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Kaili Chun: The Native Artist as Storyteller and Steward of the Land and the Water

Abstract
This Research Note proceeds from an interview with Native Hawaiian artist Kaili Chun following her presentation at the "Pacific Island Worlds: Oceanic Dis/Positions" symposium, which took place at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 2018. The conversation delved into Chun's interactive installation practice through a discussion of three of her artworks: Veritas *(2012),* Hulali i ka lā *(2017), and* Uwē ka lani, ola ka honua *(2021). Each of these pieces celebrates the importance and value of water in Native ecologies, and proposes to view Native practices of stewardship of the land as pathways towards a more sustainable future. Ultimately, the conversation draws a portrait of the Native artist as a storyteller and steward of the land.*

Keywords: *installation art, Indigenous art, water, stewardship, Native ecologies, storytelling, Hawai'i, Australia, Torres Strait Islands*

In March of the second year of the pandemic, while at home in the Indian Ocean, I met via Zoom with Native Hawaiian artist Kaili Chun (b. 1962), who was calling from the Hawaiian island of O'ahu. The setting of our communications—across oceans—turned out to be representative of our conversation, which revolved around waterways and transoceanic crossings of the digital, intellectual, and sensory types. In the rich and complex body of work that Kaili Chun has produced over the years, water—and water's centrality to Indigenous lives—has been a recurring theme. The three artworks that are presented here are emblematic of Chun's project to honor water as an important element of Native ecologies. Water is celebrated within these pieces as a connective vector between people and with the ancestors. Water also functions as a point of departure for a larger investigation of place and its genealogies.

I first met Chun at the "Pacific Island Worlds: Oceanic Dis/Positions" symposium that took place at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in the spring of 2018. At this event, which gathered Pacific Studies scholars and artists from

Figure 1. Kaili Chun, *Veritas* (detail), 2012. Fifty steel cells, each 96 x 8 x 8 in., Waimānalo Beach, O'ahu. Photograph by Kapulani Landgraf. Courtesy of the artist

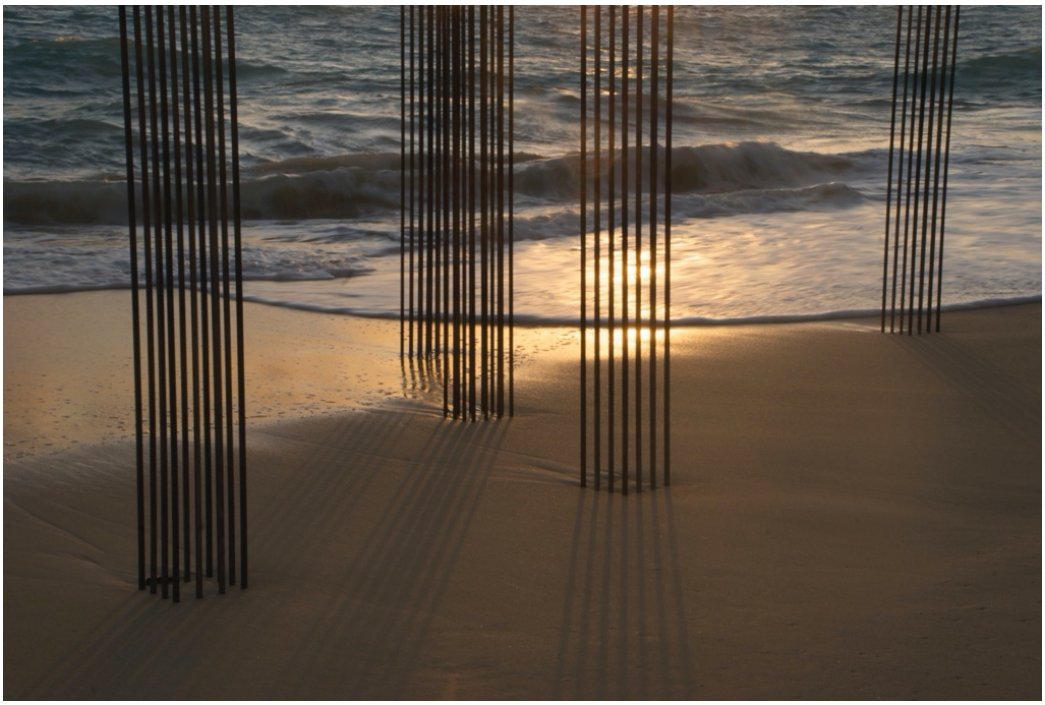

Figure 2. Kaili Chun, *Veritas* (detail), 2012. Steel cells, each 96 x 8 x 8 in., Waimānalo Beach, O'ahu. Photograph by Kapulani Landgraf. Courtesy of the artist

around the United States, Chun presented two interactive installations entitled *Veritas* (2012) and *Hulali i ka lā* (2017).

Chun's 2012 installation *Veritas* consisted of fifty steel cells, each made up of eight-foot-tall vertical rods placed temporarily on the shore of Waimānalo on the island of Oʻahu (Figs. 1–3). The selection of this beach as the site of the installation was highly strategic and integral to the piece: art historian and critic Margo L. Machida observes that the liminality of the beach as the meeting point of land and sea and as a historic point of contact between people and cultures—along with its appeal to tourists and foreign homebuyers alike—makes it a "privileged site of protest and occupation" for Native Hawaiians.[1]

Figure 3: Kaili Chun, *Veritas* (detail), 2012. Steel cells, each 96 x 8 x 8 in., Waimānalo Beach, Oʻahu. Photo by Kapulani Landgraf. Courtesy of the artist

The steel cells, Chun explains, were initially meant to represent the ruins of the Industrial Age brought about by settlers to the islands, and to allude to the settlers themselves as foreign bodies lodged into the Native land. However, the piece underwent an unexpected metamorphosis. In the early hours of the morning following the piece's installation, the steel structures started falling, one after the other—under the combined actions of the elements as the high tide softened the sand—and, perhaps, due also some metaphysical presence.

At this moment, Chun realized that the piece "was no longer about the Other. This was about us. This was about our people . . . this was no longer in my control . . . the ancestors [were] coming in and claiming" the space of the shore, which, for decades, has been occupied and owned by non-Natives.[2] This material and conceptual transmutation could be best perceived through sensory cues: the light of the full moon, the uncanny absence of wind on the typically windswept beach, the uncharacteristically glassy surface of the water, the quietness, and the sudden, intermittent thuds of the cells falling down onto the sand "like dead bodies" (Fig. 4).[3] These sounds accentuated a conceptual transformation of the installation: from the cells representing the colonizing ways of the foreigner to their embodiment of our kūpuna (ancestors) becoming fallen warriors, lying prone upon the shore.

Machida calls the collapse of *Veritas*'s steel pillars a "metaphor for the Hawaiian people's capacity to move through and beyond the imposed structures of conditions and institutions that they did not create but are unable to avoid."[4] However, during the course of our conversation, Chun provided me with a different interpretation of the event. In her view, the cells, which were initially meant to represent colonizers, came to embody the ancestral connection that pervades the shore—they became beacons of, and to, the ancestors. This radical shift in the intended meaning of the work opens up questions about the agency of the art object: can it exceed the artist's agency? Chun might agree that it does, as for her the role of the Native artist is precisely to channel the ancestral forces that animate the landscape—to steward the land and tell its stories. Stewardship is achieved here through an aesthetic that is resolutely contemporary. While informed by traditional Hawaiian iconography, Chun's use of modern materials and techniques strives to re-articulate this heritage in an effort to connect Hawai'i's past with its futures.

Figure 4. Kaili Chun, *Veritas* (detail), 2012. Steel cells, each 96 x 8 x 8 in., Waimānalo Beach, Oʻahu. Detail of "fallen warriors" with Makapuʻu Lighthouse in the background. Photograph by Erin Yuasa. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 5. Kaili Chun, prototypes for components of *Hulali i ka lā*, 2017. Copper, of varying sizes. Photograph by Kaili Chun. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 6. Kaili Chun, *Hulali i ka lā*, final installation at the Prince Waikīkī Hotel, Kālia, Honolulu, 2017. Copper. Photograph by Linny Morris. Courtesy of the artist

Chun's 2017 participatory installation *Hulali i ka lā* responded to a similar impetus to reveal space as a palimpsest construct, a conglomerate of imbricated and storied layers—at once existing as time forward and time past. *Hulali i ka lā* took place at the Hawai'i Prince Hotel Waikīkī—constructed on the site of a former muliwai—in Kalia, O'ahu. A muliwai is an estuary, a place where fresh water meets salt water, a threshold between the land and the ocean. For this piece, Chun brought together the hotel's employees and their relatives to participate in the creation of approximately 850 hand-hammered copper pieces shaped like hīnana, a fish that has the capacity to swim upstream because of its characteristically elongated belly fin (Fig. 5). The copper sculptures were suspended from the ceiling of the hotel lobby and arranged in an undulating pattern that reimagined the flow of the defunct freshwater stream on which the hotel is located (Figs. 6–7). Light bouncing off the hammered finishes of the copper forms replicated the optical effect of sunlight on moving water—the title of the installation, *Hulali i ka lā*, means "shimmering in the sun." The site of the hotel was thus re-activated as a muliwai, a place of meeting and transformation.

Hulali i ka lā was commissioned by the hotel on the occasion of a renovation of its premises. Chun saw this transformation as an opportunity to share knowledge about Hawaiian culture and history with an audience of mainly non-Hawaiian participants, who would themselves become the "new storytellers of the place" (Figs. 8–9).[5]

A. Mārata Tamaira has underscored the tensions between Western and Indigenous ways of knowing and understanding the world, particularly with regard to the land, that *Hulali i ka lā* makes visible. "From a Western perspective," she notes, "land is viewed as a commodity to be domesticated, organized, and ultimately dominated, while for Kānaka Maoli [Native Hawaiians] it is a cherished ancestor."[6] While unapologetically occupying space, Chun's installations stop short of claiming ownership of the land. Rather, her work fosters the idea of a common ground, a shared land sustaining different forms of life that ought to be in synergy with one another. Through her work Chun asks, "How can we take care of our resources and our people?"

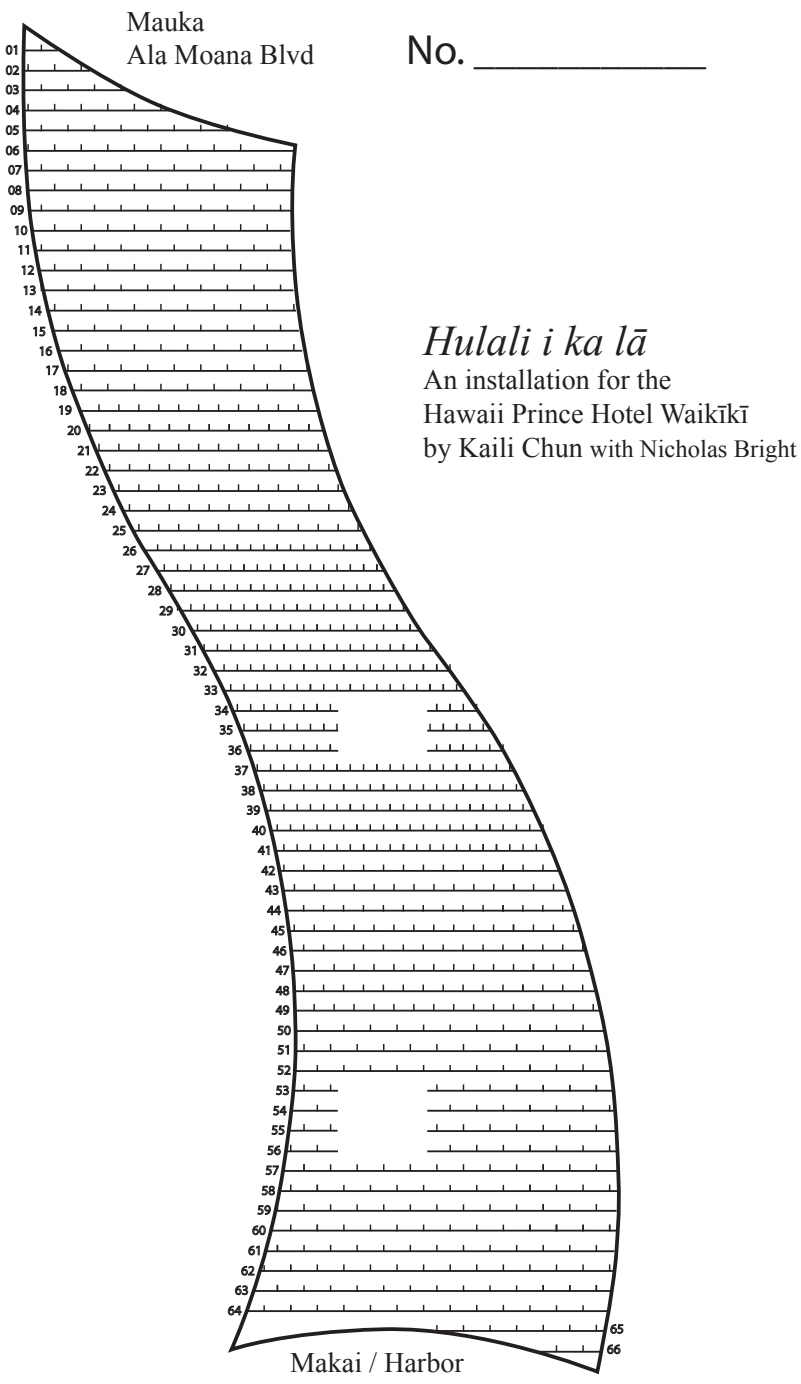

Figure 7. Kaili Chun, *Hulali i ka lā*, 2017. Installation plan, Prince Waikīkī Hotel, Kālia. Template of the "hammering cards" given to each of the 625 individuals who hammered a copper "fish" element for *Hulali i ka lā*. The copper pieces were uniquely numbered so that each person would know exactly where their hammered copper was to be located. The installation diagram was marked with these numbers and the corresponding locations were indicated on the installation's on-site layout. Drawing courtesy of Nicolas Bright

Figures 8 and 9. Participants at one of twenty hammering sessions for Kaili Chun's installation *Hulali i ka lā*, held over a four-month period in 2017. Prince Waikīkī Hotel employees, their families, guests, and others associated with the hotel hammered copper elements to be used in the installation. Photographs by Nicholas Bright. Courtesy of the artist

Both *Veritas* and *Hulali i ka lā* allowed Chun to attend to the particularity of singular colonial narratives and genealogies. In her latest work—presented at the 10th Asia Pacific Triennial at the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art in December 2021–April 2022—Chun put different points of colonial settlement and exploitation across the Pacific in relation to one another. *Uwē ka lani, ola ka honua* (Fig. 10) is a participatory and interactive installation that foregrounds the sacredness of water as a common element of both Native Hawaiian and Aboriginal Australian cultures. Visitors to the triennial are invited to make their way through a futuristic landscape made up of 400 steel cables stretched from floor to ceiling, each including a glass vial. The vials contain samples of water—either freshwater or saltwater—collected by various Aboriginal and Indigenous communities of Australia and the Torres Strait Islands (Fig. 11).

Figure 10. Kaili Chun, *Uwē ka lani, ola ka honua*, 2021. Four hundred steel cables with water-filled glass vials. Installation for the 10th Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia. Photograph by Natasha Harth. Courtesy of the artist

Alternatively, the participants were also invited to send soil or detritus, to materialize the absence or scarcity of water and to suggest, in its absence, a source that has dried up. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, contact between the artist and each participant-collector, or "steward" as Chun calls them, was established via a paper form through which each steward shared a water-related story about themselves. Each participant also sent along a local water sample. In the installation, each glass vial is etched with a unique number that enables visitors to access information about the individual who collected the sample, along with the name, stories, sounds, and genealogy of the corresponding body of water.

The title of the work, *Uwē ka lani, ola ka honua*, is a Hawaiian proverb that translates as "when the sky weeps, the earth lives." It references the interconnectedness of all living beings and the convergences between Aboriginal and Native Hawaiian experiences. The steel cables holding the water vials are inclined to resemble rainfall, reinforcing the idea of water as a connection between the sky, the land, and the people (Fig. 12). The installation functions as an archive of a new genre. Moving away from the systematicity expected of a traditional archive, Chun's water archive is organic in both its aesthetics and its

content, inspired by the cycles of human and non-human life, and laden with affect through the personal narratives that were encoded in the vials. The futuristic inflections of the piece remind us that this archive is oriented onward—it is about looking back at Indigenous practices of stewardship of land and water that have proven their valor and efficacity, in order to inspire a more balanced and restorative approach to our earth in the future.

Figure 11. Kaili Chun, *Uwē ka lani, ola ka honua* (detail), 2021. Four hundred steel cables with water-filled glass vials. Installation for the 10th Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia. Photograph by Natasha Harth. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 12. Kaili Chun, *Uwē ka lani, ola ka honua* (detail), 2021. Four hundred steel cables with water-filled glass vials. Installation for the 10th Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia. Photograph by Natasha Harth. Courtesy of the artist

With this new work, which will be on view through April 25, 2022, Chun extends the geographic range of her interest, engaging with the Indigenous peoples of Australia and Torres Strait Islands to foreground comparative, interdependent histories of different bodies of water across the Pacific. While mobilizing a transpacific lens, she remains attentive to the specificity of particular locales, demonstrating a renewed investment in restoring a sense of place eroded by a hundred years of colonialism.

Axelle Toussaint is a PhD candidate in visual studies at UC Santa Cruz. She holds an LLM from UC Hastings College of the Law and an MA in art and design history and theory from the New School. Her current research examines colonial and postcolonial experiences of trauma and fragmentation in the islands of the western Indian Ocean, and their mediation through visual culture, performance, and imagination.

Notes

[1] Margo L. Machida, "Pacific Itineraries: Islands and Oceanic Imaginaries in Contemporary Asian American Art," *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas* 3, no. 1–2 (March 14, 2017): 28, https://doi.org/10.1163/23523085-00302002. See also A. Mārata Tamaira, "Frames and Counterframes: Envisioning Contemporary Kanaka Maoli Art in Hawai'i," PhD diss., (Australian National University, 2015).
[2] Kaili Chun, interview by the author, March 6, 2021.
[3] Kaili Chun, interview.
[4] Machida, "Pacific Itineraries," 26.
[5] Noe Tanigawa, "Kaili Chun: Local/Global," *Hawai'i Public Radio*, May 9, 2017, https://www.hawaiipublicradio.org/arts-culture/2017-05-09/kaili-chun-local-global.
[6] A. Mārata Tamaira, "Frames and Counterframes," 109.