

Editor's note: In addition to producing provocative videos, installation, and performance pieces, James Luna (Luiseño) works as an academic counselor at Palomar College, near his home on the La Jolla Indian Reservation. He has performed at universities, galleries, and museums across the country. News from Native California managing editor Margaret Dubin interviewed Luna on February 7.

High-Tech Peace Pipe

an interview with James Luna

News: I understand you won a Creative Artist Exchange Fellowship for Japan. Congratulations!

Luna: Thanks. Last year was a good year for me. That was my fourth award—I also received an Andrea Frank Award, and two international travel grants. Outside of Canada, I haven't done any international work. So it's a big thing. In retrospect, I see it as a validation of my thirty years of artwork.

N: How will you spend your time in Japan?

L: The grant is wide open. My proposal was to visit traditional Japanese artists and places, and then to meet, see, and share my work with contemporary Japanese performance and installation artists. I want both ends of the spectrum, the old and the new. To me, they [the Japanese] are the forerunners of what we're going through—having a traditional culture existing within a cul-

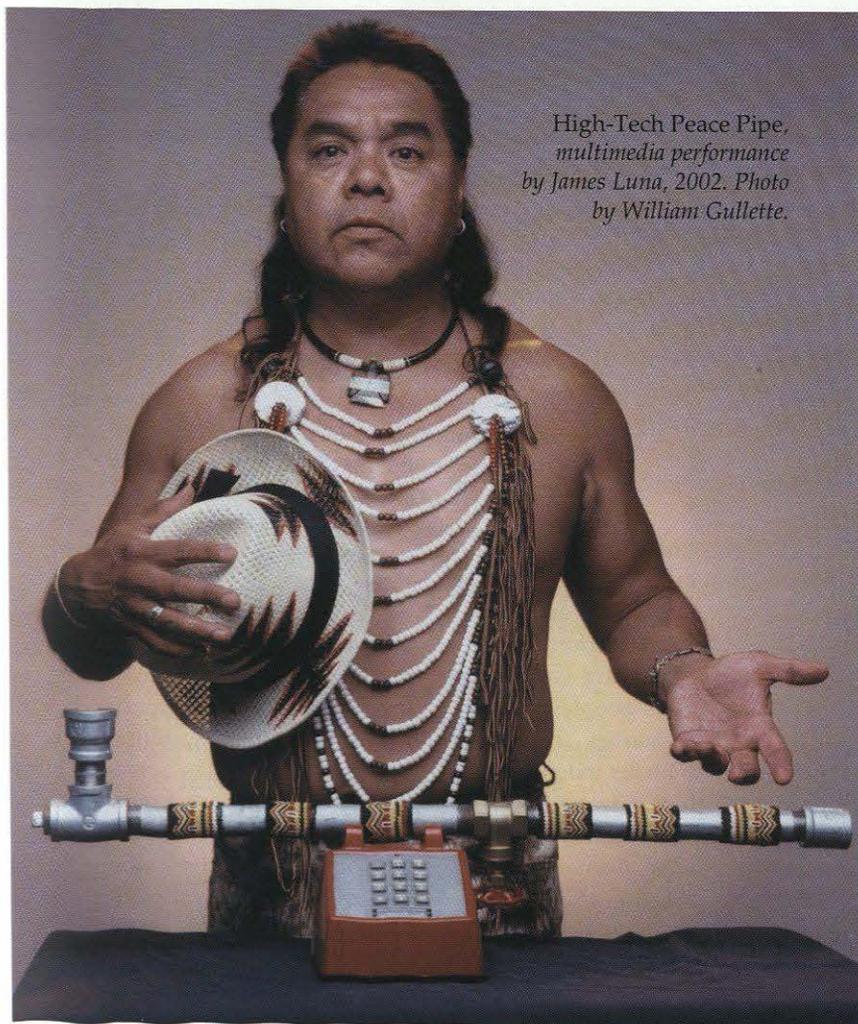
ture of high technology. Of course, I hope the trip will inspire new works.

N: Explain this photograph (left) of your most recent work.

L: The title of this piece is "High-Tech Peace Pipe." In this, I'm continuing some basic themes of my work. One is to question the view that society has about native peoples, which is usually off the mark. I use both stereotypical and traditional ideas and forms to dispel those myths, in the context of a public performance or installation. A high-tech peace pipe is very possible, but, at the same time, unrealistic. It's a play on words—people think all Indians have peace pipes, so I took this literally and constructed a peace pipe out of [metal] pipes.

As an artist, I wanted to take it one step beyond that, I wanted to add more meaning to it. So commissioned Benita Coultress, a Luiseño artist, to bead the pipe. I wanted to make it a beautiful object. Then the presentation of the pipe was a concern. I played freely with the concept that in traditional tribal cultures Indian people don't pray to God, they talk to God. In looking for a stand for the pipe, I came across the telephone. This worked because it paralleled the concept of communication with a higher power and high technology. In the photo, I'm there in a stylized Indian outfit, but it was important to add a California element, so I rendered some straw cowboy hats with California Indian designs and I have that in my hand. A lay person would look at the photo and say, how nice, an Indian in regalia. But that person has to look again. It's all very possible, but it's not.

N: You have worked as counselor for many years now. Does that affect your artwork?



*High-Tech Peace Pipe,
multimedia performance
by James Luna, 2002. Photo
by William Gullette.*

L: People always ask that. It affects it indirectly. I'm an academic counselor, not a therapist. As an academic counselor, my strongest asset is listening. People might assume that I talk, but no, I listen and hear what students say and then communicate back to them what they're saying. In developing my artwork, I'm also listening, listening to the world around me.

There's another thing, too. As a counselor, I work with all the students, not just Indian students. That's also an important element of my artwork. For me, the artwork is a strategy for confrontation. I use it to talk about our similarities, and then our differences.

N: In that order?

L: In that order.

N: How is your work autobiography, and how is it a comment on what's going on in your environment?

L: In my work I get to live out my fantasies, whatever that means. I can be a rock-and-roller, I can be a pseudo-medicine man, I can be a hoop dancer. I've also been my alter ego—I've been down and out, I've dealt with substance abuse.

In my performance pieces I really push myself. My latest performance went back to work I did twenty years ago. It's very physical, I literally run throughout the piece. It kicks my ass. The piece is called "Petroglyphs in Motion." It is about light and movement. There is a simple but very strong narrative. It's a loose collection of characters, both mythical and historical, and they're all pulling the narrative along. First I come out [on stage] as an Indian running with a cell phone, then I come out with a rattle, then as a coyote being pursued by a blonde, then I come out pursuing the blonde. I come out as a down-and-out Indian asking for change, then I come out as an Indian flute player asking for change. A lot of things surface as far as my relationship to the audience. For example, who would they give money to, who would they pay to see? It comes full circle, and ends with an Indian running.

My next piece is going to be conceptual, along those lines, but I'm going to have an intermission, then come back with a spo-

ken-word piece. I'm also working with music. It adds another live element to the work. In March I'll be at the Heard Museum with Luiseño blues musician Tracy Nelson.

N: You have been accused of making light of serious problems, such as alcoholism, in your performance pieces; you have even been accused of sacrilege. How would you respond to these critics?

L: They have to look at the total work, and at the total body of work. I know what I'm talking about, or I wouldn't talk about it. I'm also very cautious about how far I go. I would never set myself up as a spiritual leader of any kind, or as any kind of expert.

For example, the pipe. Someone would have to know the whole story. The story behind the pipe is in the monologue I do, which is about the depletion of the pipestone mine by Indian people who have taken the stone and carved trinkets out of it for non-Indians. It's also about the buyers of those pipes, people who buy for commercial purposes and people who are spiritually needy.

N: You don't use the term "New Age?"

L: Actually, I use the term "New Wage." The other thing is that if I, as a native person, can't be critical of my own culture, then who can? If people want to be critical of me, that's the risk I take. If I make someone angry, then my work has succeeded, because I've gotten a response.

N: Do you consider yourself a political artist?

L: I'm in complete denial of that. I'm the king of denial. I don't need any more titles handed over to me as to what I am. What I like to say is that I'm an American Indian contemporary artist. There are some things I would like to clarify for people: there is a school of American Indian art. The sun didn't rise and set on Plains Indian art. There is a big difference between traditional and contemporary art, not just in style, but also in training. Contemporary artists have been exposed to academia. Traditional arts is a different kind of education. But we are all part of one big thing called American Indian art.

Eureka Mural Unveiled

Chag Lowry

When Brian Tripp and Alme Allen unveiled their mural on September 29, 2000, they gave voice to the indigenous people in Humboldt and Del Norte counties.

"This is a mural for all people," said Tripp. The mural, titled "The Sun Set Twice on the People that Day," is the first Native American mural in the city of Eureka. It is located between the Morris Graves Museum and the Eureka Concert and Film Center, which together receive more than 20,000 visitors each year. The mural honors the Wiyot and contains images that refer to the ceremonies and history of the original inhabitants of the Humboldt Bay. The Tolowa, Yurok, Hupa, Karuk, Mattole, and Wailacki tribes are all represented. An information kiosk next to the mural displays a map of traditional political boundaries, tells the story of the imagery, and identifies the artists.

Chag Lowry, a member of the Humboldt Arts Council Board of Directors began to raise funds for the mural in the summer of 2000, after receiving approval from the Arts Council Board, the Eureka Concert and Film Center Board, and the City of Eureka. Meanwhile, Tripp and Allen started to plan their masterpiece. They created many preliminary sketches and paintings to find the right combination of images and colors.

The board of directors for the Humboldt Arts Council and the Eureka Concert and Film Center gave their support for a movable mural forty feet wide and twelve feet high. Fortunately, Allen had more than ten years of construction experience, and was able to build the framework for the mural in about a month. The actual painting of the mural took about three weeks. Even the weather cooperated: it only rained once. A lot of interested visitors stopped by while the artists worked. Volunteers who also worked on the mural were Sonny Tripp, Phil Ford, Pimm Allen, Skip Lowry, Jasper Tripp, and Paul Allen.