

Luna Remembers

Authenticity is among the founding lies of the modern age.

—Henry Louis Gates, Jr. , from Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man (1997)

James Luna is a visionary, a truth teller, a romantic, and a hanging judge. For these reasons, I wish he lived someplace other than up in the clouds on a mountain located on the extreme western edge of North America. Or at least that his mountain looked over a nondescript valley of crows and cows instead of the Pacific Ocean. And I really wish his mountain wasn't next to the one named Palomar, in the state called California.

The truth is he does live up there in the clouds, on Indian land, sharing the sky with the Palomar Observatory, for much of the last century home to the most powerful telescope in the world. He lives in the richest state in the richest country in the history of the world, ten miles from the horizon where the continent meets the sea, where destiny became manifest. California: the end of the line, the final stop on the trail. It is the last destination and therefore the newest place, where everything could be remade and forgotten. Media critic John Leonard must have been in Los Angeles when he spoke about “the unbearable lightness of being American.”

It is all too convenient, too fitting, and our interest here is with things inconvenient and ill-fitting, things forgotten and lost. Because we are speaking of James Luna, widely considered one of the most dangerous Indians alive, a story already dramatic enough, and the last thing we need is details that make him sound like some comic-book superhero skulking about in his mountain

compound. Personally, I would rather be reporting that he lives in Fresno, or perhaps Akron.

But of course James Luna lives on a mountain in California, the most exalted and perfect piece of the United States, the biggest and most beautiful, and the most forgetful place in the entire country, whose state religion often seems to be amnesia.

You might think Luna hates California. Listen, I have news for you: Luna is California.

The creation myths of North America allow little room for Indians.

We are inconvenient reminders of a tragic past. There is not really much room—conceptually or literally—for Luiseño Indians in the first place, and even less for Luiseño performance artists, so any Luiseños who wish such a career must somehow make their own room while avoiding capture by the Amnesia Police.

California forgets. Luna remembers.

There are several ways to describe James Luna. He is a contemporary Native American artist. He is, undoubtedly, a conceptual artist. He works these days in the disciplines of performance and installation. In order to carry out these activities, however, he must also be an escape artist. The traps that lie in wait for Indians like Luna are endless and lethal.

Avoiding these traps is nearly impossible. The paradigmatic career of another artist, Jimmie Durham, offers one of the few successful examples of such room-making and trap-avoidance. In the last few decades, he has become an elder statesman and godfather for a new breed of Indian artists and thinkers.

They recognize him as our toughest fighter, our bravest theoretician, and most accomplished escape artist. Twice Durham left the United States for good: his first self-imposed exile took place in the 1960s, and was cut short by the firestorm of rebellion that he felt required his active participation. He left Switzerland for South Dakota in 1973, and was a leader of the American Indian Movement for the next six years. The second exile began in Mexico City, is ongoing, and apparently has no end in sight. Durham now lives in Berlin, a critically acclaimed artist who never lacks for work. He made it over the wall. Jimmie Durham is our Houdini.

He famously wrote once that if only he had a place to stand, he felt certain he could address the entire world.¹ It is the hope of so many Indian people, but one seldom realized. It is rarely realized because the United States and most other countries are places without an Indian history, and the constructed amnesia turns the ground beneath our feet into quicksand.

There are two other Durham formulas that are relevant for our discussion. He advises that we must speak and listen well, and remember everything, especially those things we never knew. And, he claims, Europe is an Indian project.

Authenticity. Place. Memory. All are at the very core of today's conceptual artists who choose to venture far from the safe confines of neo-traditional contemporary art production. And these ideas are especially at the core of James Luna's work. Luna insists that authenticity is not a goal for Indian people, but a prison. He insists that there is no place for Native people in the conventional discourses, and will never be unless we begin to create such spaces ourselves. And he insists on remembering, especially those things we never knew.

If amnesia is the state religion, then the act of remembering turns you into a heretic, a revolutionary, a troublemaker. The problem is as much the present as the past, and it is Luna's insistence to remember the past from an active standpoint as an artist who lives in the present. This is the challenge facing Indian conceptual artists: being outside the official narratives, to even assert the relevance of an Indian past and present makes one hostage to identity politics, multiculturalism, and other narrow and suspect agendas. The very assertion makes one an amateur, a poseur, a primitive.

To mount a serious challenge to the accepted order of things involving Indians, a prerequisite for making Indian conceptual art, one must become an expert in the fine art of staging jailbreaks. I don't mean to say these artists are frequently in jail, although that does happen from time to time. I am not speaking of literal jails, but the ideological apparatus that powerfully creates its own world of expectations and normalcy. Indeed, it becomes "reality," which despite the implications of its name is always subjective, or as Lily Tomlin said once, basically just "a collective hunch."

In North America, the ideological prison that confines Indian agency has unique features. We have never been simply ignored, or simply romanticized, or been merely the targets of assimilation or genocide. It is rather all these things and many more, often at the same time in different places. The prison is a dream catcher, a vapor. It is both vicious and flattering, flexible, and never monolithic. It can't be refuted or denied, it just is. Most devastating of all, the ideological prison is capable of becoming an elixir that Indian people ourselves find irresistible.

The particular kind of racism that faces North American Indians offers

rewards for functioning within the romantic constructions, and severe penalties for operating outside them. Indians are okay, as long as the Indians are “traditional” in a nonthreatening (peaceful) way, as long as they meet non-Indian expectations about Indian religious and political beliefs. And what it really comes down to is that Indians are okay as long as we don’t change too much. Yes, we can fly planes and listen to hip-hop, but we must do these things in moderation and always in a true Indian way.

It presents the unavoidable question: are Indian people allowed to change? Are we allowed to invent completely new ways of being Indian that have no connection to previous ways we have lived? Authenticity for Indians is a brutal measuring device that says we are only Indian as long as we are authentic. Part of the measurement is about percentage of Indian blood. The more, the better. Fluency in one’s Indian language is always a high card. Spiritual practices, living in one’s ancestral homeland, attending powwows, all are necessary to ace the authenticity test. Yet many of us believe taking the authenticity tests is like drinking the colonizer’s Kool-Aid—a practice designed to strengthen our commitment to our own internally warped minds. In this way, we become our own prison guards.

Critic Joseph Kosuth observes that to understand conceptual art in the United States, you must also understand the sixties and “appreciate conceptual art for what it was: the art of the Vietnam War era.”² In the same way, understanding the work of Luna and his peers requires appreciating Indian conceptual art as the art of the Indian movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Both linked to and distinct from the antiwar and civil rights activism of the

time, the rebellions, takeovers, and demonstrations that swept through Native communities across North America profoundly changed Indian consciousness. It would not be an exaggeration to call it a cultural revolution.

The three most celebrated events all took place during a forty-two month period between November 1969 and May 1973. Each was wrapped in a self-consciously theatrical sensibility, with a sophisticated understanding of what it would take to convince the international news media to pay attention to the political grievances. At the former federal prison on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay, it meant a nighttime invasion of dozens of college students who refused to leave no matter what. Three years later, on the eve of a presidential election, it meant hundreds of Indians, some with Molotov cocktails and other improvised explosive devices, occupying the Bureau of Indian Affairs, daring police to attack them, just blocks from the White House. Three months later, it meant taking over the village of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, the place where U.S. soldiers massacred hundreds of Sioux Indians in 1890, and this time facing heavily armed U.S. marshals and the occasional Phantom jet.

In other words, it took a lot to get the world to pay attention.

The Indian movement was far more than just political theater, and its ramifications are still being felt. It is a common observation that the Indian movement is partly responsible for the existence of a national museum devoted to Native Americans in Washington, D.C. The political space of the museum, however, was also present in each of these very different events, occurring in very different places.

At Alcatraz, the students wrote a clever proclamation that offered to

purchase the island for twenty-four dollars in glass beads and red cloth, and explained what they planned to do with the property. Restaurants, job training, and a spiritual center would rise from the rocky ground. There was also this: “Some of the present buildings will be taken over to develop an American Indian Museum which will depict our native food and other cultural contributions we have given to the world. Another part of the museum will present some of the things the white man has given to the Indians in return for the land and life he took: disease, alcohol, poverty, and cultural decimation (as symbolized by old tin cans, barbed wire, rubber tires, plastic containers, etc.). Part of the museum will remain a dungeon to symbolize both those Indian captives who were incarcerated for challenging white authority and those who were imprisoned on reservations. The museum will show the noble and tragic events of Indian history, including the broken treaties, the documentary of the Trail of Tears, the Massacre of Wounded Knee, as well as the victory over Yellow-Hair Custer and his army.”

At the Bureau of Indian Affairs headquarters in Washington, D.C., occupiers seized the building’s impressive collection of Indian artifacts and appropriated arrows and clubs for use against a police attack. They also gave the building a new name: the Native American Embassy. Only a few of the objects could be used as weapons, but when the siege ended and the protesters left town, they took with them every artifact they could carry. The collection ended up in living rooms all over Indian Country. Although many Indians who took part in the occupation expressed regret at the massive destruction inside the building, few showed remorse about removing the paintings, rattles, blankets, and pots from a place where, in their view, they never belonged in the first place. Looting?

We called it liberation.

At Wounded Knee, a store called the Wounded Knee Trading Post and Museum was one of the most despised institutions on the reservation, and one of the first casualties of the occupation. Furious Lakotas ransacked the store and left the display cases broken and empty of headdresses and other artifacts.

The rage demonstrated in Washington and Wounded Knee was directed not simply at abstract notions of inaccurate representation, but arose from a deeply personal sense of violation. Often the people who wore or made the headdress, the pot, the arrow are our relatives. Indians are keenly aware that the objects were originally acquired by museums through methods few would consider legitimate. If there is any people on earth whose lives are more tangled up with museums than we are, God help them.

In 1985, Jimmie Durham created a prescient installation called On Loan from the Museum of the American Indian, filling a vitrine with photographs of his parents and goofy, brightly colored arrowheads. (In a few years, the Museum of the American Indian would move to Washington and add “National” to its name. Perhaps he knew even then.) But not even Jimmie Durham dared to climb inside the thing.

The Artifact Piece would have been a powerful installation if Luna had spent just a few minutes inside that box after closing time, with only an accomplice or two around to witness and take photographs. I doubt Luna even considered such an alternative; after all, he’s said that in his work, he’s the object. The Artifact Piece demanded much more of him than a photograph. It required that he spend hours motionless inside that box, that he invite visitors to stare at

his nearly nude body, read labels pointing out the origin of various scars and bruises, and poke and prod as they wished. It required that he become a California Indian object like those that surrounded him. And some visitors cruised right by, never seeing him at all, or if they did notice an Indian lying there in the room, they assumed he was a prop. One label read: “Having been married less than two years, the sharing of emotional scars from alcoholic family backgrounds was cause for fears of giving, communicating, and mistrust. Skin callous on ring finger remains, along with assorted painful and happy memories.” Another read: “Drunk beyond the point of being able to defend himself, he was jumped by people from another reservation. After being knocked down, he was kicked in the face and upper body. Saved by an old man, he awoke with a swollen face covered with dried blood. Thereafter, he made it a point not to be as trusting among relatives and other Indians.” A nearby case showed visitors cultural relics belonging to the Indian, referencing his favorite books (Kerouac, Ginsberg) and music (Sex Pistols, Hank Williams).

The Artifact Piece offers everyone a chance to change the narrative if they wish. If the constructions that make Indians invisible and deceased are aimed most directly at Indians ourselves, they are also a trick played on everyone else passing through the San Diego Museum of Man. The narratives that suggest Indians are of only marginal importance to California’s past and irrelevant to its present also deprive others of the agency that might result from a more accurate picture of the place where they live and work.

Few works of contemporary Indian art have been so perfectly conceived and executed. Outrageous and brilliant, The Artifact Piece rumbled across Indian

Country in the late 1980s like a quiet earthquake, making fine work by other Native artists suddenly look obsolete and timid. Luna's first masterpiece raised the stakes so high that the air that previously enveloped Indian contemporary art, for so long stifling and self-satisfied, turned thin and bracing. Luna brought danger into the equation, and in that new atmosphere, anything seemed possible.

With all the attention The Artifact Piece received, 1992 would have been a good time to sell out. But when galleries and museums phoned Luna during the modest gold rush that the 500th anniversary of the Columbus voyage brought to Indian artists, Luna sent this message from his mountain compound: "Call me in '93." He knew the sudden attention Indian artists were receiving wasn't likely to last, and it didn't. "Curators want a certain kind of Indian and a certain kind of Indian art," he said at the time. "They want you to be angry, they want you to be talking it up. So when people call me I have to ask 'Why didn't you call me before? You're calling me now, but will you call me in '93?'"³

As it happened, Luna collaborated with Guillermo Gómez-Peña in 1993 for a new work called The Shameman Meets El Mexican't at the Smithsonian Hotel and Country Club. Gómez-Peña described what transpired:

It's Friday morning. Luna and I share a diorama space at the Smithsonian's Natural History Museum. We are inside an ethnographic prison cell. I sit on a toilet costumed as a mariachi in a straitjacket with a sign around my neck that reads "There used to be a Mexican inside this body." I attempt unsuccessfully to get rid of my straitjacket in order to "perform" ("entertain" or "educate" my audience). A Mexican waltz mixed with rap contributes to the pathos of my tableau. Meanwhile, James paces back and forth, changing

personas. At times he is an “Indian shoe-shiner,” offering to shine the shoes of audience members. At other times, he becomes a “diabetic Indian,” shooting insulin directly into his stomach. He then transforms into a “janitor of color” (like most of the janitors in this, and other, U.S. museums) and sweeps the floor of the diorama. Hundreds of visitors gather in front of us. They look very sad.... Next to us, the “real” Indian dioramas speak of a mute world outside of history and social crises. Strangely, next to us, they appear much less “authentic.” The visibly nervous museum staff makes sure the audience understands that “this is just performance art ... and they are famous artists.” James and I have been rehearsing our next “intervention” at the Natural History Museum. The piece consists of a selection of irreverent monologues, songs, dances, and staged conversations that problematize our bittersweet relationship with mainstream cultural institutions. This time the performance will take place in the main auditorium. It’s 10 p.m., and James and I decide to take a break in our dressing room. Roberto and our producer, Kim Chan, are with us. James lights up some sage. I light up a Marlboro. Minutes later, several security guards break in and try to bust us for “smoking dope.” When they finally realize it’s just sage, they feel embarrassed and leave. I write in the margins of my script: “The performance is never over for us. No matter how much we understand that ethnic identity is a cultural and ideological construction, and that as performance artists we have the power to alter it at will, nevertheless, we are always confronted in the most unexpected moments by the guardians of fetishized identity and the enforcers of stereotype.”

When Aleta Ringlero, the curator of Native American art, finds out what

happened, she gets furious, calls each and every Smithsonian undersecretary, and lets them have it. James, Roberto, Kim, and I prefer to have a drink at the bar. It's just another day in our neverending pilgrimage towards the ends of Western civilization.⁴

In My Dreams challenged audiences with new memories, including those of Dean Martin, Marlon Brando, and Dennis Hopper. In one sequence, an Indian of Luna's age and physical description, played by Luna, sits at a table and has lunch. He pours artificial sweetener into an empty Styrofoam cup, and pretends to drink coffee, then adds another packet of sweetener. Then he prepares a feast of Spam garnished with packets of ketchup and mustard. Next, he takes out what the audience quickly understands are pieces of medical equipment, matter-of-factly pricks his finger, and watches as a glucometer takes measurements. With that information, the Indian draws up several units of insulin into a syringe, and then injects himself in the abdomen. Finally, before eating, he silently prays before the coffee, the Spam, and the medical implements.

Another sequence features Luna riding a stationary exercise bike in front of a white screen, where images from Easy Rider and The Wild Ones are projected to pop music from the 1950s and 1960s. The bike is a travesty, decorated with chicken feathers in electric shades of red, white, and blue. Luna wears a sequined vest and a flashing orange light in the center of his head. He rides his bike to the music and images, opens a beer, and performs tricks that mimic the stunts that Brando and Hopper perform on their motorcycles on the white screen in the background.

Critic Jane Blocker has suggested that the soundtrack for Luna's memories

was recorded from Dean Martin's music and television variety program, popular during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Despite Luna's genuine affection for Martin's music, Luna says during his performance of In My Dreams that it is not really about Dino. Instead, "it's about the memories he conjures up. The music helps us remember. He did something for us."⁵

The television show made Martin the most famous fictional drunk in America. His cheesy overacting of endless one-joke skits was a signal to viewers that he was only playing a character for laughs. This was television, after all, and Martin was bigger than the small screen. On the variety show, he was slumming. Blocker writes, "In the end, Dino is worthy of Luna's dance because, as a professional drunk, Dino cannot remember, and thus becomes the celebrity mascot for the white man's customs of forgetting."

When Luna's In My Dreams character says, "We like good music, and we like sad songs," he builds on each word, so that by the time he says "sad songs," it's somewhere between a boast and a warning. But he's not defensive, not even a little bit. He doesn't care if you think it's strange he should position the music of Dean Martin as part of Luiseño culture. So there he is, weeping about Dino, shooting himself with insulin.

I saw Luna perform In My Dreams in a packed school gymnasium in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1996, preposterously feathered yet never quite ridiculous, absurdly flapping his crutches in front of a video playing The Wild Ones. I thought of two lines from the last great song by the Clash, recorded in 1982 when leader Joe Strummer's countrymen and women thrashed helplessly against Margaret Thatcher's iron restraints. This is England is the music of failed

revolution. Strummer's singing captures the grief and sadness of living amid the ruins of that defeat, of community torn asunder, of dreams turning into nightmares, of hope mocked and finally destroyed. "I got my motorcycle jacket / But I'm walking all the time" are those lines.

Our feathered jackets are beautiful, often drop-dead gorgeous. But here's the thing: like Joe Strummer's defeated exiles, we're walking all the time. And the original idea, after all, was to ride.

In Washington, a large photograph of The Artifact Piece greets visitors in the National Museum of the American Indian's third floor gallery. On a winter afternoon a few months after the museum opened, Luna himself was one of those visitors. It must have felt like walking into one of his own installations.

The Artifact Piece is elegant and, yes, beautiful. Yet there is also something necessarily harsh at work here, and perhaps in its doppelganger in Washington. The two projects—the museum requiring more than \$200 million dollars, fourteen years, and an act of the United States Congress, and the artwork requiring not so much money, but perhaps even more than fourteen years, as well as the receptiveness of a single curator at the San Diego Museum of Man—share fundamental similarities. Both are about reversing the five-century, thousand-yard gaze of a narrative that got just about everything wrong.

The new museum proposes another way of looking at this history. Most of the gallery space is taken up with exhibits developed in collaboration with individual communities from across the Americas. Giving Indian people a voice in museum exhibitions is not new. Today there are scores of tribal museums in North America, and more are built every year. Other museums, including large,

established history and natural history museums, have been working with Indians for years. In fact, the first Indian employed by the Smithsonian is not W. Richard West, Jr., the NMAI's founding director. The Smithsonian has been employing Indians for more than a century. West is not even the first Cheyenne. What is unprecedented about the new museum is that all of the exhibits did this, not just a few. This meant a radical departure from normal museum practices. The National Museum of the American Indian created alternative ways for how objects would be displayed and described, how history is understood, and who should tell it. This led to scathing reviews by critics, certainly much of it deserved. Sharing power and authority doesn't guarantee excellent exhibits, only different ones.

One striking difference in how Indian audiences and many critics responded can be seen in the museum's insistence on mixing old objects with new, demonstrating its belief that the past lives in the present and conveying its overall message that we are still here. Critics and some visitors said okay, we get it, you're still here, why do you keep telling us the same thing? One reviewer said, "This isn't a museum, it's a public service announcement."⁶ Indian visitors tend to approve of all those images and stories of confident, assertive, contemporary Native people. The reality for many American Indians is that this seemingly obvious point is ignored and denied by the world they live in on a daily basis.

Few of Luna's performances could have been as exhausting as lying motionless in The Artifact Piece. He said later that what kept him going was the knowledge that at the end of those hours, he could get up and leave. The California Indians represented in the objects around him could not. I

remembered this when I talked with some of the NMAI staff a few months after the museum's opening. The Indian floor staff have become objects, and it's safe to assume all of them knew this would happen when they signed on. They are the first living Indians many visitors have ever "seen," although Washington is home to thousands of Indians. Visitors often have their pictures taken with the Indian staff, who are nearly always gracious and polite even in the face of casual insults, like the giggles and presumed Indian war whoops that signal the arrival of another pack of school kids. The floor staff say they love working at the museum, but they also talk about how it is so physically and emotionally draining that at the end of the day, all they can do is go home and sleep. The museum is their life.

The Artifact Piece's harshness lies in the formula: "I am the object." Indians have become conflated with the things we made, and with the fictions that others made up—using oil paints and paper and celluloid and zeros and ones—an intolerable and suffocating circumstance that requires many of us to become Luna, placing ourselves over and over again in the same rooms with those things museums call artifacts, asking others to notice, to *see*, as we perform a work titled Not Dead Yet.

In Emendatio, his project for the 51st Venice Biennale, Luna creates an imagined Native place of worship built in honor of Pablo Tac. A Luiseño Indian—of the same tribe as Luna—from the San Luis Rey Mission in California, young Tac traveled to Europe with San Luis Rey's Father Antonio Peyri, arriving in Rome in 1834 to study for the priesthood—and to be studied by others. Before his early death from disease in 1841, Tac produced a written history of the missionization of his people in California. Luna's installation houses artifacts of

the kind that Tac might have possessed or made during his stay at the Vatican, as well as actual Luiseño objects, placed on an altar and shrine-like vitrines. The interior walls recreate the look of a California mission. “Emendatio” is a word that Pablo Tac himself may have used when he attempted to correct errors in the way Europeans understood his people. Emendatio is a project that collapses the time between 1834 and 2005, and the space between Rome and California. Emendatio claims Venice as part of Indian history, and in so doing demonstrates a belief held by Luna and many other Native people: that every place is a Native place.

Indian agency has often been read as a demand to return to a utopian past that never was. Another emendation would suggest that we know very well such a return is impossible: instead the conversation is about a different kind of today, where we are present in the world like anyone else. We always have been trying to be part of the world. Pablo Tac did what he could. And that big stone barn of a museum off Independence Avenue in Washington, D.C., is, in its own imperfect, earnest way, trying, too.

So is James Luna. In his costume of feathers and empty bravado, he uses his crutches as wings, and though he never leaves the ground, he almost seems to take flight. But he’s not riding a beautiful motorcycle up the Pacific Coast Highway, heading to the next powwow or the next commune. He’s not going anywhere. He’s pedaling on a stationary bike, a bike with pedals and wheels but clipped wings of its own, and no matter how fast he pedals, how hard he flaps his crutches, he’s going no place at all—except in his dreams.

When people, most often Indian people, ask Luna why he doesn’t focus

more on the positive aspects of Native life, he answers, “I make art about life here on the La Jolla Reservation, and many times that life is not pretty.... Our problems are not unique, they exist in other communities; that is the Indian unity I know, unity in pain.” He adds, “I am not just criticizing a condition. I am in the condition.”⁷ Luna has successfully avoided the prison of being labeled a “political artist,” another absurdist American term designed to marginalize dissent. Of course Luna’s work is political, but it’s never simple and never rhetorical. Luna keeps faith with a basic, inconvenient truth of the matter at hand, and that is that Indians are the poorest people in the Western Hemisphere.

From his mountain outpost on the far edge of America, James Luna scans the horizon and sees everything. On clear days he can see the Pacific Ocean. On clear nights, ancient starlight washes over Palomar Mountain, and he can see forever.

Luna watches and remembers.