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GALLERY

# Petroglyphs In Motion

## James Luna



Opening Reception and Artist Talk Friday, October 21, 2005 7-9 pm  
Presented in collaboration with the imagineNATIVE film + media arts festival

# Petroglyphs In Motion

## by Kerry Swanson

“Performance and installation offer an opportunity like no other for Native people to express themselves in traditional art forms of ceremony, dance, oral traditions and contemporary thought without compromise.” –James Luna

Shaman, Rockabilly, Deal Maker, Drunk, Coyote: these are but a few of the personas occupied by renowned artist James Luna in the performance-based installation *Petroglyphs in Motion*. As the characters make their way determinedly down the cold and sparse silver catwalk, accompanied only by assorted percussive effects from a modern drum set, they draw different responses from the audience: laughter, wonder, silence, discomfort. Embodying both the myths and realities that permeate the lives of Native Americans, Luna refuses to shy away from that which is difficult and controversial. Perhaps that is why he has been called “one of the most dangerous Indians alive.”<sup>1</sup>

A Luiseno Indian who lives on the La Jolla Reservation in California, Luna draws on the daily realities of reservation life in his work. In *Petroglyphs in Motion* – commissioned by Site Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 2000 – Luna presents a non-linear narrative of the Native American man, exposing some of the stereotypes and challenges he continues to face in the modern world. Using the petroglyph as a starting point, the performance opens with Luna’s incarnation as a primordial man – determinedly running forward. Embodying both past and present, he affirms his connection to his ancestors, the original inhabitants of the Americas. Petroglyphic art, most often used as an example of Native primitivism, is a source of inspiration for this piece, which reminds us of the short distance and continued connection between modernity and “prehistory.” Uniting the “prehistoric” with the present, Luna rejects the Western version of history that excludes and undermines Native people and artists, and continues to deny their evolution.

As Luna’s “prehistoric” man moves forward into the future to occupy more modern guises, the artist confronts issues such as alcohol and substance abuse, racism, and the commodification of Native cultures. The concept of “authenticity” is central to the performance, as Luna questions the expectation for Native people to be “real Indians” as determined by Western movies, mythologies, and restricting stereotypes. As Paul Chaat Smith writes:

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.<sup>2</sup>



The myriad representations of Native individuals in the videotaped performance and accompanying photographs, from cellphone-wielding deal maker to leather-clad dominator, are a blatant refusal to bow down to the accepted notions of what an “authentic” Native person looks and acts like.

In one poignant scene, which provides a microcosmic window to the entire performance, Luna appears as an “Indian Jester” character, dressed in costume-like feathers and tassels, playing a Technicolor saxophone. He is a busker, and the smiling audience happily drops coins and bills into his tin cup. In his next incarnation, Luna, still wearing pieces of his bright costume, appears drunk and disoriented, a beer in his hand, a stereotypical “Indian.” This time, when he extends his cup to the audience they hesitate in palpable discomfort; fewer people give money and most who do seem somewhat embarrassed. Luna’s point is clear: America buys and sells the safe, happy, Indian myth with one hand, while turning its back on the devastating consequences of this commodification with the other.

This scene also references the role of modern Native artists in redefining the boundaries for their work, beyond the traditional confines of what society deems to be “real Native art”. Luna insists that while audiences may not want to see non-traditional examples of Native art and life, it is the role of contemporary Native artists to create a space for their own unique voices. The alternative is to lose their spirits, as Luna demonstrates with startling clarity. Most important, Luna speaks to both Native and non-Native audiences, acknowledging the complicity involved in creating and perpetuating the stereotypes that suppress Native perspectives and identities.

But *Petroglyphs in Motion* also contains humour. For Luna, humour is a powerful tool, and he uses it to great effect throughout this piece, particularly in his representation of the trickster Coyote. Limp-wristed and pouty, Luna’s Coyote is a seemingly unthreatening and amusing caricature. However, in his inclusion of Coyote in this piece, Luna speaks on a number of levels. The Coyote is a trickster who often impersonates the Creator in many traditional Native stories, dismantling the universe and wreaking havoc on peace and order. By incorporating the traditional trickster figure, Luna again acknowledges his place in the oral storytelling traditions of his ancestors, and further asserts his own role as teacher, troublemaker, and dismantler of outdated thinking.

Luna has said that performance and installation are the most powerful mediums in which contemporary Native artists can express themselves.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this is because of the space these media provide for artists to transform oral traditions within a modern framework. As Luna demonstrates, performance in particular is an ideal avenue to channel the spirits, myths, legacies, contradictions, and realities that begin to tell the story of who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. Like all good stories, this one ends with a beginning: Luna the Coyote takes us back to where we started and tells us to try again.



## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Paul Chaat Smith. "Luna Remembers," in James Luna: Emandato. Smithsonian Institute, National Museum of the American Indian, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> James Luna. "Allow Me to Introduce Myself," in Canadian Theatre Review. Issue 68, Fall 1991.

## Biographies

A resident of the La Jolla Reservation in California, **James Luna** (Luiseno Nation) has received international acclaim for his performance and installation work. His art has been showcased at venues including the Whitney Biennial, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, the National Gallery of Canada, and the Nippon International Performance Art Festival in Japan. He was recently selected by the National Museum of the American Indian for the 2005 Venice Biennale, where he featured a new work that showed historical and cultural parallels between Italy and indigenous America.

**Kerry Swanson** is the director of development and member of the Programming Committee for the imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival in Toronto. She is also a member of the board of directors for the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto (LIFT). She has a B.A. in English Literature from Queen's University and is currently working on a Masters in Communication and Culture, with a focus on Canadian aboriginal film and video, in a joint program between York and Ryerson universities. Kerry is a member of the Michipicoten First Nation in Northern Ontario.

images (cover + interior): Peroglyphs in Motion; installation photographs and stills from video (running time: 35 minutes), 2000.

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