Binding and Looping: Transfer of Presence in Contemporary Pacific Art
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In an “archipelagological” context of finite spaces, constrained resources, and vast distances, the historic, geographic, and social issues of militarism, global tourism, economic (under-)development, environmental fragility, and Indigenous peoples’ self-determination are greatly intensified. Binding and Looping: Transfer of Presence in Contemporary Pacific Art maps aspects of this intensity by gathering a diverse group of contemporary Pacific arts practitioners to form a conceptual archipelago.1 Each artist is like an island but through the literal, symbolic, and metaphoric use of shared forms, gestures, and embodied mathematics, a continuous expressive field emerges.

Integrating the formal and abstract characteristics of woven mats, canoe rigging and sails, clothing, construction, narratives, and tattoos, the exhibition showcases a new set of turns, knots, and lashings that add to the net(work) of Pacific Arts through printmaking, video, assemblage, and sculpture. Works range from the overtly political and narrative-driven to what appear to be purely formal or abstract. Hawai‘i’s Bernice Akamine, for example, creates delicately woven hanging meshes of glass and copper wire (fig. 1). These multilayered works evoke the container versus contents relationship of fruits, seeds, wombs, skulls, and souls. As gourd-like as they are, Akamine’s sculptures do not function as actual vessels. Each is a “fine” art object in the Western sense that nevertheless represents Indigenous knowledge and practice explored through the wall texts that accompany the pieces—in this case through Hawaiian proverbs.

Maika‘i Tubbs’ uncanny cardboard reproduction of a ti leaf wrapped in stone takes such simulacra even further. Inspired by the bundles of flattened boxes left on the sidewalks of New York City for recycling, Tubbs relates their overnight disappearance to tourists aping the Hawaiian practice of leaving bundles of leaf and lava on roadsides and at sacred sites. The result is an offering that reflects on navigating foreign contexts and wryly comments on misguided cultural emulations. Tubbs’ In Return complicates what a “real” twenty-first century Pacific Island object can be, and is comparable to a

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1 The artists featured in this exhibition included Bernice Akamine, Maile Andrade, Kaili Chun, Brett Graham, Patsy Herman, Angelina Jilak, Florence Jaukae, Noelle Kahanu, Cathy Kata, Maria Kenda, Kapulani Landgraf, Marques Marzan, Moana Nepia, Ani O’Neill, Su’a Sulu’a’ape Petelo Alaiva’a, Lisa Reihana, Filipe Tohi, Maika’i Tubbs, Michel Tuffery, Sheyne Tuffery, and Christina Wirihana.
bilum (string bag) by Papua New Guinean *bilum* maker Cathy Kata which reads as “traditional,” but only in terms of materials (fig. 2). Notably, Kata also makes work for galleries and museums that are not intended to carry goods or babies, but they are unlike Tubbs’ *ti* bundle that fundamentally only represents a traditional object. Therein, as the exhibition title suggests, lies another “transfer of presence” that inverts these respective works’ readings in terms of function.

The explicit connections to Indigenous principles and histories (both contemporary and “ancient”) in “modern” objects are analogous to the stories, individuals, or places that “traditional” objects encode through motifs, patterns, geometries, and restrictions on their use or presentation. By “looping” traditional techniques, forms, aesthetics, and meanings, these artists are skipping “identity politics” and reinvesting in the continuity and defense of their respective cultures.

Kapulani Landgraf’s installation illustrates this point by using photography and design to document and demystify a political process (fig. 3). In this
immersive data visualization, two walls face each other, each adorned with a set of solarized black and white photographic portraits of Hawai'i legislators. Each image is stamped with the subject’s name and the word “approved” or “rejected,” reflecting their vote on a measure to alter the relationship between construction projects and buried ‘ōwi (remains) of Native Hawaiians. Before this measure, developers were legally bound to carry out complete archeological surveys before beginning construction. O’ahu’s controversial rail project is now exempt from that requirement and permitted to carry out surveys during construction—which began long before the vote.

In response, Landgraf asks how people—citizens and representatives—are bound to their responsibilities? Her answer attaches faces and names to political machinery, and implicates viewers by hanging an overhead net crossing the distance between the walls. Hung with dozens of transparent capsules

**Figure 2**  Maika'i Tubbs (Hawai'i), In Return, 2014. Cardboard. Photograph by Brandon Ng, courtesy of the Art Gallery at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.
packed with miniature 10 000-dollar bills, the piece reminds us to “follow the money.” But it also puts viewers in the position of seeing money as bait, and thereby subject to capture. The net is hand-made of gut, punning on the courage that effective politics demands of citizens and representatives.

Brett Graham’s exploration of entanglement is figurative, but more abstract. His three-foot tall sculpted portrait, *snitch*, of Stitch (fig. 4), the illegal alien adopted by a Hawaiian family in the animated Disney film “Lilo and Stitch” offers a twisted but elegant critique of what the wall text refers to as the “forced binding of two societies.” As a daring bit of copyright infringement the piece is striking and vaguely evocative of burnt lynching victims and traditional Polynesian carving of divine figures. The figure is not blackened by fire, but by tarring and feathering, the punishment meted out to traitors to the American Revolution and a point of fascination for the artist. *snitch* can be read as a cultural militant’s revenge fantasy, with the title doubling as a sarcastic reference to counterfeiters tweaking a brand name, and as an accusation of disloyalty. But disloyal to what cause? That of accurately representing Hawaiian families, and their implied histories, in a Disney film? It’s only a stretch if one cannot empathize with an indigenous Pacific point of view that frames US worship of
Brett Graham (Aotearoa/New Zealand), snitch, 2014. Foam, tar, feathers. Photograph by Brandon Ng, courtesy of the Art Gallery at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa.
“freedom” and “independence” as hypocritical in the face of its illegal overthrow and subsequent annexing of the Hawaiian Islands.

Though all of these artists are centered on their own cultures, they recognize the continuity that runs between them in an echo of the very voyages their ancestors took throughout the Pacific. None of the artists seem concerned with Janus-like oppositions of “ancient” and “modern,” or “lost and found” traditions. Instead they focused on creating objects and systems that could not be fully understood without additional context. I read this as an intentional and general effort to reflect the Hawaiian concept of *kaona*, or “hidden meaning,” which refers to interpretations that are usually accessible only through deep experience or direct interaction with the artist or narrator. This curatorial decision risks viewers missing the deeper meaning of many works, instead taking and judging them at their aesthetic “face value.” However, *Binding and Looping* was as much about a parallel series of demonstrations, conversations, and public programmes as it was about any given object. In the context of emerging Pacific Island epistemologies (“archipelagologics” for us outsiders), this distribution of meaning through a network of channels marks the art gallery—as site and institution—as a point of negotiation or departure, not one of arrival or enshrinement.

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