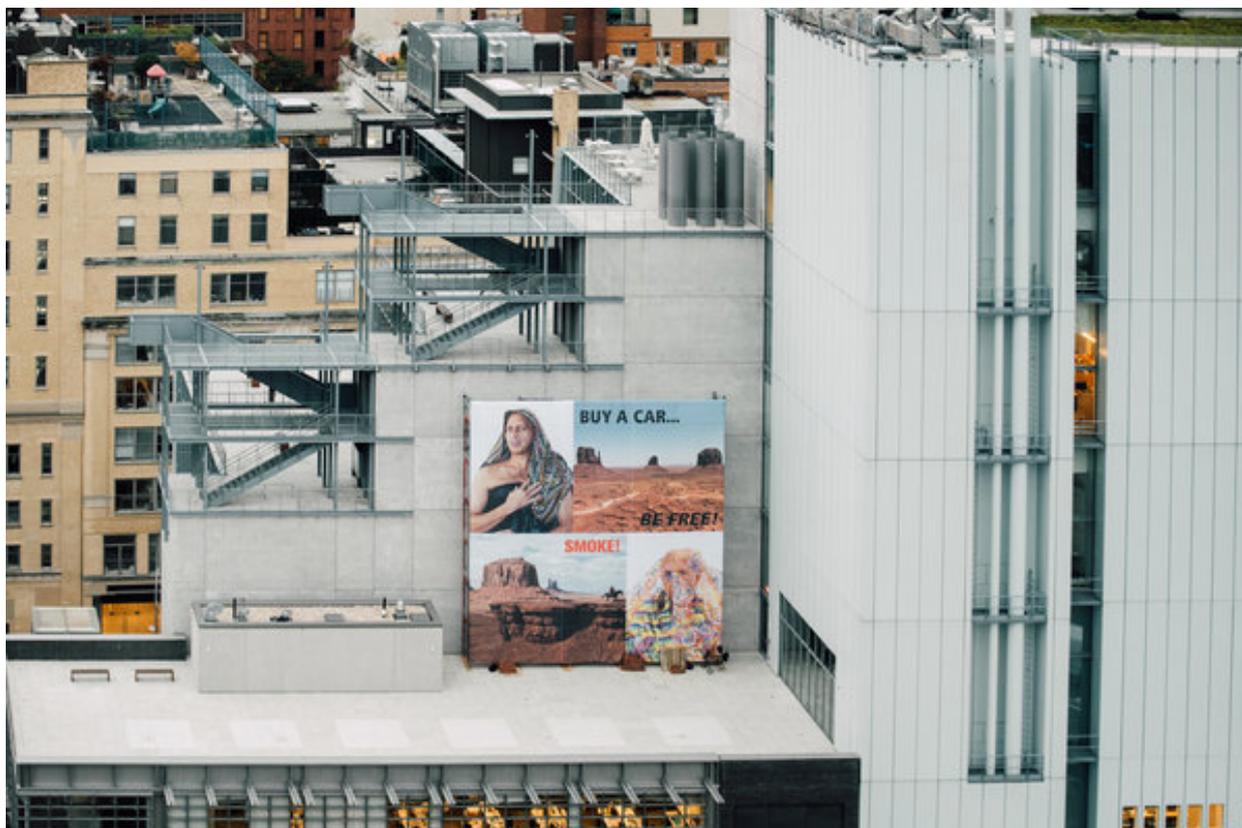
Or, rather, back to making art. In the 1960s, he had been active as a poet and performer and gone to art school in Europe. By the early 1980s, he was living in New York City with his partner, the Brazilian artist and activist [Maria Thereza Alves](#), and exhibiting in alternative spaces as multiculturalism was coalescing as a trend.



Mr. Durham's "Malinche" is made from guava, pine branches, snakeskin and a bra soaked in resin and painted gold. Malinche, Cortés's translator and mistress, has often been derided as a colonial sellout, but this is a tender depiction.

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Some of his sculptures from the era are in the Whitney show, and fascinating for the degree to which they are both Native American and not. Most are assembled from New York street finds — car parts, old clothes, animal carcasses, police barricades, wood from construction sites — to which Mr. Durham added “Indian” touches: beading, seashell inlay and feathers. A car muffler ornamented with beads and stars cut from an American flag could be a ritual object or a weapon. A stuffed moose head, pulled from a Dumpster, becomes — with its skin painted blue with yellow dots, like a night sky — the centerpiece for a scaffold-like altar.



“The Free and the Brave,” on a terrace at the Whitney, was commissioned for the New York iteration of the show. It combines photographs of “Indian country” in the American Southwest with a self-portrait of Mr. Durham.
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In this sculpture’s rambling, paragraph-long title, the artist explains that he found the head near the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, which (he writes) calls itself the world’s largest Gothic cathedral, but isn’t. It’s a modern American fantasy of such a cathedral, and, architecturally, a fake. Ethnically speaking, the moose-head altar is

a fake too. Or is it? By accepting fake as a new and different real, which is something that art does all the time, Mr. Durham gives his sculpture — and the cathedral — its own weird and authentic power.



In "St. Frigo," the dents are the result of Mr. Durham stoning the refrigerator.

Nor does he ever propose that Native American identity, at least his, is ever anything more than an artful construction. The point is instantly, and hilariously, made in his 1986 “Self-portrait.” Hanging from the wall, it’s a full-length nude figure cut from canvas (Ms. Alves traced the outline from Mr. Durham’s body), and fitted with a braid of synthetic hair, a mask-like face, wood-carved genitals, and a chicken-feather heart.



“Bedia’s Muffler,” left, and “Bedia’s Stirring Wheel.” These 1985 assemblages by Mr. Durham combine flag scraps with car parts.

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Handwritten words mark the figure’s brick-pink skin like tattoos. Some are first-person confidences (“Hello! I’m Jimmie Durham. As an artist I’m confused about many things”; “I have 12 hobbies! 11 houseplants!”). Others are like a clinician’s notes. (“Mr. Durham has stated that he believes he has an addiction to alcohol, nicotine, and caffeine”; “Indian penises are unusually large and colorful.”) The piece is one of the great sculptural selfies of the late 20th century. It’s both a record and an invention, a compound of false history and genuine cultural cliché.

When Mr. Durham does dramatize specific indigenous history, the results can be stirring. In a life-size image of Hernán Cortés, the 16th-century invader of Mexico becomes a mechanized pale-faced monster, a juggernaut of pipes and pulleys. No real surprise. But a corresponding figure of the native woman named Malinche, Cortés's slave, interpreter and mistress, has a very different presence. She is often derided in Mexico as a traitor to her people, a colonial sellout. But Mr. Durham depicts her — skeletal limbs, tiny whittled hands, disconsolate stare — with a tenderness that's almost disconcerting in the context of an exhibition otherwise laced with needling, jibing bitterness.

A source of this bitterness is the artist's unsleeping awareness of colonialism's persistence — anti-native, anti-nature, anti-difference — as a condition of American life. In 1994, in the spirit of protest, he and Ms. Alves relocated to Europe, where they now divide their time between Berlin and Naples, Italy. Mr. Durham hasn't set foot in his homeland in over 20 years. "I am not a 'Native American,' nor do I feel that 'America' has any right to either name or un-name me," he said in a 1996 interview.

Overt signs of American Indian culture have receded in his art over time. The more recent work in the retrospective — organized by Anne Ellegood, senior curator of the Hammer Museum, and installed by Elisabeth Sussman and Laura Phipps at the Whitney — includes homages to nonnative artists who have influenced him, among them Alexander Calder and David Hammons.

A brand-new billboard-size piece, "The Free and the Brave," installed on a Whitney terrace, combines photographs of "Indian country" in the American Southwest with a self-portrait of Mr. Durham playing what looks like a Gypsy version of Marcel Duchamp's drag alter ego Rose Sélavy, but that might also refer (I'm just guessing here) to the famous 1890 photograph of the Lakota Sioux chief Spotted Elk, or Bigfoot, who was found frozen to death, a scarf over his head, after the Wounded Knee massacre.

The address of Mr. Durham's work has always been both global and local, as it is in a short 2003 film called "Pursuit of Happiness," which places a comedy version of his career in the context of the international art world. The film's protagonist, named Joe Hill (and played by a real artist, [Anri Sala](#)), lives alone in a trailer on empty scrub-grassland. He scours the terrain for organic castoffs — rotten fruit, road kill — and makes collages. A gallery spots him, gives him, this unsmiling outsider, a show. The art crowd turns out. The show's a hit! The dealer (played by Mario Pieroni) hands him wads of cash. Now the new Chosen One, Joe Hill torches his trailer and heads for the Big Time (Paris, in the film). The narrative is simplistic, but accurate.

The art world — or that part of it represented by the nexus of museums, art fairs, auction houses, collectors and promoters that comprise the market — periodically makes exactly such one-off choices when it comes to artists perceived as ethically or socially marginal. We have lots of white male superstars these days, but only one

Chinese ([Ai Weiwei](#)) and one black African ([El Anatsui](#)). Mr. Durham has been assigned the Native American slot. Once such decisions are made, the diversity quota filled, the door shuts. Race-based tokenism justifiably sparks resentment. And I suspect that this resentment has done much to fuel the calling out of Mr. Durham's ethnic bona fides. But to focus on shaming an artist for what is, on the evidence of this show, a truly brilliant, half-century-long act of politically driven self-invention, strikes me as self-defeating. Far better to direct that anger at the institutions that make the decisions about what art is bought and shown. The Whitney is one, and we should demand that the place where Mr. Durham now stands should be taken by Native American artists, one after another, when he moves on.

Correction: *November 2, 2017*

An earlier version of this article misidentified the actor who played an art dealer in "Pursuit of Happiness." He is Mario Pieroni, not Jimmie Durham.

Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World
Through Jan. 28 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Manhattan; 212-570-3600,
whitney.org.