

At long last, a place and time for

A new exhibit brings the works of Native Hawaiian contemporary artists to Oahu campuses

By Steven Mark

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It has been 23 years since a major exhibit of contemporary Native Hawaiian artists has been on display on the University of Hawaii campuses. Since then, there have been major events such as the attacks on 9/11 and the subsequent war, the Great Recession of 2008, the election of a Hawaii-born man to the U.S. presidency and the pandemic.

“Ai Pohaku, Stone Eaters,” an exhibit that recently opened at the University of Hawaii Art Department’s main gallery and will extend to all UH campuses on Oahu in the upcoming months, is an attempt at addressing that absence, featuring the work of dozens of Hawaiian artists, organizers of the exhibit said. They said the lack of such an exhibit hasn’t been the fault of Hawaiian artists, who have been active and productive all along.

“This exhibition isn’t anything ‘new.’ It’s a continuation of the work that has been done, and that will be done, but it’s maybe long overdue,” said Drew Broderick, a multimedia artist who curated the exhibit along with Noelle Kahanu, a specialist in Public Humanities & Native Hawaiian Programs at the American Studies department at UH, and Josh Tengan, an independent curator. “It speaks to the kind of support that we are and are not receiving when we’re doing that work ... and our own sort of insistence on continuing to do that work regardless of what happens and how it manifests.”

The title of the exhibition refers to the song “Kaulana Na Pua” by Eleanor Kekoaoahiwaikalani Wright Prendergast in 1893. Also known as “Ai Pohaku, Stone Eaters,” the song was written to honor members of the Royal Hawaiian Band, who were ordered to swear allegiance to the Provisional Government after the overthrow of Queen Lili’uokalani and the Hawaiian monarchy. When they refused, they were told they would be “eating rocks,” Kahanu said. In the song, the moment is memorialized in the line: “We are satisfied with the stones / The astonishing food of the land.”

The song became “a broader song about patriotism — love of queen, love of country — that exists and that persists to this day,” said Kahanu. She drew a connection between the suffering musicians resisting tyranny and contemporary Hawaiian artists struggling for recognition today.

“Ai Pohaku, who are the stone eaters?” she said. “In many ways, it’s the artists present in this room.”

The exhibit, developed over the last two years and funded by contributions totalling about \$215,000, features the work of some 40 Native Hawaiian artists. Some artists will have works on display at multiple venues, but each work will be displayed at only one site. The exhibit is “linking the campuses, which normally are sort of ‘siloed,’” Kahanu said.

Each venue — the Art Department Main Gallery at UH-Manoa, Koa Gallery at Kapiolani Community College, the Commons Gallery at UH-Manoa, Gallery ‘Iolani at Windward Community College, the East-West Center at UH-Manoa and the new Ho‘ikeakea gallery at Leeward Community College, where it will be the inaugural exhibit — will have a different theme.

For example, “the East-West Center gallery will bring together work by a hui of muralists, friends, frequent collaborators,” Broderick said. “The exhibition at Leeward Community College will speak to some of the issues of Puuloa — what’s happening with Red Hill. It will be more environmentally focused and engaged. Koa Gallery will be about ‘kane’ — the energy of men.”

Some of the artists had their work displayed in that last 2000 exhibit and are well-established, but many others are younger and are still struggling to find their place in the broader arts community.



“Ai Pohaku, Stone Eaters” is a culturally rooted exhibition featuring multimedia artworks by nearly 40 Native Hawaiian artists. Works, from left, are “That which is within must never be forgotten” by Bob Freitas; “Kilipue” by Pam Barton; “Maka” by Charlton Kupa‘a Hee; “Hua La I” by Kahi Ching; “Ki‘i Poho Pohaku” by Hanale Hopfe; “Pohaku (sentinel event)” by Keith Tallett; and “Mamo” by Bernice Akamine. Hanging in the background is an untitled installation by Kaili Chun.

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art



“Ka‘i i ke Kua” by Kunane Wooton

Kapulani Landgraf, an art professor at Kapiolani Community College, created a new work for the exhibit, “E Ho‘okanakai!”, which involved getting quotes from leaders of the Hawaiian community about leadership. She then projected their words and portraits on a wall encircling

the installation, which features hanging metal shards cut in the semicircular shape of hoaka, the leaves of a koa tree, as a symbol of genealogy, succession and protection. It signifies that “it’s really remembering not to forget,” Landgraf said.

Another work of Landgraf’s on display is 2018’s “Battle Fatigue,” a collage of repeated closeup images of her eye with tiny iron nails driven into the tear ducts between them. The work stemmed from a panel discussion about the issues teachers confront in trying to validate their work to the public, which she saw as similar to what Hawaiian artists have to do in the broader art community, as well as among Hawaiians themselves, she said.

“We’re always facing non-Hawaiians,” she said, “so this is what happens when you have to do it with Hawaiians.”

Nanea Lum is one of the younger artists displayed in the exhibit. Her abstract painting “Loa’a” was originally created in 2016 for her bachelor’s degree in art and was part of two paintings she created reflecting her interpretation of the artist’s search for the truth. “I study painting from a deep knowledge of painting’s history and apply it directly to my philosophy of being a modern Hawaiian activist,” she said.

Her inspiration for the painting derived from, of all things, a piece of meat. “I would hold in my hand a piece of, like, venison,” she said. “The accompanying piece to this was like looking inside the body of an animal, so (it represents) searching inside our food systems, as Hawaiians do, in order to find the significant truth.”

Kunane Wooton, who has a day job managing nurses at Straub Medical Center, had a different kind of struggle creating his piece, “Ka’i i ke Kua,” a sculpture in the shape of a large Hawaiian adze, held up by a struggling human figure. The adze is carved out of a granite boulder, originally about 400 pounds, that had been brought to the islands as ship ballast.

It took Wooton a long time to figure out what to do with it. Eventually, it came to him that things that are “carried,” like ballast stones, are “almost burdensome,” he said. “But it’s also one of those things that’s necessary. So the piece being a non-native stone was key to that. And then (the human figure) underneath is ohia, so that’s the native part. It was important to me that it was a native part that’s holding that weight up.”

Kaili Chun, a well-known multimedia installation artist, created a work that references the stone in the exhibition name. The untitled work consists of basalt rocks harvested from Kapaa Quarry, which represent things like “ancestors, kin, all the creatures, creatures of the sea and plant life on land.” The rocks are suspended in hanging nets.

“We can either use those nets to feed ourselves metaphorically, or we could be trapped by those nets as well,” Chun said.

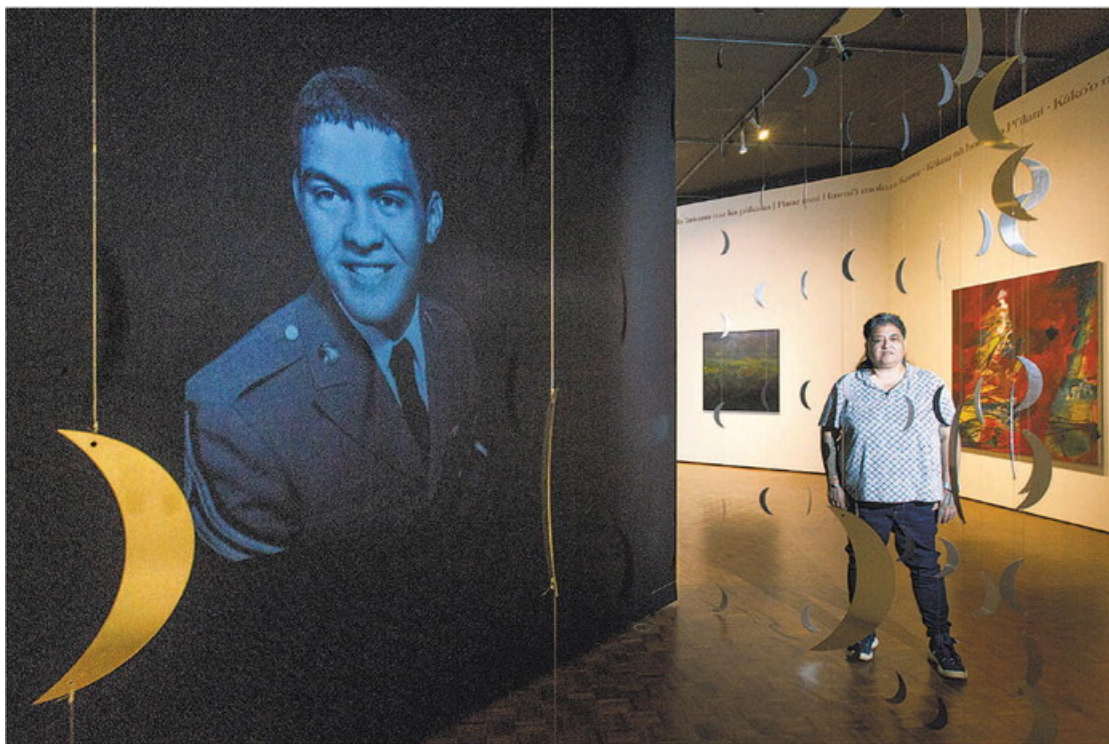
While Chun is grateful to the curators for organizing the exhibit, she said the fact that it’s been nearly a quarter century between exhibits of contemporary Hawaiian art raises questions about the university’s commitment to it. “One would think that over 23 years, more of the Indigenous perspective would be foundational, and yet it is not,” she said.

The curators said the exhibit is particularly timely considering that UH president David Lassner recently described the university as “a Hawaiian place of learning.”

“The university system utilizes Hawaiians as a form of marketing, and yet, where is that show of support for Indigenous voices on this campus?” Kahanu said.

The curators are hoping that it won’t take another 23 years for UH to mount a similar exhibit.

“It could have happened earlier. It maybe should have happened earlier,” Broderick said. “I think the time that elapses between now and when it happens next will really tell us what the department’s relationship is to Hawaiian art.”



Artist and Kapiolani Community College art professor Kapulani Landgraf created “E Ho‘okanakai!”, which projects the words and portraits of leaders in the Hawaiian community. Behind Landgraf to the right is Nanea Lum’s painting “Loa’a.”

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UH student Olivia Rigali stands in front of an untitled installation by Kaili Chun. Below, a granite sculpture, “Aina Lani II,” by Sean K.L. Browne.



