

PASSAGES

JAMES LUNA (1950–2018)

March 26, 2018 • Shanna Ketchum-Heap of Birds



James Luna in 2015. Photo: Jason S. Ordaz.

I FIRST MET JAMES LUNA in 2005, when he was selected as the first sponsored artist for the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian at the Venice Biennale's

Fifty-First International Art Exhibition. Luna performed and installed *Emendatio* (a Latin word meaning “correction”) and dedicated it to Pablo Tac, a member of the Luiseño tribal community who in 1834 was brought from Mission San Luis Rey, located in Southern California, to Rome to study for the priesthood. For the performance, Luna constructed a circle of stones, sugar packets, Spam, and medical syringes and vials. He then danced in place for four hours on four consecutive days. The installation opened thereafter and combined video imagery and objects to honor Tac’s achievements. Like Luna’s, who is also Luiseño, or Payómkawichum, Tac’s life’s work was largely rooted in his culture and provided a Native perspective otherwise absent in Californian, and American, history. In short, *Emendatio* demonstrated what Michel de Certeau asserted in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984): “What the map cuts up, the story cuts across.”

For those who knew Luna, de Certeau’s concise observations about place and the movement or migration of people and their stories fit well with Luna’s belief that “every place was an Indian place.” Beginning in the 1980s, and most notably with *Artifact Piece*, 1987, Luna used his recognizable Indian body to interrogate Western perceptions of the “vanishing” Indian by strategically embodying those same stereotypes to challenge both contemporary Native identity formation and Western concepts and categories of art. Although *Artifact Piece* received wide media attention and served, in his own words, as a “kick start to my career as an artist,” Luna conceptualized other performances and installations about his mixed heritage as Payómkawichum, Ipai, and Mexican American in works such as *Half Indian/Half Mexican*, 1991–2011, and *Take a Picture with a Real Indian*, 2001. These works confront the viewer directly by pushing boundaries, embracing different ways of knowing, and creating what Luna once termed “nontraditional spaces” rooted in embodied experiences, orality, and the memories of his home on the La Jolla Indian Reservation in northern San Diego County.

Throughout his over three decades of work, Luna forged collaborations with longtime friend Guillermo Gomez-Peña (core member of La Pocha Nostra) to produce various performances, including *La Nostalgia Remix*, 2007, where both artists staged their own ritual deaths and then engaged each other in dialogue while Luna cooked an Indian stew and Gomez-Peña played roulette. They toured the Americas and invited local indigenous artists to join them in critiquing stereotypes and assumptions about race and culture. Luna’s chosen profession as a performance and installation artist was pivotal in influencing younger artists, mostly Native American and First Nations, to challenge and

express themselves without compromise; he knew performance art was radical for its ability to excavate spaces of agency through self-narration and self-representation. Part of this process included Luna's engagement with autobiographical narratives depicting contemporary social life, as in *The History of the Luiseño People: La Jolla Reservation, Christmas 1990, 1993*, a performance theatrically staged and recorded on video by Isaac Artenstein that shows Luna drinking, smoking, and watching TV. Similarly, Luna traced the complexities of modern Indian existence by combining pop-culture imagery, music, and other references, as well as by connecting to his audience through storytelling suffused with humor, irony, and parody. In *All Indian All the Time, 2005*, Luna documents his fictitious musical career to make the serious point that there's an Indian absence in the world of rock 'n' roll and other artistic spaces. In that way, Luna's multimedia performances and installations articulate transcultural and -national narratives shaped by the local and global intersections he encountered in this post- or neocolonial world.

The last time I saw Luna was in 2015. He was excited to continue making new work, to collaborate with other artists, and to use performance to put his concepts into action. When an important cultural figure like Luna passes, one wonders: What else would he have made, and how would he have challenged his viewers? The one thing I do know is that the Native art community and others will remember Luna's heartfelt responsibility toward being Indian all the time.

Shanna Ketchum-Heap of Birds is a writer and Ph.D. Candidate at Middlesex University London.

ALL IMAGES