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Paulina Pobocho in conversation with Jimmie Durham, *Jimmie Durham's Manhattan Life*, MoMA Magazine, January 4, 2021
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[Magazine](#)

Jimmie Durham's Manhattan Life

Curator Paulina Pobocho talks to the artist about poetry, activism, and his uncanny knack for finding dead things.

[Paulina Pobocho](#) Jan 4, 2021

It's unclear if the dead follow artist Jimmie Durham or if he seeks them out. Whether it's a taxidermied moose head found behind a church or human bones discovered in the dumpster of Columbia's medical school, the artist always seems to breathe new life into found materials through his assemblage works. Curator Paulina Pobocho spoke virtually with Durham about his poetry and the meaning embedded in his works, [currently on view in the second-floor collection galleries](#).

Paulina Pobocho: Can you please introduce yourself and your work, [Cathedral of St. John the Divine](#)?

Jimmie Durham: I'm foremost a poet, and then I'm a sculptor and an artist, and I do other things. I'm a gardener, quite serious about it. The two works that I'd like to talk about are a work I did in Manhattan years ago, which I'll call by its short title, *The Cathedral of St. John*, or sometimes it's called the Bishop's Moose, but it has a long text title about the cathedral and where it is in Manhattan. The other work is about anti-art as presented by a Shakespeare character named Caliban. These are mostly drawings from the point of view of someone who made self-portraits without knowing what he looked like.

Would you tell us about the subject matter of *The Cathedral of St. John* and also the significance of the title? And since the title is quite long, I'll just read it right now: *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. It's a beautiful title.*

Oh, thank you. We lived close by the cathedral in Spanish Harlem, and I knew the two people who worked there. The canon was a good man, and Paul Moore was the bishop of New York. I was there in the garden one day, and I found a moose head that was very old and falling apart. The nose was practically gone, and it was in the garbage, such a massive thing.

I put it on my back and took it home, walking down the street. But I couldn't get it up the stairs of my apartment, it was so big, so I had to saw one of the antlers off. I didn't make anything with it until a few years later after I had moved to Mexico. I came back to New York and made it in Sandy Shepherd's house where I was staying in Harlem.



Jimmie Durham. *The Cathedral of St. John....* 1989

I think the titles of your works and how they inflect the meaning of the material is really very affecting. Would you speak a little bit about the last line of the title, which is about the separation between the cathedral and Morningside Heights?

It was such a strange thing. There is a beautiful park, Morningside Park, that I had been warned to stay away from because it was so dangerous. And when you are around the grounds or the garden of the cathedral, there is this high fence and behind it is Morningside Park and then all of Harlem stretches down below it. And at the time this cathedral was built, some of the rich people who lived up above the park hired mostly women to cook and clean their houses, and these women lived in Harlem. The rich people hired these women but didn't want them in their neighborhood, so they built this fence, and it was such a constant insult to pass by and see it.

You combined the materials in this sculpture with the moose skull and replaced the antler with a pipe. But, also, the skull itself is painted and mounted on what looks like scaffolding, the kind you would encounter on a city street, especially in New York where it's basically everywhere. Would you talk about how those formal elements play with one another?

You're right. The body of the sculpture is like scaffolding in a certain way or construction work in general. In those days, we made our own apartment because we took over a building, a bunch of Native Americans. So I had to work with two-by-fours and construction materials every day rebuilding this apartment, so it was just part of my daily life. At the same time, I didn't want to give the moose skull the kind of body that was like what the bishop's father had given it. The bishop's father had shot it. I didn't want it to be trophy-like. I wanted it to have a life but not taxidermy, not fake, but some sort of art life. I don't know how to describe this life.

We have a quote from you that's in the extended label for the work. This is something you wrote in 1984: "Coyote, who invented death and singing, was the spirit who gave me my name. As is often the case, he also gave me a gift that I would always see whatever was dead if it were within my field of vision. It became necessary to see if that was a usable gift or just a dirty trick that would drive me crazy." Would you speak a little bit more about this role of the Coyote, and that quote, and how it relates to sculpture?

I found so many skulls and dead animals in Manhattan. It was just astounding. For example, once I was walking along in Harlem when I saw a closed garbage can. I lifted the lid, and there were two complete deer skulls with the skins in the garbage can, fresh, bloody fresh. No explanation, no nothing, just there. I found a bunch of human bones in the garbage of Columbia's Medical School. I used one for a work at the New Museum in the show *The Interrupted Life*, in '91. I have two sea turtle skulls from the beach just outside of Napoli. Isn't that strange? Most people don't find sea turtle skulls on the beach.



Jimmie Durham. A sheet from *Caliban Codex*. 1992

Skulls and animal remains feature so prominently in your work and have throughout your career. Is it because you are, on some level, looking for them? How do you think about the idea of resuscitating them, giving them a second life?

It certainly is the idea. I always needed it, at least in my own mind, to be acceptable as art, to be acceptable as sculpture and not seen as something weird or exotic. So when I lived in New York, the first show I did was a bunch of animal things I had made with found animal skulls in Manhattan. I did the show specifically because I wanted to show that you could use this kind of stuff and do this kind of art and it would still be art. I wanted to prove to people that this could be done, that what I was trying to do might work. It didn't work, but I still tried.

It's interesting thinking about this work, especially, in the context of the 1980s in New York. Neo-Expressionist painting saturated the art market; many other artists were really thinking about commodity, like Jeff Koons. Your work is entirely separate from that but also became so extraordinarily influential to a younger generation. I could name so many artists who were looking at your work and thinking about assemblage techniques, something that was very different from the type of painting that was on the scene and much of sculpture that was being made. Can you remember how that felt?

It felt like a desperate time because we were also broke. Maria Thereza and I were constantly broke and finding jobs; barely getting enough money to do anything, much less make art. She was at the Cooper Union Art School at the time, and I went around to all the different art schools' garbage to find stretched canvases. You could paint over them. So I made quite a few bad paintings and sold them as a way to make some money in those days.

But I knew that there was something strange about painting. It's too tight, it's too numb. There are no surprises. A painting is a painting no matter what the painter does to it. I like a lot of painters, dead and living, but it is still too tight. It's too small for what we need from art now.

If you do something seriously with art, and you look at what society is doing, and what you're doing, and try to match what you're doing to society, it helps your seriousness, it helps my seriousness about making art. So it's not that I was looking at dead animals. It's that society had all of these dead animals. And such a strange Disneyland idea of animals, dead or living.

I think that a lot of your work is, in fact, quite political. How do your politics inflect the type of work that you make?

I do think I'm always a political activist. I write poetry politically as an activist. I make art as a political activist. We have the idea that a political activist has to protest, and I've certainly done that in my life. So if I write a poem or if I make a piece of art that says, "No colonization of American Indians," it's pretty boring, isn't it? It doesn't do anything. Everybody says, "Yeah, of course. Yeah, good." It's not art and it's not political. It's just nothing. So I learned from Freire and from many other people that our activism is about human liberation.

There was a time that you returned to the United States from Geneva to actually practice political activism in a more literal sense with the American Indian Movement.

When Wounded Knee happened in '73, I stopped everything and came back to the US; before that, I had not intended to come back. I was happy in Geneva, I was happy in Europe. But I had to respond one way or another to this strangeness, and I think the problem is still there. It gets worse, not better. But how to respond to things, what to do in life, nobody knows. I certainly don't know.

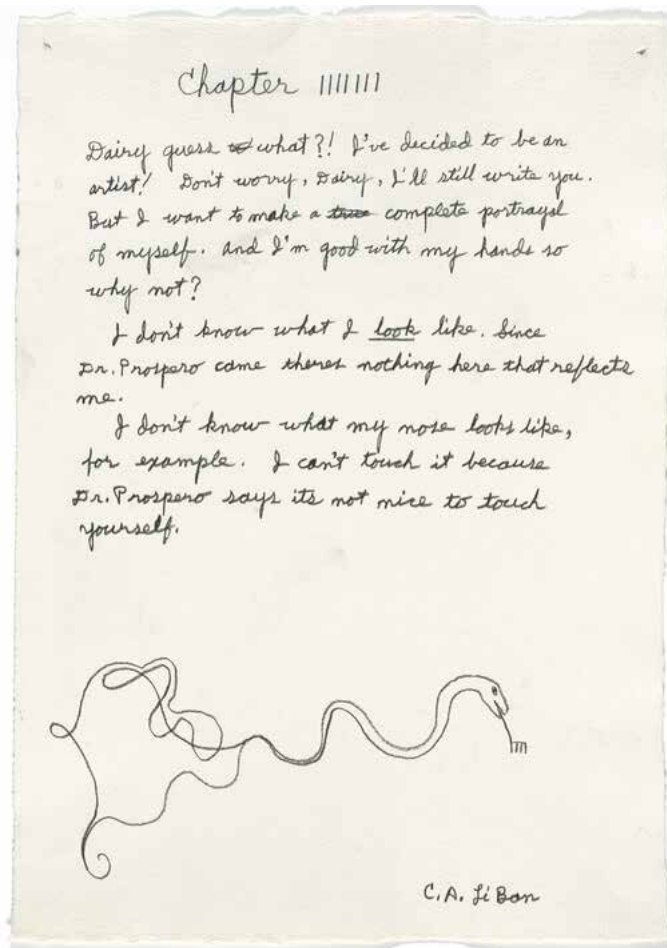
***Caliban Codex*, which is a series of pseudo diary entries, is very moving. There's this heartbreaking moment for me and it's the center image in *Caliban Codex* where you have a list of good and bad things. And all the good things are light and then all the bad things are dark, and Caliban puts himself in the bad column. That, to me, really takes your breath away. It's like a punch in the stomach when you're reading those lists and you find his name.**

It is just there in my life all the time. Most Hopi Indians are Mormons now. And I'm not sure if it's still true, but it was true in the '70s, the Mormon religion said if you really love God and follow the Mormon rules, you will become whiter. Many Hopis committed suicide. Many Indians, in general, still commit suicide. But this kind of nasty racism is so heavy in the US. It's heavy for everyone. Many white people think it's heavy for the rest of us, but it's heavy for everybody.

I noted that you introduced yourself as a poet first, and language is such a tremendously important element to any understanding of your work. Where does the demarcation lie for you between poetry and visual art?

I think there is no separation at all. I've done a couple of drawings that are poems. Then just yesterday I did a couple of drawings, they only work with the words on them. Without the words, they don't work. Without the paint, it wouldn't work, either.

But a friend here in Berlin, a composer, was talking and I said, "If you said that music had an essence, what would it be?" I was teaching at the time. I knew that art did not have an essence but I thought surely you would say that music has one, but she said, "There is nothing like that. If you're a musician, you can do a painting and it is music." And I loved that idea because, well, I knew that was true for art but I never thought of it for music.

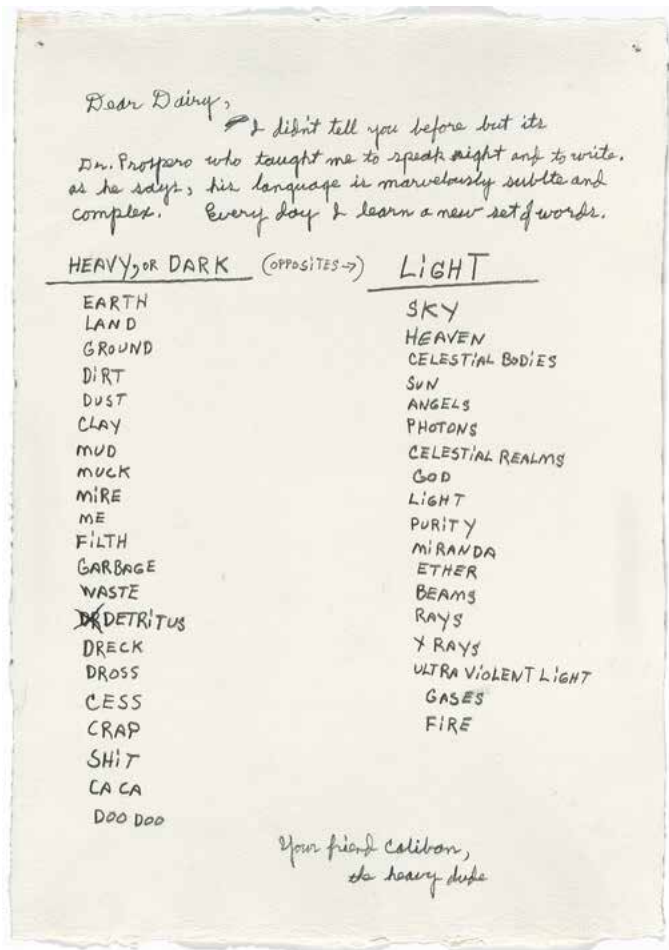


Jimmie Durham. A sheet from *Caliban Codex*. 1992

I would be curious to know a little bit more about your process as a writer. Writing, of course, isn't easy. Do you work out the text that you end up using in your visual art? Whether it's drawing or sculpture, there is text often included in your work. How does the text match up with the image, how do they inform each other?

I really do not know. I don't do any planning of text, except...I'm writing three books now and they have to be planned. But for doing poetry, especially—and almost every poet says this—they just come. They just

happen to you, and you feel like they're not really yours. But the text I use with sculpture is exactly the same way, so that, for me, there is no separation at any time.



Jimmie Durham. A sheet from *Caliban Codex*. 1992

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