

Subtle Resistance in Contemporary Native American Art

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Illustrations

figure 1. *Elk Game*, Oscar Howe, *Shared Visions*, Margaret Archuleta & Dr. Rennard Strickland, (1991): 89.

figure 2. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*, "Coyote Goes Hollywood," Rennard Strickland Ph.d. *Native Peoples* (Fall 1997): 38.

figure 3. *Fort Apache* movie poster, "Coyote Goes Hollywood," *Native Peoples* (Fall 1997): 38.

figure 4. University of Illinois logo, "Recycling the Redskins," Robin Powell, *Turtle Quarterly*, Winter 1993: 11.

figure 5. Professional sports team logos, "Recycling the Redskins," by Robin Powell, *Turtle Quarterly*, Winter 1993: 11.

figure 6. *Three Creeks, a Ute, and a Negroe*, Alfred Youngman, "The Fine Art of Protest," Rick Hill, *Turtle Quarterly*, Winter 1993: 11.

figure 7. *Cultural Crossroads of the Americas*, Bob Haozous, "Battling Bureaucracy," Charlene Teters (Spokane), *Indian Artist*, Spring 1997: 34.

figure 8. *Coming of Age*, Allan Houser, *Shared Visions*, Margaret Archuleta & Dr. Rennard Strickland, (1991): 97.

figure 9. *The Artifact Piece*, James Luna, *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century*, W. Jackson Rushing III, (1999) plate J.

figure 10. *Building Minnesota*, Edgar Heap of Birds, *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century*, W. Jackson Rushing III, (1999), 76.

Subtle Resistance in Contemporary Native American Art

Native American Art can be charged with timeless passion, spirituality, and wisdom. Some contemporary art that is categorized as *Native American*¹ seems to, more often than not, be charged with social connotations or in essence to be political. The politicalness of this art is not by accident or choice, it's a matter of survival. As the title of this paper suggests, resistance and Native peoples are closely tied. It's been the same resistance since Christopher Columbus and crew washed up lost on the shore of Hispanola and proceeded to kill off one-third of the Taino population in a time span of four years.

The concept of "fine art" in Native American Art does not necessarily limit its expression to any certain medium and has on many occasions been considered as more craft-like. This attitude could stem from an European-rooted idea that the visual arts are for a privileged class. In addition, it may be because one would be hard pressed to find a word for "art" in any one of the over 500 "First Nation"² languages. One of the effects of Western domination over Native American cultures has been to devalue the importance of other expressive forms, such as dance or narrative, that have traditionally been equally, if not more highly, valued in Native societies.³ Whatever the language imposed upon indigenous peoples the oral tradition remains as the strongest means of communication and teaching. So it should come as no surprise that what is considered "narrative" is often central in much of contemporary Native art. Native art encompasses many forms of expression: architecture, music, performance art, carving (wood or stone), painting, weaving, pot making, and ornamenting the body (jewelry.) Often the contemporary Native artist will compose an amalgamation of various media to create an

¹The title given to the collective cultures of the indigenous people of Turtle Island (North America); i.e.; Their ancestors have always been on this land.

²A similar title given to indigenous people of Turtle Island (North America) more commonly used by the sovereign nation of Canada.

³Janet C. Berlo & Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art* (Oxford, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1998), 16.

environment or “installation art.” A few prominent Native painters and sculptors are the focus of this paper. The Indigenous⁴ artists’ works examined sometimes pertain to a broad range of people, Native and non-Native alike. This paper will look at some examples of subtle and some not-so-subtle forms of resistance in Native art.

The Native cultural worldview is the essence of Native American painting. The style could be traditional or more of an individualistic nature. Both speak to a Native experience in a Native idiom.⁵ After Oscar Howe’s Cubist paintings (fig. 1) were rejected by a jury for not being “Indian” enough, he wrote a letter to the Philbrook Museum Indian Art Curator, Jeannie Snodgrass King, in 1958.⁶ That response has been called the “Indian art witch hunt” as well as the Native American Art manifesto. Oscar Howe, declared:

There is much more to Indian art than pretty, stylized pictures. There is also power and strength and individualism (emotional and intellectual insight) in the old Indian paintings. Every bit in my paintings is a true studied fact of Indian paintings. Are we to be held back forever with one phase of Indian painting, with no right for individualism, dictated to as the Indian always has been, put on reservations and treated like a child, and only the White Man knows what is best for him? Now, even in art, “You little child do what we think is best for you, nothing different.” Well I am not going to stand for it. Indian Art can compete with any Art in the world, but not as a suppressed Art.

I see so much of the mismanagement and treatment of my people. It makes me cry inside to look at these poor people. My father died there about three years ago in a little shack, my two brothers still living there in shacks, never enough to eat, never enough clothing, treated as second class citizens. This is one of the reasons I have tried to keep up the fine ways and culture of my forefathers alive. But one could easily turn to become a social protest painter. I only hope the Art World will not be one more contributor to holding us in chains (Strickland 73).

⁴A broad term pertaining to the original peoples of North America.

⁵Rennard Strickland, *Tonto’s Revenge* (Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 66.

⁶W. Jackson Rushing III, *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 1999), 169.

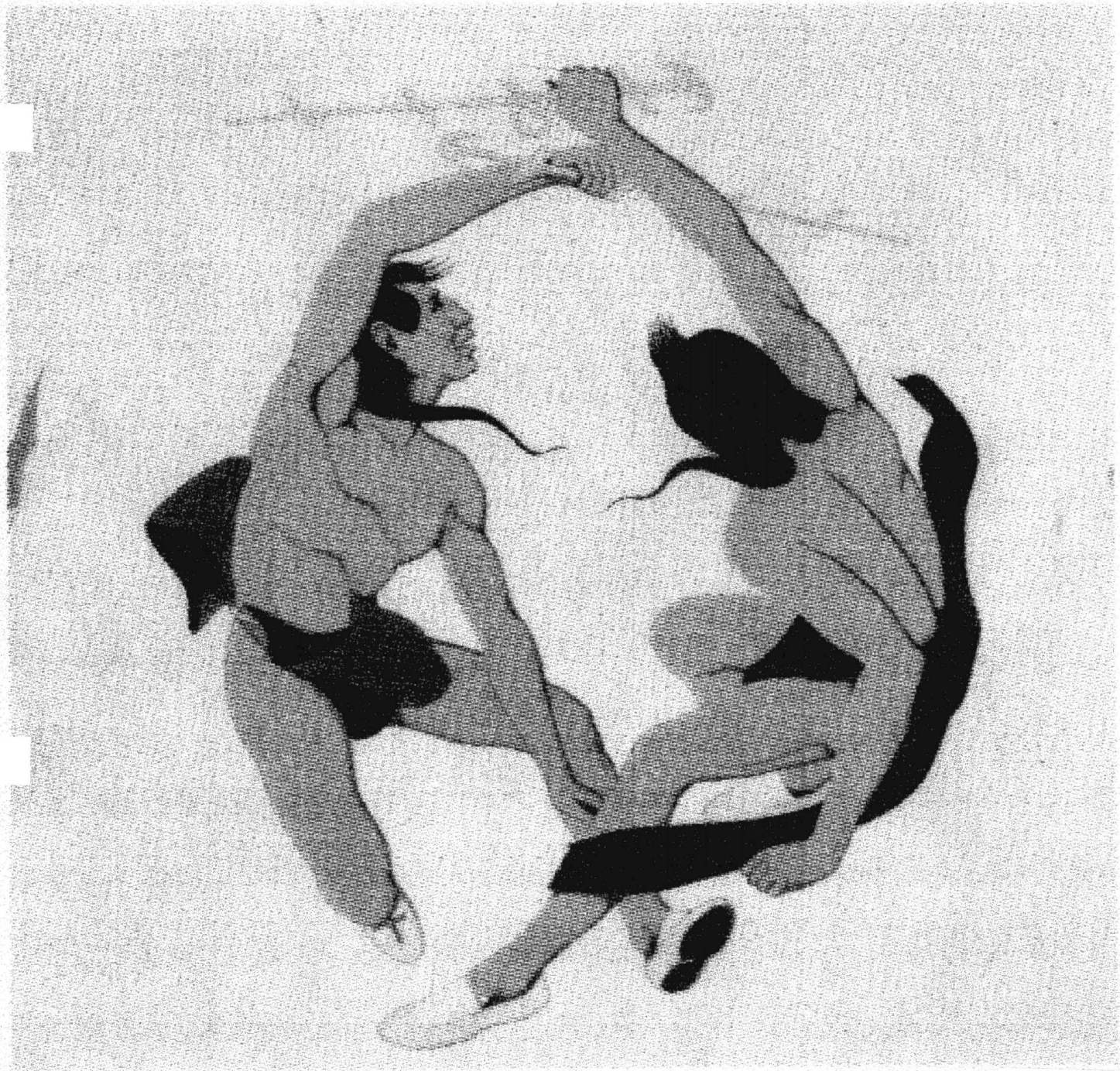


fig. 1

Protest in Native art tends to be more complex than that found in Euro-American art. Non-Native “causes” seem to usually have a single paramount objective in mind. In comparison, the Native experience of living in an oppressive dominant society presents many issues from which to draw inspiration. Native art is practiced by numerous artists and therefore has numerous intentions. For example, other than having a dominant colonialist-minded government at all three levels involved, the fishing rights issues of the state of Washington have very little in common with the proposed golf course expansion onto a cemetery in the province of Quebec in Canada. Yet these isolated cases are so integral to the people who are directly involved that they become literally the contemporary issue for battle. The work that is executed is not merely “a different rendering of the same landscape,” but the same story retold. Although the setting may be different, the plot is always the same. Someone wants to make a lot of money and they have political connections but there are Indians in the way. This isn’t a problem, remember the political connections. Instead there are countless different incidents of social injustices of varying degrees done to Native people that are a result of the business-as-usual mindset of not only the average American citizen but of both the political and religious leaders of the United States. The only common denominator is that it is the people themselves answering in resistance to these injustices, often through contemporary art. This paper will examine a few of the artists who take on some of the many “stories” that need to be told.

Two very prominent institutions of the dominant Western culture re-enforce what the colonialist American and Canadian governments have set in place. Stereotyping via Hollywood and the dehumanizing effects of the sports world combined to undermine the self-esteem and self-respect of Native people. Movies produced as early as 1894 like *The Sioux Ghost Dance*, form and re-enforce the dominant image of the cinematic Indian.⁷ According to Rennard

⁷Rennard Strickland, *Tonto's Revenge* (Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 18.

Strickland, “This Indian was portrayed as the other, as exotic, strange, romantic, demonic, dangerous and deceptive. He was a virile barbarian, as the devilish, anti-Christ, and the Indian-as-Tonto figure (fig. 2) serving his white master in the preordained task of westward expansion. He was also the Indian offering hope of an earlier natural age to the white man enslaved by technology and yet spiritually bankrupt.”⁸ Native characters were undeveloped and spoke with broken English. If the silver screen were the only exposure to Native culture that the dominant society had, and sadly for some it is, the largest nation of Indians would be the Apache. Based on such insightful celluloid dramas like *Geronimo* (1939), (1962), *I Killed Geronimo* (1950), *Fort Apache* (1948) (fig. 3), *Apache Warrior* (1957), *Apache Rifle* (1955), *Apache War Smoke* (1952), and maybe one of the most misguided movie of them all *Apache* (1954) in which the Apache people actually learned to plant corn from the Cherokee people. According to this gem of a movie, the Cherokee people learned the skill of agriculture from the white man!⁹ Moving out from the theater onto the playing field, Natives were (and still are) confronted with professional sport team names like the “Redskins,” “Indians,” “Chiefs,” and “Blackhawks” (fig. 4). A host of college and high school teams join in the circus of using Native images as mascots declaring to anyone who takes offense with the naming as “it’s an honor.” (fig. 5.)

The Indian¹⁰ was always in the way of progress and the Euro-American has had a preoccupation with fighting and killing Indians. Once the United States asserted independence from Great Britain, the government, churches, and schools attempted and succeeded in large part, to dispossess Native people of religion, language, and identity, not to mention real estate. During the “North American holocaust” five million indigenous people were killed by the Spanish, Dutch, French, English and later American between 1492 and 1900. This fact still

⁸Strickland, *Tonto's Revenge*, 18.

⁹Strickland, *Tonto's Revenge*, 19.

¹⁰A popular term coined by a lost sailor used to refer to a member of any indigenous culture of the Americas.



fig. 2



fig. 3

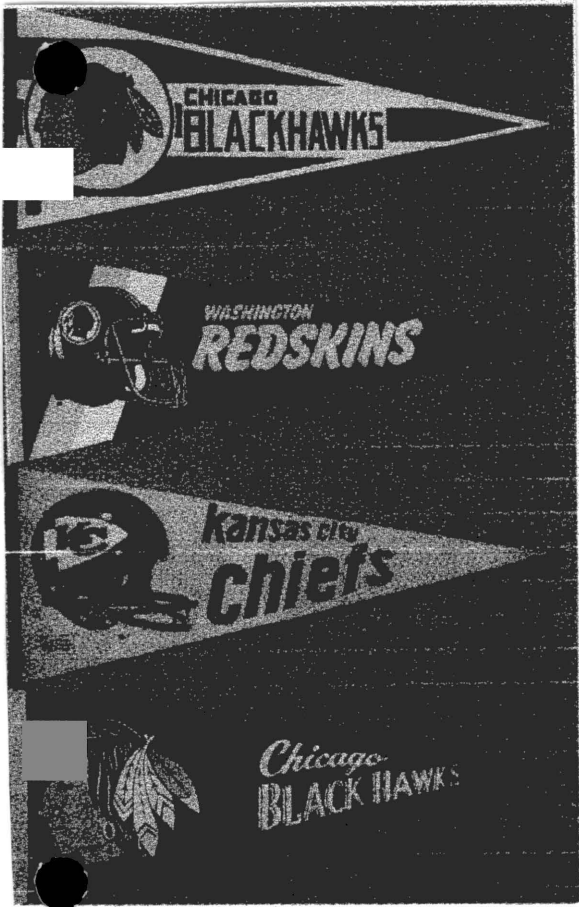


fig. 4



fig. 5

stands as one of the greatest decimations in the world.¹¹ That shameful American/Canadian reality for Native people paired with social injustices of other people of color fueled the crusade of change that was long overdue. For the young Natives, empowerment came with education and solidarity with others “of color.” Present day economic success¹² seemed to go only to the quiet Indian, the one who didn’t rock the boat of federal funding or “New-age consumerism” often at the expense of his own people.¹³ Among the many ways to “sell out” are giving up land rights, water rights, mineral rights, and dumping of hazardous wastes for “personal” profit just to name a few. The major difference here is when an individual makes a decision for the greater whole without consent. In the sell out instances not only is it without consent but it’s totally for unvirtuous personal gain. The land is for the use of the community. To take from that is nothing short of stealing.

The ordeals that prior generations had to live or die through were kept alive in the Native conscientiousness by the stories that weren’t forgotten. The boys and girls who grew up with those stories would become young adults faced with the fact that the Indian wars were not over. Racism and greed were the status quo. The Native warrior of the past had been transformed into the artist-painter who would take up the brush in defense of what he felt was right. It was the task of that warrior to remind mainstream society, the same society living off of the legacy of the grandest of larcenies, that many issues remained unresolved and to confront that same audience with art to make some moral choices. Visual art proved to be the perfect vehicle for exposing the various issues plaguing Indian country. Various art schools, though not of “traditional” teachings, would start the eventual shift towards the expression of protest.

Though it is thought that protest art came of age during the late 1960s and early 1970s amid the civil and women’s rights movements, an earlier expression of protest could have been

¹¹Rick Hill, “The Fine Art of Protest,” *Turtle Quarterly*, 1993, 12-17.

¹²To have a home without holes in the wall, a decent vehicle, and a job on or off-reserve.

¹³Hill, “The Fine Art of Protest,” 12-17.

one hundred years before. It was in 1874, when Red Cloud, a Sioux chief, cut down the flagpole that towered over his agency at Pine Ridge, stating that the flag should fly at Ft. Robinson not the Indian camp.¹⁴ Similarly, another Sioux leader, American Horse, illustrated an act of visual resistance, when he painted a tomahawk planted deeply into the flag pole on the wintercount, a pictographic history of events painted on hide or cloth.¹⁵

During the late 1960s, language was all-important during the struggle for change. All the protest movements had something to say loud and clear. “Indian Power” was the term for the empowerment that college Natives and their supporters had achieved. Indian Power would influence politics, literature, film, and the visual arts. The center for much of this activism art was at the Institute of American Indian Art (I.A.I.A) based in Santa Fe, New Mexico, during the turbulent late 1960s. Two painters to come from the I.A.I.A. were Alfred Youngman and T.C. Cannon.

“Alfred Young Man, a Cree painter at IAIA from 1962 to 1968 created some of the most intense protest art of the period.”¹⁶ Young Man wanted his work to be blatantly political to drive his Native perspective to the masses. At the time, he made the existing art circles and the IAIA uncomfortable. He was discouraged from working in this vein and was told “real artists don’t deal in politics.”¹⁷ This attitude seemed to fuel his ambition and he went on to create works based on his feelings on the oppression of Native people. In a painting entitled *Three Creeks, a Ute and a Negroe*, the five figures are faceless and chained together at the ankles, a metaphor for their struggle against social injustice (fig. 5).

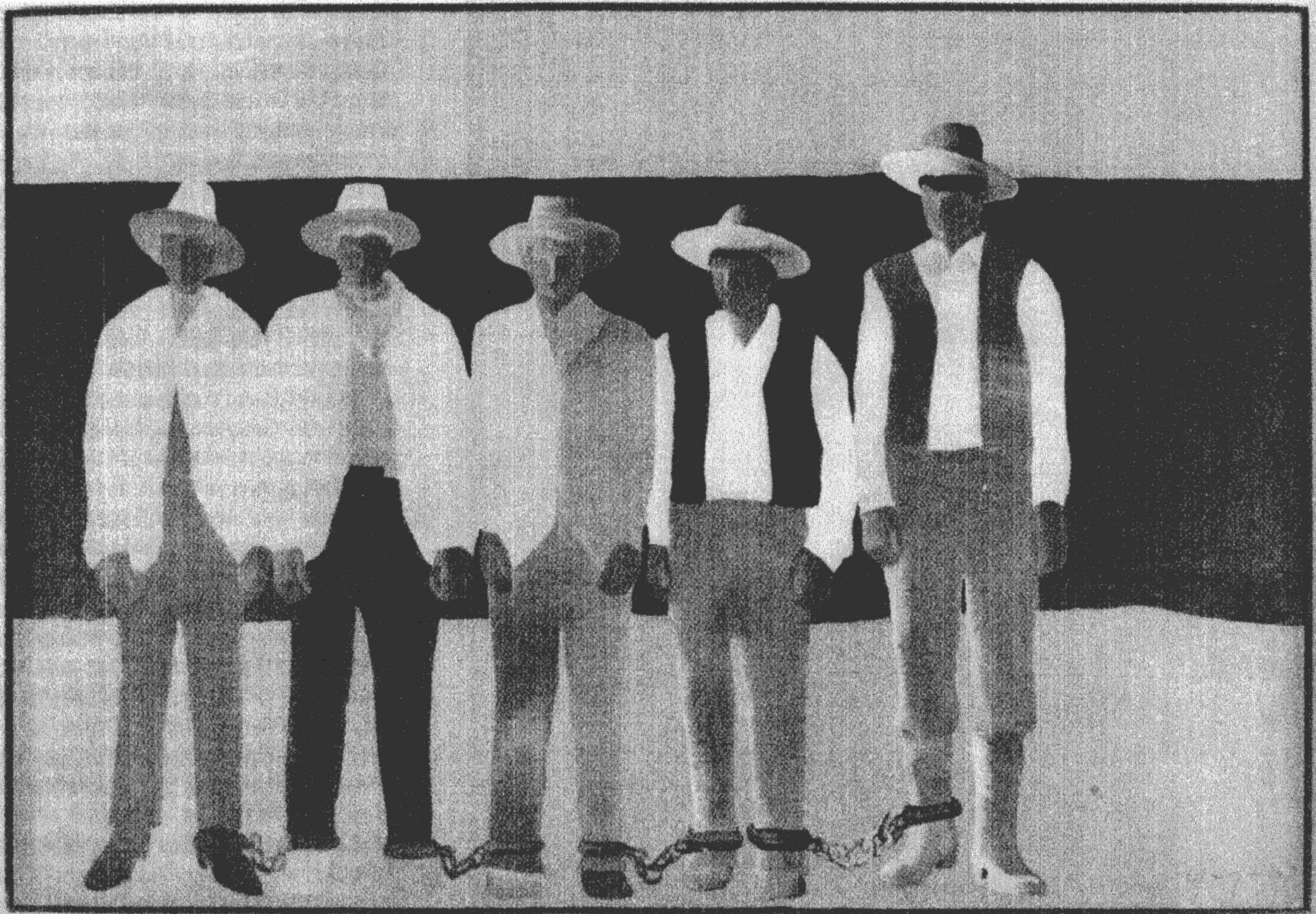
T.C. Cannon (Caddo), an IAIA student and Vietnam Veteran, employed the images of the Ghost Dance and the Massacre at Wounded Knee in multiple paintings. In *Tale of Bigfoot*

¹⁴Rick Hill, “The Fine Art of Protest,” *Turtle Quarterly* (Winter 1993):14.

¹⁵Hill, “The Fine Art of Protest,” 12-17.

¹⁶Hill, “The Fine Art of Protest,” 14.

¹⁷Hill, “The Fine Art of Protest,” 14.



“Three Creeks, a Ute and a Negro” by Alfred Young Man, courtesy of IAIA.

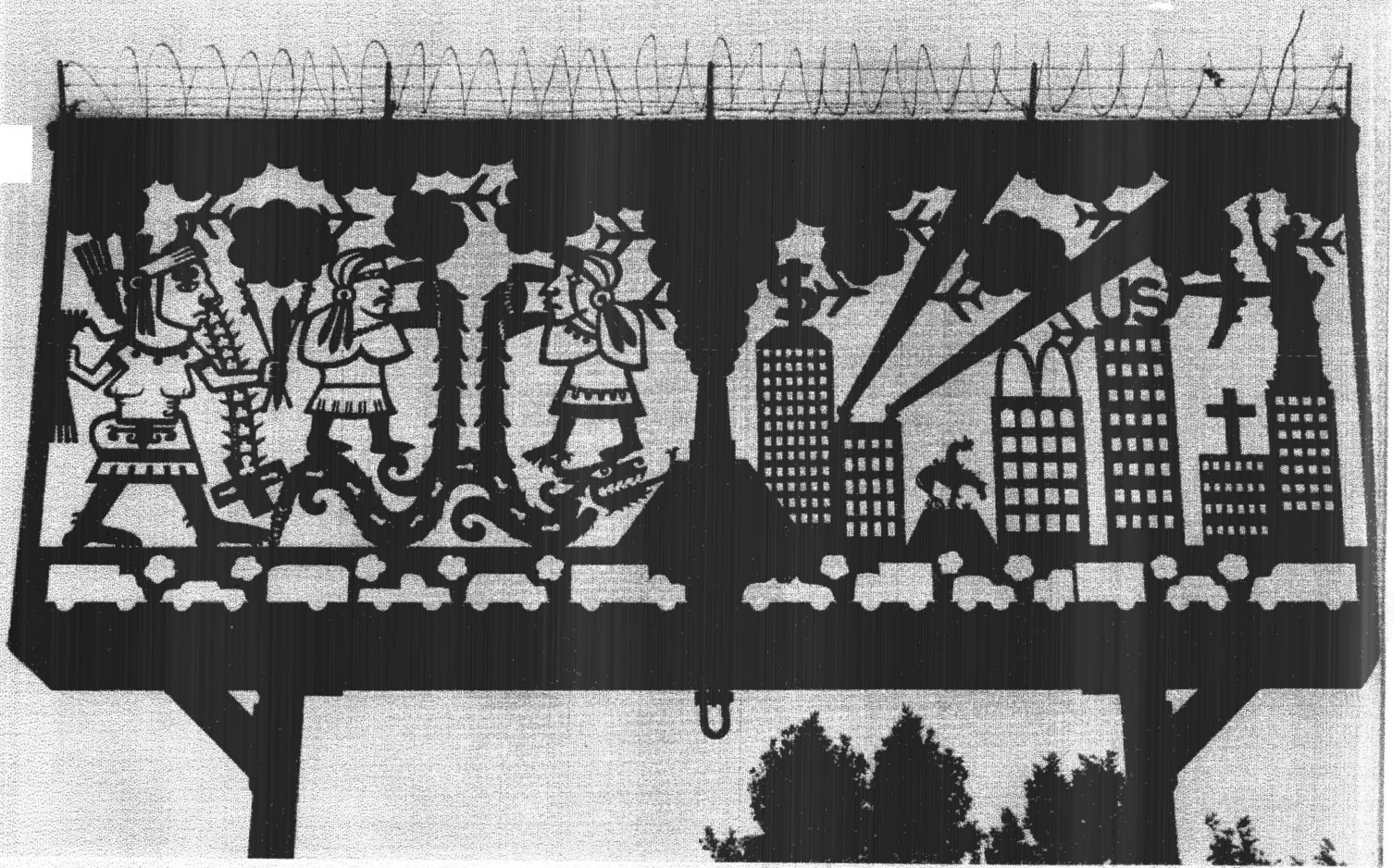
Incident in American Vernacular, the shadowy figure of an United States soldier seems surrounded by disturbance and confusion as a result of the killing. In *Bigfoot in the Snow* (1970), based on the actual photograph “showing the solitary, twisted body of the peaceful leader, frozen in time as a protest to the mistreatment of his people and the succeeding generations of Indians.”¹⁸

A sculpture, *Cultural Crossroads of the Americas* (1996) created by Bob Haozous (Chiricahua Apache/ Navajo/ English/ Spanish), was a work that involves not only indigenous interests but that of “artists” concerned with censorship (fig. 6). The work of Bob Haozous is a progressive departure from that of his father, Allan Houser (Chiricahua Apache) (fig. 8). Haozous was commissioned by the University of New Mexico to produce *Crossroads*, made of welded steel with concertina razor wire (the same material used⁷ in fencing border areas between the U.S. and Mexico) and measuring twenty-five feet wide.¹⁹ The work is elevated as a billboard would be. The steel presents a black contrast against the Albuquerque sky. The imagery is mural-like. On the left there is a depiction of migrant workers striding towards the urban setting on the right. Corporate capitalism literally rears its ugly head. The cityscape has a skyline pierced with bellowing smokestacks, and the logos of capitalism, Christianity, and McDonald’s. Ironically the University of New Mexico seems to have made Haozous a subject of censorship. Supposedly “after a dislike” of the wire material involved with the work, Haozous was told to have it removed or payment would cease.²⁰ Then he was told to remove the sculpture before classes resumed or it would be removed for him. In the light of such ultimatums Haozous had his day in court. As of this writing the outcome of the Haozous issue is uncertain.

¹⁸Hill, “The Fine Art of Protest,” 14.

¹⁹Charlene Teters, “Battling Bureaucracy,” *Indian Artist*, Spring 1997, 34-36.

²⁰Charlene Teters, “Battling Bureaucracy,” *Indian Artist*, Spring, 1997, 34-36.



Haozous,
*Cultural Crossroads
of the Americas*,
1996, welded steel
with concertina wire,
25' wide

fig. 7

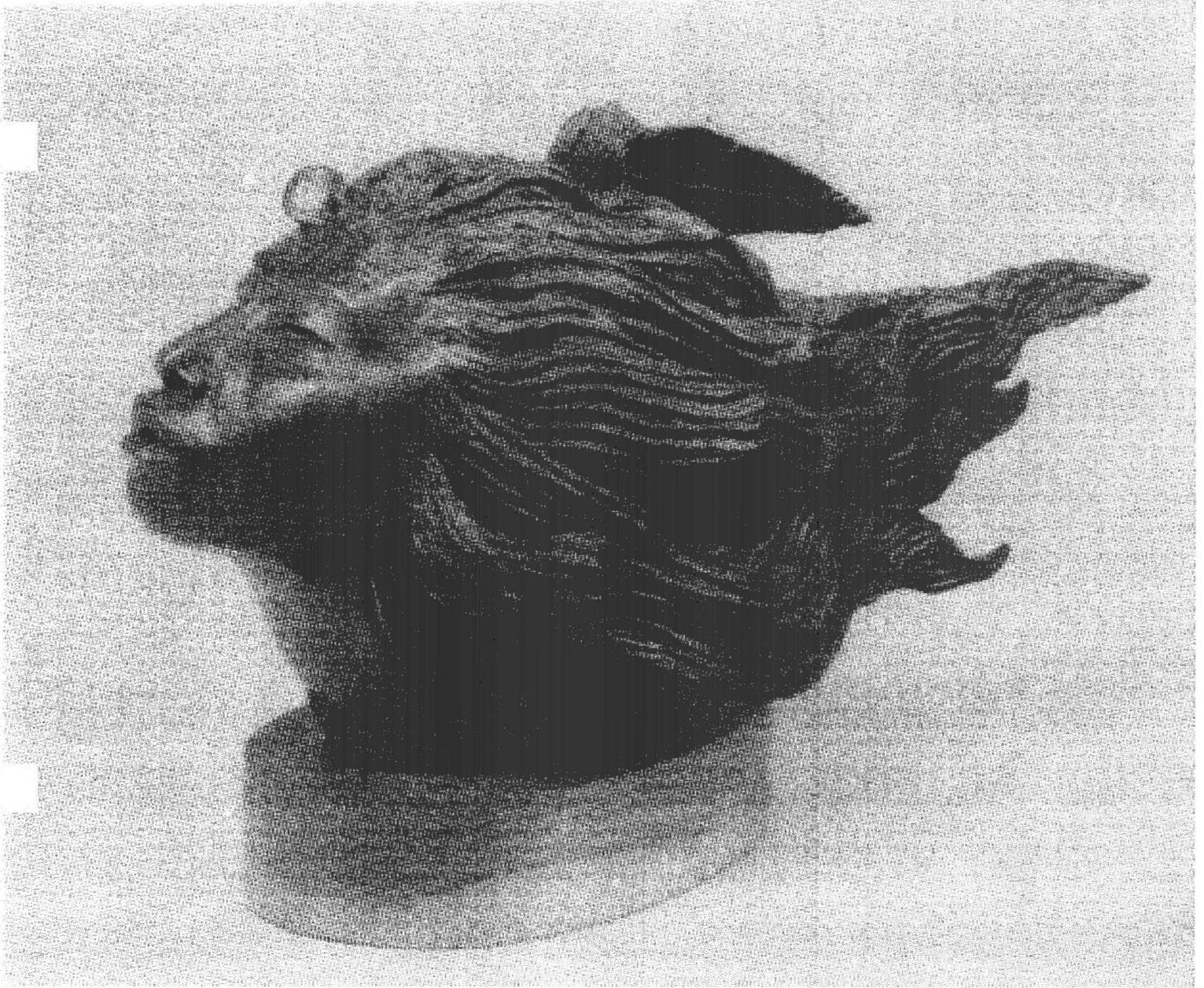


fig. 8

The Artifact Piece (1987), an installation by James Luna (Luiseno/ Diegueno), entered into art history the day that it was presented (fig. 9). Wearing only a breechcloth and lying on a shallow display case, Luna completed his installation/performance. It was a succinct rebuttal to obsolete stereotypes of Native American life. Luna's installation/performance pieces define prevalent cultural differences revealing the dominant society's hypocritical stereotyping of American Indians as well as their values and character. Luna's robust physical presence in his work filled a space marked for the dusty and dead, the Indians of romanticized legend and conventional anthropology museums, a vanishing race of savages and sage. Labels identified him by name and tribe and explained some of the markings on his body, the scars, for instance, left by injuries sustained after bouts with alcohol. Luna's college diploma, Allen Ginsberg books, Miles Davis tapes, and other personal belongings were on view in other glass cases nearby, completing the installation.²¹

Luna defines his work as, "a theater set without actors, the theme told in front of found objects, enhanced by lighting, audio, video, and other electronic media." He states "performance is thought to be a new addition to the artistic realm, even though it has been around forever."²² According to professor Richard Hill who teaches Native American studies courses at the University of Buffalo, much of Luna's work acts like a two-way mirror. Hill states, "As an artist, he's looking through the mirror to see how society looks at Indians. And as an Indian, he is looking at himself. It's a double commentary. That is what is intriguing as well as startling about his work. People expect a spiritual nirvana from Indian art. He talks about things that aren't so pretty to look at."²³ Some of those things like alcohol and drug abuse, violence, racial self-hatred, cultural conflict, loss of culture, poverty, health problems and exploitation are aspects of life on the La Jolla Reservation in northern San Diego County. These issues are

²¹Leah Ollman, "Confronting All the Demons," *Los Angeles Times-Calendar*, (June 16, 1996): 58.

²²MM, "Artists of Change- Breaking Through the Millennium," *Native Peoples*, Spring 2000.

²³Ollman, "Confronting all the Demons," *Los Angeles Times-Calendar*, Sunday June 16, 1996.

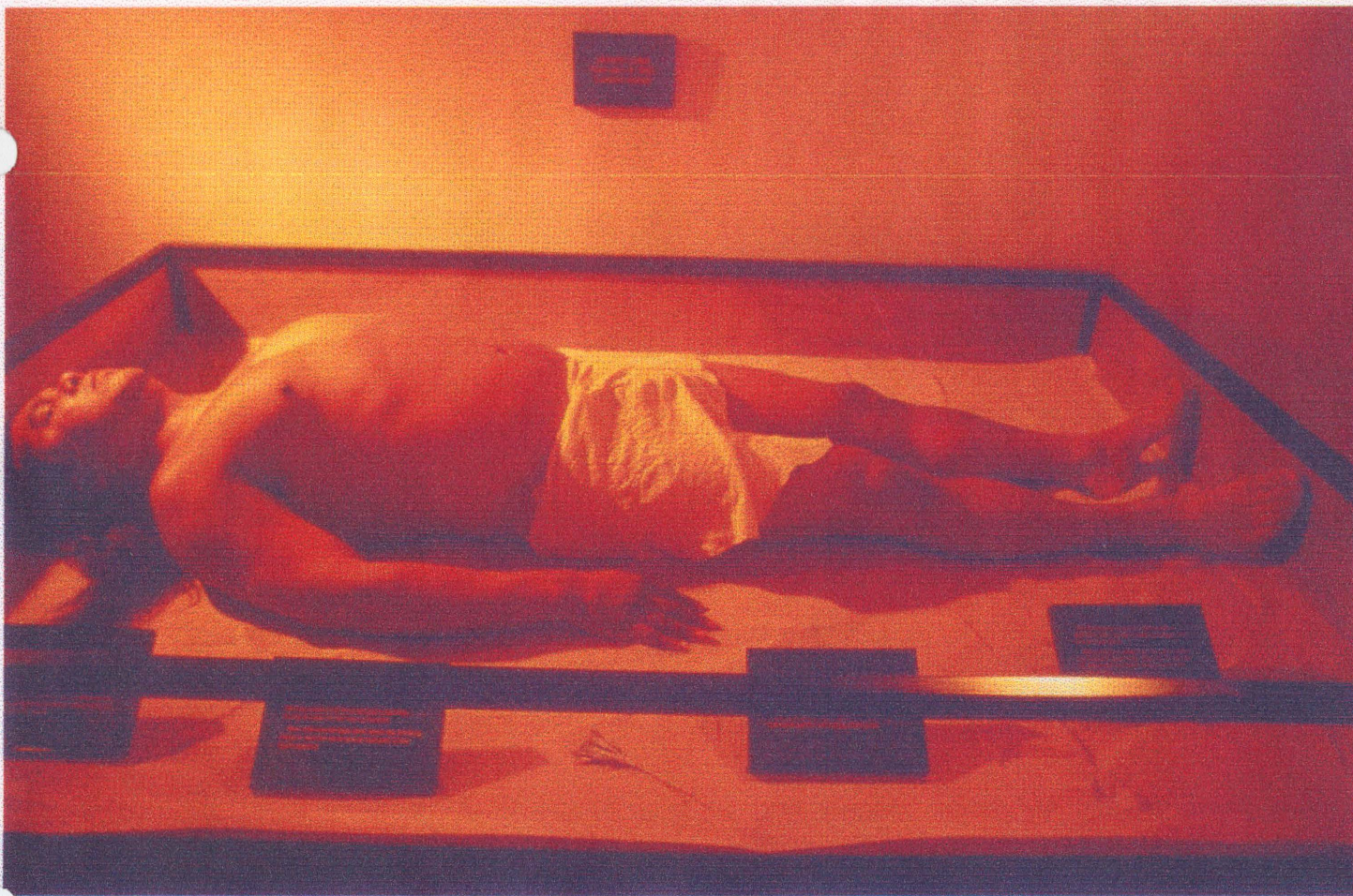


Plate J James Luna, *Artifact Piece* (1987), mixed media installation and performance, Museum of Man, San Diego, California. Courtesy of James A. Luna. Photo by Robin Holland

fig. 9

common among Native communities across the United States and Canada. The bleakness in Luna's work has functioned as a protective camouflage, as a way of saying, "There's no transcendence here, no Indian spirituality to salve your souls. We're in trouble, too. Go away."²⁴

In the Spring of 1997, James Luna exhibited an installation entitled *Our Indians*. The installation was in a storefront format not appearing much different from one of the many souvenir and Indian curio shops that can be found in Phoenix. The store housed signage objects, tourist souvenirs, sports logos, and other objects that display Indian icons found in the greater Phoenix metropolitan area.

Says Luna, "You don't have to live with Indian mannequins that look like your relatives, icons that make fun of sacred things, hurtful, clownish parodies." He adds, "this reduces Indian peoples and our ways to commercial commodities."²⁵ *Our Indians* was a collaborative project with students of Arizona State University's Native population. The community-artist residency program engaged the students in a process of art making that's intended to educate audiences about Native culture and art forms. The title is taken from a common slogan of non-Indians to address American Indians. Though the slogan attempts to claim American Indian history and culture as part of the American cultural and historical experience, Luna believes it really lays claim for the misuse and wholesale purchase of Native cultures without regard to the sacred, the respected, and the honored aspects of Native culture.²⁶

Despite earning a BFA from the University of California, Irvine and a Master's Degree in Counseling from San Diego State University, Luna makes his home on the La Jolla Reservation. Besides being an artist Luna holds a position at Palomar Community College in San Marcos, CA, as an academic counselor. Luna stresses that his work isn't marketable or commercial. His

²⁴Linda R. Martin, "Artist in Profile: James Luna," *Native Peoples*, Vol. 10 No. 3, Spring 1997, 34.

²⁵Martin, "Artist in Profile: James Luna," 34.

²⁶Martin, "Artist in Profile: James Luna," 34.

emphasis is on making a statement, and taking risks. The idea, as he states, is to “make provocative work that challenges himself and the audience.” Perhaps because of Luna’s academic connection he has become one of the better museum-shown Native artists in the genre of “Protest art.”

Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds is an artist who took to the streets in true Postmodern fashion. Heap of Birds uses information of a historical nature from “old musty books,” historical information that the dominant culture would like to suppress.²⁷ Heap of Birds erected the signage installation “Building Minnesota,” in 1990 along the banks of the Mississippi River in Minneapolis, MN (fig.10). It involved setting forty large metal signs, ranged like billboards along the Mississippi where it runs through downtown Minneapolis. The signs honored the forty Dakota men who were sentenced to death. Thirty-eight were sentenced by Abraham Lincoln and two by Andrew Jackson after the United States-Dakota conflict of 1862. That total represents the largest mass execution in the history of the United States. Critic Mason Riddle reported that some Minnesotans attacked the piece and she argues that their responses “reveal not only how fearful of (real) history many white people are, but also how powerful the piece is.”²⁸ Many choose to forget the dishonored treaties and intolerable pressuring of the Native population upon which Minnesota was built.²⁹

Historically, Native people have been suppressed and victimized by Euro-American society and governments. Acts of resistance can be traced back for several hundred years since the days of the Pinta, Santa Maria, and Nina not just in the 1960s and 1970s. Today the warrior’s weapons and physical defense has been replaced by tools of a chosen art medium and sometimes a combination of different mediums. As aforementioned, artists and their works

²⁷Terry Barrett, *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary*, (Mountain View, Ca: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1994) 134.

²⁸Barrett, *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary*. 134.

²⁹Jackson Rushing III, “Native American Art in the Twentieth Century: Makers, Meanings, Histories.” London: Routledge, 1999.



fig. 10

continue to address past as well as contemporary injustices against Native peoples. There's not only the presence of protest in contemporary Native art, there is individualism, strength, sacrifice, soul, and political power.

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