

## james luna: MIMESIS and RITUAL

### "NOTHING IS INERT."<sup>1</sup>

Jimmie Durham

In 2004, as part of a research trip, I visited James Luna and his partner, artist and curator Joanna Bigfeather, at their home in the hills of the La Jolla Reservation west of San Diego. Well fed on barbecued meat, beer and tequila, my wife and I slept that night in Luna's studio, which is separated from the house by a patio. There we were surrounded by artworks and the sorts of found objects, kitsch and what-have-you from which his art is made. We slept well there, despite having over-indulged on the beer and tequila.

Three years later, in the fall of 2007, a series of wildfires swept southern California. They moved so quickly and unpredictably that Luna was forced to evacuate his home in the middle of the night, leaving almost everything behind. The fire consumed his house, but somehow missed the studio. My first thought on hearing this, without a moment's reflection, was that it would take an audacious fire indeed to go up against the power of the objects in that studio. By this I don't mean that Luna has infused them with some sort of protective mystical aura. It's just that there is something serious going on in that studio and to my mind some species of active power resides in the collection of objects he has chosen or created.

When Luna suggested recently that I focus on the form and craftsmanship of his art in this essay—a neglected topic in the literature on his art—I thought it might be a way to explore how and why his objects have the power that they do. I suspect that close attention to how Luna handles form and pays attention to objects will not open the infamous modernist gap between form and content but rather reveal an intimacy between the two aspects. I think that Luna's attentiveness to form produces, allows, enriches and activates particular types of content, from the explicitly political to implicit, metaphysical assumptions that frame their expression in the deep structures of his work.

<sup>1</sup> "Laurence Bossé & Julia Garimoth Interview with Jimmie Durham," *Jimmie Durham: Rejected Stones*, Fabrice Hergott, ed. (Paris: Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris/ARC, 2009), p. 15.

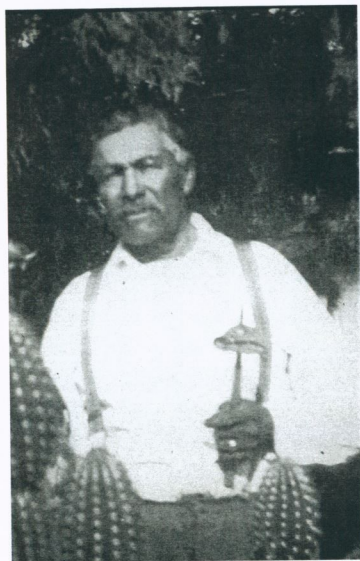


A few caveats are in order. One of the greatest challenges in writing about contemporary North American Indian artists is finding ways to articulate the processes of encounter between the diverse range of cultural experiences, traditions and innovations that drive their work. In a sense, Luna's art is often precisely about staging that encounter in all its glory and abjection. But in language one is often obliged to simplify and distinguish things that are neither simple nor discrete unto themselves. I want to be able to write of Luna's Indian heritage as an important influence without giving you the impression that it can be separated from his training in conceptual art or his experience of popular culture, which play such significant roles in his art. I'm not suggesting a warm and fuzzy melting-pot cultural hybridity: Luna is the first to show you the rough edges, the places where things don't square up, the contradictions, tensions and bloody power dynamics that shoot through contemporary Indian life. So if it seems at times that I am picking the work apart into Indian and non-Indian components, this is an analytical strategy and not necessarily the reality of the work.

I'd also like to note a useful distinction that Luna makes around his work. Although he often uses the forms of ceremony, ritual and traditional spirituality, he is not performing or demonstrating particular rituals or engaging directly in traditional spiritual behaviour. As he puts it, he is "an artist working with spiritual concepts, rather than being spiritual."<sup>2</sup> In other words one might attend and participate in traditional ceremonies and express one's spirituality in that context with a sense that those forms of experience have their own place, and that place is not the performance stage or gallery. At the same time, there are ideas, perspectives and even the basic forms of ritual that the artist can bring productively into the art discourse. I think that he is able to do this because he has the courage to see them as living ideas and ongoing, active processes.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from James Luna in this essay are from telephone conversations with the artist on July 29th and August 14th, 2010.





james luna, *apparitions:*  
*man with the rattle,*  
digital prints, 2010,  
24" x 18" each

From my perspective Luna's work depends upon, at its most basic level, a number of aesthetic tendencies and assumptions which are inextricably enmeshed in the creation and experience of his art. I'd like to explore three here. They are: studied theatricality; an indigenous ontological approach to objects; and the integration of the forms of ritual, particularly ritual's mimetic aspect. Although this is not an essay or an exhibition about his performances, I think the notion of performance nevertheless touches the many objects, photographs and installations the artist has created. Luna is an extremely meticulous and disciplined performance artist and his basic approach to the medium effects all aspects of both the form and content of his work. Unlike some performance artists—Rebecca Belmore is a good example—who derive dramatic energy from the spontaneous perils of improvisation, Luna likes to be in control of as many aspects of the performance as he can from the beginning. He rehearses often and carefully chooses costumes, lighting and music. Although his performances can be as intense, challenging and unpredictable to the audience as anyone's, the sensibility at work is distinct. I tend to think of it as a theatrical sensibility.



james luna, *OUTFIT*, DETAIL  
 COMPOSITE OF OUTFITS FROM VARIOUS DATES  
 PHOTO: USM ART GALLERY

<sup>3</sup> The work is reproduced in: Barbara Fisher, ed., Rebecca Belmore: 33 Pieces (Toronto: Blackwood Gallery, 2001), pp. 30-31.

<sup>4</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Catherine Porter, trans. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 19.

<sup>5</sup> Latour, 22.

<sup>6</sup> Latour, 22. Latour explored the social role of objects further in his exhibition and book *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass. & Karlsruhe, Germany: MIT Press & ZKM/Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Latour, 6.

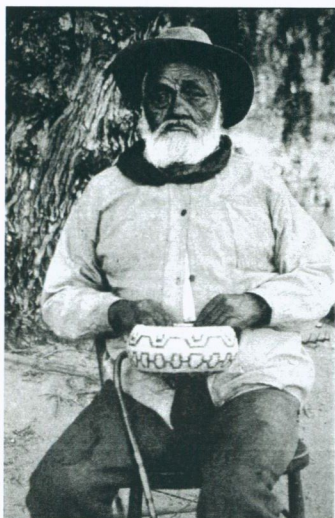


James Luna the performer is larger than life. (You might even want to call him Mister Luna, as Belmore does in the title to a sculpture she created as a tribute to him in 2001. The wall-mounted work consists of a pair of glossy yellow loafers surrounded by a ring of lights.<sup>3</sup>) Every prop and costume, every aspect of the various personae Luna inhabits is heightened and intensified to register at the theatrical scale. And he stages his photographs, objects and installations with a similar sort of care and concern for theatrical effect.

One thing Luna's theatrical approach to object making and installation does is to teach us how to look carefully at objects. Ritual, as you may know, often depends in part on carefully choosing sites and potent objects. To me this is where an awareness of the fundamental distinctions between indigenous and Enlightenment ontologies become crucial in exploring his art. Since the Enlightenment, understanding the truth of "things" lies in grasping and policing an object's difference from ourselves in several related and crucial senses. Objects do not feel, will, suffer or imagine. They are not persons, they are not subjects. They are acted upon rather than agents, things to be represented rather than initiators of meaning. We do not relate to them socially, we simply apprehend them as sense data and their nature is rationally and immediately evident. In Western cultures therefore the distinction between animate and inanimate is taken to be self-evident to the extent that any speaker of English could easily run down a list of nouns and classify them as one or the other. But from a post-structuralist perspective our experience of objects can never be so innocent, because it always occurs through existing social structures, such as language.

In We Have Never Been Modern sociologist Bruno Latour attempts to explain how this enormous gap between ourselves and the rest of nature arose. He argues that the political controversy over early enlightenment scientific theories caused scientists to attempt to depoliticize their work, drawing on and intensifying the distinction between objective nature and human, politicized culture to assure critics that they were concerned only with natural facts.<sup>4</sup> This "purification" led to the creation not only of the idea of the ontologically distinct individual human subject, but also "overlooks the simultaneous birth of 'nonhumanity—things or objects, or beasts...'"<sup>5</sup> Beneath this distinction and repression, however, "hybrids continue to multiply."<sup>6</sup> Latour's project is to develop a language that can account for the hybrid object that is at once empirical and social, without falling off to either side.<sup>7</sup>

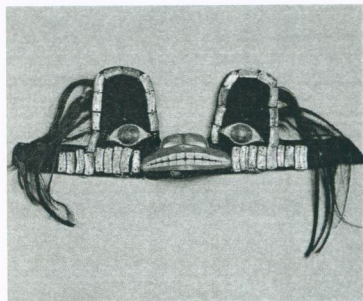
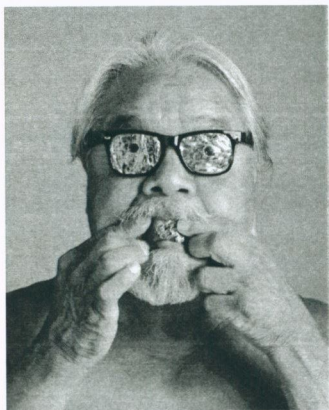
The idea of a social relationship with 'objects' as fellow agents is much easier to conceptualize and discuss in many indigenous languages and traditional ontologies. In some Indian languages stones are considered beings rather than things. The winds and waters likewise. Non-human animals often occupy the category of persons; there are the human people, but also the bear people and the elk people and so forth. They might also occupy the position of relations: the bear might be a brother, the Thunder a grandfather, the Moon a grandmother. So it seems perfectly reasonable to me that Luna has a gift for recognizing potent objects and drawing them into the conversation that is his art.



james luna, *apparitions: man with the golf club*, digital prints, 2010, 24"x18" each

As I noted, Luna often brings the forms of ritual into his performances without ever reproducing any of the specific traditional rituals that are still practiced in indigenous communities. I'd also like to argue that the forms of ritual are also present in many of his non-performance artworks as well. For our purposes here I am thinking of a ritual as an action performed according to a set of existing guidelines or protocols in order to create a particular experience or effect for the participants. If a ritual is, by definition, an action, then how do we find ritual in objects? Primarily through the objects the ritual requires and the material traces the ritual leaves. Luna's *We Become Them*, is a good example.

"just as the master carver of each mask infused that object with power through his artistic skill, luna manipulates his body with similar virtuosity."



james luna, *we become them: bear*,  
digital prints, 2010, 30"x24" each

*We Become Them* consists of a series of photographic pairings that each feature a found photograph of a Northwest Coast mask printed in black and white and a colour headshot of Luna imitating the mask. They are inspired by a Northwest Coast elder Luna heard speak who said that when a ritual dancer performs with a mask he is not imitating, for example, a particular animal, but becoming that animal. This gives us quite a different understanding of both the mask and the role of mimesis in ritual. The masks we see in the photographs are potent in themselves, in their ability to enable this process, but also fundamentally incomplete when not in use—for example as we often see them in books and museums. I suspect that Luna has chosen to represent them not being worn and in black and white to acknowledge the fact that in his work the masks are a reference point and inspiration, but his own documented performance is the space in which active transformation is in effect in this work. Luna's visual presence and vitality are intensified through the limited palette of the photographs because the warm hues of his tanned face, accented by his silver hair, push dramatically to the foreground against the grey backdrop. Even more crucial to the work's success is Luna's skilful control over another medium: his body. In each photograph it is evident that the artist has developed a deep resonance between his own body and his source of inspiration. Just as the master carver of each mask infused that object with power through his artistic skill, Luna manipulates his body with similar virtuosity.



In his book *Mimesis and Alterity*, Michael Taussig described mimesis as a crucial way in which we use our bodies and our senses in encounters with alterity—that which is radically different from ourselves.<sup>8</sup> We mimic, often with our bodies or other non-linguistic strategies, what we don't understand in order to begin to understand it. It is necessarily a tactile and sensual response rather a semiotic one, because we have no shared set of symbolic codes. In a sense *We Become Them* instantiates this process in the most dramatic and transformative form possible. Bodily imitation of that which is initially other gives way not only to connection but to a complete, if temporary, fusing of identity.

Not all of Luna's experiments with mimetic transformation are so total, although many of them feature a longing to close a gap between the artist's self and an other, particularly an historical other. To give an example of how this plays out in life, take Luna's interest in the grinding stones that turn up from time to time in his yard. Listen to how he describes his relationship to these supposedly inert objects: "I have not found them," he tells me, "they found me." For Luna, the tactile experience of handling the stones creates a relationship between himself and the ancestors who created and held the tool. If we think of ritual as being fundamentally about creating a series of actions and conditions for the body that provide particular, repeatable experiences, then Luna's mimetic handling of the object in itself also satisfies that minimal definition.

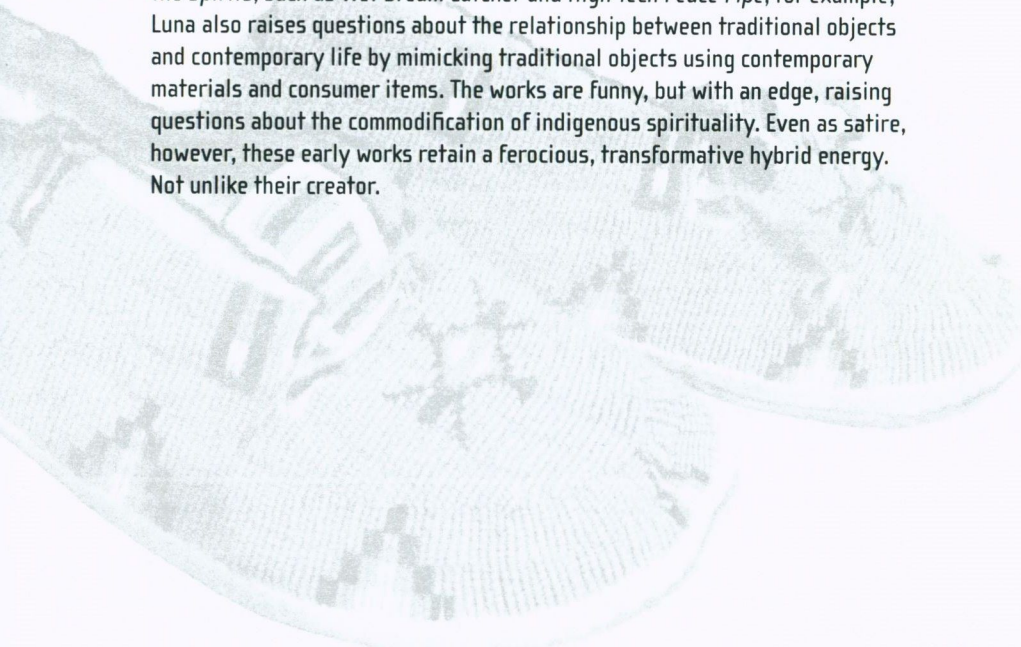
In some circumstances, however, Luna deliberately leaves open the gap between self and ancestors. The work *Apparitions*, for example, has a similar formal structure to *We Become Them*, featuring pairings of historical photographs and the artist's own portrait. In this case the historical portraits are of influential California Indians, such as the Luiseño spiritual leader José Albalá, holding a turtle rattle and the Pomo basket maker William Benson holding one of his creations. Luna imitates their poses, drawing out the connection he no doubt feels to the men, but this time he interrupts the process of identification by inserting signs of his own time, including, in one, an icon of time itself, a clock. This interruption arises in part out of the history of "Indian" photography; both our rush to believe in the authenticity of old photographs and the expectations created by photographers like Edward S. Curtis, who eliminated all signs of European contact from his work.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York; London: Routledge, 1993).

Luna imagines, for example, Benson being asked by the photographer, "could you hold something to look more Indian?" All the same, in the older pictures of California Indians, as we can see in these examples, many of the usual signs of "Indianess"—long hair, traditional clothing—are absent and Luna says that although he was first disappointed by this, he quickly realized that the photographs were actually an important record of the truth of that moment. In his portraits of himself then, he also insists on the truth and validity of his own moment, as well as his connection to the past.



james luna, *Apparitions I*,  
digital print, 2006, 24"x30"



In still other works the artist uses satiric mimesis to force open a gap between self and other, rather than to close it. One of the definitions of satire, after all, is mimicry with a comic, revealing difference. It imitates to critique or undermine. In the early works gathered together under the heading *Dial up the Spirits*, such as *Wet Dream Catcher* and *High Tech Peace Pipe*, for example, Luna also raises questions about the relationship between traditional objects and contemporary life by mimicking traditional objects using contemporary materials and consumer items. The works are funny, but with an edge, raising questions about the commodification of indigenous spirituality. Even as satire, however, these early works retain a ferocious, transformative hybrid energy. Not unlike their creator.

james luna performance mocassins