

ART; Confronting All the Demons; James Luna deals candidly with the alcoholism, violence and bad health plaguing many Native Americans.

Ollman, Leah . Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Fulltext) ; Los Angeles, Calif. [Los Angeles, Calif]16 June 1996: 58.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Wearing only a breechcloth, James Luna climbed onto the sand of a shallow display case at the San Diego Museum of Man, lay down and made art history. It was 1987. Multiculturalism was still a force on the upswing, chipping away at the stubborn exclusiveness of American history. For the viewers of "The Artifact Piece," as Luna's performance/installation was called, those stalwart myths of discovery and conquest, justice and liberty for all crumbled before their eyes.

During the run of the show, Luna's robust presence filled a space marked for the dusty and dead, the Indians of romanticized legend and conventional anthropology museums, a vanishing race of savages and sages. Labels identified him by name and tribe (Luisen~o/Dieguen~o), and explained some of the markings on his body—the scars, for instance, left by injuries incurred after excessive drinking. Luna's college diploma, Allen Ginsberg books, Miles Davis tapes and other personal belongings were on view in glass cases nearby.

In his first solo show in Los Angeles, Luna evokes the physical decline of the community on the La Jolla Indian Reservation where he lives, in northern San Diego County, while also conjuring an image of his community's thriving ceremonial traditions. "The Dream Hat Ritual," at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, is enacted by 12 sculptural dancers and singers, some on the floor, some suspended from the ceiling. All wear cowboy hats that Luna painted with patterns relating to Indian basketry designs. Nature sounds and plaintive cries float through the space, made sacred for the dance by a ring of willow branches. The dancers' skeletal bodies are fashioned of crutches or walkers, painted with simple "tattoos" of dots and diamonds.

FULL TEXT

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"The Artifact Piece" (reprised in 1990 at the Studio Museum in Harlem) was a succinct, stunning rebuttal to obsolete stereotypes of Native American life. Like many of Luna's works, it drew its power to engage and provoke from its function as a "two-way mirror," according to professor Richard Hill, who discusses Luna in his Native American Studies courses at the University of Buffalo.

"As an artist, he's looking through the mirror to see how society looks at Indians. And as an Indian, he's looking at

himself. It's a double commentary. That's what's intriguing as well as startling about his work. People expect a spiritual nirvana from Indian art. He talks about things that aren't so pretty to look at."

Things like alcoholism, violence and exploitation.

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"I'm surrounded by bad health," Luna explains, sitting in his orderly studio on a quiet, oak-covered hill. "My brothers {on the reservation} have lost their legs to diabetes. The other night, I was saddened, touching these objects used by sick people. In our beliefs, you don't play with these things. It'll come back to haunt you. But there's a fine line-- I'm not playing with them, I'm using them, I'm working with them."

Luna, a stocky man of 46, with long black hair gracefully turning silver around his broad face, was born on the reservation of a Luisen~o mother and Mexican father, and he grew up in rural Orange County. In 1976, after getting his bachelor of fine arts degree at UC Irvine, he moved back to administer the reservation's education department. A few years later, he returned to school, earning a master's degree in counseling from San Diego State University. In addition to making art, Luna has worked since 1982 as a counselor at Palomar College in San Marcos. Counseling, he says, has kept him "people-oriented," and imposed a healthy distance between him and the art world, which has lavished attention on him. Announcements for his exhibitions and performances at museums and art centers across the country neatly paper an entire wall of his studio. In 1993, he performed "Shame-man," a series of searing vignettes about America's love/hate relationship with Indians, as part of the much-watched Whitney Biennial in New York City. He's scheduled to show a higher-tech version of "The Dream Hat Ritual" at the Whitney in 1997.

Spurred on by an almost treacherous political correctness, many curators and critics now open their arms wide to artists from traditionally marginalized communities. But that openness brings with it new burdens on the artist and a different, subtler form of entrapment, Luna says. When called upon because of their ethnicity, such artists are then presumed to represent their entire culture by viewers laden with their own stereotypes and preconceptions. Luna has felt this backlash in various ways. When studying at Irvine, he began making hard-edge abstract paintings that incorporated Native American designs.

"People would look at the paintings and say, 'Oh, these are nice paintings'--and in almost the same breath--'Too bad they're Indian,'" he recalls. "It was like they couldn't be real critical of them, because if you're being critical of the paintings, you're being critical of the culture."

In 1992, when the quincentenary celebration of Columbus' voyage gave rise to myriad equal-time exhibitions and programs about Native Americans, Luna was well-booked. He challenged curators to extend their temporary, goodwill gesture into a real, enduring relationship. "Call me in '93" became his motto for the year.

Now, he will sometimes end a performance by saying, "Thank you for inviting me here, and thank you for not inviting me as part of your Indian culture week. Look at our work, show us as individual artists and buy our work." Gallery people wince at that, he says, but eliciting discomfort is an important part of Luna's repertoire. In "The History of the Luisen~o People," a dauntingly bleak performance, Luna downs much of a case of beer while sitting home alone on Christmas Day, making evasive phone calls to his dispersed relatives. An American Indian in the audience once objected to Luna drinking on stage, claiming that it perpetuates stereotypes non-Indians have about alcoholism on the reservation.

"Who cares what they think?" Luna remembers shooting back. "I understood fully what I was doing. What he was saying to me was what I've heard so much--don't say, don't tell, don't air our laundry, that kind of stuff. I'm supposed to ignore it, and pretend it doesn't exist?"

Luna insists that he makes his art for Indians themselves, even if they're only a small part of his real audience, and shaking them up is preferable to leaving them indifferent. What matters is that he, as an American Indian, is taking control of his own representation, his own image. Self-definition and self-determination are no trivial matters for a culture whose names, geographical borders and political reach have long been imposed from the outside.

Looking in on Indian culture from the outside, non-Indians feel an intense mix of frustration, sentimentality, love, resentment and anger, Luna says in his "Shame-man" performance. What dominates the emotional landscape, however, is shame.

"There's a lot of shame out there, America," he proclaims. "And who do you think everybody's coming to to get healed? Her Indians."

Parodying the commercial exploitation of native craft and ritual, Luna then makes a sales pitch for a "Wet Dreamcatcher," made from the head of a tennis racquet and adorned with a dangling feather, a rabbit's foot charm, and four "sacred color condoms" fastened to the strings.

Luna doesn't laugh much in conversation, but his work is thick with irony and rich with satire. He uses humor to mediate the friction between stereotype and reality. Mixing the seemingly unmixable is another way of replacing one-dimensional misperceptions with multidimensional truths. So in addition to layering the sad and satirical, he plants pop culture icons (Dean Martin is a current favorite) among more traditional Native American rituals and objects. That kind of disjunction lies at the heart of contemporary Indian life, which has become, in the words of Hill, "a strange mix of ancient ritual and modern insanity."

Luna's art, while disturbing to some, embodies that dynamic acutely and accessibly.

"His work is a little startling sometimes, his message is delivered with such abruptness," Hill explains. "I see him as breaking new old ground. That's what we {Native Americans} have always been doing, but we've become so cliched, by the public and ourselves. But when you look back, these moments of change are the only constants in our lives, in our history. One person presents a new vision, and in the end, everyone dances around those visions. That's how I see James. He's offering a new vision."

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"THE DREAM HAT RITUAL," Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2437 Main St., Santa Monica. Dates: Wednesdays through Saturdays, 11 a.m.-6 p.m.; Fridays until 10 p.m. Through Aug. 25. Prices: Free to members; suggested admission for nonmembers, \$4. (Luna will give a free lecture and performance July 12 at 7:30 p.m.) Phone: (310) 399-0433.

PHOTO: SYMBOLISM: "The Dream Hat Ritual" features skeletal figures wearing cowboy hats painted with Indian designs, like the one at left.; PHOTOGRAPHER: JAMES LUNA; PHOTO: CONTROVERSIAL: "I've heard so much . . . don't air our laundry," Luna says.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Copyright by JACK MITCHELL

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DETAILS

Publication title:	Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Fulltext); Los Angeles, Calif.
Pages:	58
Number of pages:	0
Publication year:	1996
Publication date:	Jun 16, 1996
Section:	Calendar; Calendar Desk