

## Galerie Barbara Wien

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*Jimmie Durham (1940–2021)*, Artforum International, November 17, 2021  
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 **JIMMIE DURHAM, SELF-PORTRAIT PRETENDING TO BE A STONE STATUE OF MYSELF, 2006.**

Jimmie Durham, *Self-Portrait Pretending to Be a Stone Statue of Myself*, 2006.  
November 17, 2021 at 6:52pm

### JIMMIE DURHAM (1940–2021)

Sculptor and poet Jimmie Durham, who parodied and challenged Native American stereotypes in his work even as the question of his ancestry drew criticism and controversy, died November 17 in Berlin at age eighty-one. The news was confirmed by the Mexico City–based gallery Kurimanzutto, which represents the artist. Durham in 2019 received the Venice Biennale’s prestigious Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement. “We should probably be giving him two lifetime achievements by this point in time,” noted the Biennale’s curator, Ralph Rugoff. “Durham has continued to find new, ingenious and cogent ways to address the political and social forces that have shaped the world we live in. At the same time his contributions to the field of art have been outstanding for their formal and conceptual originality, their agile blending of dissonant parts and alternative perspectives, and their irrepressible playfulness. His work moves and delights us in ways that can never be anticipated.”

Born in Houston in 1940, Durham experienced a peripatetic childhood, moving from Texas to Louisiana to Oklahoma with his family as his father sought work. As a young man, in the 1960s, he was drawn to the civil rights movement, his interest in which led to his becoming active in theater, performance, and literature. Moving to Austin in 1965, he took a job at the University of Texas there and received his first solo show that same year. Four years later, he moved to Geneva to attend the École des Beaux Arts. On his return to the United States in 1973, he became involved with the American Indian Movement (AIM),

for which he began working as a political organizer. Shortly thereafter, he joined the International Indian Treaty Council, of which he ultimately became chief administrator. In 1979, he departed both Indigenous organizations over differences regarding AIM's support of Cuba. Durham subsequently moved to New York City, where he began creating the sculptures for which he first became widely known, typically combining found objects, natural materials, and text in order to question white Western prejudices in relation to Indigenous people. Following a productive stint in Mexico in the late '80s and early '90s, during which time he published a book of poems, *Columbus Day* (1985) and the essay collection *A Certain Lack of Coherence* (1993), Durham in 1994 returned to Europe, where he has lived since.

During the course of his lifetime, Durham variously claimed and denied Native American heritage, most commonly being quoted as saying he was one quarter Cherokee. In 2017, a group of Cherokee tribal representatives, artists and scholars published an open letter titled "Dear Unsuspecting Public, Jimmie Durham Is a Trickster," in which they noted that Durham was neither enrolled in nor eligible for membership in any of the United States' three federally recognized Cherokee tribes and called his claim to Native heritage and those made on his behalf on this point by arts institutions "harmful as they misrepresent Native people, undermine tribal sovereignty, and trivialize the important work by legitimate Native artists and cultural leaders." In response, Durham emphasized that he does not consider himself a representative of any ethnicity. "I am Cherokee," he said. "But I'm not a Cherokee artist or Indian artist, no more than Brancusi was a Romanian artist."

A self-described "interventionist," Durham participated in half a dozen Venice Biennales, two Documentas, and three Whitney Biennials. Among the many solo exhibitions of his work were those at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2017–18); Serpentine Gallery, London (2015); the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (n.b.k.) (2015); and Portikus, Frankfurt (2010). Retrospectives include those at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp (2012); the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (2009); and the Gemeentemuseum, the Hague (2003). He additionally authored a number of essay and poetry collections.

"He asks us to consider the history of oppression, the futility of violence, and the powerlessness of our positions in the world, but allows us to contemplate these dour realities while keeping smiles on our faces," wrote Anne Ellegood of Durham in Artforum in 2009. "And because of this, his work is inherently hopeful. Life's a bitch, he seems to say, but nonetheless, life is good."