

## Jimmie Durham

HAMMER MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES

Michael Ned Holte

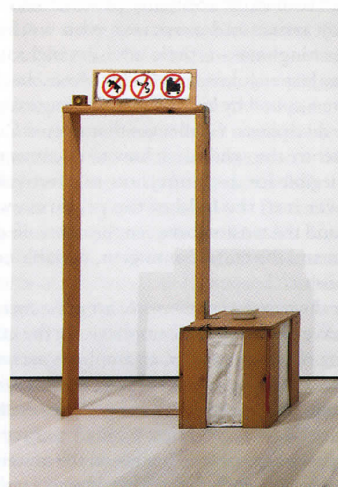
**YEARS IN THE MAKING**, Jimmie Durham's long-overdue first career survey in the United States couldn't be more timely. As if to prove the point, the exhibition—which opened two days after President Donald Trump issued a discriminatory travel ban—includes a 1993 sculpture called *Forbidden Things*: an assemblage comprising an oak door-frame, a painted deerskin sign depicting contraband, and a nondescript box adorned with a cheap plastic bowl, in sum resembling an airport security gate. Throughout the show, such thresholds, borders, and boundaries are frequently demarcated and occasionally crossed. Pointedly titled “At the Center of the World,” the retrospective provides evidence of an itinerant subject, born in Washington, Arkansas, but given to continual relocation ever since: As suggested by a hand mirror casually tethered to a wooden staff in *A Pole to Mark the Center of the World in Berlin*, 2004, the lodestar is wherever the artist goes, or wherever the viewer manages to find him.

A poetic approach to materiality threads through the cosmically vast array of objects made over four decades and gathered by curator Anne Ellegood. In *Obsidian arabesque*, 2009, a modestly scaled wall-based work, glossy black shards of cooled lava mounted against a white-painted wooden ground recall letters arranged in four lines, occasionally punctuated by glyph-like tangles of hair and more readily identifiable painted symbols: !, ( ), ?. Its message appears urgent, if only we could read it. Obsidian, an incredibly hard and brittle glass, commonly used in the crafting of knives and arrowheads, is a recurring item in Durham's travel kit—one of countless geologic specimens to make appearances here (from a small Brazilian bloodstone affixed to a panel to an assortment of minerals that look like fine cheeses and cured meats to photographic documentation of a car being crushed by a massive boulder, whose side is crudely painted to resemble a face). Rock

joins wood (commercial lumber and plywood; tree limbs painted, carved, chewed on by a dog, or simply left as found), skulls (human, bear, skunk, armadillo), and dozens of other items repurposed in the service of a seemingly ad hoc syntax. There is such consistency in Durham's materials and methodology that it's hard to discern whether an object was made two years ago or twenty; in this, his works are not unlike the assemblages of the Los Angeles-based recyclers George Herms and Betye Saar. Like his slightly senior peers, Durham hasn't grown weary or skeptical of auratic potential: His sculptures, like the objects that compose them, carry their histories with them—and here, their narratives are often given voice through writing.

Given the sprawl of evidence on display, it would be hard to dispute that Durham is a wildly inventive and prolific sculptor. But it's also abundantly clear that he's equally a poet. Indeed, language provides the most consistent material presence here, whether scrawled directly on panels studded with objects or affixed to an assemblage as a conspicuous note, usually in the artist's unfussy handwriting. (Additionally, a number of his poems are included in the exhibition catalogue.) These objects speak, and Durham's texts frequently take the form of direct address to the viewer-reader, albeit one filled with digressions, asides, false starts. A panel approximating a natural-history display, dotted with little odds and ends from the artist's studio, announces, **THERE'S PLENTY MORE WHERE THESE CAME FROM**—also the title of the 2008 work—while a meandering blue-and-orange line painted across the middle is accompanied by a note that alerts, **I PUT THIS PAINT [sic] JUST TO MAKE THE WORK MORE ARTISTIC**. Which isn't to say that the artist is an entirely reliable interlocutor, as another note at the right side of the panel admits, **ACTUALLY, IT IS TO HIDE A MISTAKE**.

Durham's humor is endearingly flat-footed, reliably earnest, and self-effacing; his videos—mostly quarantined in a dedicated gallery tucked deep within the exhibition—lean even further toward slapstick. In lesser hands, these jokes might be corny, but Durham's comedy is intended to disarm an unsuspecting viewer, while simultaneously arming the work for maximum impact: It cuts deep. (**OBSIDIAN IS SO SHARP THAT WHEN YOU ARE CUT BY IT YOUR BODY DOES NOT RECOGNIZE THE TRAUMA**, informs



From left: Jimmie Durham, *Stoning the Refrigerator*, 1996, video, black-and-white, sound, 3 minutes 27 seconds. Jimmie Durham, *Forbidden Things*, 1993, oak, canvas, polyester resin, acrylic on untanned deerskin, plastic bowl, 89 × 56¾ × 32¾". View of "Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World," 2017. Photo: Brian Forrest.



one drawing.) Following ludic tradition, the humor also undoubtedly masks pain and anger.

In 1973, Durham returned from Geneva to join the American Indian Movement in the wake of the occupation of Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. He went on to direct the International Indian Treaty Council, then stepped away from direct movement politics in 1979. A decidedly New York-based artist through most of the 1980s, Durham was included in the infamous 1993 Whitney Biennial and, like many of its participants, was saddled with the burden of “identity politics” that dominated the show. Durham has continued to wrestle with whatever it might mean to be not only an American but an American Indian artist—one who has never registered for Cherokee citizenship, and who has spent much of life outside native borders. (In addition to Geneva, he’s lived in Cuernavaca, Mexico; Berlin;

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Naples—all in self-determined displacement.) His tragicomic *Self-portrait*, 1986, is by now a canonical example of an artist accumulating stereotypes until they begin to collapse under the weight of absurd signification. “I feel fairly sure that I could address the entire world,” Durham declared in his 1988 essay for these pages, “The Ground Has Been Covered,” “if only I had a place to stand.” With impeccable timing, he’s finally been given that place, and it’s unlikely he will overstay his welcome. □

*“Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World” is on view through May 7; travels to the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, June 22–Oct. 8; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Nov. 3, 2017–Jan. 28, 2018; Remai Modern, Saskatoon, Canada, Mar. 23–Aug. 5, 2018.*

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