

## ***Jimmie Durham, Sculptor Who Explored Indigenous Themes, Dies at 81***

He played with and challenged Native American stereotypes, then was criticized by Cherokee artists for tracing his ancestry to their tribe.

Jimmie Durham, an artist celebrated for incorporating traditional Native American imagery and materials into lively, unconventional sculptures before his claim of Cherokee ancestry was widely challenged, setting off an intense art-world debate over his authenticity, died on Wednesday in Berlin. He was 81.

Monica Manzutto, the co-founder of his Mexico City gallery, Kurimanzutto, confirmed the death but did not specify the cause. Mr. Durham had lived in Europe, mainly in Berlin and Naples, Italy, since 1994.

Mr. Durham began his career as an artist and activist in New York, working as an organizer for the American Indian Movement in the 1970s. He emerged as an important artist in the 1980s, gaining recognition for using materials like animal hides and skulls, feathers, beads, seashells and turquoise to create startling sculptures that skewer native stereotypes.



Jimmie Durham in 2017. Early on he fought for Indigenous rights, then became celebrated for how he incorporated Native American materials and themes into his work. Giulio Piscitelli for The New York Times

For one important work, in 1984, he installed an open-jawed Puma skull adorned with a feathery headdress on a blue wooden police barricade, seemingly a symbol of oppressed Native Americans. In 1986, he made a life-size, copper-colored self-portrait out of canvas tacked to wood with a seashell for an ear, chicken feathers in place of a heart (“I am lighthearted,” he wrote nearby) and annotations throughout that play with and challenge Native American stereotypes.

But over the years, Cherokee representatives questioned his Native American identity, becoming more vocal as his art became more visible. In June 2017, shortly after his first American museum retrospective, [“Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World,”](#) moved from the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, 10 Cherokee artists, writers and scholars published an opinion piece in Indian Country Today titled [“Dear Unsuspecting Public, Jimmie Durham Is a Trickster.”](#)

The article said Mr. Durham was neither “enrolled nor eligible for citizenship in any of the three federally recognized and historical Cherokee Tribes.” It went on to dismiss his being Cherokee in any “cultural sense,” either.

“Durham has no Cherokee relatives; he does not live in or spend time in Cherokee communities; he does not participate in dances and does not belong to a ceremonial ground,” the group wrote.

The Walker Art Center quickly added a note to its exhibition materials acknowledging that there were “Cherokee artists and scholars who reject Durham’s claims of Cherokee ancestry.”



Anne Ellegood, the curator who organized the Hammer Museum show, responded several weeks later by publishing [a long essay on the website Artnet](#). She pointed out the complexities of tribal identification versus self-determination and the possibility that Mr. Durham had Cherokee ancestry. Over the last two centuries, she stressed, “the Cherokee diaspora separated many individuals from their communities, sometimes by choice, and sometimes by force.”

Paul Chaat Smith, a curator at the National Museum of the American Indian who had known Mr. Durham since the 1970s and is himself Comanche, was more direct in [a talk at the Walker that month](#). “Jimmie Durham was born into a Cherokee family, has never considered himself anything but Cherokee, and neither did anyone else in his family,” he said.

Mr. Smith explored the reasons some Indigenous people resist tribal enrollment, while pointing out how “moral outrage” had become “the millennial’s drug of choice.”

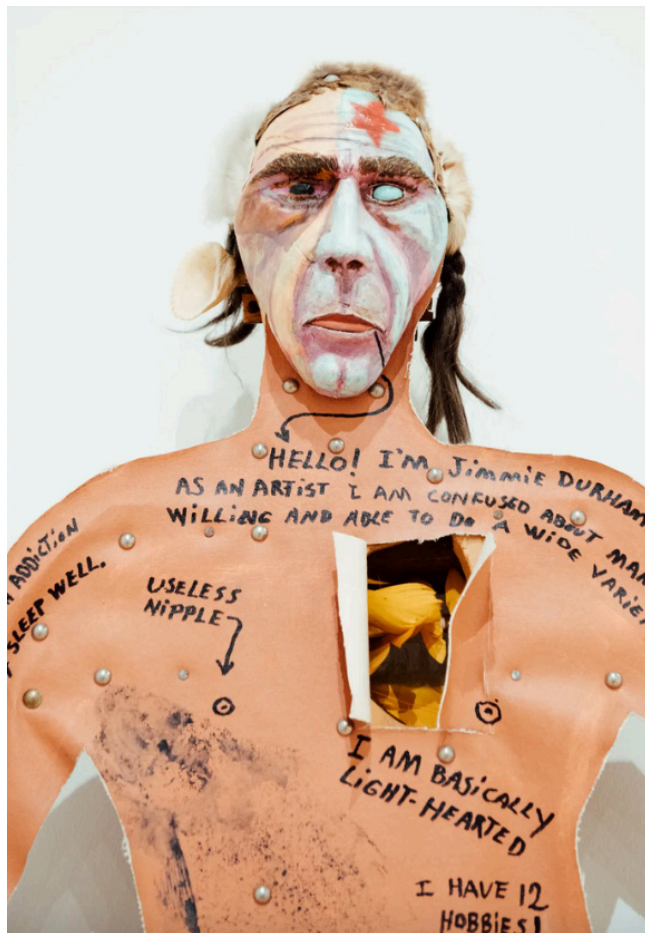
“Wow, so much passion,” he said. “So much certainty.”

The show later moved to the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

Mr. Durham himself did not publicly address the allegations made in *Indian Country Today*, but he did discuss his identity with this reporter earlier, in the lead-up to the Hammer show. “I am not a registered member, and I never would be,” he said, describing tribal enrollment efforts as a “[tool of apartheid](#)” and an attempt “by the Bureau of Indian Affairs to steal land and control the Indian population.”



“Bedia’s Muffler,” 1985. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times



Part of Mr. Durham’s full-length “Self Portrait,” 1986, which was also shown at the Whitney. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

He also pushed back against the idea that his artworks speak for or represent any ethnic group. “I am Cherokee,” he said. “But I’m not a Cherokee artist or Indian artist, no more than Brancusi was a Romanian artist,” he said. Or as he once wryly wrote for an exhibition statement: “I am a full-blooded contemporary artist, of the subgroup (or clan) called sculptors.”

Jimmie Durham was born on July 10, 1940, in Houston, the fourth of five children of Jerry and Ethel (Simmons) Durham, who named him after the yodeling country singer [Jimmie Rodgers](#). His father was an oil field worker at the time. Jimmie mainly grew up in rural Arkansas, where his father found odd jobs in construction and carpentry.

As a boy he spent a lot of time fishing, hunting and working in the tool shed, making his own tools, toys, slingshots and small animal traps. His father taught him to carve wood, and from early on, Mr. Durham said, stone and wood felt to him “like living things.”

“These things have always talked to me, jabbered at me,” he said.

He left home at 16 to travel and work on ranches; later he found a job as a mechanic at the University of Texas campus in Austin. He became friends with a Swiss student, visited him in Geneva and ended up moving there to attend its *École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts*. He eventually earned his B.F.A. there in 1973.



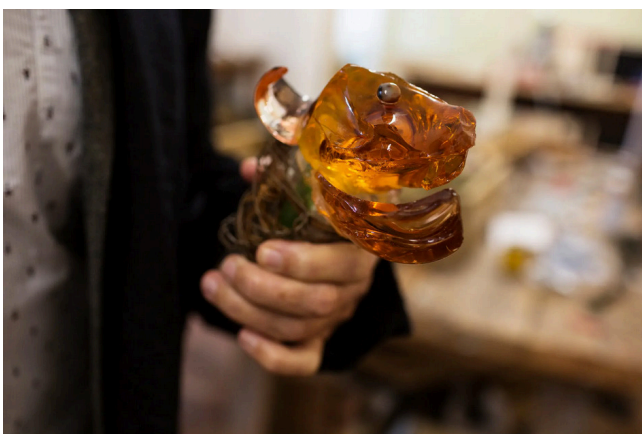
In Switzerland Mr. Durham teamed up with Indigenous friends from Chile and Bolivia to create a group called “Incomindios,” who raised money in Europe to support the rights of Indigenous people in the Americas. Galvanized by the 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee in South Dakota, Mr. Durham moved back to the United States to work as an organizer for the American Indian Movement; he soon became director of the International Indian Treaty Council in New York. He resigned in 1979, citing frustrations with its leadership and a desire to spend more time making art.

He started showing his work in New York galleries and did performances at alternative art spaces. One performance involved giving away handmade things like small carvings and, by the end of it, the very shirt off his back while projecting images that made reference to genocide of Native Americans.

In 1987, he moved to Cuernavaca, Mexico, with his companion, [Maria Thereza Alves, an activist-artist from Brazil](#), before decamping for Europe. She is his only survivor.

Mr. Durham said he had abandoned the United States because of what he saw as the increasing commercialization of the New York art world and the challenges he faced in exhibiting after the passage of the [Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990](#). The act made it illegal to market or sell any work as Indian unless it was made by “a member of any federally or officially State recognized tribe of the United States, or an individual certified as an Indian artisan by an Indian tribe.” The law exacted fines of up to \$250,000 and prison time of up to five years for a single offense.

He began showing his work instead in Europe, in gallery and museum exhibitions in Belgium, France, Austria and Germany. In Naples, he transformed a former leather factory, which had originally been a 12th-century convent, into a studio.



Mr. Durham, at his studio in Naples, Italy, showing a piece made with broken Murano glass. Giulio Piscitelli for The New York Times

By this time he had — by chance or design or both — begun making work that was more removed from Native American themes and materials. For one series, made in 2012, he used machine parts that had been left over in the leather factory and combined them with large, beautifully carved blocks of walnut and other wood. Some of the sculptures look vaguely totemic in their stacked forms, but they are also resolutely abstract — an unidentifiable, hybrid species of metal and wood.

Mr. Durham also liked to work with shards of Murano glass, giving his artwork flashes of light and color. He took a glassblowing workshop in Marseilles with a friend, the Norwegian artist Jone Kvie, in 2016, and the two ended up mounting a gallery show together, exhibiting glass “puddles,” as he called them, and other forms.

“I love the energy of broken glass, but this time I wanted to show the strange energy of glass without actually breaking it,” he said.

More recently he returned to animal skulls in a big way, mounting those of large animals from European habitats on man-made objects, including a wooden armoire, plumbing and steel scaffolding, in a way that makes them still seem powerful even when displaced and seemingly endangered by our everyday, over-furnished world.

Mr. Durham showed several of these sculptures at the 2019 Venice Biennale, where he won the Golden Lion award for lifetime achievement. Ralph Rugoff, the American-born, London-based curator who [proposed him for the award](#), praised him “in particular for making art that is at once critical, humorous and profoundly humanistic.”

The prize also served as a repudiation of American-style anti-cultural-appropriation campaigns — or righteous identity politics, depending on your point of view — that overshadowed Mr. Durham’s retrospective.

As Mr. Rugoff wrote, “Durham typically treats this material without the slightest trace of ponderous gravitas; instead, he forges razor-sharp critiques that are infused with shrewd insight and wit, and that pleasurably demolish reductive ideas of authenticity.”

Alex Traub contributed reporting.

**Correction: Nov. 18, 2021**

*An earlier version of this obituary misstated where an essay by the curator Anne Ellegood, who organized a show of Mr. Durham’s work, was published. It was the website Artnet, not the magazine ARTnews.*