

Jimmie Durham

FONDAZIONE MORRA GRECO
MUSEO MADRE



Jimmie Durham, *Malinche*, 1988–92, wood, cotton, snakeskin, watercolor, polyester, metal, 69 3/4 × 23 5/8 × 35".

Naples has devoted an expansive show to Jimmie Durham, who, after definitively bidding farewell to the United States in 1994, set up house in this city in 2015. Durham, who passed away in 2021 at the age of eighty-one, had many selves: He was an author of radical political statements, a self-identified Cherokee activist, an artist interested in relationships between art and science, a satiric humorist who loved wordplay, and a creator of elegiac verses. This exhibition, “humanity is not a completed project,” curated by Kathryn Weir, director of the Museo MADRE, unfolded over an entire floor, with ramifications elsewhere in the museum. A master of reuse, Durham imbued objects with new life, but with an aggressive and provocative spirit.

The nonchronological hang brought together works from different periods characterized by common themes. Moreover, it stayed to true to Durham’s preferred approach to installation, with each room overflowing with diverse pieces. A sort of anteroom featured various large-scale sculptures, notably *Gilgamesh*, 1993, titled after the heroic bearer of both culture and violence, symbolized here by an axe anchored in an enormous door held up by a large PVC pipe passing through it. The first rooms contained works from such thematic cycles as “On loan from the Museum of the American Indian,” 1985, and “Museum of European Normality,” 2008, created with Maria Thereza Alves, Durham’s companion. Rejecting the term “*American Indian*,” Durham challenged the cultural criteria that define Indigenous identities, identifying these categories as the constructions of white conquerors and expropriators. With great irony, he imagined an ethnographic museum dedicated to uses and customs of the Swiss people (*Maquette for a Museum of Switzerland*, 2012), and a museal display devoted to a reinterpretation of European history (*The History of Europe*, 2012).

Iconic works such as *Cortez*, 1991–92, and *Malinche*, 1988–92, evoke personalities from the Spanish conquest: the ferocious military leader and the Indigenous woman who was his lover, later condemned as the betrayer of her people. The former has the appearance of a robot, with a cruciform body inserted into a metal base equipped with wheels; the latter sits on a crate, wearing a cloth skirt and a golden bra, her body fashioned from wood and her face adorned with snakeskin. Monstrous in character, these assemblages perfectly express the violence of the history to which they refer.

Much of the exhibition was dedicated to Durham's relationship to nature and his fascination with possible creative relationships between art and particle physics. Durham understood human beings and animals as reflections of one another, and, as an expression of this belief, he mounts musk ox and bear craniums on large steel or wood "skeletons" and adorns these bodies with blankets and clothing (*Musk Ox*, *Brown Bear*, both 2017). The video *Savage*, 1991, created with Alves, draws on Cherokee origin myths, according to which a coyote created human beings. And then there are stones. The artist flattened various items with rocks and boulders of all sizes, an act that was meant to be transformative, not destructive, inaugurating the passage of an object from one state to another. In the understatedly comical video (*Smashing*, 2004), Durham, seated at a desk, smashes with a stone various objects that individuals offer him and then rubber-stamps and signs a certificate.

At Fondazione Morra Greco, a second part of the exhibition, curated by Salvatore Lacagnina, was dedicated to Durham the poet. Printed on large sheets of paper extending from ceiling to floor, a selection of verse revealed, along with Durham's usual political engagement, an almost pantheistic fusion with nature. "only with a great uncertainty and with a great deal of dialogue . . . can some very small achievements be made for some future that we cannot see or imagine. we have to work in strange ways and hopeless ways but not cynical ways," Durham once wrote. Let us take this as his lesson.

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore

— Giorgio Verzotti