



JAMES LUNA
NEW YORK

The Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House in Manhattan makes a peculiar home for a branch of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). The Beaux-Arts confection was built at the turn of the twentieth century to house collections operations for the port of New York. Its sculptures and murals, designed to trumpet American imperialism and capitalism, now reek of colonialism—which is why the site is fertile ground for James Luna's latest intervention.

To enter *Emendatio* [NMAI's George Gustav Heye Center; March 1—April 20, 2008], Luna's installation commissioned for the 2005 Venice Biennale, one must walk through a marble rotunda whose ceiling is decorated with WPA-commissioned frescoes by Reginald Marsh. Half are trompe-l'oeil portraits of explorers like Christopher Columbus; the rest depict ships—one with bloody tomahawks attached to its stern—sailing through the city's port as spectators wave U.S. flags. However, as wall text announces, *Emendatio*—"emendation" in English—corrects what is "erroneous or faulty." Marsh's frescoes epitomize the visual rhetoric that has been in Luna's crosshairs for twenty-five years, and set the stage for the show's emendations. *Emendatio*'s deceptively minimalist appearance yields, only with a long look, a nuanced rejoinder to Euro-American (mis)perceptions about Native identity and history, told here from the perspective of the Luiseño, Luna's nation of southern California Indians.

It begins in darkness. Two electronically-modulated bullroarers whizz through the air. Then there is light: a ceiling-mounted projector beams a silvery-gray pattern floorward onto a sand bed with grinding stones. The image begins to whirl. Striking abstract patterns become folds of fabric. Then, the video stops to reveal an archival photograph of a woman grinding acorn meal, once a staple food of California's indigenous peoples.

Apparitions follows *Spinning Woman* in the installation's trajectory. A video montage of past and present photographic portraits is projected onto a multi-layered

fabric scrim. The camera zooms around a 1907 photo of elders waving feather plumes, and then morphs into a Kodak moment with Luna and friends, in jeans and tennis shoes, waving bats and rattles. A sepia-toned image of Luna's great-grandmother with a child on her lap appears and fades into the sun-saturated color photo of Luna's niece and daughter in the same pose. This is not an account of extinction or assimilation but a story of *transculturation*—a term coined by sociologist Fernando Ortiz. Here, "colonized" peoples choose what they borrow from the dominant culture. Luna argues that the Luiseño have transmuted Euro-American culture's useful elements into something uniquely their own.

A brief video introduces *Emendatio*'s Biennale debut, which included Luna's sixteen-hour *Renewal* performance, signified here by its artifacts. A short video of the private pre-Biennale rehearsal that shows Luna "playing Indian" is projected on a screen above *Ritual Circle*, which recreates on the gallery floor the performance space he made in Venice with sugar packets, syringes, and insulin vials.

We then reach the show's centerpiece, *The Chapel for Pablo Tac*, an homage to Pablo Tac (1822-1841), a Luiseño born at Mission San Luis Rey—after which the tribe was named—and sent to study for the priesthood in Rome. There, the multilingual Tac produced the first Luiseño grammar and dictionary, and wrote a manuscript about life under Spanish colonial rule.

Using sight and sound(track), Luna resignifies the typical chapel found in Roman Catholic missions dotting California's coastline. A pipe organ's somber hymn, punctuated by tinkling bells, morphs into Procul Harum's hit *A Whiter Shade of Pale*. A (fake) nineteenth-century Navajo "chief's blanket" replaces the crucifix on which a tortured Jesus hangs slumped dead. A woven basket, whose feather design symbolizes the sacred four directions, replaces the altar's tabernacle, a box that holds the Eucharist, that is, the "body and blood of Christ." More objects are juxtaposed in four vitrines

along the "chapel" wall, near rows of pews: a ceremonial rattle paired with a church bell, and a censer with an abalone shell and sage. Catholicism's Stations of the Cross, the story of Christ's suffering and death, are replaced with portable DVD players in wall-mounted wooden boxes that replay *Apparition*'s scenes of Luiseño survival and the co-existence of past and present. Luna asks: and who are the "savages" here?

Like worshippers at mass, visitors must genuflect to watch an unnamed, looped video summarizing five centuries of Luiseño history that plays on the altar's front panel. Luna's wily trap, and the video's story of resilience and survival—not death and resurrection—are two of the exhibition's most potent emendations.

—Eleanor LeBeau

ABOVE: James Luna, *Emendatio*, 2005, rehearsal for performance (courtesy of the artist and the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian; photo: Katherine Fogden)