

Jimmie Durham: Musee d'Art Contemporain - Marseille - there is a political aspect to the artist's sculptures

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The Musee d'Art Contemporain de Marseille is not an easy place for an artist to handle. For example, a marble pavement is no doubt a very nice thing. It looks very smart in the lobby of the Plaza Hotel. But--and artists know this well--it is a problem, a real challenge, in a museum of contemporary art. That marble is a burdensome luxury that lends the MAC the look of a chic white cube--well, more chic than cube--underlining its already intimidating power of legitimization through the immediate display of an external sign of wealth. But where some other artists take over the place and its floor by trying to cover it, to erase it, to neutralize its ostentatious vanity, Jimmie Durham is content with an almost hands-off attitude, placing his precarious works of art here and there nonchalantly, as if it were all quite natural: an airplane crushed by a rock (Tranquillite, 2000), a mirror shattered by a rock (The Flower of the Death of Loneliness, 2000), a bicycle smashed by a rock (Fin de la Semaine, 2000), a refrigerator that's been pelted by rocks (St. Frigo, 1996) ... in short, nothing but broken-down compositions of the most humble objects, low in the social and aesthetic hierarchy of materials but surprising in the force of their resistance to this place and its luxurious marble floor. For instance, Arc de Triomphe for Personal Use, Turquoise, 2003: multiple pieces of painted metal that compose a rickety doorway, a public work as the antithesis of monumental architecture. Or the heap of trash that makes up Maquette for Public Sculpture in Rome, 1997. In this resistance one recognizes the profoundly political aspect of Durham's work: the innate conflict, the almost inborn disdain he manifests toward seats of power and their triumphant symbols.

Similarly, Durham himself resists America: Of Cherokee descent, he compares himself to the coyote living on the outskirts of town. A political militant in the '70s at the core of the American Indian Movement, since then increasingly prominent as a poet and artist, Durham has cultivated an elemental and energetic sense of difference in his explicitly multicultural work, of which Tlunh datsi, 1985, a triangular sculpture mixing an animal skull, shells, feathers, and fur, is a prime example. But since his 1994 move to Europe ("Eurasia," he calls it, to evoke its rush toward the East), Durham has gradually abandoned this ethnically coded vocabulary. Now, museums in Marseille, The Hague, and Gateshead, England, are mounting his "European" retrospective "From the West Pacific to the East Atlantic": "After seven years, I wanted to take stock. It was about knowing whether I had 'learned how to speak' Eurasian."

The artist mixes his ethnic vocabulary ("my old stories"), with the fragile mineral and vegetable forms of arte povera: rocks drawn with faces, two-color canvases mounted with precious stones (Calcite, Azurite, Quartz, A Gold Nugget, all 1998), tubes running along the walls (underground conduits for the buried memory of the Indian peoples, as in *The Libertine* and *the Stone Guest*, 1996), or assemblages of found or recycled objects like *Quem Disser*, 1995, a table made of wood and branches, dressed in a white cotton shirt. In this incessant juxtaposition of the forms of the American West with those of Eurasia, Durham attains a less ethnological, less identity-oriented work than he began with and, as such, subtly deepens our sense of multiculturalism.

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