

JIMMIE DURHAM *At the Center of the World*

by Anthony Hawley

The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles | January 29 – May 7, 2017

Midway through Jimmie Durham's current retrospective at The Hammer Museum, a 1992 sculpture titled *The Guardian* (free tickets) offers the following advice to viewers: "May I suggest that we imagine systems in opposition to any concept of opposites?" The entreaty comes at the end of a page-long note mounted to the Durham's representation of the Roman god Janus, though duct-taped PVC piping in a quick frame of lumber and found wood calls to mind more of a Loch Ness Monster model made for a middle school science fair. Durham's material playfulness echoes in Janus's note as well when Durham himself interrupts the god mid-speech: "Sorry folks! This is the artist Jimmie Durham interrupting here! As soon as Janus mentioned opposites I could see he was going in the wrong direction." One can practically see Durham marching on stage from the wings, waving arms, canceling the whole affair, and handing out refunds.

Durham's sculptural language balances wonderfully ungodly materials with big ideas, while shifting speech acts merge with poetic insight. A painted armadillo skull, motorcycle mirror, and black and white photograph attached to pieces of found wood form a hybrid figure. An old, thrashed fridge sits in the gallery as record of a prolonged sculptural performance in which the commercial object was stoned to death. An attractive shoe-sized rock—seemingly either a stone or an oversized petrified turd—rests atop a pedestal of four stacked cardboard boxes: one unmarked, one a "urinal bowl" box, the others a Merrell and a New Balance shoebox; a card with text, propped on a wooden branch arm, poses contemplations of objects' origins with casual questions to the viewer: "This stone is from the river Po, which some think is the real heart of Italy. It looks like a foot, doesn't it? Or a shoe."

Durham's proclivity for straddling myth, legend, politics, mass-produced materials, linguistic insight, and natural objects (such as shells and animal skulls) results in decades of nuanced work that avoids both didacticism and one-liner humor. Few bodies of work have a way of undercutting American anti-intellectualism without taking themselves too seriously.

Perhaps the most satisfying are the minutiae of these many works: an abalone shell as the eye of a ghostly head; a keyboard's asterisk key beside the text "les étoiles Cherokee à sept pointes" (seven-pointed Cherokee stars); a text painted on piece of wood, drawing attention to the holes an insect made. All of these choices and interventions allow thought and information to coincide in remarkable ways; Durham accesses Western literary history,



Jimmie Durham, *Anti-Brancusi*, 2005. Cardboard, wood, serpentine stone, rope, ink on paper. 48 × 17 × 31 1/8 inches. Collection of Michel Rein, Paris.

challenges capitalist oil consumption, jokes about how a collection of rocks resembles petrified cheese and other foods, and calls attention to Native American stereotypes often in the same breath.

One of the loveliest and easily missed details of the show is in *The Guardian (free tickets)* where a tag of wood with the word “morning” rests on a hook protruding from the start of the text—following “Good”. At different times of the day, a security guard changes out “Good *morning*” for “Good *afternoon*” or “Good *evening*.”

This remarkable retrospective summons sculptural assemblages and interventions, drawing series, videos, performance props, texts, and more in what amounts to a singular body of work positioning itself uniquely, per the title, at the center of the world. With linguistic and material acuity, Durham offers insights into the space between things, into the invisible areas that appear when you puncture the gravitas of myth, legend, and Western imperial agendas.

CONTRIBUTOR

Anthony Hawley