

Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World review – America's native son finally comes home

The Native American artist's most trenchant political statement remains his choice to live abroad – making his first US retrospective all the more potent

By [Travis Diehl](#) in Los Angeles

Jimmie Durham's retrospective, *At the Center of the World*, curated for the Hammer Museum by Anne Ellegood, landed almost prophetically in the aftermath of a big American week: the new president loosed the dogs of oil on [the Standing Rock water protectors](#), withdrew funds from [reproductive service providers](#), and pulled up the drawbridge against [refugees](#).

Durham, a Cherokee born in Arkansas but not officially enrolled in any tribe, is something of a refugee in his own country, disinherited by centuries of genocide and displacement. He studied sculpture in Geneva, but spent the early 70s with the American Indian Movement, petitioning the United Nations as director of the International Indian Treaty Council. After becoming frustrated with that particular activism, he returned to contemporary art, producing sharp-witted assemblage, bricolage, painting, performance and video. Yet Durham's most trenchant political statement remains that he chooses to live abroad – which is perhaps why, despite counting two documentas, two Whitneys, five Venice Biennales, and the 2017 Robert Rauschenberg Award among his honors, this thorough and essential survey is the artist's first on his own continent.

When Durham hit New York, he found a foothold within 80s-style identity politics; but he was uneasy. Alongside the overheated mystique of [Jean-Michel Basquiat](#) and neo-expressionism came an attempt to align modernism with the indigenous cultures it pilfered (see the MoMA's 1984 Primitivism exhibition), while a multicultural revisionism culminated in the radically diverse 1993 Whitney Biennial (which included Durham), but could do little to diversify the canon. Into this mix, Durham's earliest sculptures, bright scrap-wood totems of animals and people, stack up the stereotypes of Native American craft – beads, shells, turquoise, skulls and skins – as if to give the colonialist rubes what they came for. Yet their armatures – a police barrier as the forelegs of a puma in *Tlunh Datsi* (1984), or, in the bead-covered *Bedia's Muffler* (1985), a discarded car part – join traditional reverence to impure realism; Native Manhattan meets roadkill and the NYPD.

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Durham's heritage informs his work mostly insofar as he aims it against the authenticity it's presumed to follow. Among the objects framed in the suite *Six Authentic Things* (1989) are "REAL TURQUOISE", surrounded by native-looking designs; and "REAL FLINT", a flake of the stone drawing blood from a drawing of a cavalryman. The first panel, tinted like an old treaty, summarizes the artist's recursive truthiness: it contains, per a handwritten text, "REAL WORDS". In his essays, poems and titles, Durham uses language with the same puncturing alacrity as he does stones, bones and sticks. The texts appearing directly on the works or on appended flags read less as captions than as the pieces' own qualifying asides.

This postmodern museology defines Durham's approach to exhibition making. It's reiterated in *On Loan from the Museum of the American Indian* (1985), which features such "artifacts" as Pocahontas's panties (in fact the bottom of an exotic dancer's feathery costume) and a handprint rendered in the artist's own blood ("COLOR ENHANCED"). Here, in the crude idiom of racial identity, Durham none too subtly asserts his individual authorship over objects that would otherwise be billed, collectively and derisively, as "folk art".

After moving to Europe in 1994, Durham took on western art at large; stone no longer signified just arrowheads and jewelry, but serpentine marble, Murano glass, and Roman ruins. As for the presuppositions of contemporary art, some colleagues fared better than others. He mocked Joseph Beuys's shamanic attitudes at every opportunity, while *Homage to David Hammons* (1997) at once smashes and reaffirms the readymade by stoning a porcelain urinal. In *Anti-Brancusi* (2005), a foot-shaped rock polished by the River Po sits atop a stack of cardboard boxes – among them the carton for a urinal, and shoebox for New Balance sneakers – placing High Modernism alongside less vaunted but arguably equal notions of form.

Durham's knack for keeping so-called cultural achievements in perspective is evident in one of the show's most discerning juxtapositions. His *Arc de Triomphe for Personal Use* (1996) is a freestanding doorway made from posts, branches and a thin stand; painted red, blue and white, and held together by padlocks. Across the room is its double: *Forbidden Things*, 1993, a metal detector made of oak planks.

Such a long view of human nature can pass for prophecy. The several *Poles to Mark the Center of the World* (1995) that lend the show its title, simple carvings sometimes adorned with tags or mirrors, easily skewer the western-centric mindset. Yet, as with all of Durham's work, there is tenderness in the irony; the pieces declare individual sovereignty, but remind itinerant monarchs to stay humble. This sentiment runs from the simplest stick to the most complex assemblage: *In Something ... Perhaps a Fugue, or an Elegy* (2005), the viewer faces their reflection through a tangle of pipes, A/V gear, leering busts, and the muzzle of a BB rifle.

At the finish, on the reverse of two signs that read STOP and TOP, are two citations – a NYMEX listing for sweet light crude, and a quote from Nobel laureate José Saramago: "We worry, and are full of anxiety. We think the world will demand an explanation. But in fact the world has already moved on, and has forgotten us." It's a fitting double slogan from an artist whose own retrospective underscores the impermanence of everything from art to institutions to the people and stones they're made of. At the Venice Biennale, where Durham first exhibited *Something ...*, he represented no nation.