

[Jimmie Durham](#), one of today's most celebrated sculptors, died in Berlin on Wednesday at 81. Anne Ellegood, director of the Institute of Contemporary Art Los Angeles and the curator of the artist's 2017 retrospective, posted news of his passing on Instagram, writing, "One of my favorite humans has left the earth and moved onto the next life." A representative for Durham's gallery, Kurimanzutto, said he died of medical complications.

Using materials like stone, bones, and discarded ready-made objects, Durham offered up inventive assemblages that refer to histories of colonialism. Many of these works eye Western art institutions with suspicion, calling into question what really counts as authentic. At its heart, Durham's incisive art makes a mockery of the notion that one's identity could—or should—be easily understood.

## Related Articles

Durham was a key figure within the American Indian Movement of the 1970s, and much of his work dealt with what it meant to be an Indigenous person today. But, over the years, some activists had called his background into question, saying Durham's narration of his own personal history was unreliable. Durham said he was Cherokee, but Cherokee activists and artists pointed out that because he was not an enrolled member of Cherokee Nation, he should not claim to be a member of it. (Durham never released records of his family history publicly.)

To add to the confusion, Durham made it so that labeling him one way or another was virtually impossible, at certain points claiming the identity and others distancing himself from it. In 1984, Durham wrote, "I am a Cherokee artist who strives to make Cherokee art that is considered just as universal and without limits as the art of any white man." Less than a decade later, in 1993, he wrote, "I am not Cherokee. I am not an American Indian. This is in concurrence with recent US legislation, because I am not enrolled on any reservation or in any American Indian community." His 2017 retrospective at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles said he identified as Cherokee.

Jimmie Durham, *Self-portrait*, 1986. *Courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City and New Yor*

The puzzling quality of Durham's interviews and writings extended to his artworks. His famed *Self-portrait* (1986), for example, is an image of an artist quite unlike any produced before it. Roughly life-size in scale, this wall-hung work takes the form of a tan-colored body whose features are ill-defined. An aperture in its chest is cut open to reveal an array of chicken feathers for its heart; its bright yellow penis is surrounded by blades. "MY SKIN IS NOT REALLY THIS DARK," a note on its left foot reads, "BUT I AM SURE THAT MANY INDIANS HAVE COPPERY SKIN."

As with his life, fact and fiction blended neatly in Durham's work, often to a point where even viewers less susceptible to the artist's trickery had difficulty telling when they were being lied to. For *On Loan from the Museum of the American Indian* (1985), one of the essential works of an artistic style known as institutional critique, Durham collected a grouping of objects in vitrines recalling ones seen in museum galleries. (First shown at New York's storied Kenkeleba Gallery, the piece largely no longer exists.) Among the objects included was *Pocahontas' Underwear* (1985), a pair of panties adorned with red feathers and strung with shells and beads. According to Durham, some viewers thought they were seeing objects actually on loan from a real museum.

"My question must always be, does what we know matter?" Durham asked in his 1988 essay "A Certain Lack of Coherence." "Does it matter if I interrupt your authoritative history with a correction or a footnote? I mean, to the ongoing human discourse in which your declamations must surely be short-lived? Or to you collectively and personally?"

Jimmie Durham, *Stoning the Refrigerator*, 1996. Courtesy the artist and Kurimanzutto, Mexico City and New York

Jimmie Durham was born in 1940, though the details of where he has himself proven difficult to pin down. When his 2017 retrospective showed at the Hammer, the catalogue said he hailed from

Washington, Arkansas. When the show traveled to the Whitney Museum in New York, his birthplace was listed as Houston, Texas, according to the *New York Times*.

Durham recalled that he was introduced to sculpture early on by his family. “Everybody in my family carved and made things,” he told Ellegood in the Hammer’s exhibition catalogue. “Not just carving. We made everything all the time. Slingshots to murder birds with, traps to trap animals with.” At age 16, he left his family and took up various odd jobs. While he was enlisted in the U.S. Navy, he began to read poetry. He later began writing poetry himself, and also made early forays into performance art.

Critics have repeatedly claimed that, once he became involved with the American Indian Movement (AIM) starting in 1973, art took a backseat for Durham. He eventually became director of the International Indian Treaty Council, which has been advocating for the rights of Indigenous tribes and nations since the ’70s. But Durham often said that he saw no difference between art and activism. “I don’t see why there would be a separation,” he told Ellegood. He recalled creating art while working in the AIM legal office, sometimes at the behest of activist and curator Paul Chaat Smith.

Durham officially broke with AIM in 1979, viewing the movement as having grown unfocused in its concerns. The following year, with Smith, he wrote an open letter decrying AIM’s leadership and questioning its dedication to the movement’s “ongoing struggle.”

*Jimmie Durham, The Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Manhattan is the World's Largest Gothic Cathedral. Except, of course, that it is a fake; first by the simple fact of being built in Manhattan, at the turn of the century. But the stone work is re-inforced with steel which is expanding with rust. Someday it will destroy the stone. The Cathedral is in Morningside Heights overlooking a panoramic view of Harlem which is separated by a high fence., 1989. AP*

A series of offbeat exhibitions and events cemented Durham's reputation as an era-defining artist during the '80s and '90s. Although Durham's art is now prized for its willingness to muddy viewers' expectations of it, the work at the time was produced during a period in New York when art by artists of color, queer artists, and women was often seen by certain critics through simplistic lenses. Amid the rise of "identity politics" during the early '90s, Durham was "widely perceived as a Native American artist, maybe *the* Native American artist," as *New York Times* critic Holland Cotter wrote in 2017.

Jimmie Durham, *La Malinche*, 1988–91. *Courtesy the artist and Kurimanzutto, Mexico City and New York*

Indeed, Durham's work was included in the famed 1993 Whitney Biennial, a show that explicitly tackled issues of race, gender, and sexuality, and often drew the wrath of critics because of it. At that exhibition, Durham exhibited an untitled installation composed of ramshackle assemblages of gun parts, bones, and

more, each with quotations from giants of Western literature. “The finished work looked to me like a science fiction-type weapon as much as anything,” Durham wrote of the work, which is now owned by the Tate museum network.

Durham’s sly sensibility could also be glimpsed in his carefully fashioned persona. As if to short circuit critics’ expectations, he left New York with his longtime partner Maria Thereza Alves in 1987, relocating to Cuernavaca, a Mexican city with a history of luring leftists involved with the arts. His departure came just as his market was beginning to develop in New York. Then, in 1994, he and Alves relocated once more to Europe, where they have lived ever since. His 2017 Whitney retrospective was his first New York exhibition since one held at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery in 1995. At the time of his death, he and Alves were based in Berlin.

By moving to Europe, Durham had quite literally decentered himself, moving his studio out of the city that has been regarded as the nexus of the art world in the U.S. Fittingly, his work has gently poked fun at the notion of a mainstream. In 1995, he made *A Pole to Mark the Center of the World, Middelburg, the Netherlands*, a long stick from a beech tree, accompanied by some steel and a mirror. He went on to make several more versions of the work for different locales, as if to suggest that there is no one center of the world.



Jimmie Durham, *Xitle and Spirit*, 2007. Courtesy the artist and Kurimanzutto, Mexico City and New York

Durham's works made following his move to Europe deal less overtly with Native American identity. Some took a more grandiose turn. For the 2004 edition of the Biennale of Sydney, he created *Still Life with Stone and Car*, for which a Chrysler automobile was crushed beneath the weight of a giant boulder. "Like

most of my recent work, this piece is concerned with monuments and monumentality, but also with nature; that implacable hard stuff,” he told the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Other works took the form of elegant variations on past themes. For a photograph entitled *Self-Portrait Pretending to Be Maria Thereza Alves* (1995–2006), the artist posed as his partner, holding a mask to his face. Once again, Durham portrayed his own identity as something unknowable to most.

Durham’s death came as his career soared to new heights. Following the 2017 traveling retrospective, which also made stops at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and Remai Modern in Saskatoon, Canada, Durham won the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the 2019 Venice Biennale in Italy. In 2022, he is set to appear in Documenta 15 in Kassel, Germany.

Throughout his lengthy career, Durham spoke of the necessity of making art that upended expectations. “I want all art to be political,” he said at a 1994 talk at the International Association of Art Critics in Copenhagen. “My art has to be political, but it doesn’t have to be political. It’s just, the point is to integrate instead of separate.”

Source: [Jimmie Durham, Sculptor Who Resisted Easily Legible Identities, Dies at 81](#)