

## Performance Artist Luna Takes Another Road: Art: The Bessie Award ...

JAN BRESLAUER SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

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# Performance Artist Luna Takes Another Road

■ **Art:** The Bessie Award winner's works are changing how curators perceive works by American Indians.

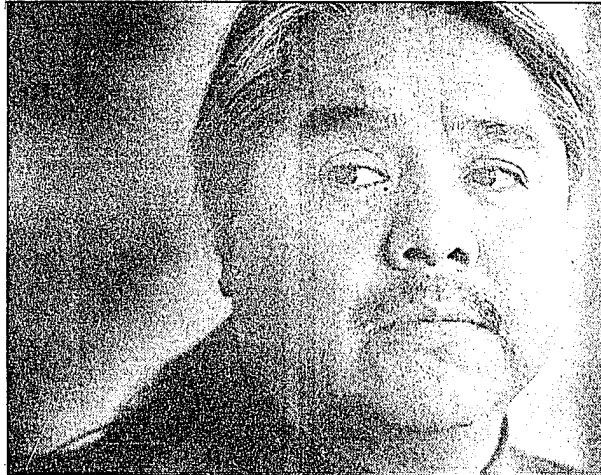
By JAN BRESLAUER  
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

SAN DIEGO—James Luna steers his red pickup down Reservation Road, winding through the hills of the Pauma Valley, northeast of San Diego. A single feather hangs by a leather strap from the rear-view mirror, pointing down toward the car phone.

An artist, student counselor and Luiseño Indian, Luna has a foot in several worlds, which makes for a lot of contradictions. Right now, he's talking about the ones set off by the Christopher Columbus celebrations.

"I'm not doing any more Columbus shows: I'm turning them down," vows the artist whose work is included in "Encuentro: Invasion of the Americas and the Making of the Mestizo," which is at Venice's Social and Public Art Resource Center Gallery through Dec. 21.

"I don't think it's a good place for us to work," says Luna, addressing the participation of some American



DON BOOMER / Los Angeles Times

James Luna: "I'm not that crazy about the multicultural movement; all I've seen it do is lump us all . . . in another category: other."

Indian artists in Columbus-themed shows.

"If people are really interested in my artwork, then they should have called me in '91 or call me in '93. But don't call me in '92 because you need an Indian for the show or for your grant.

"Indians are America's victims. We could really play that if we

accorded experimental dance and performance art.

With the flurry of Columbus boosterism from governments and corporations on one side and the anti-Columbus ranks swelling on the other, Luna feels that in the art world there's been some progress toward understanding.

Curators started finding out a lot of Indians aren't as hot on this Columbus thing like they thought they would be," he says. "They understood they've been insensitive, and so some of these shows that were going to be Columbus may now just be contemporary Indian art shows."

If so, that change would overcome a long-standing resistance to American Indian artists making contemporary or avant-garde work.

"Shows are changing people's attitudes about what Indian art is," Luna says. "There's still an attitude that fine art does not include culturally based art."

Yet if anyone exemplifies how

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# LUNA: The Performance Artist Takes Another Road

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non-traditional work by Native American artists is making inroads into the rarefied art world echelons, it's Luna himself. He won his Bessie for two installation-performance works—"The Artifact Piece" and "Take a Picture With an Indian"—both of which have been seen recently in New York.

In "Artifact," Luna put himself on display—along with his college degree, arrest record, divorce papers, favorite tapes, family pictures and other tokens of everyday life—in museum-style cases.

"People were outraged that they had to see this," says Luna of the

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**'Indians are America's victims. We could really play that if we wanted to, but I think it's dead.'**

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JAMES LUNA

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work's original showing in a San Diego museum. "It was a slap in the face, because the piece was about the reality of the Indian world. People didn't come to the museum to see the reality, they came to see the splendor."

Inspired by a road trip to New Mexico, where Luna saw American Indians decked out in costume "to attract people to come in and buy jewelry," "Take a Picture With an Indian" featured three life-size cutouts of Luna in various guises. In one, he wore normal street clothes; in another, a breechcloth; and in the last, full Plains Indian war regalia, "What people would identify as *real Indian*," the artist says.

At times, Luna himself was present, dressed in these various get-ups, inviting the audience to participate by doing just what the title of the work suggests.

"I thought the crowd would be too sophisticated for this little trap that I laid, but they weren't," says Luna of the viewers at Manhattan's downtown Whitney. "Toward the end, they were almost pushing each other to get in line so they

could have their picture taken before I left."

That kind of blind rush is also what Luna sees in today's much-vaunted multiculturalism.

"I'm not that crazy about the multicultural movement, because all I've seen it do is lump us all in together in another category: other," he says.

"We talk about all the changes we want. So they have a big conference and invite all these ethnic people. I haven't seen art departments hiring people of color,

institutions having curators of color or really doing outreach to the communities."

Community, in fact, is the one thing that's as—or more—important than art to Luna, who counsels American Indian students at the Palomar College satellite classroom on the Pauma reservation, as well as on the main campus.

"I don't think I'd ever take a job as a full-time artist," he says. "It's been a delicate balance between my work and my artwork, but it keeps me in touch. It keeps me honest."

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