

JIMMIE DURHAM: *At the Center of the World* & LAURA OWENS

by Hovey Brock

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
DURHAM: NOVEMBER 3, 2017 - JANUARY 28, 2018
OWNES: NOVEMBER 10, 2017 - FEBRUARY 4, 2018

The Whitney Museum's concurrent exhibitions for artists Jimmie Durham and Laura Owens make for a terrific conversation, a convergence definitely more than the sum of its parts. The pairing underscores the generational divide that separates them, in particular the shift from concerns around the self and identity to the environment and the internet. However, what they have in common makes the exchange across that divide especially rewarding to witness as their sensibilities sync up to a remarkable degree.



Left: Jimmie Durham, *Self-Portrait Pretending to be a Stone Statue*, 2006, Color photograph 31 3/4 × 24 in. (80.7 × 60.9 cm) Collection fluid archives, Karlsruhe, Germany; courtesy of ZKM | Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe. Right: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2012, Acrylic, oil, vinyl paint, resin, pumice, and fabric on canvas 108 × 84 in. (274.3 × 213.4 cm), Collection of the artist.

Intellectually, both artists are—to use Isaiah Berlin's metaphor—foxes rather than hedgehogs. Their restless temperaments have pushed them to venture far and wide in practice and style—in Durham's case, even geographically, the artist having lived and made art in Mexico, Italy, and Germany as well as parts of the United States. In his eventful life, Durham has, in addition to his art making, engaged in political activism on behalf of indigenous peoples in America, written poetry, and published essays. Owens has cycled through many shifts in subject and techniques in her paintings before arriving at her current synthesis of computer graphics, *trompe l'oeil*, pop culture, and design.

Both are devoted to craftsmanship that often takes surprisingly quirky turns. Jimmie Durham's *Pink Palm-Tree-Like Glass Construction with Various Decorative Elements* (2015) is one of many assemblages in the retrospective made from found objects and tree branches. The unlikely combination of table, wood, glass, and other materials results in a surprisingly elegant and eloquent object that tells of a rough-and-ready cosmopolitanism. Owens in 2012 executed a series of paintings each about three-feet square, featuring a letter of the alphabet in yarn, acrylic, and oil on dyed linen. They are weirdly obsessive, vaguely kitschy, but overall made with great attention to detail.

Owens, meanwhile, has a legendary obsession with animals. On the Whitney web pages for her show, the cursor sometimes turns into a lion or a sheep depending on its position on the page. *Untitled* (2006) has an adorable billy goat bending his neck upward at an absurd angle to get at what look like nuts. As with Durham, while the tone is amusing, the message is serious. Owens speaks for her generation's greater awareness of the interconnectedness of all species—an awareness born from the knowledge of impending ecological catastrophe.



Jimmie Durham, *Malinche*, 1988-1992. Guava, pine branches, oak, snakeskin, polyester bra soaked in acrylic resin and painted gold, watercolor, cactus leaf, canvas, cotton cloth, metal, rope, feathers, plastic jewelry, and glass eye, 70 × 23 5/8 × 35 in. (177 × 60 × 89 cm.) Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (SMAK), Ghent, Belgium



Jimmie Durham, *THERE'S PLENTY MORE WHERE THESE CAME FROM*, 2008. Objects from the artist's studio, acrylic paint, and ink on panel 40 × 27 1/2 in. (101.5 × 70 cm.) Collection of the artist; courtesy Paul van Esch & Partners. Amsterdam

Unfortunately, Owens and Durham also share the bitter cup of controversies connected to their retrospectives that called into question their integrity as socially responsible artists. In June 2017, in

response to the inaugural opening of the Durham retrospective at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, cultural and political leaders in the Cherokee community published an editorial in *Indian Country Today* that took issue with Durham's self-identification as Cherokee. Their statement went so far as to deny his art spoke for the Cherokee people, or Native Americans in general. In Owens's case, community activists from both Los Angeles and New York banded together to picket her opening at the Whitney in November 2017, accusing Owens and her dealer Gavin Brown of "art-washing" the gentrification of working-class neighborhoods in both cities.

Durham's and Owens's controversies reflect the larger cultural trends that defined the artistic goals of each generation. Durham had already had a long history of activism during the '60s and '70s, first in the Civil Rights movement and then in the American Indian Movement. Settling in New York in the '80s, his visual art practice aligned with others, including David Hammons, where racial and ethnic identity was a key concern. Since moving to Europe in the '90s, Durham's practice has shifted from art about Indian identity to more general reflections on history, architecture, and science. However, considering the earlier work, it is particularly ironic to see Durham publicly denounced as he was last year for not being a true Cherokee.

Owens emerged in the late '90s and early aughts when the internet was revolutionizing everything in artists' lives, from their social networks to how they thought about the nature of images. It also initiated a new entrepreneurial spirit that encouraged artists to manage their own careers. In that context, it made sense that Owens, with Gavin Brown's help, would establish her cultural center, 356 Mission, in the neighborhood where she practices her art. The confrontation between Owens and the community activists from Boyle Heights in Los Angeles and Chinatown and Harlem in New York is an art-world instance of the larger economic reality in the United States today—the hollowing out of the middle: huge corporations, unemployed or underemployed workers, and nothing in between—that contributed to Donald Trump's election.

While the real-world controversies surrounding their art are murky, it is quite clear from the works themselves that these artists deserve the positive art-world attention they are getting. The pursuits of truth and justice are vital to a well-functioning society, but not necessarily to making great art. Indeed the best art often sprouts from the muck where boundaries collapse and all is shades of grey. About Durham's *Self-portrait* with its inscriptions the artist stated he wanted to "say things that were not true but were absolutely not lies." Owen's stance toward her subject matter, which often veers into the ridiculous, is equally hard to make out. For example, is she being genuine or ironic when *Untitled* (2014) bears the hackneyed inscription, "When you come to the end of your rope, make a knot and hang on." Sincerity here, and in Durham's art, seems beside the point. What does seem to matter is the strong positive energy and playfulness that the best works of both artists exude. That, in these dark times, is something to hang on to.



Laura Owens, Detail of *Untitled*, 2014. Ink, silkscreen ink, vinyl paint, acrylic, oil, pastel, paper, wood, solvent transfers, stickers, handmade paper, thread, board, and glue on linen and polyester Five parts: 138 1/8 × 106 1/2 × 2 5/8 in. (350.8 × 270.5 × 6.7 cm) overall Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from Jonathan Sobel