James Luna: Emendatio

Through emotionally compelling performances and installations, James Luna has dramatically expanded the language, territory, and possibilities of Indian art. His art—infused with humor, irony, and penetrating insight—confronts and challenges commonly held perceptions about Native Americans.

*Emendatio* was conceived for and first presented at the 2005 Biennale di Venezia. Before coming to the George Gustav Heye Center, it was on view from November 2007 to February 2008 at the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, where James Luna was selected as the museum’s 2007 Distinguished Artist and recognized for his lifetime achievements. The exhibition’s title, *Emendatio*, is a Latin word whose English translation is “emendation.” The definition speaks of “the act of altering for the better, or correcting what is erroneous or faulty; improvement; removal of errors or corruption.”

*Emendatio* is a work in three parts: a performance and two installations.

During the performance at the outset of the Biennale, Luna blessed and laid a ritualistic circle of stones, low-income food items, sugar packets, medical vials, and syringes—references to the current health plight of many indigenous nations. As a gesture of sacrifice, he then began to dance in place within the circle for four hours on each of four days. A videotaped excerpt is a permanent part of the exhibit.

The first installation, *Apparitions: Past and Present*, contests the popular notion that there is a discontinuity between the indigenous world of the past and that of the present. The second installation, *The Chapel for Pablo Tac*, pays homage to Pablo Tac, a Luiseño Indian—the same tribe as Luna—who in 1834 came to Rome from the San Luis Rey Mission in California to study for the priesthood—and to be studied by others.

“Emendatio” is a word that Pablo Tac himself may have used when he attempted to correct errors in the way Europeans understood his people. *Emendatio* is a project that collapses the time between 1834 and the 21st century, and the space between Italy and California. *Emendatio* claims Venice as part of Indian history, and in so doing demonstrates a belief held by James Luna and many other Native people: that every place is a Native place.

Truman T. Lowe (Ho-Chunk) and Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche), Curators

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**Pablo Tac: Memory, Identity, History**

Born at Mission San Luis Rey in 1822, in what is today Southern California, Luiseño Indian Pablo Tac wrote about the Spanish colonial system he witnessed in his youth, and produced the first grammar and partial dictionary of the Luiseño language. Accompanied by a missionary from San Luis Rey, Tac traveled to Europe as a young boy in order to study for the priesthood. He arrived in Rome in 1834 and enrolled at the Collegium Urbanum de Propaganda Fide, founded in 1627 to train young men to become missionaries. Tac studied Latin grammar, and then rhetoric, humanities, and philosophy. He also wrote a 150-page manuscript in which he intersperses a history of Luiseño life during the mission period with a study of Luiseño grammar and work on a Spanish-Luiseño dictionary. Tac identified as “Quechnajuís” (the word Luiseños used to refer to themselves) and as a Christian Luiseño. He expressed allegiance to Quechnajuís elders, whose knowledge and translations of the sacred formed the basis of his work.

Already weakened by a bout with smallpox, Pablo Tac died from a virus on December 13, 1841. He never completed his vows or returned to his homeland, but his manuscript continues to inspire people. The writing of this brave, complex young man offers some parallels to James Luna’s work. Tac expresses lament and yet has humor. He defies definitions of Luiseño people, culture, and thought that originate from the outside. He records the foreign concepts and ideas that he and other Luiseños brought into an indigenous framework, and offers unique ways to comprehend Luiseño society and experience.
James Luna: Emendatio, with essays by NMAI curators Truman T. Lowe (Ho-Chunk) and Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche), provides an absorbing exploration of James Luna’s art. The book features a lenticular cover image that interlaces two photographs of James Luna in a “flip effect,” providing a sense of Luna in performance, and includes a bound-in DVD. The book is available in the NMAI’s shops and online at www.AmericanIndian.si.edu.

James Luna: Emendatio is on view from March 1 to April 20, 2008.

George Gustav Heye Center
One Bowling Green
New York, NY 10004
www.AmericanIndian.si.edu

Heye Center hours: 10 AM to 5 PM every day, except December 25, Thursdays to 8 PM
Admission: free
The museum is fully accessible.

For recorded information about exhibitions, public programs, and services, call 212-514-3888.

For the complete NMAI Calendar of Events, visit our website.

To become a Member of the National Museum of the American Indian, please visit www.AmericanIndian.si.edu/give or call 1-800-242-NMAI (6624).

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Photos of James Luna by Katherine Fogden

Inside: Cathy Nelson Rodriguez (Luiseño), Portrait of Pablo Tac, 2005. Oil on canvas. This painting, included in the Emendatio exhibition, portrays James Luna as Pablo Tac (1822–1841).