

ART THAT SINGS OF WHO WE ARE

AFTER FOUR YEARS, the highly successful exhibit of California Indian art and poetry, *Sing Me Your Story, Dance Me Your Song*, concluded at Humboldt State University's Native American Gallery in Arcata. The final venue was celebrated with a crowded and jubilant opening, a variety of performances, and a very poignant closing led by Tolowa artist and ceremonial leader Loren Bommelyn. The festivities were heightened with news that the Pequot Museum and Research Center in Mashantucket, Connecticut, was going to host the complete exhibit at its prestigious facility.

Poets and visual artists from throughout the state participated in the exhibit, which was curated by Theresa Harlan (Santo Domingo and Jemez Pueblos) and based on the book *The Dirt Is Red Here: Art and Poetry from Native California* (Heyday, 2002). The exhibit traveled to fourteen different venues in California before going to the Pequot Museum. According to Exhibit Envoy, the organization that organized the tour, more than 62,000 visitors viewed the exhibit. The venues included museums and galleries in Arcata, Lodi, Northridge, Ojai, Ontario, Roseville, San Clemente, Santa Ana, Santa Clara, San Francisco, Tulare, Ukiah, Yuba City, and Yucca Valley.

Each venue was encouraged to actively meet with and engage their local Native artists and poets and to schedule public events. This collaborative approach helped to build communication between the venues and the local artists and, according to Harlan, also provided an opportunity to sensitize museum and gallery directors to the unique sensibilities of Native artists.

An advisory committee of Native experts was established to help guide Exhibit Envoy to package the tour. This committee consisted of Paula Allen (cultural coordinator for United Indian Health Services in northern California), Gerald Clarke (Cahuilla artist, southern California), Sherrie Smith-Ferri (Pomo/Miwok, director of the Grace Hudson Museum in central California), Judith Lowery (Pit River/Mountain Maidu artist, northern California), and Linda Noel (Koyungkawi poet, central California). In addition to giving valuable advice to the museum and gallery directors, this group assisted in the creation of a pamphlet titled *The Community Connections Project: Perspectives and Tools for Museum Professionals*. The pamphlet presents facts about the exhibit, key individuals affiliated with the exhibit, and also provides strategies and perspectives useful to small and mid-size museums and galleries to understand and appreciate



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Courtesy of
Julia Parker
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the value of their local Native artists and the benefits of involving them in their organizations.

The exhibit itself provides a rich and broad view of Native American visual arts and poetry. Harlan stated that she “wanted to bring together artists who were saying something unique” about today’s Native California experience. She also sought “work that was unexpected,” that she felt might surprise the visitor who knew an artist’s or poet’s previous work. “I didn’t want people to come and say, oh, yeah, I’ve seen that before.”

The range of work included two-dimensional paintings, drawings, and prints; three-dimensional sculptural pieces; and multi-media pieces. Poetry was printed on broadsides and hung along with the artwork. The Exhibit Envoy folks secured funding to purchase digital equipment that allowed visitors to use their cell phones to hear the artists reading their statements and the poets reading their poetry, which enhanced the overall experience. Reflecting on the success of the exhibit, Harlan said she was surprised at how “it took on a life of its own.”

Humboldt State University was the final California destination for the show and coincidentally the first major exhibit for the newly established Native American Art Gallery. The organizers wanted to recognize the success of the exhibit

Beaded and woven items complement paintings and sculptures in *Sing Me Your Story*. Photo by Chris Dustman.

James Luna: A Kindred Spirit

Julian Lang

A kindred spirit is someone who understands you and, in turn, someone whom you understand. Empathy and non-verbal cues become much-used tools to communicate. James Luna, a member of the La Jolla Reservation (Luiseño), and his performance art often achieve that kind of intimacy with Native and non-Native audiences alike. He is our kindred spirit: we understand him, and we feel he understands us. His stories and words seem to resonate with our very core. His artwork relates to us as a message: Native people are integral parts of a grand nexus where spirit, earth, humanity, and life meet.

Luna's artwork speaks to us from a deeply personal place. Over the years, he has consciously created autobiographical work. The result is that many California Indian people see themselves in his work. He creates an experience in which he portrays himself and adds voices and stories that allow his audience to see what is not usually seen: the often chaotic and yet still sublime inner machinations of a contemporary Native California worldview.

Luna considers himself a multi-media artist. His palette includes his body, a space (the stage) in which he many or may not employ props, ambient sound, the audience, lights, and various digital devices. This rather minimalist approach works to focus his audience's attention on the story. His story slowly shifts from James Luna, the intrepid artist regaling us with tales of a contemporary Native artist's life, to one where his life is metaphor for who we are today. We see how we are the sum of our cultural legacy, the ever-present yoke of colonial federal Indian policies, the yin and yang of sacred and profane sensibilities, and the reality of being on a path towards redefining ourselves in the age.

Luna establishes a contract with his audience: "I will tell you stories from my life," he says, adding, "I will not lie to you or attempt to romanti-

cize Native life." In turn we, the audience, agree to watch and listen to the entire story. In a recent interview, Luna recognizes the importance of this contract with his audiences. He says this trust is reciprocal: he portrays Native life in a truthful and authentic way. We are privy to his mundane life and to the demons that seem to rear their heads at such inopportune times. We sense his courage in baring himself to strangers. As a result, it is difficult for some of us to witness Luna's performance as "Uncle Jimmy," the self-destructive uncle of us all who adamantly insists on being so. At the same time, it is liberating to see the depth of heart and power that he possesses despite his constant fight against the assimilative forces that society has perpetrated against his soul. He stands, or rather sits, in a wheelchair, ravaged by diabetes and a hectic lifestyle, unrepentant. He is our rebel with a cause.

In the mid-1970s, Luna started out as a painter. In the 1980s, he ventured into installation arts. He began performing his art in the 1990s, a synthesis of his installations and a new direction that included himself as a central motif. His art was less and less about political realities and more and more about our emotions as they relate to a day-to-day California Native experience. By the end of the 1990s, he was incorporating digital media into his work.

His recent performance at the Gist Theater on the Humboldt State University campus in Arcata, California, was a reprise of his first visit to the area in the early 1990s. There was excitement in the air from those seeing him for the first time, and anticipation from those who saw him during his previous visit. His goal for this performance was to synthesize many the stories of the 1990s into new pieces. Putting these stories together "sort of fit," he remarked recently. Yes, James, they fit. And we'll be talking about them for the next ten years, or until we see you again. ▼

by ending it with a bang. Julian Lang and Lyn Risling were invited to prepare an opening of song, story, and poetry. Lang was included in the exhibit, not as a visual artist but as a poet. Risling was a participating painter whose artwork was used extensively in publicity materials during the course of the tour. The opening also included a short film series featuring a family friendly film, *Edge of America*, and Lang's animated piece *Frog Marries Moon*, and a poetry reading with Linda Noel and Stephen Meadows. Brian Tripp read his poetry and sang traditional songs, and his hanging found-object sculptures were included in the exhibit.

The Humboldt State venue also featured "Frankly Speaking," a panel discussion about art that included Brian Tripp, George Blake, and L. Frank. These artists have known each for many years and their interaction was both very informative and hilariously funny. And finally, the audience enjoyed a much-anticipated performance by renowned Luiseño artist James Luna. His performance was a sold-out event and harkened back his last visit some twelve years prior. The autobiographical nature of his work resonated with the audience, and there were both tears and laughter.

Sing Me Your Story, Dance Me Home provided local Native communities a glimpse of how their neighbors live. Non-Indians received a rare dose of what it means to be Indian in these times and in this country. It's confusing at times, it's inspiring, and it's always emotionally charged. Most important art is transformative, leaving us wondering what the next incarnation might be. ▼

Julian Lang (Karuk) is a multi-media artist and writer from Humboldt County. He also teaches the Karuk language and performs as a singer-songwriter.

Sing Me Your Story, Dance Me Home. Photo by Chris Dustman.

