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# Walk-Through at the Hammer

*James Luna*

I've been waiting for my Jim Durham moment and I finally came to the realization that it wasn't going to come. Though moved by his writing on his take on art, art making, Indians, and his place at the center of his world, at the same moment I came to the realization that we are at opposites on many art and political issues. These include being a member of a tribe and part of our tribal art community, our art-making process, and our career goals and aspirations for self and the Indian community.

Let me begin with the elephant in the room for me, which is the question concerning Jim Durham's tribal identity. This issue is the basis of his early work and how he is seen and presented in the mainstream. This is a personal as well as a political issue for us in the Indian arts—and as artists. I am an enrolled member of the La Jolla Band of Luiseño Indians and reside on the La Jolla Indian Reservation in north San Diego County. Please don't confuse us with La Jolla on the coast. As my mom says, "We are the poor ones."

Being a member of a federally recognized tribe is but one of the criteria that begins to communicate who I am on many levels. I feel strongly that it is in one's cultural

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For more than thirty years, the late performance and installation artist JAMES LUNA, Payómkawichum-Ipi (Luiseño-Diegueño) and of Mexican-American descent, worked in innovative and versatile media and gave voice to Native American cultural issues. With numerous solo exhibitions and eighty-five group exhibitions, he performed and exhibited in venues that include New York's Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Canada, and the Museum of Contemporary Native Art in Santa Fe. A recipient of numerous grants and awards, Luna was selected as the first artist to be sponsored by the National Museum of the American Indian at the 2005 Venice Biennale's 51st International Art Exhibition. In 2011 he was recognized by the Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe with an honorary doctorate in humanities. On February 21, 2017, Luna conducted a walk-through of *Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World* at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. "Walk-Through at the Hammer" was first published in *First American Art Magazine* 19 (Fall 2017): 87–88.

training that we begin to know *who we are*, which speaks to our cultural ways and to family lineage, of utmost importance if you live in your community. If you live in an urban environment, then these questions are less prevalent or nonexistent. Each tribe sets its criteria as to who can be a member, and this may include one or more of the following:

- ♦ Documentation of your lineage
- ♦ Degree of tribal blood
- ♦ DNA testing (to confirm lineage and/or blood quantum).

For our enrollment purposes, you need to possess one-quarter blood degree of La Jolla Indian blood. Any other blood, including other tribal groups, doesn't count.

Do I agree with this established process? No, I do not.

The Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990 established who could produce and sell what is deemed "American Indian arts and crafts" and *that* establishes that Indian artists need to be a member of a federal- or state-recognized tribe or be designated a tribal artisan by a federally recognized tribe. We Indians promoted this law as it was becoming apparent at the time that Indian visual arts were on the threshold of being big business in the mainstream of American art. The law did reduce the flow of fraudulent "Indian artwork" being made in foreign countries and made it so it could not be sold as authentic Indian art. Fines are in place for the producers and sellers of such art if it is being passed as American Indian made. I was there when this was happening. There was not unanimous consensus on this law. It divided our COMMUNITY. This law goes back to the standard of who is an American Indian as proved by enrollment. The issue divided our community, and tears, tension, and anger surfaced when the subject came up for discussion. We knew that it would hurt those bona fide Indians who did not get enrolled for various reasons, but today many of those tribes have been subsequently recognized. There wasn't a problem with those who identified as of Indian descent as there are many individuals that have an Indian in the family; and for many of these people, they were proud of this, as Indian holds a special place in many American hearts.

**Where Jim and I Agree: Being Defined.** I've been at this art thing for 40 years and have been confronted with the "box" that I was placed in at the beginning of my career. I still hear these concerns from emerging Indian artists dealing with the same issue. I had a very lucky beginning as an artist. My installation performance, *The Artifact Piece*, propelled me into instant art stardom and history, and I found myself in demand. Then came the box issue and how I should be identified: as a mainstream contemporary artist or "other artist" placed in the "minority," "ethnic," or "person of color" category that I felt would limit my career avenues to success by being in such a box. Around this time I happened to be in Santa Fe on business and remember lamenting to a well-respected Indian artist friend about this issue. He told me that I had many from our community in envy, wishing for the place I had established, and told me I needed to understand the pedestal, not just the box, I was being placed on in our community. So, I coined my handle thereafter so I could feel clear about how I wanted to be seen.

From that point on I identified myself as a “Contemporary American Indian Artist.” This is art. As for legalities, I am a member of a federally recognized tribe.

Now to the heart of the matter for me: Jim Durham ain’t no Marcel Duchamp.

Jim is a great writer, but I feel from my frame of reference that his philosophical “manifestos” many times do not match the artwork he produces. I feel left with the question, “Does one have to know the artist’s politics to understand and enjoy an artwork?” For me, I gravitate to the simple and direct route to the message that a work is trying to convey.

I see his body of work in two phases: his work from the ’80s through the early ’90s and after which I would categorize as his current work.

**Early work:** I feel as an artist and art instructor that his early work, such as *Self-Portrait* (1986), fits many categories of what I would gravitate to and cite as a successful artwork. There is craftsmanship in the selection of the materials. There are careful art decisions at play and a clear message and theme. His use of found objects set his foundation, and many of these objects were tactfully rendered.

During this early period he considered himself—and others considered him—a spokesman for Indian art and politics. That voice was cooled with the Indian Arts and Craft Act, which denied him in some way to be that spokesman, and that earlier bravado dimmed. He also made a political grandstand by moving out of the US to Mexico and then to Europe where the identity issue was not a focal point to his audiences.

**Later Work:** Durham’s insistence that his use of random objects and his call on speaking to the absurd and chaos remain consistent, but there are contradictions. I also see a lessening of an “Indian” look or voice in the work. The attempt to ignore or make work that doesn’t speak to formal craftsmanship has played out here, but I question his “manifesto” as it may be an effort to cover his inabilities to produce work that speaks “finished” work.

My measurements for good artists: *Craftsmanship* that includes the selection process of materials, finished work that has reached a reasonable level of application, and a good artist knows when to stop. *Innovation:* The drive to press on with new ideas and artwork. In my summation: He’s not kept up and his best work is behind him.

In my way of thinking, lasting art stands because of its quality and execution and its theme. They need to be of equal value to last.

When *Shared Visions: Native American Painters and Sculptors in the Twentieth Century* came about in 1991, it was magical. We were all together for the first time! I was like a child in awe of Allan Houser, the Kaboutie brothers, and Kay WalkingStick, and I was happy to meet the new guard that included James Lavadour, Harry Fonseca, Rick Bartow, and Jean LaMarr, to name a few. The premise of the exhibition and conference was for us—us—to establish the American Indian Fine Art Movement instead of outsiders and Indian art experts. The decree was that our fine art movement was established when we Indians were being formally trained in Western art and being introduced to Western art tools.

Let me pose these questions that I have ideas about but not complete answers:

- ♦ Beyond Jim Durham and issues of tribal identity, where do we go from here?
- ♦ What do we, Indians, have at stake?
- ♦ What do we, Indians, aspire to?

I pose the question that I have posed to art institutions: "What Indian artists do you have in your collection?"