

## **Duty-Free Paradise**

January 22 – February 25, 2021

Radial Gallery, Department of Art and Design, University of Dayton

### **Abstract**

*Duty-Free Paradise is a multimedia exhibition and a series of live broadcasted performances that play on the tensions between lived and imagined Hawai‘i.<sup>1</sup> It explores the contradictions between the perceptions and realities of island life—broadly as a “paradise” constructed by American pop culture, and down to the flora and fauna, underwritten by militarism and biopolitics—through the lens of eco-tourism, around which Hawai‘i’s economy heavily circulates. Duty-Free Paradise opened coincidentally 15 days after the attempted coup on the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, and four days after the anniversary of the successful coup of 1893 that overthrew Hawaiian sovereignty.*

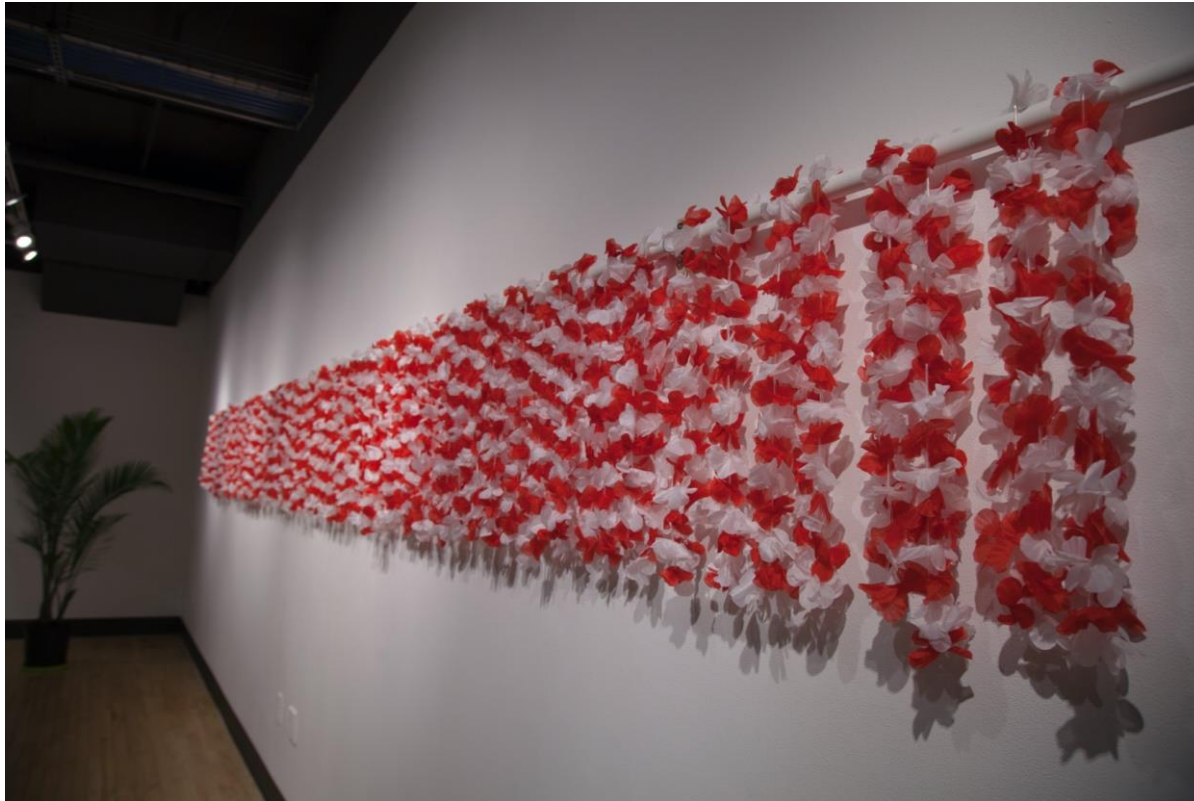
**Keywords:** Hawai‘i, eco-tourism, militarism, paradise

*Lani Asuncion is a Boston-based artist with roots in Appalachia who grew up in O‘ahu, Hawai‘i and Okinawa, Japan. They are a multimedia artist who performs in both public and private spaces using video, sound, projection, and movement to create a visual language that comes from their identity as a queer, multicultural, third-generation Filipinx artist. Asuncion’s work explores how new media can be used in transmedia storytelling to visually create a dialogue around eco-tourism throughout Hawai‘i and the many connections it has to biopolitics and militarism throughout American history to the present day. They use new technologies to create conversations, connections, and decolonized spaces in the face of colonial and imperial ideologies.*

Asuncion | Duty-Free Paradise



Figure 1. View of a portion of the exhibition, *Duty-Free Paradise*, Radial Gallery, Department of Art and Design, University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio, January 22 – February 25, 2021. Courtesy of the artist



The wall text accompanying this work reads: *Please take a lei as you enter the exhibition. Mahalo nui.* Visitors from Japan make up the largest number of inbound international arrivals in Hawai'i in a typical, non-pandemic year.<sup>2</sup> In September 2020, 79 visitors arrived in Hawai'i from Japan compared to 143,928 visitors from Japan during September 2019. From September through December 2020, the number of Japanese arrivals declined 74.9 percent compared with the same period the previous year.

Figure 2. *79 Visitors*, 2021. Seventy-nine red and white plastic leis, 12 x 25 feet. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 3. *Golden Token: Bango 720740*, 2021. Video (11:35 trt), print. Courtesy of the artist

This work is a wall print with a design based on a 2018 entrance pass to the Dole Plantation Pineapple Garden Maze accompanied by a video of a first-person exploration of the maze itself. The Dole Plantation’s website boasts that its 2.5-mile botanical maze is composed of 14,000 Hawaiian plants and was the world’s largest maze as of 2008.<sup>3</sup> The plantation is located near Whitmore Village in Wahiawa, where the artist’s family lives. The land in this district has been controlled by the U.S. military since 1888; and in 1941, the Computer and Telecommunications Area Master Station Pacific (NCTAMS PAC) was moved there. The wall print has been edited to leave only the phrase “Secret Stations,” echoing the histories of the land the Garden Maze’s grounds are located on. The number 720740 is the number of the ticket Asuncion received the day they toured the garden maze in 2018, and bango is the Japanese word for number as well as the name of the plantation ID tags made of brass or aluminum that had a number stamped on one side. They were usually worn on a chain around a plantation laborer’s neck, and the shape was typically determined by the worker’s race. Every Hawaiian plantation used the bango system, which was borrowed from the slave tag system used in the South before the American Civil War. Laborers were required to wear their bango during working hours, and plantation accounts were kept by bango number rather than the employee’s name. The gold token in the video was produced by the United States to commemorate Hawai’i’s statehood in 1959. One side has the Great Seal of the State of Hawai’i and the other side depicts the United States of America Seal, while the entire coin was packaged with a survey of flora and fauna found in the islands.

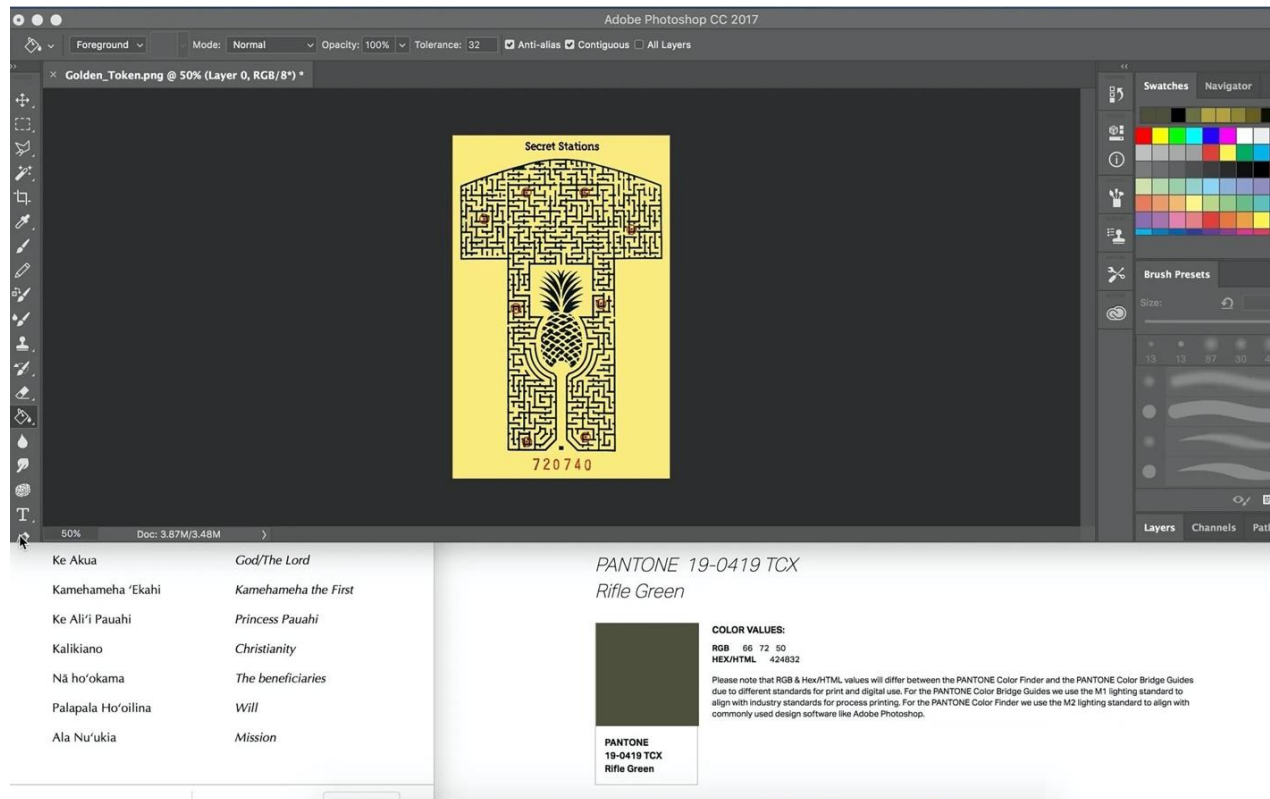


Figure 4. Video still from performance background for HEX 424832, 2021. Courtesy of the artist

This video still is from the interactive background used in *HEX 424832*, a virtual performance hosted by Blue House Arts at Front Street Gallery in Dayton, Ohio, that took place on Friday, February 5, 2021. A “hex” can be a spell, a curse, or a prefix for color numbers in the hexadecimal color-coding system, a tool for identifying exact colors across other systems including RGB, HSL, HSV, CMYK, and PANTONE. The color identified as Hex #424832 is the same color as PANTONE 19-0419 TPX - Rifle Green. The ‘Rifle’ refers to the Honolulu Rifles, an armed militia that participated in the overthrow of 1893. The performance points to the deeply layered yet invisible way militarism is embedded in economic and political planning in Hawai‘i and the influences it has on everyday life. A total of 11 military bases are on O‘ahu, Maui, Kaua‘i, and the Big Island, many of which were active in WWII.



In this piece, a fresh pineapple that was custom-crated by Asuncion six years ago represents the last pineapple plantation in 2007 in Hawai'i and the canneries that eventually closed, the last one on Maui in 2017 before moving overseas to the Philippines and Puerto Rico. This piece stands as a symbol of the last pineapple crop marking the end of 146 years of the production of this fruit as a monocrop in Hawai'i.

Figure 5. *The Local*, 2015–2021. Six-year-old petrified pineapple, screws, wood. As exhibited in *Duty-Free Paradise*, Radial Gallery, Department of Art and Design, University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio, January 22 – February 25, 2021. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 6. *Fair Use Hawaii*, 2021. Liteboxer machine, palm plants, paint, foam gym mats, three-channel video (11:26 trt). Courtesy of the artist

This work (figure 6) critiques the commodification of Hawai'i as an escape to paradise for Americans living overseas on the U.S. "mainland" and tourist activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The video addresses the ways eco-tourism advertising perpetuates neoliberal economic and political gain through the exploitation of Hawai'i's resources, land, and peoples. The performative action of boxing reflects the cultural importance of boxing in Hawai'i since the 1920s, as well as Asuncion's training at the Waipahu Boxing Club from 1994–97. It also reflects the struggle for a sense of identity as a local and for the independence of Hawai'i as a sovereign nation. In certain sections of the video, the figure of the artist in the foreground is blurry while the background is in focus. With this choice, Asuncion deliberately shifts the viewer's gaze, challenging the way the viewer's mind is trained to expect what is far away to appear blurry and what is closer to be in focus. From 1929–33, the Hawaii Pineapple Company (now Dole Food Company) attempted to use the brown female body as a source of allure when marketing their pineapples, racially eroticizing their bodies. By flipping this optical trope, adopted by the cinematic tradition, *Fair Use Hawaii* creates a sense of control by the artist, subverting the gaze of the viewer away from the performer's body and onto the idealized background.

"Aloha 'Oe" playing in the video as background music

"Aloha-Oe, Until We Meet Again" by Goombay Dance Band

"Hi'ilawe – Aloha 'Oe" by Gabby Pahinui (1972)

"Aloha 'Oe" by Elvis Presley

"Aloha 'Oe" (Acapella) by Tavita Te'o

"Aloha 'Oe" – The Kawaiahao Church Choir (1970)

YouTube video: *Hawaii, USA by drone* [4K]<sup>4</sup>

Talunan is the name of a popular Filipino chicken soup, but in Tagalog the word also means “loser” or “defeated.” Sabong, another Tagalog word, translates to “cockfight.” Despite the name, talunan soup is sometimes made from the winning cock of the brood when it is too old to fight. This work reflects the nuances of war, violence, and sport and how these exist in places like Hawai‘i and the Philippines where imperialism and U.S. militarization has played a role in shaping past and current histories.



Figure 7. *Talunan sabong (defeated cock)*, 2007. Seven pairs of preserved rooster feet, 19th-century square-cut nails, beeswax-coated string, leather, wire, wood. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 8. *Talunan sabong (defeated cock) (detail)*, 2007. Seven pairs of preserved rooster feet, 19th-century square-cut nails, beeswax-coated string, leather, wire, wood, 7 x 5 x 3 inches. Courtesy of the artist

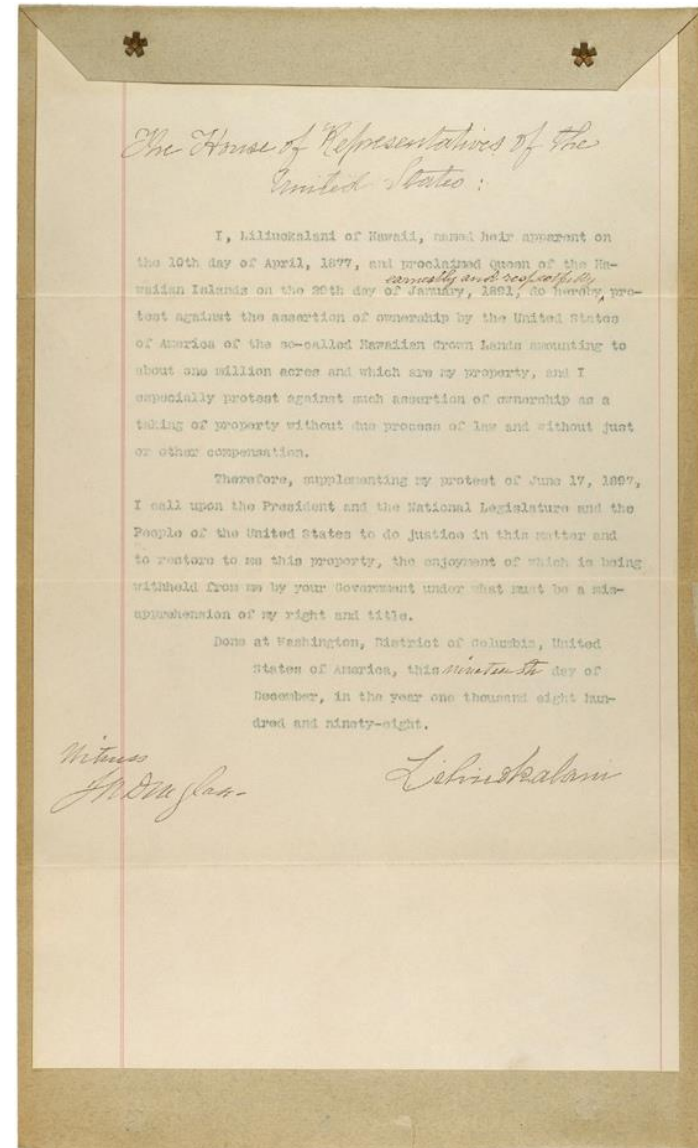


Figure 9. *In place where she stood*, 2021. Pineapple-printed slippas and dirt, 24 x 24 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist

This work was influenced by a letter Queen “Lydia” Lili‘uokalani wrote while imprisoned at ‘Iolani Palace following the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy by a Euro-American oligarchy that desired greater control of the Hawaiian government on January 17, 1893: “Alas! My love for my homeland and my beloved people. The bones of my bones, the blood of my blood. Aloha! Aloha! Aloha!” The United States annexed the Republic of Hawai‘i in 1898 during the presidency of William McKinley. In this work, pineapples are printed on pink slippers, or ‘slippas’ as they are called in Hawaiian pidgin, to reference Queen Lili‘uokalani and the stand she took against her overthrow through letters of protest. The text is written in dirt, or ‘āina, the Hawaiian word meaning ‘land.’<sup>5</sup> The statement in the piece, “*blood of my blood, bones of my bones,*” alludes to the land and the people being one in the same.

This letter was written by the Queen to U.S. president William McKinley protesting her overthrow and asking for the return of her sovereign title over Hawai'i. The letter influenced the text featured in *In Place Where She Stood* (fig. 9).

Figure 10. Letter from Liliuokalani, Queen of Hawaii to U.S. House of Representatives protesting U.S. assertion of ownership of Hawaii, December 19, 1898. Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration 306653.





*Duty-Free Paradise* was made possible by a 2020 Live Arts Boston grant from the Boston Foundation, and Blue House Arts in collaboration with Front Street Art supported by Culture Works in Dayton, Ohio.

Fig. 11. View of a portion of the exhibition, *Duty-Free Paradise*, Radial Gallery, Department of Art and Design, University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio, January 22 – February 25, 2021. Courtesy of the artist

## Asuncion | Duty-Free Paradise

Lani Asuncion has a working art studio in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, one block from the family home of James Dole. Their work was included in the group exhibition CONTACT ZONE (2018), curated by Michael Rooks and Keola Rapozo and organized by the nonprofit Pu‘uhonua Society at the Honolulu Museum of Art School. Asuncion has performed their work for the Boston Women’s Film Festival (2017) at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and their work was screened in Another Athens Film Programme (2014), a traveling series run by Interview

Room 11 (Edinburgh, Scotland) and SNETHA (Athens, Greece). In 2016, they received the Dame Joan Sutherland Fund Fellowship from the American Australian Association, and in 2020 they received a Live Arts Boston grant from the Boston Foundation. Asuncion is founder and organizer of Digital Soup, a collective in Boston which offers public, tech-supportive spaces for AAPI and BIPOC queer artists to perform and share new and experimental performative works in video, sound, and performance.

Mahalo nui loa to Nicholas Arnold and Anthony Zaninno for believing in this work and for all their help in making this exhibition possible in such hard times.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Duty-Free Paradise Performance at Front Street Gallery,” YouTube, accessed August 27, 2021, <https://youtu.be/DR-7NUm2DOW>.

<sup>2</sup> “Hawai‘i Visitor Statistics Released for September 2020,” Hawai‘i Tourism Authority (website), October 29, 2020, <https://www.hawaiitourismauthority.org/news/news-releases/2020/hawaii-visitor-statistics-released-for-september-2020/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Pineapple Garden Maze,” Dole Plantation (website), accessed August 27, 2021, <https://www.doleplantation.com/worlds-largest-maze/>.

<sup>4</sup> “Hawaii, USA by drone [4K],” Drone Snap, 7 June 2019, last accessed 29 April 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XZOgggWRhI>.

<sup>5</sup> “Āina”, Ulukau Hawaiian Electronic Library, accessed August 26, 2021, <http://wehewehe.org/gsd12.85/cgi-bin/hdict?!=en>.