



artist in profile

JAMES LUNA

By Linda R. Martin / Atlatl

Stoically sporting a gaily-feathered warbonnet, finely-crafted buckskin leggings, and a glitter-adorned vest, the Indian warrior straddles his trusty steed. Head held high, a cigarette in one hand, a beer in the other, the warrior begins his journey. Racing like the wind with Brando and the *Wild Ones*, he weaves across the road, straightens out, then performs daring tricks on his faithful mount...“The Bikemaster.”

For performance and installation artist James Luna, this vignette from a piece entitled, *In My Dreams*, recently performed at the Scottsdale [Arizona] Center for the Arts, provided a dramatic glimpse of the other side of contemporary Indian culture. Using elements of pop culture, humor, and irony, Luna brings to life the serious issues of drug and alcohol abuse, cultural apathy, and loss of cultural identity in many of today’s Indian communities.

For Luna, the medium of performance and installation is a unique form of cultural expression that educates audiences about multiculturalism and how it affects all people. Born to a Mexican father and Luiseño mother from the La Jolla Indian Reservation in North County, San Diego, California, Luna’s upbringing exposed him to the traditional teachings of his Luiseño grandparents and the California Mission system.

Originally a painter, Luna received a BFA from the University of California, Irvine, and expanded his work beyond canvas through the use of performance and installation. Earning a Master’s Degree in Counseling from San Diego State University, Luna now divides his time between the arts and his position as an academic counselor at Palomar Community College in San Marcos, California.

When asked to define his work, Luna explains, “Installation can be described as a theatre set without actors. The theme is told by objects in the space, which can be sculptural or found, enhanced by lighting, audio, video, and other electronic media.” Similarly, he defines performance art as not unlike a theatrical experience. Using himself as a key object, in combination with electronic media and found objects, Luna pulls the audience through a “rollercoaster of emotions,” producing laughter, discomfort, and anger.

Much of Luna’s work challenges the romanticized “noble savage” stereotype. This spring, he will exhibit a multimedia installation, *Our Indians*, a collaborative project that will include students from Arizona State University’s American Indian population. Presented by Atlatl and ASU Public Events, this community-artist residency project engages the students in a process of artmaking that will educate audiences about contemporary American Indian culture and art forms.

The title for this installation, *Our Indians*, is taken from the slogan commonly used by non-Indians to address American Indians. Though the slogan attempts to claim Indian history and cultures as part of the American cultural and historical experience, Luna believes it lays claim for the misuse and wholesale purchase of Indian cultures without regard to the sacred, the respected, and the honored aspects of Indian cultures.

“You don’t have to live with Indian mannequins that look like your relatives, icons that make fun of sacred things, hurtful, clownish parodies,” says Luna. “This reduces Indian peoples and our ways to commercial commodities,” he adds.

Presented in conjunction with the *Drawing the Lines* festival, *Our Indians* will be installed in a storefront format, looking not unlike Indian curio and souvenir shops that are found throughout the Phoenix vicinity. The interior of the “store” will house tourist souvenirs, signage objects, sports logos, and other objects that display Indian icons found within the greater Phoenix metropolitan area. Collecting, finding and acquiring these objects will be assigned to the core student groups participating in the project. *Our Indians* will be presented at the ASU Step Gallery in Tempe from April 11 through May 7, 1997.

Through the visual medium of performance and installation, James Luna challenges stereotypical definitions of Native values and character. He stresses that his work isn’t commercial or marketable, but that his emphasis is on risk taking, making a “statement,” and continuing to “make provocative work that challenges myself and the audience.” —