

Pan-Pacific Nation

March 3rd to March 28th at The ARTS at Marks Garage

A Selection of Contemporary Pacific Island Art

Maile Andrade, Leanne Lupelele Clayton, Noelle M.K.Y. Kahanu, Leilani Kake, Lily Laita, Nanette Lela'ulu, Janet Lilo, Carol F.K. Pao, Siliga David Setoga, Ema Tavola, Angela Tiatia, Sopolemalama Filipe Tohi

The following is a draft of an essay that will be featured in the *Pan-Pacific Nation* Catalog, available soon.

Spaces of Relatedness

By Jaimey Hamilton

For this exhibition we asked a selection of Pacific Island artists to contemplate the affinities and unities, as well as the fraught histories, embedded in the notion of a “pan-pacific.” The initial inspiration for the show was an historic moment in the 1880s when King David Kalakaua established a Confederation of Pacific Island Nations. The title, “Pan-Pacific Nation,” plays on the language of such late nineteenth century alliances, including Pan-Africanism. These terms expressed optimism in the strength of regional or continental solidarity against racism and colonialism, sometimes at the risk of losing other complicated contemporary cultural identities. Kalakaua’s dream was very much part of this zeitgeist. The strength of a Pacific identification has continued to resonate: most significantly in 1976, when Albert Wendt called for a “New Oceania” in the journal *Mana* and in 1994 when Epeli Hau’ofa wrote “Our Sea of Islands.”

Given this history, as well as our current political, economic, environmental, and cultural seascape, what could “pan-pacific” mean at the present moment? The pieces included in the show offer multilayered responses. They celebrate a continued and hopeful identification of Pacific Island peoples that share a strong genealogical

history and geographic kinship, while also offering ambivalent considerations that uncover the subtle and specific localized histories involved in any strategic collective social identification.

The notion of the Pacific as a cultural space has been continually re-imagined. In thinking about who does this “re-imagining” and for what purpose, the artists in this show address how these representations can speak to political, cultural, and ecological struggles still very much with us today.

Va

Many of the pieces in the show draw on the indigenous Polynesian concept of va (or wa in Maori). This is more than a simple notion of space or geography. Conveyed in ancestral chants, embedded in materials, and embodied in the peoples that inhabit the islands, va (or often ta-va) is partly a genealogical “locatedness.”ⁱ The temporal rhythms of past and present are integrated with the physical, psychic, and social space of Pacific cultures. In some Maori whakapapa, for instance, genealogy is described as a dispersal of canoes and different iwi (people, bones) attached to different places. The paintings of Tongan artist Sopolemalama Filipe Tohi draw upon this Polynesian tradition, at creating parallels between ancient and present day migration. His geometric shapes refer to the patterns of sennit/coconut lavalava lashings, in reference to canoe building. They also act as expressions of the relationships between living culture, the sea, and the migration of his ancestors across the islands.ⁱⁱ

Ema Tavola’s customized wearable textile assemblage also reinterprets notions of indigenous space. Her Fijian *sulu vakataga* garb describe the ways that our spatial and cultural connectedness have been transformed by globalization. Taking the Cook Island technique of Tivaevae quilting, which is, in itself, a collective practice of maintaining close socio-spatial relationships, she created a patchwork of mass-produced hibiscus prints that represent the present day Exclusive Economic Zones in the Pacific Ocean. Her garment is a complex layering of customary fiber arts with

references to exploitative global labor markets (often used to make cheap tourist clothing).

“Escape Routes”

When nautical distances between the islands began to be drawn up by cartographers, space as conceived in material and social relationships came into conflict with newly charted and carved out territories. A map attributed to Tapaia, a man from the island of Ra’iatea who joined the Endeavour when Captain Cook left Tahiti in July of 1769, suggests just how quickly the trajectories of local trade and ancestral mythology became a part of a larger geographic and colonial space.ⁱⁱⁱ As Tapaia described the other islands and their relative positions, Captain Cook and Joseph Banks transcribed his knowledge into longitudinal and latitudinal space.^{iv} By the nineteenth century the territory of the Pacific was thoroughly graphed, both anthropologically (racial and cultural boundaries of Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia were drawn) and economically (important ports and strategically located island groups dually noted). “Oceania” as a collection of exotic island cultures replete with treasure, became a construct of the European imagination. As Victor Levasseur described it on his 1838 map, Oceania was now the “fifth part of the world,” with lush landscapes “rich in gold, silver, lead, and copper,” and composed of societies with “absolute and barbarous” governments. Nanette Lela’ulu’s painting *Lost in Transit* counteracts such exotic notions that continue to this day. Her realistic style, which references both a European “master-style” of painting and kitschy velvet tourist paintings, shows a young figure holding an uprooted tree and walking on the parched earth while looking back towards the viewer.

Carl Pao’s “possible aboriginal Hawai’ian artifacts” also comment upon the colonial rhetoric of primitivism. As a fictional future archeologist of his “Post-Historic Museum,” he proffers “evidence” to support the idea of a pre-existing Pan-Pacific Nation before Kalakaua’s proposal. He explains that the paper-like material of his artifact is from Japan, the ink from the continent of America, the design from Hawai’i, the

shellac sealant from Southeast Asia, and some found carving fragments composed of “super condensed tofu product” from China or Japan. These on-board emergency manuals in a faux naive style represent an odd future past in which our contemporary notions of universal communication and current modes of transportation are put into question. His complex and witty prints asks us to perhaps think of more plausible “escape routes” if Oceania as a whole is to continue to be a living culture rather than an inexplicable past.

Symbols of Pacific Confederations

It is in the context of exploration, colonization, and occupation -- in which European epistemologies were mapped onto indigenous relationships -- that King David Kalakaua’s strategic notion of a federation of sovereign Pacific islands is most interesting. His investment in the ideals of nationalist representative governments and regional coalitions was a way to use European constructs of national autonomy as a defense against those same powers.^v Kalakaua, along with his key diplomatic advisors and envoys, generated a number of different ways to represent Hawai’i as a sovereign power. Official documents, flags, seals, and crests (such as the Royal Order of the Star of Oceania), were made, sometimes without the extensive historical knowledge of Euro-American customs, but with a definite understanding of how important these flourishes were in representing power and reestablishing the independence of Oceania from European and American interests.

Lily Laita’s expressive painting, *After Westminster* (a reference to the Fijian coup of 2000) conveys the weight that such cultural symbols still have today as expressions of both cultural solidarity and abuse of power. The Maori taiaha, the Samoan to’oto, and the British crown vie with each other for space. The clash of cultures is also palpable in the passages of color that both create a sense of struggle and renewed energy. With the statement “democracy is a foreign flower” scrawled at the top, this unstretched canvas acts as a “flag” to the complicated ambivalences of national sovereignty.

Maile Andrade's *Woven History of an Notion* (a nice verbal pun playing off the word "ocean") represents the complicated diplomacy of Kalakaua's Confederation. Onto aluminum strips, Andrade has stamped portions of letters that were written by Premier Gibson on behalf of Kalakaua in an effort to intercede in the rush of European and American annexation. These strips were then woven into a Polynesian basket form. The statements, all made between 1870-1885, vacillate in their representation of Hawai'i (and Kalakaua) as a protector of other island nations and as a powerful nation on par with European imperialist powers.^{vi} Andrade's piece references the fraught contradictions and unclear motivations of Kalakaua's actual orchestration of a coalition of sovereign Pacific Islands. Its history is this Polynesian basket left unfinished (not unlike a Gordian knot that is too complicated to untangle).^{vii}

With the annexation of many of the Pacific Islands by Euro-American powers, as well as the loss of Hawai'ian sovereignty, the optimism of a Pacific Island Federation in a European style was lost. This sense of mourning is most striking in Noelle Kahanu's *Mai Poina* ('Ahu'ula) and *E Koko Mai* (Kahili) constructed in memory of Queen Lili'uokalani. Kahanu has constructed the 'Ahu'ula (cape) in particular to reference the ribbons that Queen Lili'uokalani was said to have given to her supporters. They were inscribed with the words *Mai Poina Oe la'u - Do Not Forget about Me*. While Kahanu's reconstruction does act as a potent reminder to a proud kingdom lost to the forces of colonization, it is also a symbolic rallying point for thinking about a future of Hawai'i through the strength of this great matriarch.

Liquid Capital

Since this pivotal moment of annexation through the twentieth century, reviving and sustaining specific island cultures were at times seen as more important than reaffirming a regional Oceanic identity. Simultaneously, a notion of the Pacific has been absorbed into global delineations of power and economic relationships. Notions of the

"Pacific Rim," or "Asian-Pacific," have become more prominent, and the Pacific seems to be more and more often represented as an exploitable medium rather than a genealogically coherent space. As Christopher Connery notes, it is "capital's element... Movable capital is liquid capital."^{viii} Leanne Lupelele Clayton represents this strange liquidity in her funny poly-saturated nation of plastic Lavalava puddles. Her islands of mass-produced island print covered in clear acrylic proliferate across the wall of gallery like some self-perpetuating force.

As the process of globalization threatens to homogenize specific island cultures and traditions, young artists have responded with their own culture jamming tactics. Siliga David Setoga's *Pan Pacific Brand - Landscapes and Portraits* comments on the dangers of identifying with a notion of "pan-pacific" as the construction of a generic identity and landscape. His simple graphics of black, white and red correspond to the generic processed foods available on supermarket shelves from Hawai'i to Samoa. As a Samoan selling his art in local markets in the contemporary urban culture of South Auckland, he sees the power of his pieces in the way they mimic and infiltrate global market structures and unsettle the logic of standardization. Janet Lilo's appropriation of people's profile pictures from the online networking site of Bebo (similar to Myspace or Facebook) also comments on the complicated construction of Pacific identities as they meet hip-hop street culture, global constructions of gender, and online fantasy.

The tensions inherent in the history of an exploitable oceanic body are also richly allegorized in Angela Tiatia's silent, slow motion, single shot video, *See*, 2008. In this video, a woman's mouth is forced open by two male fingers to reveal an eye (a real fish-eye). As the fingers pull away, the eye confronts the viewer. The lips blink and the eye sweeps back and forth to take full-view of its surroundings, including the viewer. This is a Pacific response to Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou*. As in the French film, Tiatia's video loop represents a never-ending tension, in which no single force triumphs. The images suggest that beyond our conflicts, we can perhaps gain some perspective on the catastrophic as well as the emergent forces of a new Pacific.

Oceania is Us

If the waters of the Pacific have been exploited in the development of global trade -- as a body in which the interpenetration of cultures and the forces of influence, contact, and integration are happening on a global scale -- it also holds the islands together in a concept of unity.^{ix} A different image of the fluidity and boundlessness of the ocean is offered by Epeli Hau'ofa, who sadly, just died this year. Instead of isolated islands in the sea, he incited us to imagine a vast expanding indigenous space.

"Oceania is humanity rising from the depths of brine.... Oceania is us. We are the sea, we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again, physically and psychologically, in the tiny spaces which we have resisted accepting as our sole appointed space, and from which we have recently liberated ourselves."^x

His strategic Oceanic identification has raised important questions in recent years.^{xi} What is the balance between acting upon a notion of the Pacific as a self-sustaining system, a region rich in its own resources and traditions, and recognizing its inextricable role as part of the globe? How do we promote a regional unity while also being realistic about how, for instance, the ecology of the islands is effected by supranational and supra-continental issues of pollution, fishing, global travel, etc?^{xii} The balance, perhaps is in seeing that a strategic identification can help to define concrete local or regional responses to historical and contemporary issues that would otherwise be too daunting. Leilani Kake's pursuit of documentary footage for her increasingly recognized videos does just this. She pictures a new Pacific by capturing it in concrete personal and community events. *Waiata In the Kingdom of Tonga* is her most recent film, which follows twelve South Auckland, Otahuhu college music students of Samoan, Tongan, Maori, Cook Island and Nuiean heritage to the Kingdom of Tonga, where they perform for six schools around the capital of Nuku'alofa. In this video, relationships among the islands are

established through beat, rhythm, and duration. In the most tangible of gestures of arms held out we see possibilities of connection and embrace. Her film suggests that Oceania is still very powerfully conceived through the notion of va, particularly in the sense that Samoan poet and educator Albert Wendt described it:

"Va is the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates, but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-all, that space that is context, giving meaning to things."^{xiii}

ⁱ Lilikalā Kame'eleihiwa, *Native Land, Foreign Desires: Pehea Lā E Pono Ai? How Shall We Live in Harmony?* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1992).

ⁱⁱ Margaret Jolly, "Imagining Oceania: Indigenous and Foreign Representations of a Sea of Islands," *The Contemporary Pacific*, v. 19, no. 2, 508-545.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jolly, 508.

^{iv} Thomas Suárez, *Early Mapping of the Pacific* (Singapore: Periplus, 2004).

^v Jonathan Kay Kamakawiwo'ole Osorio, *Dismembering Lāhui: A History of the Hawai'ian Nation to 1887* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002). Noenoe Silva, *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawai'ian Resistance to American Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

^{vi} Gibson to Carter, no. 3, Feb. 13, 1886, printed in *ibid.*, pp. cxxix-cxxxii. In another statement Gibson claims, "Hawai'i sought no extension of territory, yet, he added, "should anything in the way of federation in regard to their foreign relations be desirable and found to be feasible by the independent communities of Polynesia, the hegemony of such union would naturally fall to Hawai'i." Gibson to Carter, Jan. 12, 1886, printed in *Rept. of Min. of Foreign Affairs*, 1886, Appendix, pp. cxviii-cxxi.

^{vii} Still the most thorough description of Kalakaua's foreign policy efforts is Ralph Kuykendall, *The Hawai'ian Kingdom*, v. 3 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1967).

^{viii} Christopher Conner, "Pacific Rim Discourse: the US Global Imaginary in the Late Cold War Years," *Boundary* v. 2, 40. Republished in *Asia/Pacific as Space of Cultural Production*, ed. Rob Wilson and Arif Dirlik, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 30-56.

^{ix} For an important and great discussion on this, see Hereniko and Wilson, *Inside Out: Literature, Culture, Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific*,

^x Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," 16.

^{xi} See the multitude of responses collected in *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Pacific Islands*, eds. Vijay Naidu and Epeli Hau'ofa, (University of the South Pacific, Fiji, 1993), 402.

^{xii} Micheal Powles, ed. *Pacific Futures* (Pandanus Books, 2006).

^{xiii} Albert Wendt, "afterward," *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Pacific Islands*, eds. Vijay Naidu and Epeli Hau'ofa, (University of the South Pacific, Fiji, 1993), 402.