

## Carving a Hawaiian Aesthetic

*Contemporary Hawaiian artists challenge the old notions of art. Will others be able to see their vision?*



# māhealani

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I am from the big Dudoit 'ohana, born and raised on the island of O'ahu (Kalaikaua Housing, Palolo, Waipahu, 'Āliamannu). But because I'm niele, I travelled a lot. I left home when I was eighteen, with a one-way ticket to Switzerland, a little bit of kālā, and plenny naiveré. I fell in love with many different places, music, art, food... I'm pulled to the indigenous heart of a culture.

After many years travelling and working all over the world, I came back home and started school at UH-Mānoa at the age of thirty-three. I still travel, mostly during school breaks, a lot in the islands. I believe my journeys in the world have only helped me to love and understand Hawai'i more, and to deepen the happiness I find in my connection to this *āina*.

"Carving a Hawaiian Aesthetic" is a piece I wrote in early 1998, when I took my first university art class. It was also the first art class ever taught at the university that was dedicated to Hawaiian perspectives.

## Carving a Hawaiian Aesthetic

Every morning before I get down to work, I go through a ritual of sweeping and dusting, brewing tea, walking through my garden and, if I remember, praying to the 'aumākua. This last act is perhaps the most important, yet the one I most easily forget to do. The 'aumākua, I figure, will be here despite myself. That is the excuse I give for my laziness, partly because I believe it to be true, but also partly because the praying has yet to achieve the kind of reality that, say, sweeping the floor, already possesses.

Nā 'aumākua mai ka lā hiki a ka lā kau,  
Mai ka ho'okui a ka hālāwai.

You ancestral gods from the rising to the setting sun,  
From the zenith to the horizon!

Nā 'aumākua iā ka hina kua, iā ka hina alo,  
Iā ka 'ākau i ka lani.

You ancestral gods who stand at our back  
and at our front,  
You gods who stand at our right hand!

From the bedroom window of my small house in the middle of Mānoa Valley on the leeward side of the island of O'ahu, I can see almost without obstruction the peak called Kōnāhuanui, the highest point in the Kō'olaus. Kōnāhuanui gathers together the winds travelling towards us from the north-east and turns them into clouds. Kōnāhuanui is also the source of the waters that run through the little stream near my house that my companion and I dug open in spots among the clusters of Job's tears and reeds to create *lo'i* for taro. I am not sure if the taro will live. That depends on the good graces of both humans and gods. Yet I

refuse to believe that their condition is fragile, although I more and more believe that it will depend on my remembering nā 'aumākua.

Nā 'aumākua iā ka hina kua, iā ka hina alo  
Iā ka 'ākau i ka lani.  
'O Kīnā i ka lani,  
'Owē i ka lani,  
Nunulu i ka lani,  
Kāhōlo i ka lani.

You ancestral gods who stand at our back  
and at our front,  
You gods who stand at our right hand!  
A breathing in the heavens,  
A murmuring in the heavens,  
A clear, ringing voice in the heavens,  
A voice reverberating in the heavens!

Recently I have been saying these words a work at my table that sits beside my patipatipale and beets and behind a screen of trees that borders a path running alongside the stream. Many people in the neighborhood walk the path to get to the public pool on the other side—parents with their dog and children or groups of boys and girls. Often I hear them commenting, always favorably, on the taro. But I've yet to hear single comment on the praying. I think that do not know what it is I am doing.

My work these days has been to plait strai of hau for the making of a cape. After soaping the strands in water, I twist them into strong cordage between which I will weave aerial roots of the banyan tree, a tradition *kapa* design in marine-blue cloth, strips of paper with words and photos imprinted on them, and the delicate skeletons of leaves gathered with my companion one windy day in the mountains nearby. The piece will be called "mo'okū'auhau"—genealogy.

The cape is my first piece of "contemporary Hawaiian art." I have made other things I call "art" or "artistic"—bamboo nose flutes, 'ohe kōpala, kīkepa I paint with acrylics or bathe in natural plant dyes. But these are largely recognized as traditional Hawaiian objects, despite the use of acrylics or cotton fabric or my Swiss Army knife. The cape would also normally be considered "traditional," but what distinguishes it from my flutes or kīkepa has something to do with the direction it is reaching towards. Traditional Hawaiian art reaches back—or Hawaiians would say *i mua*, towards the things *in front of us*—with the goal of rediscovering or recreating something from the past. It attempts to articulate its existence in our ancestral language.

Contemporary Hawaiian art also reaches towards the past, but in order to translate our traditions into the language of today. Whereas, for instance, with the *kīkepa* I've made so far I have been concerned with replicating the designs my ancestors had created and used in their *kapa*-making in order to understand and appreciate their world, a *kīkepa* as a piece of contemporary art would take some of those designs or methods and transform them into an object that has not yet been seen. That transformation is an expression of my condition as a Hawaiian in contemporary times and, by extension, an expression of the contemporary condition of the Hawaiian people in general.

I am not the only Hawaiian who is new to this kind of work. Hawaiians who considered themselves "artists" only began to become visible as a force about twenty-five or so years ago, when they organized themselves into a group called Hale Nauā during the general revival of Hawaiian culture now known as the Hawaiian Renaissance. The Renaissance was largely concerned with recovering our traditions and foundations.

Those who became involved with Hawaiian artistic expression mostly dealt with reproduction. But the formation of Hale Nauā was the first time a group of Hawaiians publicly distinguished themselves as contemporary artists. That was in 1976. Other groups followed over the years.

ʻImaikalani Kalahale, one of the first members of Hale Nauā, told me in a recent conversation, "Fo' us guys in contemporary times, it's been a trip. From the '70s Hawaiians have been redefining who we are. So things started changing. The cultural view of our people, the 'ono [the good taste], all of a sudden became something that we wanted to define, not the 'ono da *haole*. When we talk about 'art,' what dat 'art' as *mao'i* [native] people? What is our taste? What feel good to us? I like hair. So I'm working on a piece wit' hair..."

ʻIma'i's most well-known pieces are permanent marker-and-pen drawings of warriors, sharks, *mo'ō*, city slums, human insects, petroglyph symbols, and *kapa* designs. His central figures are reminiscent of the artist—tall and imposing, with the same wild mass of coarse Hawaiian hair, the same side chops, the same aura of strength and stubbornness.

In elaborating on his work, he spoke about the concept of the image: "When you read da word *kī'i*, what dat mean, *kī'i* image? *Kī'i* is take pictha, *kī'i* is pound rock, *kī'i* is also being in da right place when da shadow hit da right spot, and you go, 'Ho'i' Image is...song. Image is...poetry. Image is whatever stimulates something inside of you, whether you see it, hear it, feel it, smell it, taste it. These are all images. And den *mao'i* images? These are our images. Da European images were color, shape, form,

balance, *ka mea, ka mea, ka mea*. Okay! Right on! Us guys, we dealt with other images also. We dealt with smell, taste, sound. We dealt with these other things. Fo' me art is 'ono. Art is not doctrine. If I wuz to take dis term 'art' and move it into something Hawaiian—we no mo' one word named 'art'—I would have to put it into a place like 'ono. And for me, wat dat is is dealing with stuff dat's more primal dan intellectual. Fo' me, if we go call something art, if no mo' /hi/ liner substance! You might as well sell Coke, Bic pens. Because nice image, look sharp, heavy if' dat, but if da ting no say no'ting, it's like saying, 'Plopo, plopl' Fizz, 'fizzi' So fo' me art gotta make da 'ono. 'Cause if not, it's all bourgeois stuff."

Both Hawaiians and non-Hawaiians have agonized over the absence of a Hawaiian equivalent to the word "art." Some have simply concluded that because there was no concept in ancient Hawai'i of an object judged on its formal and aesthetic qualities alone, there was therefore no such thing as art. That logic fails to appreciate the fact that while aesthetic quality was most decidedly important to ancient Hawaiian sensibilities, it always functioned in conjunction with a practical, spiritual, or symbolic capacity, whether secular or sacred. The same was true for the word "artist." Individuals were recognized as being good at *hana no'eau*, or "skilled work," but their activities were appreciated for their functional, as well as aesthetic, strengths.

One of the important things about contemporary Hawaiian artists is that although they define themselves as such—as distinguished from the "skilled workers" of the world of their ancestors or even from the "traditional artists" of today—there is a sensibility among many of them that equally

distinguishes them from the western artist. Pīleka Clark, teacher of the first course in contemporary Hawaiian art taught at the university level (and in which I am currently a student), speaks about the distinction in terms of a lived, cultural difference. His course became the battleground for the deep discontent long harbored among Hawaiian art students regarding the underlying assumption of the University of Hawai'i's Art Department that Hawaiians only produced "folk art," never "fine art."

"The course, I think, has been in the minds and hearts of many Hawaiians who've passed through this particular department," he told me one day when I went to visit him in the fiber arts lab, where he was simmering a large pot of stewy-smelling *wauke* which he would later transform into sheets of cloth. "And they've benefited by what th department's had to offer them. But at a certain point in their growth, they recognized that what they were being fed was an external point of view, one that was imposed on them from an American curriculum, an American philosophy of our curriculum. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but I suppose questions were being raised in many of our people who'd gone through here. Questions like, What about our own? What about our own aesthetic? What about our own condition? What about our own culture which is 2,000 years old? Why is it that in the Art Department of the University of Hawai'i only one course existed before this course that was dedicated to Hawaiian culture and that course is in art history, and it goes from about 1778 back as far as it can go? Meaning that our culture and our people no longer exist as a *living, breathing* body. That course is looking at our people, at our culture, as if it were frozen in time—very

much an anthropological view of us. And while the professor does the best that she can, the professor's from somewhere else. She can't but treat the subject matter as an observer, rather than as a practicing member, a participating member of that society."

Although Pi'ikea insists that the Hawaiian art community (and he always uses this phrase as if it were a coherent whole) refuses to define contemporary art in terms of giving restraint to its form, he is equally insistent that there is what might be called a *genealogical* difference between Hawaiian artists who participate in a Western tradition and those who participate in a Hawaiian tradition. One day in class he brought up the fact that only a single Hawaiian had been included in the art exhibit held at the Academy of Arts three years ago entitled "Encounters with Paradise." That man was Joseph Nāwahi, who lived in the second half of the last century and who was famous then, and now, for his brilliance as an orator, educator, intellectual, politician, editor, and for being one of the first Hawaiians to become a lawyer (a position he achieved through self-instruction). Nāwahi was also deeply beloved by the Hawaiian community, and his death when he was only in his forties, at a critical juncture in Hawaiian history, in the aftermath of the overthrow of Queen Lili'uokalani, caused an outpouring of public and private grief. Nāwahi was famous for all these things, but he was not famous for his *hana no'ea*. In fact, he only painted six known pieces. Yet one of them, "Hilo from Coconut Island," made it into the Encounters with Paradise exhibit.

The title of the exhibit already hints at something not quite honorable in its focus, the kind of anthropological approach Pi'ikea talked about when describing the problem

with the University of Hawai'i's Art Department. And Nāwahi's piece seems to take that approach. The subject is a Hawaiian one—a view of Hilo Bay and town with Mauna Kea in the background. But the moment I laid eyes on it I was struck by how much it looked like the works of the Dutch masters. There is something definitely impressive about Nāwahi's painting, the same "something" that impresses me about the Dutch or other European realist painters. But that is also the problem. There is nothing in it besides its subject that distinguishes it as Hawaiian. Pi'ikea put it this way: "For me Nāwahi's painting was an exercise in learning through the West, learning his land and what was relevant to him through the West. And so the entire viewpoint, the entire way of looking at his landscape was through that filter. The clues that come to me are linear perspective, structure, space, the way in which he structured the space and captured time. To me, Joseph Nāwahi's piece was an exercise in seeing and understanding the world, *his* world, from a Western standpoint."

Like Joseph Nāwahi, Pi'ikea is himself a cultural landmark. He even appears larger than life—a tall, athletic, tan-skinned man with features eerily suggestive of the *ki'i* that once stood guard over the *heiau*, although the intensity and ferocity of his features are belied by the gentle nature for which many know him. In all our conversations, I sense that he is fully conscious of the *kuleana* (a word denoting both "privilege" and "responsibility") he carries with him as a leading contemporary Hawaiian artist and as an intellectual. He has already told me in so many words that he felt it was his responsibility to bring into existence the first contemporary Hawaiian art course ever offered at the highest institution of learning in the

State. The birth of the course was achieved only after a lengthy battle with the department, which Pi'ikea fought with all the conviction and political savvy of a hero like Nāwahi.

The history of discontent among Hawaiian art students at the University of Hawai'i has been a long one, but it was brought to a head with Pi'ikea's thesis exhibition in 1996, an installation reinterpreting a myth of the creation of the Hawaiian people. The installation, as Pi'ikea puts it, was more a contemporary Hawaiian "ritual" than an art work *per se*. Its central element was a

twenty-by-twenty-foot large human form shaped on the ground in the style of a petroglyph and using black and red volcanic cluder. Four fourteen-foot high 'anu'u towers representing the four major Hawaiian gods stood at the earth's cardinal points on the extremities of the human figure. A ti-leaf enclosure was constructed around the installation, imposing a *kapu* on the area. When the installation was set up in the third-floor roof courtyard of the Art building, it was accompanied by a ritual of dancing and hula. The position and performance were highly intentional, Pi'ikea tells me, a challenge to the Art Department to reach beyond the limitations of the "ceiling" that Western art normally imposes.

"I planned with my thesis exhibition that I would call my department to the mat."

Pi'ikea says: "And what I was calling them about is that out of the faculty of twenty-seven, something like twenty-three of them were from America and were white. I was calling them to the numbers of Hawaiian students and graduates, the numbers of Hawaiian faculty, and the failure of this department to reconcile its location in the Pacific. I called them out publicly through

the venue of my exhibition. Then following that I submitted a course proposal to the curriculum committee while they were a little bit off balance. The proposal was, 'Here is a course for you. You don't have to write it. You don't have to do anything about it. This course is what we [the Hawaiian artists] have all designed. We've all had a hand in it. And if you just approve it, then you're on your way to beginning, just beginning, to diversify this department in terms not only of its curriculum offerings to the students, but to faculty points of view.'"

Pi'ikea also told the department that their adoption of the course would be the beginning, rather than the end, of the process to remedy the historical neglect of Hawaiians at the university. "There's only one point of view in this department," he tells me, "and what does that say about the knowledge that they're imparting? Is it knowledge, or is it propaganda? As far as I'm concerned, it's propaganda. It's a lovely and amazing aesthetic, a fully developed one, a very intellectual one, one that has achieved great strides and great achievements. But it isn't the only aesthetic. And by brainwashing these students from Hawai'i or from the mainland into thinking it is, the department is doing Hawaiians, doing everyone that comes through, a great disservice. We're not providing a true education. We're brainwashing them."

Pi'ikea succeeded in establishing the course. He attributes his success partially to timing: "I just think that the reason this class exists at the present time has much to do with the larger environment or condition of our people, the movement towards some type of self-determination, some type of sovereignty. In a sense, this course is an example of educational sovereignty, education in terms

of art or visual language. I feel myself a member of a large or growing group and I just felt that my focus was more pronounced in that direction and that it reflects a feeling, a collective feeling, in our community. And I've had the good fortune of much support from our community and much help just from dialogue over the years about how a course like this should be constructed."

But the ink has yet to dry on the pages of the class's history. The department has made it clear that they never promised to continue offering the course beyond the present semester and for the time being they are treating it as a "special project" that will need to undergo further review. In the meantime, we continue with our work.

It could be said that Joseph Nāwahī, Pi'ikea Clark, and 'Imaikalani Kalāhele are products of their time, merely reacting in predictable ways to the great social movements into which they happened to have been born. I think it is more true to say that these men came at a time when they were individually needed, when their people required them to move the community in a certain direction. I would also say that that is art. Art is not about color or shape or form. It is ultimately not even about the thing that gets put down on paper, or made into an object, or carved into a stone. Art is the life that made that thing of paper or clay or stone. It is the lives that the individual life is moving forward into another stage of being.

I am one of those lives, and I am convinced that I was drawn to be with those others in that otherwise everyday classroom because our collective energies were absolutely required to be there.

I am right now making the cape for our first project. The theme: the story of our ancestors. Before I begin, I try to remember my prayer:

*Nā 'aumākua mai ka lā hiki a ka lā kau...  
Eia ka pulapula a 'oukou, nā 'ōiwi  
o Hawai'i nei.  
E mālama 'oukou iā mākou.  
E ulu i ka lani,  
E ulu i ka honua,  
E ulu i ka pae 'āina o Hawai'i.  
E hō mai i ka 'ike,  
E hō mai i ka ikaika,  
E hō mai i ke akamai,  
E hō mai i ka maopopo pono,  
E hō mai i ka 'ike pāpālua,  
E hō mai i ka mana.*

You ancestral gods from the rising to the setting sun...  
Here are your children, the native people of Hawai'i.  
Safeguard us!  
That we may grow in the heavens,  
That we may grow on the earth,  
That we may flourish in the islands of Hawai'i!  
Grant us knowledge,  
Grant us strength,  
Grant us intelligence,  
Grant us true understanding,  
Grant us the gift of second sight,  
Grant us spiritual power!

In this cape there will be stories of life and death, birth, marriage, a man who pledged his loyalty to his sovereign, another man who defied that sovereign. There will be murder, insanity, desertion. There will be love and happiness. There will be homelands left, homelands returned to, homelands in which to be buried. There will be stories, many stories. And the cape itself will be one of those stories.