

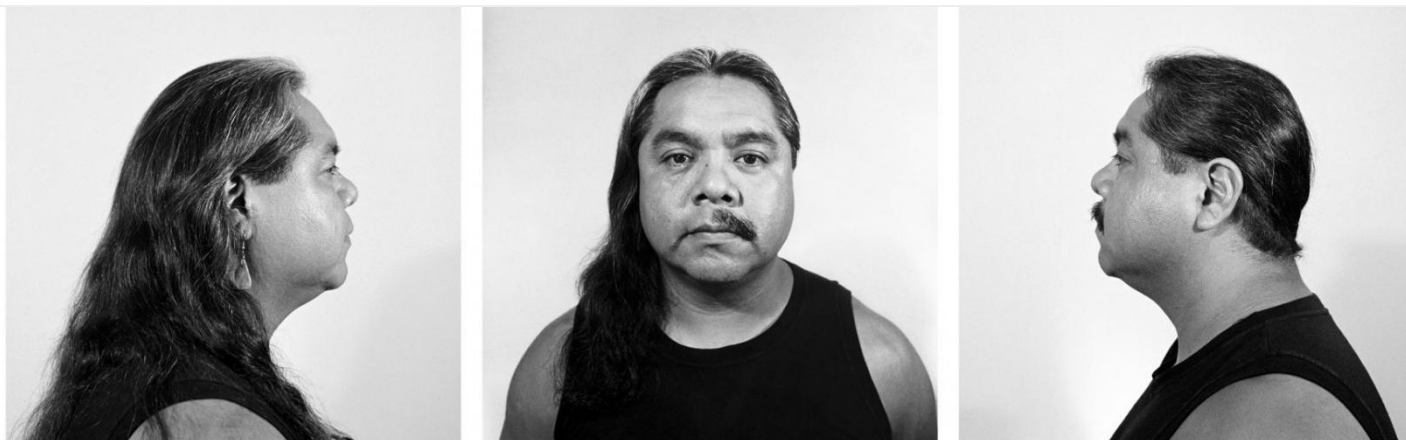


Countering the Fetishization of Indigenous Art

How contemporary Native artists are evading recognition and visibility for a more 'speculative indigenous futurism'

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BY [IAN BOURLAND](#) IN [OPINION](#) | 15 MAR 21



In 1991, James Luna invited audiences at the Whitney Museum of American Art to stand on a small riser with him – or alongside one of three life-size, cardboard cut-outs of him shirtless in a beaded necklace or ornate headdress – to ‘take a picture with a real Indian’. It was a precipitous moment for both the institution and the wider art world: two years later, the museum would host the decisive ‘identity politics’ Whitney Biennial (curated by Thelma Golden, John G. Hanhardt, Lisa Phillips and Elizabeth Sussman) that conventional wisdom suggests began a slow tectonic shift toward greater inclusiveness and ‘globalization’. In 1992, to mark the quincentenary of Christopher Columbus’s arrival in the Americas, Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña toured a performance as ‘Amerindians from Guatinau’ in which the audience could taunt them through the bars of a cage, feed them bananas or purchase pictures of Gómez-Peña’s genitals. *The Couple in the Cage* (1992–93) ended its international run at the 1993 Whitney Biennial.



James Luna, *Take a Picture with a Real Indian*, 2001, video (color, sound), 12:50 minutes. Courtesy: Garth Greenan Gallery, New York

Both *Take a Picture with a Real Indian* and *The Couple in the Cage* sought to turn the tables on their ostensibly liberal audiences, drawing out comparisons between the longstanding spectacularization of Indigenous peoples in Wild West vaudeville shows or human zoos of the early 20th century and then-contemporary imperatives to ‘diversify’ the institutional landscape. Such ambivalent restaging of stereotype would typify the 1990s-era art of, among others, Chris Ofili and Kara Walker, but it also risked advancing underlying bias – both implicit and structural. As curator Lowery Stokes Sims cautioned in the pages of *Artforum* a year before Luna’s performance: “‘Others’ handily exist to provide a focus for periodic rituals of self-recrimination and catharsis by the art world. But, in the final analysis, there is no substantive change in the attitude toward artists of colour and the art they create.’”

As Luna himself noted, after restaging the project at Washington D.C.’s Union Station in 2010, it was an act of mutual humiliation in which no one walked away unscathed. In a January 2011 interview with *Smithsonian Magazine*, he observed: ‘Just because I’m an identifiable Indian, it doesn’t mean I’m there for the taking. But, in the long run, I’m making a statement for me, and through me, about people’s interaction with American Indians, and the selective romanticization of us.’ Certainly, art-world players periodically romanticize Indigenous artists: curator Jean-Hubert Martin’s fascination with Aboriginal painting at the 1989 ‘Magiciens de la terre’ (Magicians of the World) exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris; the dropping into Santa Fe by collectors to browse ‘traditional crafts’; the clockwork-regular paroxysms about the authenticity of artist Jimmie Durham’s Cherokee ancestry; or audiences posing for a selfie with Luna or Fusco because they are ‘in on the joke’. In this sense, over the past 30 years, Indigenous artists have faced a similar dilemma to many from the postcolony and the Global South – that there was a demand for their work, as long as it confirmed backward-looking or reductive audience expectations, that ‘difference’ be made hyper-visible, a rehearsal of one’s putative identity.



James Luna, *Half Indian/Half Mexican*, 2010, chromogenic print, 1.5 x 3.5 m. Courtesy: Garth Greenan Gallery, New York

It is unclear whether we are still trapped in that moment or whether another path is coming into view. For one, the encampments of thousands of water-protector activists in North Dakota, who protested the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016–17, brought renewed international attention to the confluence of environmental despoliation and violation of sovereignty that has, for generations, marked the relationship between Indigenous Americans and the settler-colonial state. Moreover, the past few years have seen renewed interest by scholars and curators in work in a range of media by Indigenous artists, including Jeffrey Gibson’s naming as a MacArthur Fellow in 2019 in advance of multiple major exhibitions and Alan Michelson’s solo show, ‘Wolf Nation’, at the Whitney in early 2020. Following Luna’s death in 2018, Garth Greenan Gallery restaged *Take a Picture with a Real Indian* in autumn 2020. The show featured large-scale self-portraits, the stage setup from the original performance and a short, edited video of the performance at the Salina Art Center in Kansas from 2001, which is all the more disturbing for the fact that it’s hard to imagine the attitudes of the participants would be very different today. Many sensed the gravity of the event but partook anyway. One woman approvingly remarked: ‘I could smell the leather [...] Don’t you think that’s the way real Indians smell?’

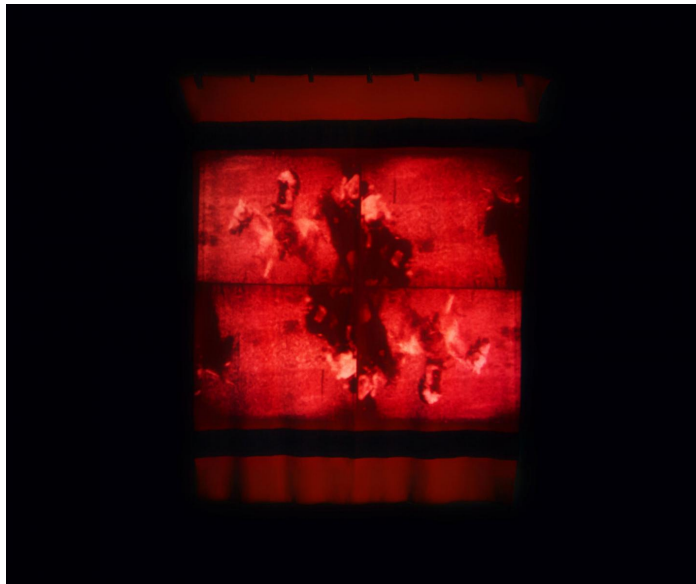
Greenan’s gallery is historically focused on and represents several Indigenous artists. In a recent conversation, the gallerist told me that, while Luna never resolved for the audience the central contradiction of his practice – ‘that his work is both critical of and reliant on the selective romanticization of Native Americans’ – there are artists whose more recent practices navigate this binary. Melissa Cody’s textile works, such as *World Traveller* (2014), produced on a Navajo loom, integrate traditional patterns and video-game graphics. ‘Taken as a whole’, Greenan notes, ‘these works claim new possibilities for Native American artists, but also artists more broadly. Esteban Cabeza de Baca makes the point that art from the pre-colonial Americas also became an important ingredient in modern painting. Many of these artists are exploring the complex ways that various traditions intermix.’



'Esteban Cabeza de Baca: Nepantla', 2021, exhibition view, Garth Greenan Gallery, New York. Courtesy: the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York

This latter point, about time, is crucial. Many audiences reflexively consign Indigenous cultural practice to a kind of nostalgic preservationism; at the same time, recognition of buried histories – both political and artistic – are vital to understanding the present and offering alternatives to the orthodoxies of the art market and the neo-colonial economies in which it is situated. These tensions are at the centre of Michelson's practice, which deploys archival materials in a range of multimedia installations. His most recent work, *Pehin Hanska ktepi* (They Killed Longhair, 2021), reclaims 1926 footage of a parade commemorating Lakota, Dakota, Cheyenne and Arapaho veterans who defeated George Custer at the Battle of Greasy Grass (1876). These horse-mounted figures are projected in four orientations on an antique blanket, creating a visual loop suggesting the cyclicity of time and evoking the plains tradition of the annual 'winter count', in which the year's events are marked on a buffalo hide. At least three chronologies are superimposed here, linked in an unbroken cycle, multiple generations surviving across a broad temporal tapestry. The red blanket onto which the video is projected also evokes the title of the recent group show, 'Speculations on the Infrared', at EFA Project Space in New York, where the work was on view this winter.

'Infrared' calls to mind both the exhibition's chromatic leitmotif and a wavelength of light beyond the visible spectrum. The seven artists/collectives in the show variously evade the trade-off of hypervisibility for participation in the art world or, as theorist Glen Sean Coulthard has argued in *Red Skins, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (2014), the exchange of 'recognition' in lieu of sovereignty. 'Infrared' curator, Chris Green, noted in remarks at the opening that these artists are 'wary of visibility as a necessarily positive position' and opt instead for misdirection, inundation or refusal, 'tactics of speculative indigenous futurism [...] that imagine new sovereign structures in our time'.



Alan Michelson, *Pehin Hanska ktepi* (They Killed Long Hair) 2021, single channel video installation: wool blanket and video projection. Courtesy: the artists and EFA Project Space, New York

Sometimes, these refusals are literal, as in Nicholas Galanin's photographs of the Northwest Coast Hall of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, juxtaposed with recordings of an auctioneer calling the 'fair warning' that bidding is about to end ('Fair Warning: A Sacred Place,' 2019). Galanin was one of four artists who published an open letter in *Artforum* calling for their works be pulled from the 2019 Whitney Biennial until Warren B. Kanders – whose company, Safariland, made teargas used on asylum seekers at the US–Mexico border – resigned from the museum's board. Galanin's installation for 'Infrared' broadly implicates the market for antiquities and debates around repatriation currently roiling global institutions but is more immediately unsettling in its presentation of absence: 'artifacts' taken from their source communities and freely available for scrutiny in a state museum replaced by inert voids. It is a moving and timely work that foregrounds pressing questions of institutional ethics. Yet, now more than ever, cultural survival is imbricated with existential struggles in the wider world. To that end, in 2019, the online collective Unicorn Riot released police drone footage of confrontations between water protectors and paramilitary agents of the state, in which hundreds were injured. Paired here with a form-line print of a crimson Raven figure by Lyle Wilson (*Untitled #1*, 1986), the footage is a reminder of the militarized and neo-colonialist strategies long deployed against Indigenous people in the Americas, especially when extractive resources are in play.



Unicorn Riot, *Infrared Aerial Surveillance from Standing Rock*, 2016–2017, 2019, digital video, 1:57:48. Courtesy: Unicorn Riot Media, Redistributable Under Creative Commons Non-Commercial Share-Alike; photography: © EFA Project Space/Yann Chashanovski

But the Unicorn Riot footage is also a case study in resilience, the pairing an homage to intergenerational activism and acts of survival. As seemingly omnipotent as aerial drones came to be over the past decade, here the drone loses its way, following bison, its machine vision occluded by tear gas or, harrowingly, by the plummeting body temperatures of water protectors sprayed with fire hoses in freezing weather conditions. The path forward, 'Infrared' posits, may be about evading the roving eye of countries predicated from their inception on the simultaneous fetishization and annihilation of those who came before. It is an extraordinary show, but one that, if taken at its word (and those of the Indigenous theorists whose words underpin it) does not suggest an easy alliance of these and other artist activists and the commercial circuits of contemporary art. This work demands more than mere recognition and foregrounds the apocalyptic world toward which we are collectively on a course, and in which some already reside. Audiences in 1991 were not ready for such a message. The question is: will it be any different now, 30 years later? As Luna observed: 'Americans like romance more than they like the truth.'

Main image: James Luna, *Half Indian/Half Mexican*, 1991, silver gelatin print, 1.5 x 3.5 m. Courtesy: Garth Greenan Gallery, New York



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