

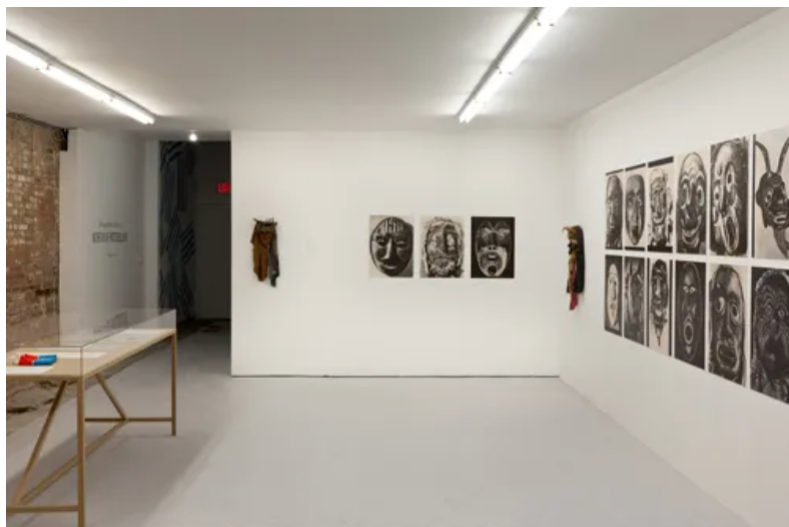
Jimmie Durham

Swiss Institute

Swiss Institute | 38 St Marks Pl

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By Dawn Chan ☺



View of "Maquette for a Museum of Switzerland," 2012.

In 1984, Jimmie Durham described himself as “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.” This challenge—to make work that reads as both personal and universal—has long been familiar to artists who’ve watched themselves or their work get marginalized. In his current show, Durham has found yet another sly, inspired solution to that very conundrum he pinpointed nearly twenty years ago and has continued to address ever since.

“Maquette for a Museum of Switzerland” takes a playful look at the nation that gave us the Red Cross and the cuckoo clock. Two squat vitrines showcase an array of Swiss cultural artifacts real and fake, from children’s-book illustrations and imitation Rolex watches to a giant, fatty sausage link. On the wall across the room, forty black-and-white images show traditional Swiss masks: an absorbing and grotesque mix of aquiline noses, lions’ manes, forehead wrinkles, and rictuses with ragged tombstones for teeth.



Swiss Institute

Contemporary Art

38 St Marks Place
New York, NY 10003

+1 (212) 925-2035
info@swissinstitute.net

swissinstitute.net
Free and open to the public

This show could have been a mere turning of tables—a recasting of a dominant culture as quaint and foreign—had Durham’s subject been a bigger European country that’s perhaps left a weightier mark on the course of world history, or at least our evolving but ever-excluding notions of “high art.” But Durham focuses on Switzerland: a relatively tiny, neutral nation, and one that seems to enjoy playing up its own folk traditions, judging from (if nothing else) Bruno Bischofberger’s ads on the back covers of *Artforum*. Is Durham’s fascination ironic? It seems not; if anything, viewers can’t help but notice the personal nature of his interest in the alpine country and specifically the folklorization of its pre-Christian art. The show’s handwritten exhibition didactics often veer into hilariously subjective prose. And the preponderance of masks seems more the result of a curator’s individualistic passion than any attempt at the broad, impartial survey one might expect from a “Museum of Switzerland.” Therein lies Durham’s art, Cherokee and universal: To the extent that he’s exhibiting himself as a curator—his interests, biases, and delight at finding common ground in foreign lands—he’s revealing a person who seems like someone we all know well.