NCAD

FINE ART PAINTING

JIMMIE DURHAM: RE-COLONISATION FROM THE FRINGES

By

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Introduction

Jimmie Durham is an artist.

Jimmie Durham is a political activist.

Jimmie Durham is a member of the Cherokee nation.

These statements present us, as Westerners, with a number of uncomfortable truths, and demand that we re-examine our preconceptions about art, about who makes it and to what it pertains. Jimmie Durham, throughout his multi-faceted career as a writer, performance artist, sculptor, poet and activist, has never shied away from controversy. He has endeavoured to resist the conformity imposed by the United States Government on the racially different 'Indian' which manifests itself in both popular and high brow culture. He has always insisted that art, if it is to have any relevance in the late twentieth century, must be inseparable from the political sphere. During the 1970s and early '80s, he was a member of the American Indian Movement, holding the posts of Director of the Indian Treaty Council of the U.N., and Director of the Foundation for the Community of Artists.

He sees himself as a third world artist belonging to a nation whose territorial claim has never been acknowledged or even considered valid. His attempts to voice his own cultural identity have often met with severe opposition, both overt and subtle. The F.B.I. altered his writings in 1974 and accused him of being a Communist, a slur which saddened Durham; not only had the F.B.I. insertions been grammatically incorrect, but they had also failed to tell the public just how good a Communist he actually was and how dedicated he was to un-

American activity. [Durham, 1993, p.XII] He has encountered the subtle but arguably more sinister force of colonialism in the language of the colonial oppressor. "The English vocabulary used to describe us is designed to prove that we are inferior." [Durham, 1993, p.5]

In his efforts to re-direct the misrepresentations of the colonial narrative, Durham has employed many stategies and utilised as many seperate disciplines and media as possible. He has attempted to re-animate forgotten histories and constantly challenge Western complacency. He has been careful to remain outside definition and has constantly avoided the often simplistic labels of Western discourse. His art has provided us with an irrepressible voice for what Franz Fanon calls the "wretched of the earth", [Fanon, 1968], and offers an alternative conception of reality to the dominant Eurocentric model.

Here, the principal intellectual strategies in Jimmie Durham's career are reviewed. A critical synthesis of the written material available on Durham's work is combined with a first hand view of most of the work in question. In examining the two principle texts which deal directly with Durhams work (DURHAM, Jimmie, A Certain Lack of Coherence, KalaPress, 1993, and DURHAM, Jimmie, Jimmie Durham, Phaidon, London, 1995), it became obvious that the bulk of the material presented was contributed by the artist himself.

So the arguments that will be presented draw from the starting point of Durham's own diverse writings, combined with research into Native American History, post-colonial theory and the writings of third world authors and intellectuals. I have focused on particular aspects of Durham's work, discussing his attempts in varied media to sidestep assimilation into the dominant colonial narrative and to represent himself on his own terms. Parallels have been cited between Durham's appraisal of

Geronimo, 1992, and his own strategy as an artist. Durham's evocative re-working of Shakespeare's character, Caliban, has been re-considered with parallels drawn to his early self-documented education as an 'Indian' child and the official text books given to the Native American children on the Pine Ridge Reservation. In the re-examination of the Caliban Series, Shakespeare's Caliban, by Alden T. Vaughan, proved invaluable, and led to new insights, providing, as it did, a detailed history of the etymology of the character's name and discussing a history of the symbolism associated with Caliban. Durham's 1993 show, *Original Re-Runs* and the written text which accompanied it, has been re-examined as the manifestation of a colonial reversal, where Durham forces the British audience to re-think their models of Indianess whilst symbolically attempting to reclaim his own identity through the de-construction of the language of the colonist.

Chapter one briefly outlines the problems created by the legacy of European interaction with the inhabitants of idigenous America and discusses Durham's negotiation with these problems and with the American art world. Chapter two deals principally with Durham's embodiment of Shakespeare's character, Caliban. Chapter three concerns Durham's negotiation with an English audience in his 1993 show, *Original Re-Runs*.

The exhibition which Durham presented to an Irish audience in the Douglas Hyde Gallery (1993) differed significantly in content and offered the unique opportunity to see the Caliban Series and other retrospective works.

Chapter 1

Negative Places

> Nothing could be more central to American reality than the relationship between Americans and American Indians yet those relationships are, of course, the most invisible and the most lied about. [Durham 1988, p103]

Understanding Native America has always been inextricably bound up with Eurocentric discourses of colonialism and racism. Since Europe's very first encounter with the indigenous 'Indians' (a misnomer which arose from a navigational miscalculation), its representations of these peoples became projections of its own dreads and desires. A binary or 'Manichean' mode of thought evolved amongst the colonists which ignored native American history and culture, relegating it to a position of an 'other', an object of Eurocentric definition. Thus the heterogeneous societies of the American continent were homogenized into a single conceptual sphere and became the mirror of the colonist's own psychic demons. As the polar opposite of the colonist from this Manichean viewpoint, the native must be a manifestation of the quintessence of evil and must be removed or exterminated.

> Western culture's knowledge of the racially different other is more than a body of potentially correctable lies and myths, it is more properly a sign of the relations of power. [Said 78, p35]

The authors of the dominant text demanded that the 'Indian' relinquish his lands and cultural identity and they cleansed their own consciences by seeking

refuge in their mythic constructs; it was more 'suitable' to portray 'Indians' as wild savages at the mercy of a 'virgin' earth in need of subjugation. The Cherokee nation as one of the "5 Civilised Tribes", threatened the heart of colonial discourse by absorbing difference with an enthusiasm and sophistication that alarmed the colonising powers. If the word of God and the word of law were the basis for the seizure of land from a people who were ignorant of words and the territorial boundaries inscribed by written language, then the Cherokee nation had transgressed this principle by developing their own written language. Such a flourishing culture conflicted with the colonial ethos and could not be tolerated. Therefore in 1830, Andrew Jackson (whose life had been saved in action by Junaluska, a Cherokee soldier) initiated a campaign of ethnic cleansing which came couched in paternal rhetoric ..."we look with deep interest on the face of this irreclaimable son of the wilderness, the child who will not be weaned from the breast of his rugged mother." [Durham 95 pp 60-61]

In the forced removal in 1838, one quarter of the Cherokee nation was killed. This policy of removal culminated in 1924 when the Native Americans were 'allowed' to become citizens of the state which had dispossessed them on the condition that they relinquish their Indian names. Thus Indian identity was wrestled from its owners and became the property of the White mythology. Their cultural identity and proper names were, and still are, used to denote primitivism and/or authenticity through an association with market products or sports teams, eg. Cherokee Chief Jeeps, Washington Redskins football team.

> **By these stategies indigenous America was transformed not only from one territory to another but from one linguistic place to another, a place were the menace of savagism could be safely recycled as a nostalgic primitivism in art advertising and so forth.** [Fisher, 1988, p.104]

The historical details of the cultural and physical genocide of the indigenous Americans has become the subject of a wave of popular amnesia, submerged beneath the mythologies of the mass circulated fiction of the 19th century and the Manichean struggles of the Cowboys and Indians in the 20th century cinema. 'Indian' culture has been consigned to necrophilous museums. 'Indian' art has been assimilated, superficially mimicked and cast aside by the modernist project as it searches for new 'virgin territory' and new childlike primitivism. It is allowed space as cultural artefacts but not as art, because art is produced solely by white men.

Jimmie Durham belongs to the Cherokee nation (or 'tribe' depending on one's position or motivation). In his work as an artist he has attempted to bear witness to a lost history, not a history that will be consigned to the necrophilous museum, but a history that must remain a functioning part of the present. His activism and art are inseparable. His desire to engage with contemporary art discourses on his own terms reflects the Cherokee tradition of successful integration without loss of identity. It also exemplifies his refusal, as he puts it, to "read the lines provided for him". [Durham, 1988, p.102]

In a 1995 interview with Dick Snauweart, Durham underlined his determination to remain outside the dictates of the 'master narrative' of the US, a narrative which offers Native Americans space only if they conform to a romanticised, fetishised portrayal of 'Indianness'. Successful Indian artists such as Fritz Scholder, R.C. Gorman and T.C. Cannon, through their romanticised images,

occupied a place in the Indian art market, a suboutlet of the 'real' art market, borne out of White American and not Native American needs. [Durham '95 pp 8-29]

> If you make some crazy non-reliance reliance on your background as an American Indian, there are only negative places that the art world can put you, only the most disgusting places. [Durham, 1995, p.19]

Durham sees both the weakness and the definition of the modernist project in its insistence that art only address other art. Durham's work in all media necessitates a political engagement from both artist and spectator. His sculptures, particularly by their very physicality and their often provocative and historically engaged titles, are designed to challenge people's expectations of art and to intelligently initiate discourses which encompass both the political and the aesthetic.

Writing in 1992, Durham expressed his affinity with those who occupy the fringes of the American city, the dispossessed who comb the city's refuse for society's leftovers. His juxtapositions of found objects and precarious constructions almost always have their origins in such dumps.

> I so loved the dumps where one could find the products of civilisation elegantly, surrealistically, juxtaposed with pieces of wood, magic rocks, bones and wild flowers, that they have remained the metaphor by which I define myself.

He revealed his ongoing strategy, his attempts to initiate a form of re-colonisation from the fringes inwards, where the artist attempts to use the discarded products of the city as a vehicle which challenges and subverts the "constant stream of misinformation" which emmanates from the master narrative of the city. [Durham, 1992, pp 224 - 251]

When he left the Indian Movement, Durham attempted to, as he put it, "continue a conversation with the world that the world never wanted and still doesn't want". [Durham, 1995, p.14]

Whilst his initial education in Geneva in the early 1970s had been relatively provincial and academic, his experiences on his return to America informed his attempts to address the complexities and potential pitfalls of the New York art scene. Having worked closely with Juan Sanchez in 1980 he saw the inherent weakness of producing work which facilitates and unintentionally panders to the desire of the "New York art crowd", to be entertained by the sufferings of third world peoples. He watched Sanchez become the archetypal angry primitive, become the darling for six months only to be rejected in favour of the more acceptable Neo Primitivism of Jean Michel Basquiat. Durham recognises the dangers faced by third world artists who blindly participate in the discourses of Modernism and Post Modernism. If he was to be allocated space as an independant thinking subject in the Eurocentric sphere of the Avant garde, he had to do more than merely "interrupt" momentarily; he had to challenge the structures of Modernism yet simultaneously avoid assimilation and regurgitation in accordance with the dictates of that narrative.

In order to accomplish this he has turned to his own tradition and recognised what he calls a Pre-Columbian Indian Aesthetic which has neither declined nor gone out of use. Durham is aware that this century the art market has rewarded those Indian artists whose work dealt with Indian subject matter within the imposed boundaries of a European aesthetic. In the early twentieth century, Indian students were told that their art was craft based and, therfore, inferior to European art which concerned itself with placing pigment on canvas squares. The

act of making a painted representation on canvas was invested with such mystical granduer in Western society that when it became obvious that Indians were capable of understanding and partaking in this lofty tradition their perceived authenticity and primitive purity as Indians was again called into question. Whilst Durham had no desire to adopt an imposed aesthetic into his own work, he demands that we recognise the flexibility of Native American societies who could assimilate the perceived pinnacle of Western cultural expression with relative ease. His own practice has tried to combine elements of what he calls an, "American Indian Aesthetic" [Durham, 1983, p.73], with received European traditions. This Indian Aesthetic is based on flexibility and finds its best expression in what Durham calls "acts and perceptions of combining". He regards Native American art as being driven by the attempt to connect objects or concepts on many levels. He scoffs at the colonial contention that Native American art is based on primitive art, and has a religious but not an intellectual significance. This viewpoint ignores the fact that Indian 'religion' (if the term fits at all) was based around the reality that the Indian 'gods' had 'real' counterparts in the natural world such as animals or the elements. European religions are not only heirarchical, but they manifest the ultimate form of binarism -- one either comes from god, is white, pure and go[o]dly, or one is dark and dirty and embodies the characteristics of the devil.

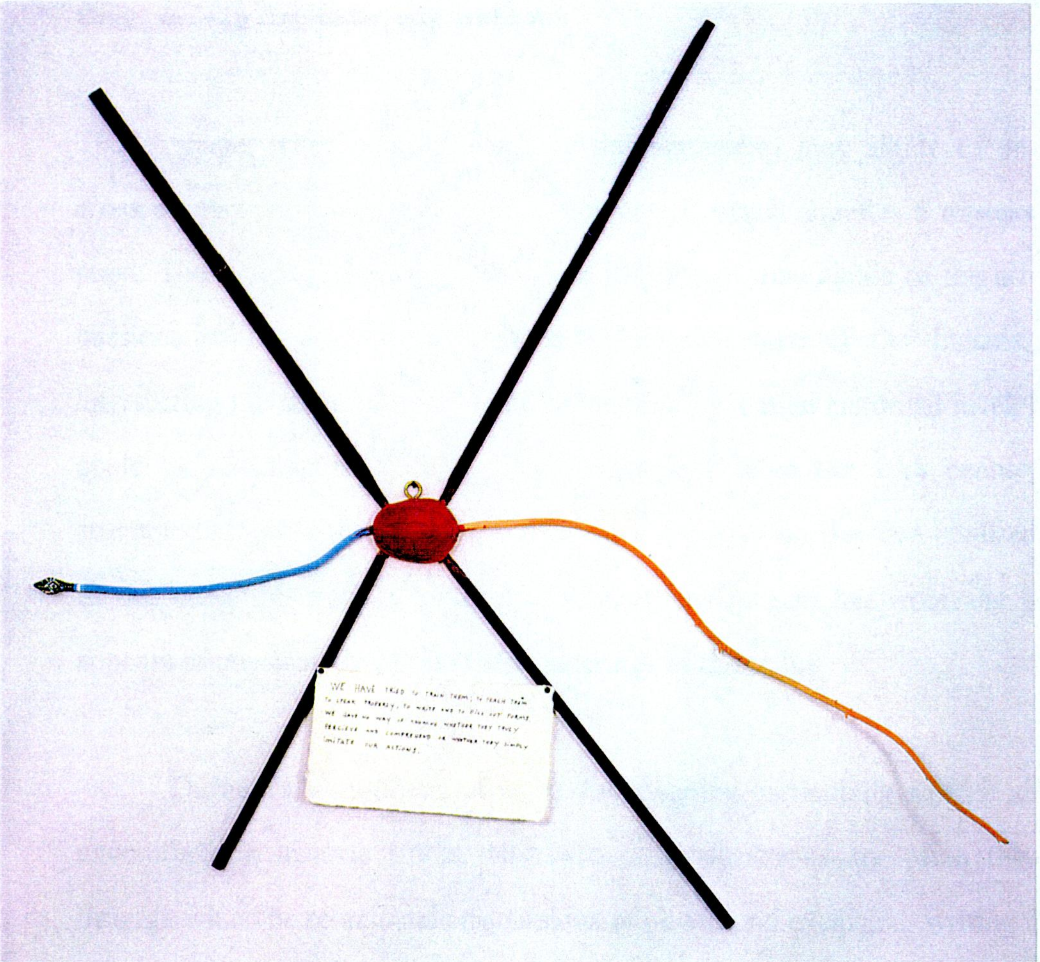
Durham, like Duchamp before him, challenges the principle of creativity which is given such a credence in Western art. Artists are mythologised for a god-like creativity which transforms raw material into an utterly new entity, the work of art. This process has often been aligned with the process of 'creation' itself. Duchamp's 'ready mades' incorporate raw materials from the 'real' world, but do not attempt to synthesise these materials into a new 'creation'; rather they maintain their presence as objects, creating a new dialogue but remaining unfinished in a

traditional sense. Duchamp's combination of a bicycle wheel and a stool from 1913 preserves the essence of the original objects and satirises the concept of a "zero point" of creativity from which the "work of art" emerges. Duchamp's essay, *Creativity and the Social Process*, addresses this issue:

> ...what a sculptor does is change objects. After Duchamp, this re-arranging can often be a matter of placing an object in a different way or in a different place than we would normally expect to see it or by consecrating it with a signature. [Durham, 1993, p.70]

Durhams juxtapositions (which recall the "Duchampian Changes" imposed by a warrior on the captured rifle of the oppressor by the addition of feathers and bead work) create unexpected and challenging combinations which call into question the binarism and polarity which so characterises the Western system. He recalls how he was taught to make lists of opposites at school and the problems which he encountered in doing so. He work has been concerned with the breakdown of the system of seperations and heirarchies which characterise European and American culture and which so opposes his concept of a Native American Aesthetic. Even the Western name 'Cherokee' when translated from its native American origins loosely means 'the people', a title which appears unconcerned with a specific national identity or cultural seperation.

Durham utilises a number of strategies in his endeavours to re-direct the one way traffic of Western representation. He employs a non-linear, sardonic humour which can often boil over into outright rage. His humour always functions on several levels and it rarely detracts from the work by allowing the spectator/reader to disengage from the seriousness of the work. For example, Durham's untitled *Red Turtle* [plate 1] from 1991 attempts to communicate on


WE HAVE TRIED TO TRAIN THEM; TO TEACH THEM
TO SPEAK PROPERLY, TO WRITE AND TO FILL OUT FORMS.
WE HAVE NO WAY OF KNOWING WHETHER THEY TRULY
PERCEIVE AND COMPREHEND OR WHETHER THEY SIMPLY
IMITATE OUR ACTIONS.

different levels through the vehicle of combined objects and text. He has placed a brightly coloured turtle shell at the intersection of three sticks (two straight sticks forming an X shape with a further intersection bending stick reminiscent of a snake). The text voices the colonial educator's perennial dilemma:

> We have tried to train them, to teach them to speak properly, to write and fill out forms. We have no way of knowing whether they truly perceive and comprehend or whether they merely imitate our actions.

The X shape, when contextualised by this statement, may allude to missionary cross or may simply refer to the teacher's mark which signifies a mistake by the pupil. The X may refer to the statement itself or it may allude to the attempt by missionaries to supress the erroneous 'bestial' nature of the Indians, the X intersecting the snake with all its evil connotations. On an historical level, Durham could be recalling the 'Crazy Snake Movement' from the 19th century which attempted to resist the imposition of private property on the 'five civilised tribes'. In this case, the state-endorsed rhetoric, which Durham has ironically imitated, appears to physically suppress the wanderings of the snake.

Durham's humour can often be disconserting particularly when it alludes to uncomfortable historic truths. His witty deconstructions are often the vehicle through which he re-animates discussions of power and exclusion, writing from the viewpoint of the oppressed, turning the tables on the oppressor.

His work sometimes reveals extreme self-doubt and self-consciousness and his attempts to oppose the weight of the dominant text of US imperialism have sometimes left him bitter and cynical. This cynicism has occasionally caused his work to retreat into a private alternative system of logic which leaves us feeling, as

Dan Cameron suggests, that we have fallen outside the cultural boundaries necessary for us to get his jokes. [Cameron, 1993, p.36]

> I want to say my own things to the world, and so, of course, given history part of 'my own things' is that you don't let me say anything. Another part is that your name is Kak. You may think that these are the main things I have to say; you probably think I am your mouse, you probably think I am your other. [Durham, 1988, p.105]

Chapter 2

Ultra Violent Light

In his essay, *Cowboys and ...*, [Durham, 1990, pp170 - 187], Durham reveals the problems which he encounters in trying to break down and challenge aspects of cultural colonialism. He reveals plans for an installation which he deliberately never built. The installation would have involved a juxtaposition of racist images of Native Americans with 'noble savage types' from advertising, which he indicates would have have been titled: *which is the correct way to portray Indians?* He believes that the colonial discourses are so predominant that even the most perceptive Americans would merely be amused and remove themselves immediately from any involvement with the work.

The strategy which Durham uses to "portray" himself seems, in part, to have been informed by the famous Apache leader, Geronimo. In Lucy Lippard's *Partial Recall: Photographs of Native Americans*, Durham contributes what might traditionally be called an essay discussing a photograph of Geronimo [plate 2] which he obtained from an "unidentified book". This piece is an example of Durham's typical assault on the expectations of the viewer/reader. It could conceivably be argued that Durham is attempting, once again, to assert his uniquely Cherokee identity by deliberately blurring the distinctions between writing about art and making art, and also by blurring the distinctions between the internal disciplines of art and its appreciation. His major European show of 1993 entitled, *Original Re-Runs* , incorporated formats traditionally associated with video documentary and preparatory autobiographical text which challenges us to look at our expectations and to question what the Brazilian writer, Paulo Freire has called

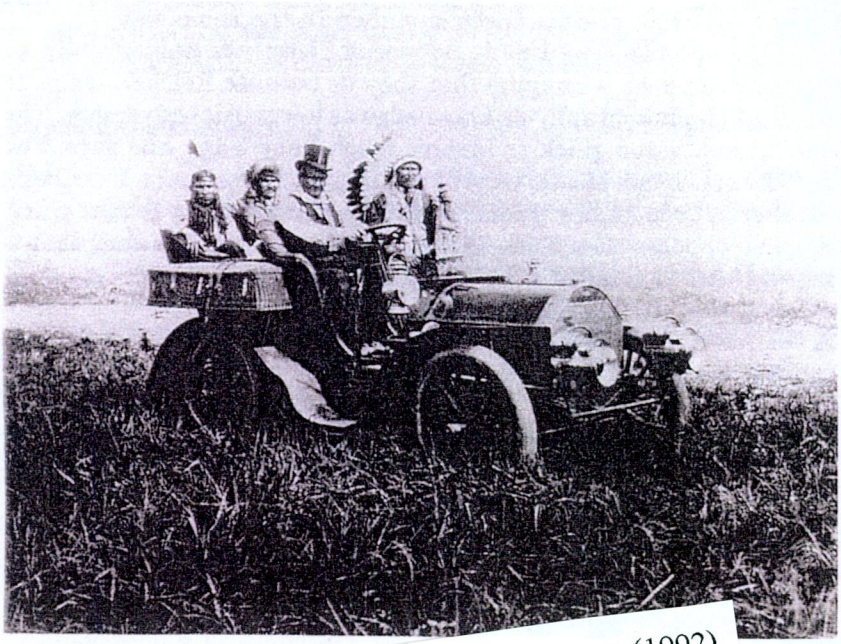


PLATE 2... *Geronimo at the wheel* (1992)

the, "specialism" or self-imposed compartmentalism of Western culture. Dan Cameron argues that Durham is indulging in the time-honoured Native American tradition of refusing to speak when he is spoken to. He suggests that the actual practice of maintaining seperate but equal domains in art discourse has been declared invalid by the artist as a manifestation of the same coloninsing mentality applied merely to art instead of world domination. [Cameron, 1993, p. 36]

Durham invests the photograph of Geronimo (which accompanies the essay mentioned previously) with a meaning which may or may not be factual, but which gives him a precedence for his own attempts to operate within the framework of European/American institutions. He implies that Geronimo is demanding to be seen on his own terms. The photograph (possibly taken by Walter Ferguson) shows Geronimo at the wheel of a car wearing Western costume, accompanied by three companions dressed in traditional costume. The original text which accompanied this photograph declared that Geronimo... "obtained pocket money through the sale of photographs of himself". Durham recognises the obvious attempt to degrade Geronimo to the status of a childlike primitive, but he significantly addresses the reader and declares that although his work is intended as "a constructive act", he must sell it on in order to obtain his own "pocket money". This photograph of Geronimo represents for Durham the self-expression of a man who refuses to read the lines given to him and assume the stance which his companions in the car adopt, that of the noble savage, the representative of a dying breed. [Durham, 1992, pp. 242 - 246]

Certainly we can recognise some of Durham's own strategies in his description of Geronimo as a man who is defiant and progressive, who asks for nothing from the viewer (not even understanding) but demands to be recognised.

Geronimo, Durham believes, actively sought out photo opportunities in order to define himself as a subject rather than an inanimate object of romantic myth. Geronimo therefore, although physically defeated by imperialism, sought ot maintain the ability to dictate his own appearance and identity.

In "Geronimo!", Durham cites his own particular dilemma:

> On the one hand, how can I write, carry on intellectual or cultural investigations when our situation demands activism, on the other hand, to whom might I address my investigations... in an untrustworthy situation? [Durham, 1995, pp. 9]

Edgar Heap of Birds, an artist of Cheyenne-Arapho extraction, finds no seperation between Durham's cultural investigations and "hands-on" activism. For him, ... "artwork is a modern weapon," a weapon which has the potential to create what Heap of Birds describes as "new messages for America". [Durham p.112]

Durham's messages for America are voiced most successfully through his re-embodiment of Shakespeare's character, Caliban (1992). [plate 3]

> I want to engage the N.Y. art world specifically about its current events, including my place in those events,... so I made Caliban into a visual artist. I created a fictitious archive of Caliban's drawings, letters and sculptures as a way to explore the third world artist in contemporary practice. [Durham '92 p.124]

1992 significantly marked the quincentenary of Columbus' initial encounter with the "New World" and its population. It began the process of displacement visited by the white man upon the red man. This was both a physical and linguistic displacement; white men and "white" crops on Indian territory and European names supplanting Indian ones. Columbus' mania for re-naming territory stemmed from a desire to confer European rights of possession and to banish the previous

PLATE 3.1... *Untitled Caliban's Mask* (1992)
Glass eyes, button, mud, PVC pipe, glue.

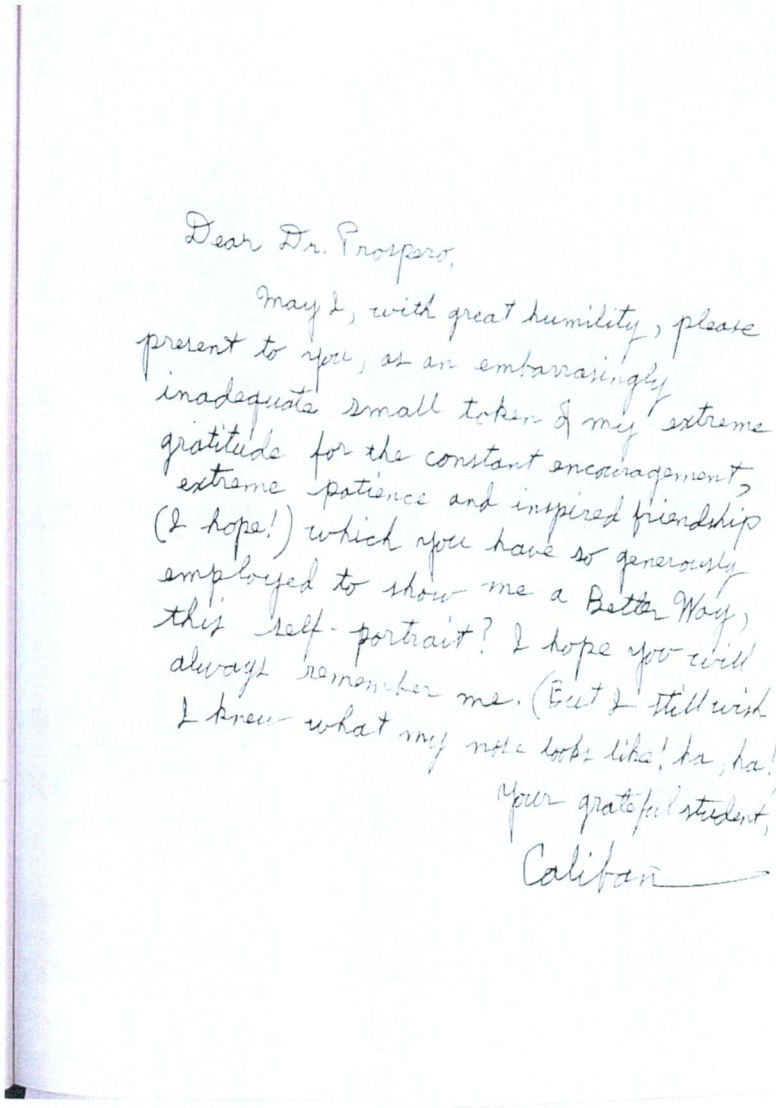


PLATE 3.2... *Untitled Caliban's Mask* (1992)
Pencil on paper.

inhabitants to the 'wilderness' where they, and the legitimacy of their claim for the land, can be conveniently forgotten. The 19th century saw the extension of this doctrine and the virtual completion of the banishment westwards. By the 1890s the red man was not only dispossessed but was officially 'vanishing'. Theodore Roosevelt encapsulates the legitimisation of the dispossession: "As regards taking their land, the simple truth is that [they] never had any real ownership of it." [Durham, 1995, p.46]

Tzvetan Todorov suggests that to deprive a person of his/her own name and language (as in Columbus' campaign of re-nomination) is fundamentally to deprive him/her of identity. [Le Marr, 1988, p.102]

Jimmie Durham telescopes the 500 year history of deprivation and dispossession into the relationship between two of the characters in William Shakespeare's, *The Tempest* (1611), Caliban and Dr Prospero.

The character of Caliban particularly has had a great deal of symbolic significance and has been adopted by many writers and thinkers since his original appearance in the 17th century.

"Caliban is a loose end; for centuries readers and playgoers have wanted to tie him up."

[Vaughan, 1991, p.19]

A great deal of ambiguity surrounds Shakespeare's monster in The Tempest. Shakespearean scholars and historians have argued over the etymology of the name, Caliban, hoping that it will shed some light on the author's original intentions in his conceptualization of Caliban. The most popular explanation of the name is that Caliban is an intentional anagram for cannibal. In his essay, *The*

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Caliban Codex or a Thing Most Brutish , Mark Alice Durant flatly states this explanation as fact. [Durham '95 p.79]

Because of the confusion over the written translation of the consonants i, r and n between the spoken language of the inhabitants of the new world and European written translations, the word "carib" is tantamount to "calib". The inhabitants of "Caribana" hailed from the northern part of South America, their name appearing in bold type in Theodore de Bry's atlas, *Americae pars VIII* (1599) which Shakespeare would have had access to. Samuel Johnson and George Stephens' 1778 annotated edition of The Tempest stated bluntly that... "the metathesis in Caliban from Cannibal is evident." [Vaughan, 1991, p.32]

This, however, is the first mention of the acceptance of Caliban's etymological roots in the word cannibal and its late emergence (almost 200 years later) calls its acceptance into question somewhat. In 1895 Albert Kluyver, a Dutch scholar, rejected the cannibal explanation because "it is improbable that Shakespeare could have known Caliban as an English name for cannibal". [Vaughan, 1991, p. 34]

Rather, Shakespeare would have been familiar with the gypsy language which flourished in England a century before 1611. "Cauliban meant black or things associated with blackness.

Prospero does not consider Caliban as a person, for he addresses him as earth and filth ie. mud, dirt."

[Vaughan, 1991, pp 34 - 35]

Durham (probably unconsciously) incorporates elements of both explanations into his embodiment of Caliban, highlighting his widely accepted association with the indigenous American peoples and incorporating the "black" otherness of the gypsy into his texts. Durham, however, is probably unconcerned with the etymological roots of Caliban or even with the original intentions of

Shakespeare. His work emerges from more recent post-colonial discourse which forefronts Caliban as a powerful symbol for third world nations emerging from the remnants of colonial oppression. Until the late 20th century Caliban had principally been associated with the boorish colonial aggressor as exemplified by the Argentine writer, Paul Groussac who, in 1898, dubbed the United States "Calibanesque". [Vaughan, 1991, p.141]

Similarly the Uraguayan philosopher/politician, Jose Enrique Rodo in his essay entitled, *Ariel* (1900), criticises "yanqui" expansionism and aggression (as Durham continues to do) but finds in Ariel, as opposed to Caliban, more befitting characteristics to represent the self-image of Latin Americans.

Durhams characterisation owes much to Robert Fernandez Retamar's 1971 book, *Caliban*, which explicitly rejected Rodo's ideas.

> **Our symbol is not Ariel, as Rodo thought, but Caliban. Prospero invaded the islands, killed our ancesters, enslaved Caliban and taught him his language to make himself understood. I know of no other metaphor more expressive of our cultural situation, of our reality... what is our history, our culture, if not the history and culture of Caliban?** [Retamar '71, p.6]

Calibanesque associations have featured prominently in African prose and poetry on the late 20th century. Taban Io Liyong of Uganda was writing politically charged poetry in the early 1970s, a time when Durham was undoubtedly formulating his own identity as an artist. Liyong wrote in an ironic, acerbic style very similar to Durham's and applied The Tempest metaphor explicitly in his book *Frantz Fanon's Uneven Ribs: with poems more and more.*

Bill Shakespeare
Did create a character called Caliban
The unwilling servant of Prospero
... (By the way I am also called Taban
very near to Caliban
And was taught language
And what do I do with it but to
curse it in my own way)

[Vaughan '91 p.165]

Retamar's argument contends that the coloniser, as represented by Prospero, enslaves the 'savage' Caliban and steals his land but offers him, in return, what is perceived as 'civilisation'. Prospero brings civilisation to Caliban in the form of books and language but Caliban concludes ..."You taught me language and my profit on't is I know how to curse. The red plague rid of you for learning me your language." [O'Connor, 1975, p. 21]

Durham sees Dr Prospero and what he represents as the vehicle for a form of cultural cannibalism which endures to this day. Within the relationship of Dr Prospero and Caliban we find the struggles of language and identity and the authorship and ownership of history played out in Iambic verse. If we examine Miranda's comment to Caliban (obviously inspired by Prosero)... "Thou didst not savage know thy own meaning but thou wouldst gabble like a thing most brutish", we find parallels to Roosevelt's or Jackson's disavowal of Indian identity and possessions, and their attempts to portray them as children of the wilderness.

Durham's essay, *The Ground Has Been Covered* , may shed some light on the behaviour of Durham's Caliban and help us also to understand the cultural cannibalism which the United States has inflicted on Native America.

> I've been careful not to reveal too much, understanding is a consumer product in your society. You can buy some for the price of a magazine. Once you've bought some understanding, it's only natural for you to turn it around and make a profit from it -- psychological, economic, or both. Then you'd get even fatter and then where would I be? [Durham '93 p.136]

Durham's conception of the United States is the antithesis of Groussac's or Rodo's; Dr Prospero has assumed the cannibalistic traits originally attributed to Caliban, as he consumes culture with boorish zeal getting "fatter" as a result.

Durham imbues Caliban with the characteristics of an artist but highlights his inherent lack of any coherent identity. Caliban defines himself through the master's tongue and can only make himself understood in that tongue by becoming the polar opposite of his master and assuming the bestial traits of the cannibal. His innability to define his own identity is demonstrated through symbolic attempts to represent himself in drawings and letters to a fictional diary. Durham's work is fictionally biographical but also retains obvious elements of autobiography. Caliban writes in his diary: "I don't know what I look like, since Dr Prospero came, there's nothing here that reflects me." [Durham, 1992]

Durham's self-portrait of 1987 [plate 4] demonstrates how virtually impossible it can be for an Indian artist to make a representation of 'self' which is divorced from colonial discourse. He creates a life size image of himself with a carved wooden head (covered in paint and animal hide) and a two dimensional body made of canvas and wood. This formless body bears many inscriptions written by the artist. He uses language that parallels that of the Caliban series, as it panders to the paternalism of the viewer, just as Caliban attempts to curry favour with his master:

PLATE 4... *Self Portrait* (1987)
Canvass, wood, paint, feather, shell, metal.

"Hello, I am Jimmie Durham... I want to explain some things about myself... As an artist I am confused about many things..." He plays on spectator's preconceptions of 'Indianness': "I am willing and able to do a variety of jobs, my hands are small, sensitive... Indian penises are usually large and colourful."
The flatness and emptiness of the form possibly symbolises the non-being of belonging to the category of an "other". On the other hand, Durham may be presenting a mere 'shadow' of himself, flattened and denied any corporeal form, mocking attempts to place him into categories as two dimensional as this projected form.

Both his *Self Portrait* and *Caliban's Diary* share a common critique of the Manichean perspective. Durham as himself and Durham as Caliban speak from the fringes on behalf of the unrepresented 'other'. Durham's critique of Western binarism in the Caliban series has a autobiographical reasonance particularly as he portrays Caliban combining pairs of opposite phrases and expressions, just as Durham has described himself doing as a child. Working within the framework of what Caliban ironically calls the "marvellously subtle" language of Dr Prospero, he contrasts words under the headings, "Heavy or Dark" with words under the heading, "Light". Within Prospero's frame of reference as provided by his language, Caliban has no option but to conceptualise himself "me" as the opposite of "purity" and to group the word "me" with "dirt", "muck", "filth" and "detritus". As the opposite of these earthbound concepts, Durham cites (under the heading "Light") "Heaven", "Celestial bodies", "God", "purity", "X-rays", "ultra violent light" (sic). Thus science and heavenly spirituality are the preserve of the en"light"ened Dr Prospero, whilst Caliban, or "the heavy dude" as he describes himself, is forced to identify himself with the heavy dark earth and its associated mud and detritus.

Caliban, in an attempt to please his master, boasts that everyday he learns a new set of words. Here, Durham is acutely conscious of the parallels between the fictitious diary entries and the sinister reality of the education of Native American Children by Dr Prospero's counterpart, the US government. In his 1983 piece, *Stop the Genocide of Indian People* , he quotes from the "Vocabulary of a Lakota Primer" which was printed in the early 1970s to educate the children of the Pine Ridge reservation, an area prone to "unrest". The selective vocabulary provided by the government gives an insight into official attitudes to Native Americans. (In the vocabulary, the English word was presented alongside its Lakota equivalent.) They are taught about figures of "legitimate" authority from the sheriff to the commissioner of Indian affairs. Young Indians are taught to say "I like the Sheriff". These authority figures are mentioned in the same list as the Pope, the Church and Heaven. However, the most insiduous aspect of the vocabulary provided is the focus on the innate "dirtiness" of the Indian children being addressed. Of the 28 words given, 16 refer to disease and hygiene. For example: "your face is dirty", "comb your hair", "always take a bath", "be silent", "your ears are dirty", "cut your hair". Thus the children are 'enlightened' and made to believe that Indianness is innately dirty and religion and 'legitimate' authority from the sheriff to the Pope offer the only hope of cleanliness and godliness.

Caliban's fumblings are represented in childlike pencil drawings and diary chapters which feign ignorance and show an eagerness to please his master which resembles an insecure child attempting to win the favour of his teacher. His paradox is that he cannot represent himself without digging himself deeper into the hole of signification in which Prospero has trapped him. His metaphorical attempts to draw his own nose have a superficial humour but the humorous qualities

evaporate when the metaphor is connected to outside reality. Caliban finally completes an image of himself which he presents to Prospero, like an apple for teacher. He has made a mask of dark mud with one brown eye and one yellow eye and a childlike nose made from a button. He lionises his master, thanking him for showing him "A Better Way", just as in the vocabulary of a Lakota Primer the children are warned about "wrong procedure" and are shown the path to purity which Durham now calls the "Better Way". In Durham's or Caliban's final presentation to his "master", Mark Alice Durant finds "... a travesty of representation, an absurd demonstration of language internalised." [Durham, 1995, p. 87)

We see, in Caliban's mud man image, a crisis of identity which has afflicted the indigenous peoples of America for hundreds of years.

Chapter 3

Working the Angles

> I do not want to entertain you in any sense of the word... I would hate it if you all came to understand me... so that any white person with a few bucks could spend an evening being entertained by our sorrows gaining in power by a better understanding of our predicaments, our dreams.
>
> [Durham, 1988, p.105]

In his poem [Durham, 1988, p.105] entitled *This is not New Jersey*, Durham again satirises Westerner's expectations as he prefixes the poem with the statement... "Okay, I can do Indian tricks!" He highlights the ludicrousness of colonial re-nomination and the natural immorality of planting one culture in the rightful place of another. "Tear down old Jersey and build a new one there; You can't import Jerseys or Yorks or Hampshires."

A culture which attempts to re-cast or fly in the face of all natural laws is doomed, according to Durham. He associates the colonists with the disease and death which they brought to the indigenous races and successfully overturns the smugness of Europeans who believed that they were bringing purity and holiness to replace primitive hovels and unenlightened savagery. The colonists were so pure by their own reckoning but brought with them a variety of disease which claimed the lives of countless Indians. The response from the colonists is echoed in the Lakota Primer: "the Indian is presumed to be dirty, to have a need to always take a bath."

Durham attempts to reverse the injustice of this representation... "why don't you ask the government to sterilize you?" (Speaking to his colonial cousin.)

"You're so insanitary dragging around that load of Jersey bullshit." "You are just German Germs or Dutch elm disease."

The new land was beyond the conception of the Eurocentric sphere of the colonlist so he attempted to re-define it as something familiar. Land which had existed and had been populated for thousands of years cannot be, by Durham's reasoning, either the 'new world or the new likeness of an old Jersey.'

This land will ultimately reject Western wheat in favour of indigenous corn; the master narrative of deception and lies which built the US must similarly come unstuck in the face of natural justice.

This theme is echoed in the 1989 piece, *The Cathedral of St John the Divine* [plate 5]. The sculptural piece created by Durham represents the largest Gothic cathedral in the world, St John the Divine in New York. The cathedral itself is made of stone reinforced by steel. The steel, however, is expanding with rust and soon will cause the stone to collapse. The cathedral is of course, because of its 19th century origin, merely fake Gothic. Its false history functions as a remarkable allegory for the colonial process; Medieval and Renaissance European principles and practices are doomed to ultimate failure when applied to the New World and its new circumstances. Durham's sculpture is a similarly flimsy structure, crowned, as it is, by a painted moose's skull. The wood significantly bears the inscription "Made in the USA" which highlights the allusion to the flimsiness of a system built on the genocide of one people and the enslavement of another.

The reversal of the colonial progression westwards is played out in *This is not New Jersey* in a form of pathetic fallacy. The colonist is instructed to ride a passenger pidgeon into the sunrise (back eastwards) because "... even the grass

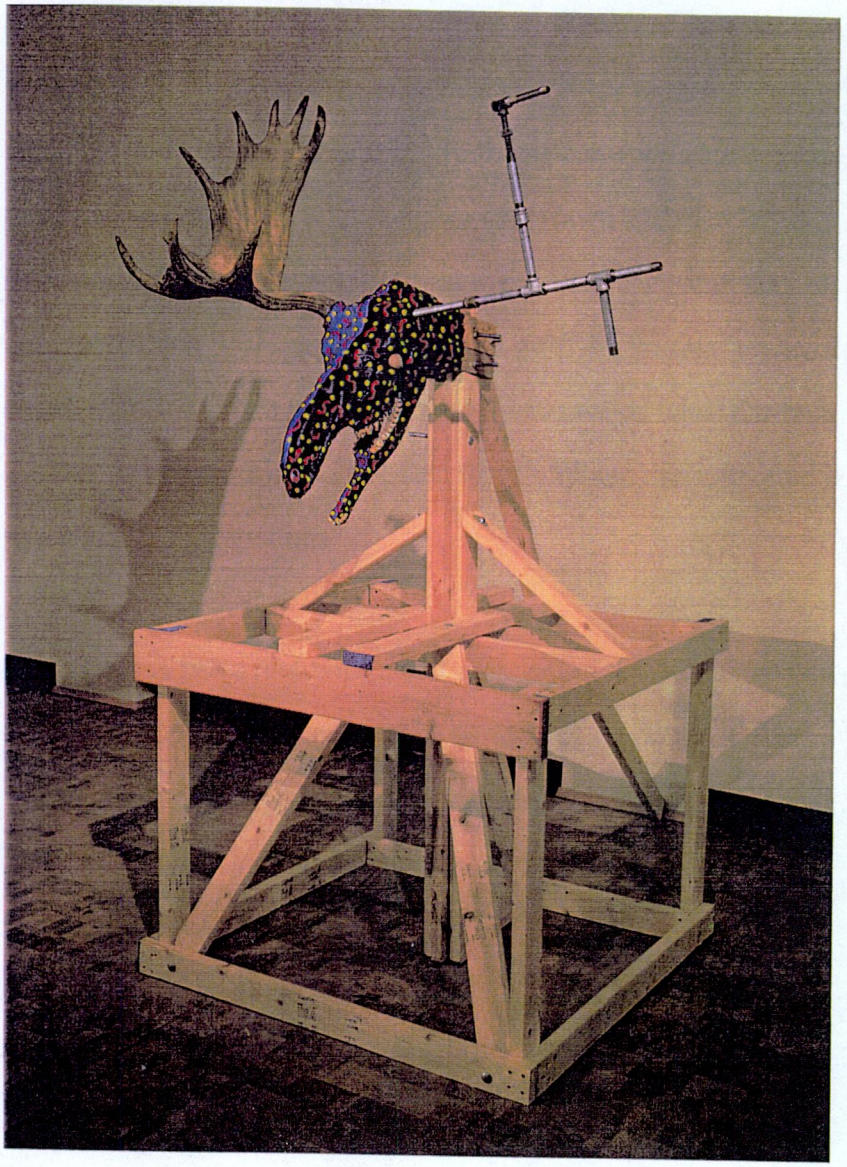

PLATE 5... *The Cathedral of St John the Divine* (1989)
Skull, wood, antler, paint, metal.

around here hates you". The people who have been truly "made in the USA" or at least in the "New World" are imagined by Durham to say "... we live here and you are scaring the fish". This colonial reversal is alluded to in Edward Poitras piece, *Offensive/Defensive* , from the same year as Durham's poem (1988). Poitras transposes sods of natural prairie grass and cultivated lawn, placing the removed line of prairie grass sods into the urban park lawn and vice versa. In his own work, Durham suggests to the colonist that even the grass hates him and that he should pack up his golf balls and jump in the gulf. In Poitras' piece, the prairie grass flourished in the urban park enviroment because of what Durham describes as its "... never to be messed with freedom to be". Whilst the cultivated lawn did not fare too well on the reservation.

Poitras piece met with much criticism in the Indian community who saw it as a suggestion that Indians would do as well or better if they were to re-locate from the reservation. Durham does not shy away from this challenge and critices those "PC Indians" who attempt to remain on the reservation (a white man's construct) for political reasons.

[Durham, 1993, p. 211]

He sees them as unconsciously accepting the White man's definition of themselves and as echoing, even by their very stance as "politically correct", the current stance of the colonists.

"The more we become super Indian, the more we become the White man's Indian."

Durham's 1993 text, *Mental Fatigue and Social Politics*, amounts to a scathing critique of the rhetoric of colonialism, masquerading as an autobiographical accompaniment to the *Original Re-Runs* Exhibition [plate 6]. It was published under the title: *My Book the East London Coelcanth, sometimes called troubled waters, The story of British Sea Power Begins with a chapter titled;* (sic).

This text is an outright assault on Western ideals of linear thought structure and rigourous compartmentalisation and, more specifically, the text attempts to deconstruct the ideal of English imperialism through the vehicle of the English language.

> **This is not an art project. This is an art book, not a fish hook. Aren't I writing perfectly good English here, you could almost imagine it to be my native tongue, couldn't you?**

Durham writes with a kind of cyclical logic, veering off into allegories and dead ends but always returning to his central aim: to challenge the Westerner to question their own identity and their expectations of his work. His opening words undermine any complacency on the part of the reader/viewer by calling attention to the physical realities of examining the text.

> **Most of the time you are not careful with the ordinary things... the pressures put upon you by a very inclusive state narrative mitigates against you fondling this page... remember the myriad political histories involved from growing tree to pulp factory.** [Durham, 1993, p.4]

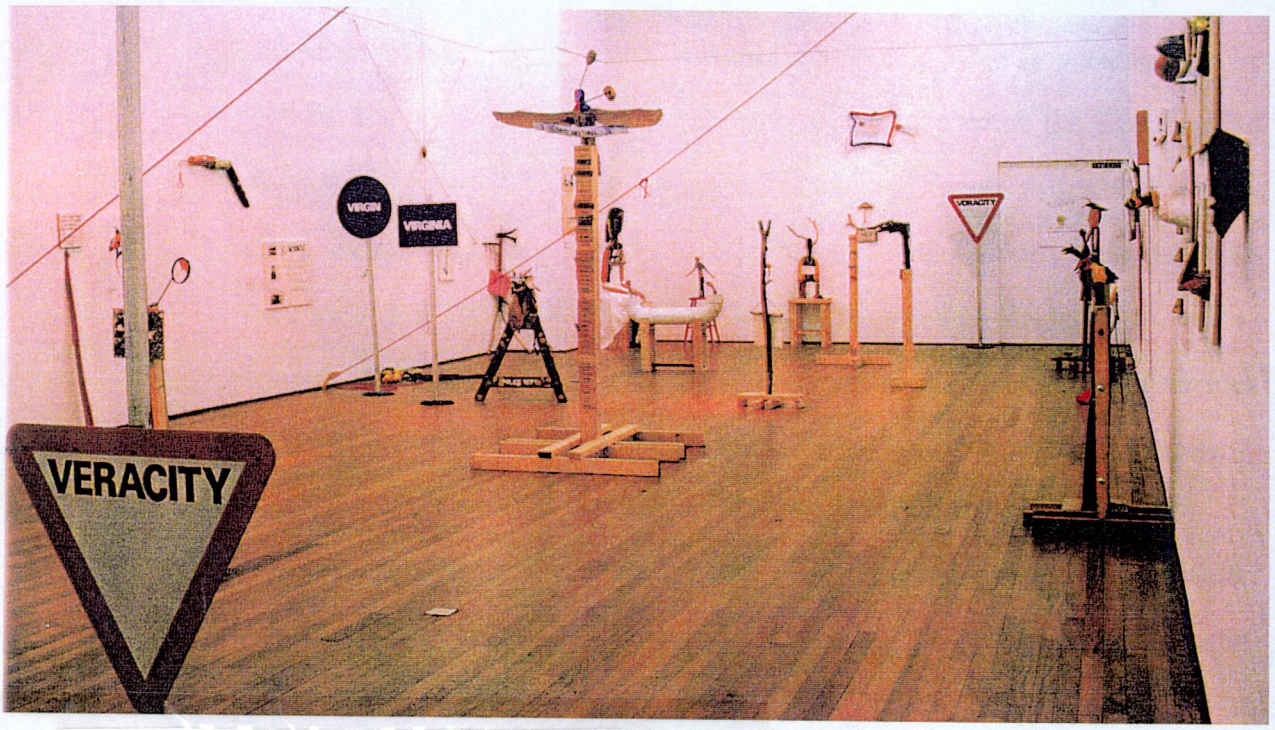

PLATE 6... *Original Re-Runs* (1993)
Exhibition, I.C.A. London.

When we consider Durham's desire to remain outside definition as "the White man's Indian", it is evident that the sculptural works contained in the *Original Re-Runs* Exhibition cannot be considered in isolation, relegating the *East London Coelacanth...*or the *Educational Video* which accompany them to the status of mere documentation.

The *East London Coelacanth...* records Durham's Quixotic quest in search of a fish. The East London Coelacanth was caught in 1957 off the coast of South Africa causing a stir in the scientific community (it was presumed to be extinct for a hundred million years). Durham attempts to catch the East London Coelacanth not in the colonially titled "East London", South Africa, but in East London, England. His impossible quest for an extinct fish obviously functions as an allegory for his search for his own identity as the bearer of an English name and as a member of a "disappearing" race. Durham thinks that if he can catch an East London Coelacanth in East London, England, he might "... somehow be helping to resolve some of the residual problems of Anglish Imperialism".

His symbolic actions are similar to those of the Aboriginal leader who 'celebrated' the bicentenial of Australia by sailing into Dover and re-reading a proclamation which was read to the Aborigines two centuries before. He ironically spoke of claiming the territory yet meaning its inhabitants no harm, calling into mind the subsequent two hundred year history of dispossession inflicted upon the Aboriginal people by the colonists. Durham's negotiation with the English people, significantly only a year after the Columbus quincentennial ('92), is similar in style.

In the *Educational Video* Durham and his companions arrive in the desert near Cuernavacu in Mexico having completed their "expedition". They decide to rename the place East London. Durham declares that the prized specimen which he and his companions have caught is merely a "common desert shark". There are obvious parallels with Durham's challenges to the discourse of authenticity yet the failure of the expedition might reflect a resignation in the face of Western misrepresentation. However, the video, alternatively, could be another of Durham's conceptual gags; he may be challenging our investment in the exotic which his work represents, playing with our received desires for authenticity or for the romanticism of the proud Indian who resists the tyranny of the West.

> In the process of catching our gaze and turning it back on ourselves and by other linguistic procedures which treat the insider-outsider paradigm as a curious double standard, Durham's art tries to help us understand why we find such machinations necessary at all. [Cameron, 1993, p.36]

Durham's written text on the East London Coelacanth is a maze of similar allegories and non-linear associations which often defy logical interpretation. However, Durham seems to be attempting to offer an alternative to Eurocentric thought, a type of cyclical logic which demands that we pay attention to the everyday things rather than accept the state narrative which has, in Durham's view, promoted the "abstraction of objects" in the interest of status rather than usefulness. Hence his art cannot merely address other art but must be involved politically; his art must... "speak to other areas of life". [Durham, 1988, p.101]
His linguistic deconstructions attempt to highlight and ridicule the injustices inflicted upon the real people behind the mythic 'other'. Durham's 1988 "document" listing the counties and rivers of the state of Virginia emphasises the dual standards of colonialism. Every name is English from King William to King George with, as

a sole Indian exception, the river Rappahannok. The colonial narrative dictates the obliteration of Native America and its identity yet retains control of the remnants of the dispossessed peoples by the appropriation and control of their proper names. He associates "general crookedness" and working the angles with the ancestors of the current inhabitants of England, the Angles. As soon as he has established this tenuous link (arguably no more tenuous than the assumption that all native Americans are savages) Durham veers off into an aside which traces his family lineage for the benefit of the Westerner who doubts his "authenticity". Both of his fictional characters, his imagined ancester, Willie Durham,and his fictional coloniser, David Bar Muda (presumably a derivative of Bermuda), undertake a journey westwards. Bar Muda, we are told, took his name instead of his "anglish" name Smith because... "Bar Muda is Anglo-Spanish and means to keep things from being moved or displaced". As a metaphor for Durham's own attempt to displace the Anglo-Spanish colonial mentality, his alternative 'journey' eastwards ends in self-proclaimed failure.

"I located no one who knew of us [he and his fellow native Americans], in fact there was little sympathy or interest."

Durham is left with no place, his colonising alter ego, David Bar Muda, has succeeded in his mission -- "That mission was nothing less than making the entire world become Anglia, No East, No West, No direction home."

Durham's conclusion of this text may reveal something of the reality behind the humorous allegories. He describes his text as something that... "really went nowhere". He appears to retreat into reverie, wishing to be a better artist, wanting "out" of this century, wishing that we could know how good he is so that we could help him.

However, to dismiss Durham's conclusion in the East London Coelacanth as mere pessimistic reverie would be an oversimplification which would allow the Westerner to distance themselves from the work. Durham's aim is to initiate critical considered dialogue in a British audience brought up to cherish the pink bits of the map and the colonial heritage. His comments, particularly in the conclusion, appear self-effacing or even insecure, but by intercepting our train of thought and challenging us with every sentence he can attempt to resolve the seemingly unresolvable relationship between coloniser and colonised. Even if he only succeeds in unsettling the preconceptions of a Western audience, he will have maintained the Cherokee tradition which requires that we "speak well and listen well". His assertion that the word "silly" originally meant "happy" allows him to qualify his statement that in writing this book he... "wanted to be silly". Durham is happiest when he has produced investigative rather than declarative work, when he has demanded that the audience/spectator approach his work in a truly scientific spirit, ready to question and discuss. It is Durham's contention that Western science operates too much on belief and that the belief systems which control its findings are in accordance with the Manichean mode of colonisation.

> **Our project is not to believe, not to find answers, it is to be analytical, to do experiments that should lead us to the next experiment, it shouldn't lead us to a cheap answer.** [Durham '95, p.25]

Even the title of the 1993 show, *Original Re-Runs*, suggests the role reversal which is so crucial to Durham's strategies. He "re-runs" the colonial strategies of the West from viewpoint of the colonised. His assemblages serve as ironic reminders to the discourses of colonialism. They are flimsily constructed in a deliberate manner in order to appear, often times, as if they will fall to bits at any moment and return to a heap of rubbish. For example: *We Have Made Progress*

(1993) [plate 7]. This piece consists of a seperated stick which is suspended precariously from a wooden joint bearing the placard upon which Durham has hand written: "We have made progress and we will continue to progress."
This installation clearly illustrates the self-delusion upon which the myths of colonialism are based. He re-presents the glorious narrative of progress upon which the colonies were founded, highlighting its flimsy basis in morality and truth.

Original Re-Runs continues Durham's critique of the concept of artistic "creation". He successfully links the investment in the absolute novelty of the artistic invention with the colonist's investment in the newness of his so called "virgin" land or his New Jersey. His sculptures always maintain the rough quality of the process of their assemblage; they are never 'moulded' or made to assume a dictatorial stance. The signposts which punctuated the ICA London show (and were omitted from the Douglas Hyde show in Dublin), contrasted with the assemblages, attempting to deceive by their pristine sharp edges and simple colours. Durham's main body of 'sculptures' in this show are set up like numerous wooden plinths. Perhaps the most historically evocative of these plinth-like pieces is Durham's representation of La Malinche, the Mexican mistress of Cortes. [Plate 8]

Similar to his 1987 self-portrait, La Malinche's body is flat and virtually formless (this time assuming the shape of a chair). Her head and hands are carved by the artist and her hollow figure is draped with a gold Western style bra. Here, Durham links the colonial lust for gold with the sexual lust which figured so strongly in the psyche of the colonist prompting his contradictory emotions of dread and desire. La Malinche's face is etched with such a deep sadness by


WE HAVE MADE
PROGRESS
AND WE WILL CONTINUE TO
PROGRESS

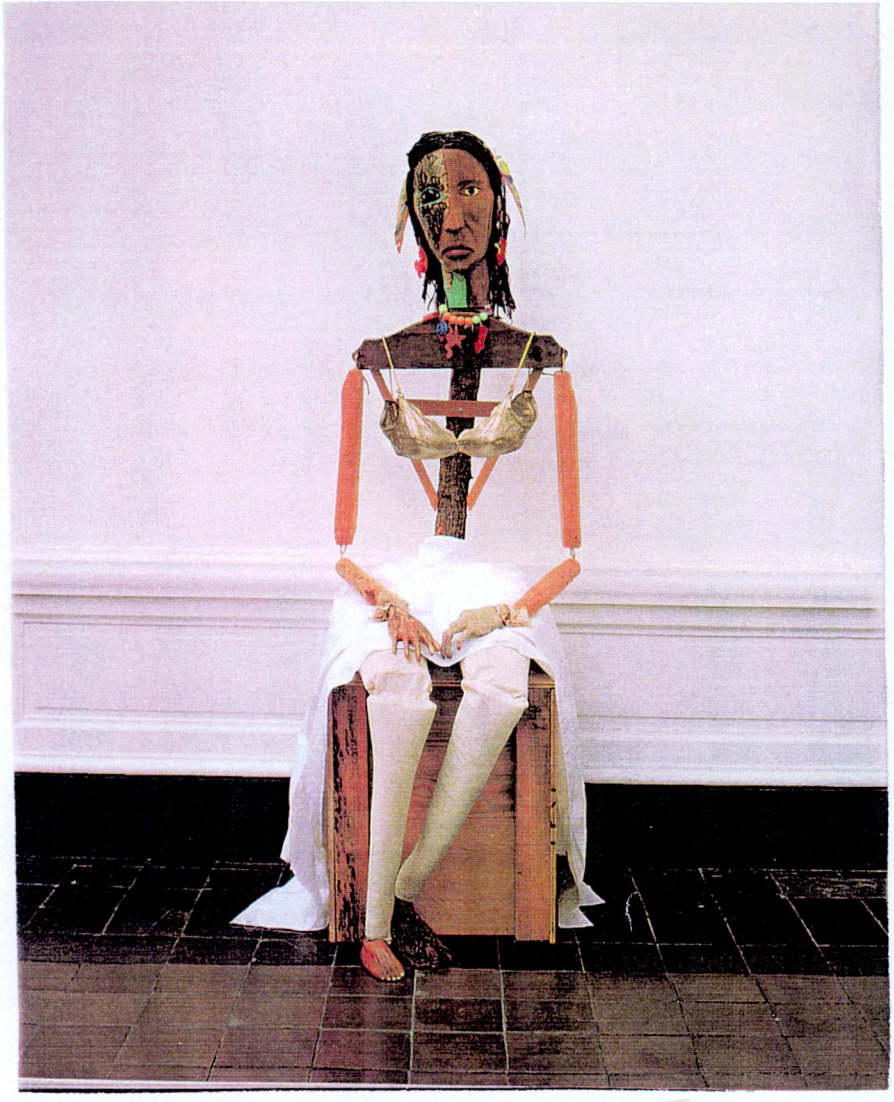

PLATE 8... *La Malinche* (1991)
Wood, paint, polyester, cotton, beads.

Durham, who links her sexuality, an object claimed by the Spanish, to the plight of her native land which endured the rape and pillage of the invader.

La Malinche suffered a fate similar to Durham's alter ego, Enkiddu Wildemann (1995). Durham created this allegorical character for his essay, *Gilgamesh and Me.*

His character (Wildemann), Durham tells us, was a writer and chronicler of great influence... "outside virtually every city in Europe", whose work faded into oblivion when the master narrative of the city began with the enlightenment. Durham hijacks the ancient Gilgamesh epic and portrays Wildemann as the 'other' of King Gilgamesh. He is initially a friend of the King who helps him to build the wall around the settlement which demarcates the 'city' and the fictional 'wilderness'. Here Durham is pointing to the perceived breakaway point of European and Native American culture. The King suddenly tells Wildemann one day: "You are dead, I'm going to the wilderness to find you, come with me."

Wildemann, having helped the King to build the wall and having previously taught the King to delight in "... the flimsiness of card houses... ", replies, "... What wilderness?"

[Durham, 1995, pp 136 - 139]

Conclusion

In his 1974 essay, *American Indian Culture*, Jimmie Durham attempted to win support for Native American rights amongst liberal white Americans. He quoted the Brazilian educator, Paulo Friere, warning his audience to be vigilant against blindly following the dictates of the state narrative.

> In mass societies where everything is pre-fabricated... people are lost because they do not have to risk themselves... there is always some manual which says what to do in situation A or B. [For example] Although street signs are not an evil in themselves... they are amongst the thousands of directional signs which, introjected by people, hinder their capacity for critical thought.

Of course such an overt criticism coming from a member of a 'best forgotten' race incurred the wrath of the state censors, the federal bureaucracy preferring to maintain a monopoly on critical thinking. The state narrative offered Durham a life of conformity on the Reservation and a life expectancy of 44 years, or, if he was lucky, he could have had the opportunity to serve the country which had dispossessed him and denied the validity of his rights. Durham did not choose these paths. His career has been characterised by defiance and also by a self-consciousness which can be both productive and unproductive. This self-consciousness contributes to his rigorous critical investigations, yet it amplifies his uncertainty in a society where self-knowledge is the preserve of the authors of the dominant text. He has said that to be an Indian artist today is to be on no path, contradicting yourself at every turn.

His work since 1974 has steered clear of the simpler overt criticism which had landed him in trouble with the F.B.I.. The intensity of Durham's critique of the dominant text has not diminished but the deliberate incoherence of his stance and the intellectual demands that he places on his audience have confined it to the relatively 'free' space of the art world. Working within this free space, Durham's most evocative and coherent critique of the dominant narrative arguably emerges in his depiction of the Prospero/Caliban relationship. His embodiment of Caliban has an obvious autobiographical significance yet it simultaneously resonates with oppressed outsiders throughout the world.

Durham could never adopt a role similar to Russell Means, a former Indian activist whose current cinematic self-parodies in *Last of the Mohicans*, *Natural Born Killers* and *Pocahontas* serve only to further an attitude of benign racism, nor, alternatively, could he assume the stance of fellow outsider, Amiri Baraka, who when addressing a ninety nine per cent white audience would indicate that he wasn't speaking to the white people there. Durham relishes the opportunity to speak to the colonial oppressor. However, it is his contention that he must... "not reveal too much"... or a fickle Western audience would become bored and file him away as a Neo-Primitive who belongs to a particular category within another category of a compartmentalised society. [Durham, 1988, p.105]

> **Your name really is Kak. You will not fall down just by my saying it, but if millions of us say it over and over maybe you will fall down and that would be very good for you.** [Durham, 1988, p103]

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