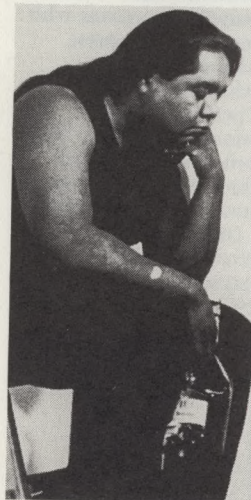


Allow Me to Introduce Myself

The performance art of James Luna

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Installation/Performance Artist



I don't have to say that I'm an Indian artist, I am simply an Indian and an artist ... For many of you this may seem trivial but it isn't.

The above is how I would probably introduce myself. This is very curious, did you know that? I don't have to say that I'm an Indian artist, I am simply an Indian and an artist. I do not know when this happened; I can tell you that it didn't happen recently, but it has taken me a long time to say that. For many of you this may seem trivial, but it isn't! Some may say, "Now that he is successful he is not an Indian any more." No, that is not what I said because I identified my tribe along with being an artist. What I'm really saying here is that I do not make "Indian art," but that I'm an Indian who makes art and that, my friends, is a big difference ...

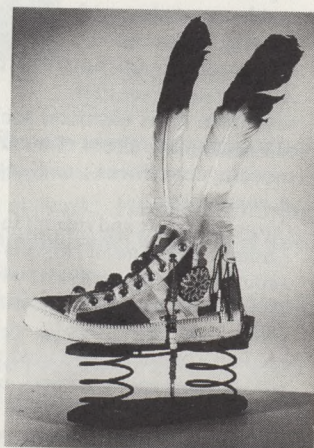


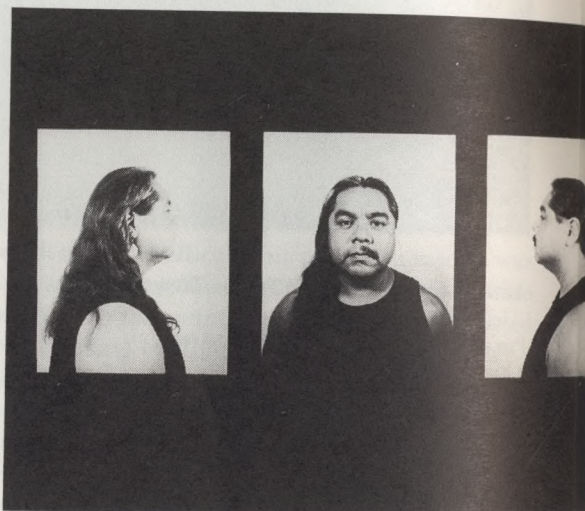
PHOTO: RICHARD LOU

I do not separate myself or my art from conditions here on the La Jolla Reservation where I live.

In the United States we Indians have been forced by various means to live up to the ideals of what being an Indian means to the general public. In art it meant work that looked "Indian" and that look was controlled by the market, and if the market said that it did not look "Indian" then it did not sell. If it did not sell, then it wasn't "Indian." I think somewhere in this mess many Indian artists forgot who they were, by doing work that did not have anything to do with their tribe, by doing work

that did not tell about our existence in this world today, by doing work for others and not for themselves.

So what does this have to do with anything? Why am I raving? Because it is the basis of my work, my ideals and unbelievably what has made me currently "successful."



It is my feeling that art work in the media of performance and installation offers an opportunity like no other for Indian people to express themselves without compromise in traditional art forms of ceremony, dance, oral traditions and contemporary thought. Within these [non traditional] spaces one can use a variety of media such as objects, sounds, video, slides, so that there is no limit in how and what is expressed.

You see that I use quotations around certain words and I wanted to tell you that it is for effect. I want you to let that word in quotes float around in your head.

Someone said to me that they saw my installations as theatre without actors, that they were more than sets because they themselves told a story. I said yes, I'll take that definition. For those of you who have not experienced installation works, the way I best can describe them is that by using made and found objects within a space an artist is able to create an environment as a statement and/or an environment and a statement.

I began as a painter and still consider myself one in many ways. In the structure and decisions of the performances the visual considerations are similar. In installation, as in painting, I felt that I went to a point where the painting was not filling my need to what I wanted to express, so I expanded my work into the performance area, and put the concepts into action. This action need not be movement and can incorporate other players, or other media and varied environments.

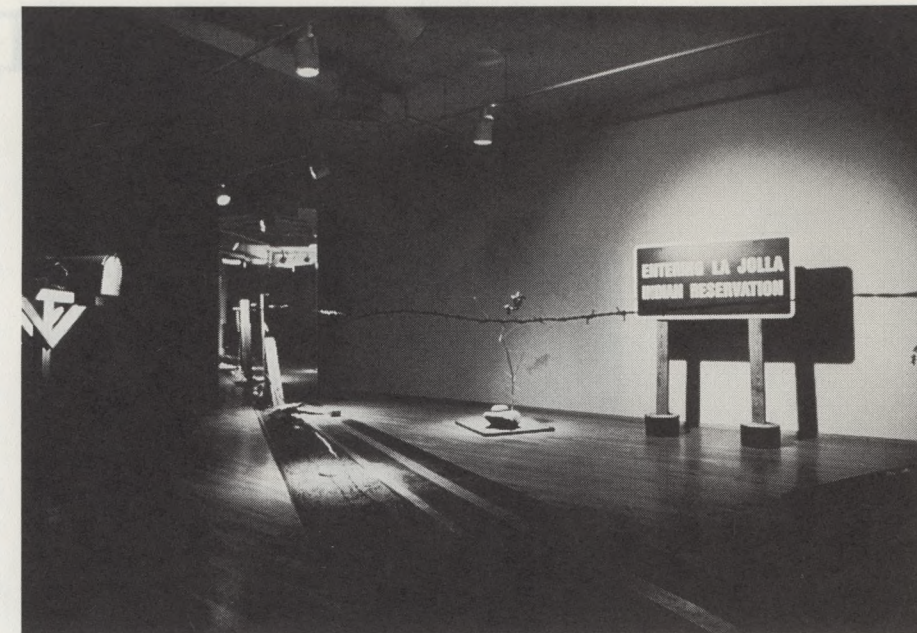


Let me say that I do not talk about things that I do not know, have not experienced or am currently experiencing. It is not my place to tell people how to act, so I talk about my dysfunction in general and attempt to communicate and touch people in this way.

In my recent work I have included performance within my installation spaces. Sometimes these performances are recorded and the video recording becomes a part of the final installation thus creating a multi-media presentation.

I do not make pretty art, I make art about the life here on La Jolla Reservation and many times that life is not pretty. I do not need to go elsewhere for information, I have thirty years of work (a rough estimate) just exploring myself and my community. Our problems are not unique, they exist in other Indian communities; that is the Indian unity that I know, unity in pain.

There are many things that just need to be talked about, the many things withheld and the things that we don't understand. I see this communication as the first step in recovery. The social conditions of this community are many and inter-related such as alcohol / drug abuse, crime, lack of education, unemployment, cultural apathy, loss of



My appeal for humour in my work comes from Indian culture where humour can be a form of knowledge, critical thought and perhaps used in a way of easing the pain.

personal and cultural identity. In much of the work that I have done I have met these subjects in a clear and simple way and thus have allowed my work to be accessible to Indian people and many others. Despite the many hardships we as Indian people face there is much beauty and fun in our cultures. I would live nowhere else as my life is filled with variety, as I truly live in two worlds. This "two world" concept once posed much pain for me as I felt torn as to who I was. In maturity I have come to find it the source of my power as I can easily move between these places and not feel that I have to be one or the other, that I am an Indian in this modern society. Whether I like it or not this society is not going to go away, so I (and my culture) must learn to survive in it. So in some of my work, I use the vantage point of "two worlds" combined with Indian humour and many of the painful and dark subject matters become accessible. The dual edge of the work also makes it that much more interesting.

I make my art for Indian people first, that is to say, I do not make it for the approval of the people, but so that they will get it. This also helps me to keep rooted and not get too "artsy fartsy." I make the work simple in its message, but thought-provoking in its content as well, that's Indian logic to me. There are things in my work sometimes that only other Indians will get, but as I move forward I have been surprised to know how many others get and need these messages as well. ♦