

VIEWS FROM CONTEMPORARY HAWAI'I: GLOBALIZED LOCALISM & ISLAND IMAGINARIES

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Tropical Disturbance: a guide to place making and contemporary art in Hawai'i provides a spirited and thought-provoking counterpoint to oft-prevalent notions of the island as an exceptional, even paradisaical domain ostensibly sequestered from the world's exigencies by the vast expanse of an oceanic realm. Via richly imagined ties to Hawai'i, the show underscores the significance of locality and place as compelling subjects, featuring nine artists of diverse backgrounds whose projects engage shifting alignments between the global and local that are shaping modern-day conditions in these islands—an orientation I term, “globalized localism.”

Tropical Disturbance builds on a wave of recent contemporary art exhibitions that foreground the longstanding position of Hawai'i as a key site for trans-oceanic circulation and cross-cultural intersection. In 2017, two groundbreaking exhibitions mounted in Honolulu—the inaugural Honolulu Biennial, Middle of Now | Here and the Smithsonian Institution's 'Ae Kai: A Culture Lab on Convergence—featured works by local artists alongside their Pacific regional counterparts in which islands, archipelagos and oceanic passages were conceived both as metaphors for human experience, and as real sites with pressing social, political, economic, and ecological concerns to be interrogated. Their projects touched on a

spectrum of subjects assuming heightened urgency across the Pacific region, the U.S., and globally, including: land use and environmental sustainability, climate change, pollution, immigration and the closing of America's borders, and indigenous representation.

Based on the artists' descriptions of their work in progress in *Tropical Disturbance*, this discussion profiles the concepts behind selected pieces that actively bring forward trans-Pacific and transnational connections. By framing their views of Hawai'i in such terms, the artists point to formations of affinities and complexly entwined relations between groups, resulting from centuries of contact, trade, labor flows, migration, and settlement that link the Pacific world, Asia, the Americas, Europe, and lands beyond.

For artist, architect, and urban planner Sean Connelly, the built environment acts as the anchor to engage with the local history of land use, development, and resource management in Hawai'i. In *Waterway*, described as an "interior earth sculpture," Connelly focuses on Honolulu's Ala Wai Canal, an artificial waterway dug in the 1920s to drain wetlands that developers subsequently converted into the lucrative real estate that today stretches the entire length of Waikīkī Beach. This project rechanneled the streams that formerly fed area fishponds, rice paddies, and wildlife habitats, significantly altering its vital ecosystem. Moreover, sand was brought in to augment Waikīkī Beach, dredged from local sources and acquired from places as far away as Manhattan Beach, a Southern California municipality near Los Angeles.

While far-reaching forms of land transformation are scarcely a new phenomenon in human history, Connelly notes that the expansion of beaches for recreational use is comparatively recent—beginning in 1920s America with the importation of sand to build up the resort area of Coney Island, New York. Fashioned from reinforced sand molded to echo the “L” shaped footprint of the Ala Wai Canal, Waterway references the profound transformative impact of urbanism on natural environments around the world. By tangibly incorporating California beach sand in Waterway, the artist foregrounds another distinct way in which trans-oceanic connections materially link seemingly distant locales.

Sculptor and installation artist Lynne Yamamoto likewise employs references to Hawai‘i’s built environment as motifs and metaphors for transcultural circulation, interchange, and overlay. Intrigued by the ways in which people’s everyday lived experience and material circumstances are historically transmuted and imprinted by larger systemic conditions, the artist examines how outside influences have been introduced, synthesized, and reworked by Hawai‘i’s local culture to produce hybrid vernacular forms.

In *Homes in Hawai‘i* (working title), 1920s-era floor plans of sugar plantation workers’ housing and modest cottages for working-class Honolulu families provide templates for Yamamoto to trace the intrusion of American styles of architecture on the local landscape. As she notes, these residences were commonly designed and built according to specifications and materials provided by local building supply firms, or assembled from prefabricated kits ordered

directly from the “mainland.” Despite this pervasive standardization, the artist discovered that many of these homes share a distinctive trait: the incorporation of local volcanic rock in their designs. To call attention to such historic superimposition, as well as reciprocal processes of cross-cultural transmission and syncretism, in Homes in Hawai‘i Yamamoto incises these period dwellings’ schematic floor plans onto imitation lava rocks cast from cement and mineral aggregates—typical of artificial design elements now ironically used to lend buildings in Hawai‘i the aura of island ‘character.’

Island ecosystems can provide sensitive barometers for changing environmental conditions brought about by the ever-expanding presence and intervention of humans in the natural world. Not surprisingly, a growing body of work by Hawai‘i artists addresses ecological issues, including the mounting pollution that is having a visible impact on the land, the surrounding waters, and the sky above the islands.

Lawrence Seward’s mixed media sculptural project is informed by an environmental catastrophe in Hawai‘i that potentiated a globe-circling cross-cultural collaboration with the Ghanaian artisan Paa Joe via the Internet. To address the disastrous 2013 spill in Honolulu Harbor of 1,400 tons of raw molasses being shipped to the continental U.S. for processing, Seward commissioned Paa Joe—internationally renowned for his carved and painted wooden “fantasy coffins”—to craft custom-made stylized effigies in the form of Hawaiian reef fish. Seward, by setting these colorful African funerary forms on ghostly white Styrofoam bases whose rough

organic shapes invoke dying coral reefs, memorializes the mass death of countless coral species, fish, and other marine life that suffocated beneath this thick blanket of molasses.

Photographer Alison Beste's investigative installation, *Light Pollution Grid–Wallpaper*, chronicles the “beautiful yet ominous” phenomenon of artificial light pollution in Hawai'i. Associated with industrialized civilization and human habitation, the continuous exposure to light (and attendant absence of true darkness) is being recognized as a global problem that adversely affects everything in the biosphere, ranging from bird migration to human health.

Through her ongoing photographic studies of O'ahu's night sky, Beste assembles concrete evidence of how light pollution increasingly suffuses the local environment. Resembling delicately gradated color “swatches,” the artist offers printed “samples” of light pollution taken at a variety of island locations, arrayed together as luminous panels in a tight grid formation. By decoupling identifiable references to the environmental conditions the work seeks to expose, Beste's arrangement of these outwardly abstract yet visually seductive images can perhaps be seen as a counterpart to common representations of Hawai'i, in which the sheer beauty of the natural surroundings can serve to obscure serious environmental problems that currently exist in tandem.

With the emergence of migration as a politically volatile and deeply polarizing issue in this country and around the globe—closely entwined

with intensifying concerns about international terrorism, illegal migrants, and domestic security—the widespread impact of increasingly restrictive policies is rapidly becoming definitive of our era. Amid the escalating U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s crackdown on illegal immigration, the July 2017 deportation of a local Mexican-born coffee farmer, a long-time Hawai‘i resident and respected community member, has had a galvanizing effect on Big Island-based Native Hawaiian artist Keith Tallett. The farmer’s plight provided Tallett with an immediate point of contention over how profoundly current immigration policies, including the new blanket travel ban against nationals from countries deemed a threat to the U.S., affect many communities at home and abroad. For the artist, this issue has a particular resonance in Hawai‘i as the first state to take legal action to block the federal government’s travel ban, maintaining that the policy is against the islands’ longstanding commitment to diversity and non-discrimination.

Entitled *Vamos Amigo* (a Spanish phrase the artist loosely translates as, ‘come on friend, let’s move on’), Tallett’s project takes the form of an offering of flowers as a symbolic expression of condolence and solidarity with this Hawai‘i farmer, Andres Magana Ortiz. Comprised of two related components, the piece features: a pair of wall-mounted C-prints depicting the artist’s hand bearing a bouquet of white anthuriums tattooed with the work’s title (respectively, ‘Vamos’ and ‘Amigo’), and an encircling installation of fresh floral arrangements displayed on pedestals. Tallett’s use of the anthurium references historic ties formed between the Americas and Hawai‘i through agriculture, and the circulation and cultivation of non-native plants as cash crops. As

the artist notes, although the anthurium is today commonly associated with the islands, where it has become a leading ornamental export item, this tropical flower is in fact indigenous to the Americas. Indeed, Ortiz's life trajectory follows an analogous trans-Pacific circuit of exchange between Hawai'i and the Americas, since he had originally arrived in Hawai'i as a migrant farm laborer.

Portland-based, Hawai'i-born illustrator and graphic designer Dana Paresa's works appropriate iconic motifs and themes from Western art—works like the ancient Greco-Roman statue of Laocoön and His Sons, and Michelangelo's Renaissance-era marble sculpture, the Pietà—and replaces these majestic figures with a cast of highly stylized, graphic renditions of characters drawn from the artist's extensive observation of people on Honolulu's downtown streets and in its Chinatown. Paresa aims, by reworking recognizable grand visual tropes of Western culture to embody the presence of Honolulu 'types,' such as earthy "aunties/local ladies" sporting boldly patterned outfits, to render such commonplace local figures legible and thus potentially more accessible to larger American audiences.

As the artists convened in Tropical Disturbance vividly demonstrate, islands have the capacity to wield a potent expressive and epistemic force as trans-historic, symbolic, and vernacular spaces. In so doing, their projects trace and delineate topographies, constellations of human relations, societal positions, and subjectivities with a planetary span.

