

HALENA KAPUNI-REYNOLDS

Exhibition Review

***Nā Māla: Layered Landscapes of Kona Coffee Heritage*,
curated by Mina Elison. Donkey Mill Art Center, Kona,
Hawai‘i, October 24, 2020 – December 12, 2020.**

Abstract

*One such place on Hawai‘i island where the arts are being pushed into new directions is the Donkey Mill Art Center (DMAC), a community art center founded by the Hōlualoa Foundation for Arts and Culture (HFAC) and located in the town of Hōlualoa, in the ahupua‘a (a type of Hawaiian land division) of Keauhou, in the moku (district) of North Kona. Although the institution’s name is unassuming, connoting the region’s coffee history and honoring the historic Donkey Mill that serves as the flagship building and campus of the organization, DMAC functions as a vital center of creative production in this part of Hawai‘i island. Throughout the year, DMAC organizes classes, demonstrations, workshops, presentations, and most importantly for this review, exhibitions that celebrate various art mediums, including but not limited to ceramics, drawing, painting, printmaking, mixed media, fiber arts, metal works, photography, and Hawaiian arts. In 2020, *Nā Māla: Layered Landscapes of Kona Coffee Heritage*, was one of DMAC’s in-house exhibits, organized by Communications Director and Curator Mina Elison.*

Keywords: *Hawai‘i, exhibition, Kona, landscapes, Donkey Mill Art Center, place*

Many believe that the nexus for the arts in Hawai‘i is the island of O‘ahu, the most populated and developed island in our archipelago. As a Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) born and raised on the island of Hawai‘i, I believe that this is not the case. While it is true that there are more museums, galleries, and artists working on O‘ahu than any other Hawaiian island, to expand our purview of the arts in the Hawaiian islands as a whole requires a “de-centering” of O‘ahu and the highlighting of innovative work by artists and curators who live on the other islands. By intentionally visiting and writing about these lesser-known art scenes, we gain a better grasp of the diversity of artists and curators—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—who draw inspiration from working and living in this archipelago. Furthermore, we achieve a greater understanding of what the arts look like in Hawai‘i and how they continue to play a vital role in our communities.

One place on Hawai‘i island where the arts are being pushed into new directions is the Donkey Mill Art Center (DMAC), a community art center founded by the Hōlualoa Foundation

for Arts and Culture and located in the town of Hōlualoa, in the *ahupuaʻa* (land division) of Keauhou, in the *moku* (district) of North Kona. Although the center’s name—which acknowledges the region’s history with relation to coffee by taking the name of the historic Donkey Mill building—is unassuming, DMAC functions as a vital center of creative production for the region. Throughout the year, DMAC organizes classes, demonstrations, workshops, presentations, and exhibitions that celebrate various media including ceramics, drawing, painting, prints, mixed media, fiber, metal, photography, and Hawaiian arts. One of DMAC’s exhibits in 2020 was *Nā Māla: Layered Landscapes of Kona Coffee Heritage*, organized by DMAC’s communications director and curator Mina Elison.

Nā Māla featured the works of 19 Kona-based artists, each invited by Elison to produce an artwork that explores the layered natural, cultural, and agricultural landscapes of Kona as they relate to the artist’s own positionality (i.e., Kanaka Maoli, long-time non-Hawaiian resident, recent transplant, etc.). The exhibition was shown in DMAC’s Donkey Mill gallery space, a building with rustic charm and historical significance to the region, having opened as a coffee mill in 1954. The featured artists were Jake Boggs, Robert Corsair, Tara Cronin, Heide Cumes, Angaea Cuna, Akiko Cutlip, Michael Cutlip, Eric Edwards, Bailey A. Ferguson, Pier Fichfeux, Patsy Greenwell, Jesse Kekoa Kahoonei, Kanani Kaulukukui Jr., Chris Lindborg, Kasey Lindley, Gerald Lucena, Kahaka’io Ravenscraft, Laurel Schultz, and Hana Yoshihata. Each work of art was accompanied by a wall label that included an artist statement and artist bio. I appreciated reading the artists’ statements as opposed to a curator’s interpretation of their art, as they allowed me to learn first-hand about their practices and inspirations.

Although the exhibition’s title suggested that its focus was “Kona Coffee Heritage,” the scope of the artwork in the show was much broader. In some ways, this phrase in the title undermined the complexity of the narratives and artworks presented. Yet, through the terms “*nā māla*” (the gardens) and “layered landscapes” the exhibition’s title also captured the curatorial emphasis on ‘āina (land), cultural histories, and contemporary experiences. *Nā māla* refers to the Kona region’s Indigenous agricultural past and its successful place-based methods of growing food and other plant resources in locations lacking perennial streams, rivers, and deep topsoil. For individuals with Hawaiian cultural acuity, *nā māla* also conjures images of Kūāhewa, the vast agricultural fields cultivated by Kamehameha I on the slopes of Hualālai in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. These Indigenous field systems served as the basis for the development of the Kona coffee industry decades later. For Kānaka Maoli from Kona, these ancestral lands continue to be interwoven into their contemporary identities. The term “layered landscapes” in the title builds on these Indigenous histories by alluding to the accumulation of histories, cultures, and peoples in Kona over the centuries.



Figure 1. Jesse Kekoa Kahoonei, *Kokole*, 2020. ʻŌhiʻa wood and *hala*, 58"x2.5"x2.5". Collection of Heide and Jeffrey Cumes. Photograph by Eric Edwards. Courtesy of the Donkey Mill Art Center

The artworks in the exhibition provided multiple points of contrast and comparison with regard to how artists from different backgrounds relate to Kona’s dynamic landscape. Jesse Kekoa Kahoonei’s *Kokole* (Fig. 1), a hand-carved ‘ō‘ō (digging stick), spoke directly to his deeply rooted genealogical ties to Kona. The detailed crisscross pattern that Kahoonei exquisitely carved into the wood, as well as the *lauhala* (pandanus leaf) woven on the handle of the piece, embodied the “weaving” together of family, land, and artistic practice. In his artist statement, Kahoonei explained that the term *kokole* refers to the fifth generation of *kalo* (taro) to be harvested. As an ‘ō‘ō, *Kokole* offered viewers a celebration of Hawaiian agricultural prowess, and an opportunity to imagine how *kalo* was, and continues to be, grown and harvested in Kona and elsewhere in Hawai‘i using simple yet effective tools. Kahoonei’s work was also political; in his statement, the artist identified himself as a “fifth-generation Hawaiian since the overthrow of our Kingdom” and as someone who persists in spite of the colonial violence that Kānaka Maoli have endured. Thus, *Kokole* served as a fervent reminder of Indigenous presence and modernity in Kona.

Kasey Lindley’s *Kona Phenomena #1* (2020) and *Kona Phenomena #2* (2020) were abstract works—cutout pieces of paper painted with watercolors—representing the artist’s lived experience of looking, listening, and creating in Kona. The colors, patterns, and shapes in each work suggested an array of settings that one may experience along the winding roads of Hōlualoa or the scorching *pāhoehoe* lava fields of Kona’s *makai* (coastal) region, including flourishing coral reefs, stands filled with tropical fruits, and colorful flora of various hues and textures. Whereas Kahoonei spoke to his deep ancestral roots in Kona, Lindley’s paper works evoked ephemerality and vibrancy in ways that allowed the viewer to imagine the experiences of a recent arrival to Kona.

Other works represented points on a spectrum of lived experiences in Hawai‘i. On one end were Kānaka Maoli artists, including Kahoonei, Ravenscraft (*Eia ke Ko‘i!*, 2020), and Kaulukukui (*Kealaokeakua*, 2020), whose families have lived on these islands for hundreds of generations and whose works speak to that ancestral connection. On the other end were Lindley and Cutlip (*Untitled – ‘Āina series #9*, 2020, and *Untitled [Mauna Loa Collaboration with artists Pier FichEFEUX]*, 2020), whose connections to Kona are recent and speak to a different relationship to those lands. “Layered landscapes” can also be thought of along this artistic spectrum, as the depth of one’s connection to specific ‘āina can have a significant impact on the ways that relationships to the natural world are interpreted through art.

Another example of how place-based relationships can inform artistic production is Gerald Lucena’s stunning piece *Winter Squash, Bitter Melons, and Winged Beans* (Fig. 2), a multimedia artwork utilizing watercolor, masking tape, cotton string, ink, glass vases, and dried wood. Lucena (b. 1967) is not Kanaka Maoli but was raised on a coffee farm in the town of Captain Cook in South Kona. In his statement, he reflects on his childhood connections to

Kona’s lands, as well as on the meaning of these lands amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The title of the work refers to three drawings of vegetables that the artist grew during the pandemic as part of his self-described “garden therapy.” Each drawing included layers of burnt pieces of masking tape mimicking the volcanic soil of Kona, as well as cotton strings that were stitched into the drawings’ paper. The ends of these strings were placed in vases filled with ink, resulting in the ink bleeding up into the paper at the base of each drawing. For the artist, the dried wood and the burnt masking tape represented death and decay in contrast to the vibrancy of the growing vegetables, while the stitching represented “connecting to the landscape.” The strings absorbing the ink symbolized knowledge and nourishment and evoked the ways in which ‘āina, literally translated as “that which feeds,” sustains our communities. Lucena’s piece reminded viewers that an individual’s relationship to place is not something that is intrinsic; it must be desired and actively cultivated over time.



Figure 2. Gerald Lucena, *Winter Squash, Bitter Melons, and Winged Beans*, 2020. Watercolor on paper, masking tape, cotton string, ink, glass vases, and dried wood, Each panel 22" x 30", variable dimensions on wood pieces, glass vases, and arrangements. Collection of the artist. Photograph by Eric Edwards. Courtesy of the Donkey Mill Art Center

Nā Māla: Layered Landscapes of Kona Coffee Heritage was a thoughtfully curated exhibition that offered viewers a wealth of ideas and information to unpack regarding the varying degrees of connection to place that exist even within a specific island community. *Nā Māla* is a model for how museums and community centers across Hawai‘i island can use art to prompt meaningful dialogues around the ways in which we all relate to this archipelago. I hope Alison revisits the theme of layered landscapes while expanding her curatorial scope to consider how artists relate to other parts of Hawai‘i island, such as Kohala, Hāmākua, Hilo, Puna, and Ka‘ū. How do artists in these *moku* (districts) imagine and depict their connections to ‘āina? How does their art compare with works created by the Kona artists for *Nā Māla*? Hawai‘i island’s art scene is growing and has much to offer for art scholars and enthusiasts.

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