

A. MĀRATA TAMAIRA

Albert Wendt: Writing in Color

Abstract

*Between 2004 and 2008, celebrated Sāmoan writer Albert Wendt held the Citizens' Chair in the Department of English at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. By 2007, Wendt had completed twenty-seven paintings, each one a visual ode to the land and people of Hawai'i. These paintings were featured in his first art exhibition, held at the Louis Pohl Gallery in Honolulu in 2007. This piece is a review of that exhibition, *Le Amataga: The Beginning*, along with an interview with Wendt that took place soon after the exhibition opened.*

Keywords: *Albert Wendt, Sāmoan art, painting, Hawai'i, contemporary art*

Writing is the painting of the voice.
—Voltaire, 1764

Between 2004 and 2008, celebrated Sāmoan writer Albert Wendt held the Citizens' Chair in the Department of English at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Inspired by the light and landscape of his surroundings, Wendt used his time in the Islands as an opportunity to return to painting, a creative passion of his that had lay dormant under a distinguished, decades-long writing career. By 2007, Wendt had completed twenty-seven paintings, each one a visual ode to the land and people of Hawai'i. In that same year, Wendt and Kanaka Maoli artist Carl F. K. Pao began talking about the possibility of a future exhibition of the writer's paintings with Pao as curator. Pao took the idea to the Louis Pohl Gallery and the rest, as Wendt would perhaps say, was *le amataga*—the beginning.

What follows is an unpublished 2007 review I wrote of Wendt's first art exhibition, *Le Amataga: The Beginning*, as well as an interview I undertook with him not long after the exhibition opened.¹



Figure 1. Albert Wendt and his partner Reina Whitiri, Honolulu, 2007. Visible in the upper left is *Black Star 1: The Black Star Arrives*, date unknown. Acrylic and metallic pens on canvas, approx. 30 x 36 in. Photograph courtesy of Carl F.K. Pao

***Le Amataga: The Beginning*—An Exhibition by Albert Wendt**

A broad shaft of yellow, early-dawn light spreads across a canvas illuminating the soft contours of the Ko‘olau Range, while from above, a star—the Black Star—leaves an incandescent trail of red and yellow across an aubergine sky as it makes its final descent to earth. Words extending across the bottom of the frame seem to cradle the image: “The Black Star arrives over the Ko‘olau at dawn, traveling all the way from Aotearoa / It wants to meet all its Maoli (indigenous) cousins and learn the ways of the Aina (land).”

This painting, *Black Star 1: The Black Star Arrives* (Fig. 1), is one of twenty-seven works featured in an exhibition by highly acclaimed Sāmoan writer Albert Wendt. The exhibition, *Le Amataga: The Beginning*, was held at the Louis Pohl Gallery in downtown Honolulu between August 28 and September 21, 2007, and marked Wendt’s first public showing of his artwork. The opening night—which began with a group of singers and an oli (chant) given by Lilikalā Kame‘eleihiwa—drew students, art lovers, and a large contingent of the artist’s friends and family. Throngs of people milled around the paintings—some engaged in enthusiastic discussion regarding the artist’s use of light and color, while others simply stood quietly absorbing Wendt’s masterful blend of images and words.

The paintings are a testament to Wendt’s prolific creativity—all the works were produced during his tenure as Citizens’ Chair in the English Department at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, which began in 2004. As Wendt notes, the visual arts have always been close to his heart. During his time at teachers’ training college in New Zealand in the late 1950s, he immersed himself in art alongside Māori artists such as Selwyn Muru and Sandy Adsett. Indeed, it wasn’t until he began to concentrate more on his writing that his engagement with the visual arts began to wane, albeit temporarily. In 2000, Wendt returned to painting and sketching as if drawn to do so by unseen forces. He explains his journey back to the visual arts: “I couldn’t stop it . . . the urge to do it just came upon me; it was like a flood, and I couldn’t deny it anymore.”²

Wendt’s work, while thematically eclectic, retains a powerful sense of cohesion in that it is borne out of the connections he has made to the land and the people during his time in Hawai‘i. Key series of works are the *Pele* series (Fig. 2), inspired by Haunani-Kay Trask’s poem “Night is a Sharkskin Drum,” and the *Black Star* series (Fig. 3), which began as a collection of poems and ink drawings in Wendt’s *The Book of the Black Star* (2002). Through the artist’s palette, the



Figure 2. Albert Wendt, *E, Pele e 2*, 2005. Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 24 in., Pao-Tamaira Collection. Photograph by Carl F. K. Pao. Courtesy of the author

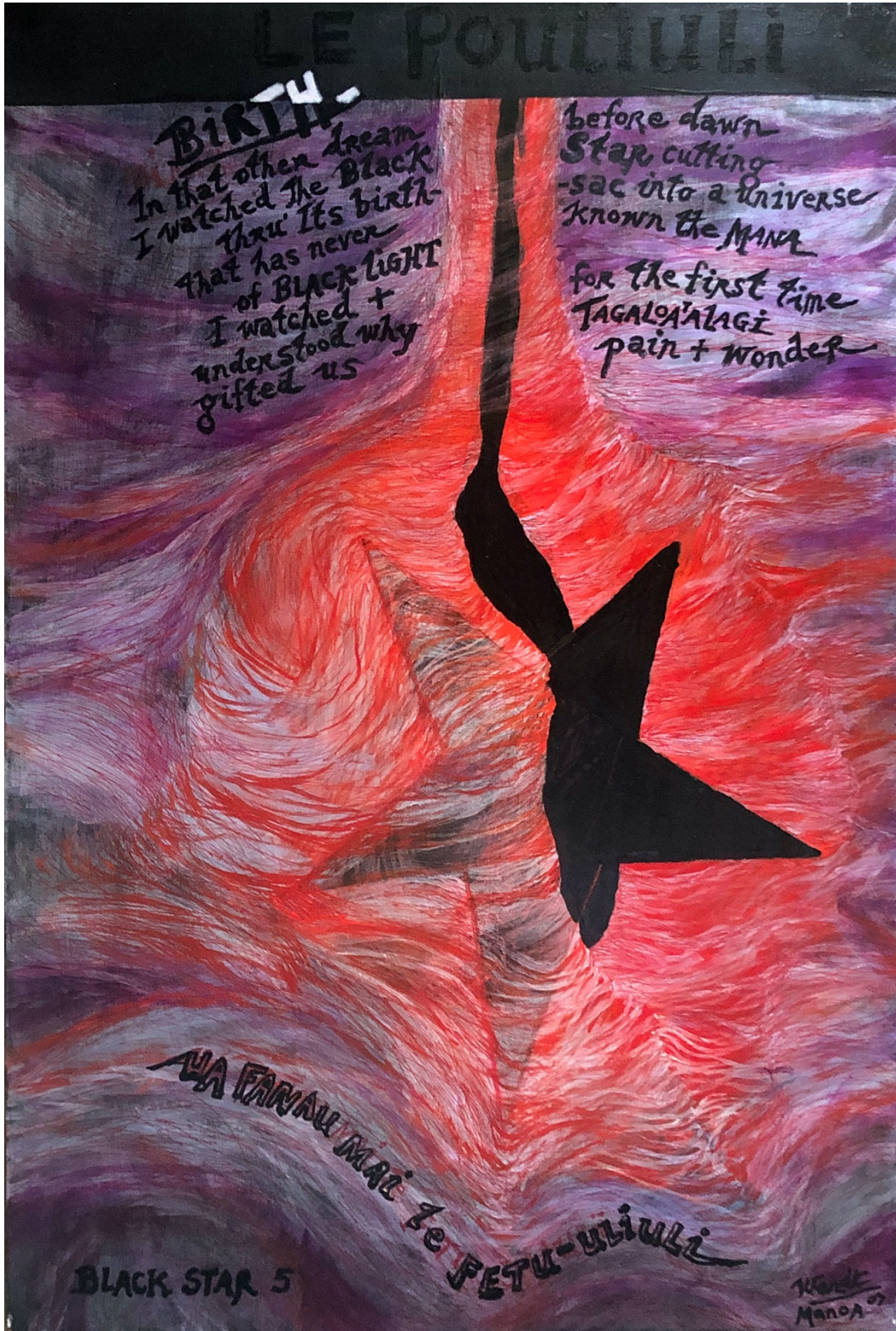


Figure 3. Albert Wendt, *Black Star 5*, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 24 in., Pao-Tamaira Collection. Photograph by Carl F. K. Pao. Courtesy of the author

Black Star resonates with a new kind of vibrancy. The Hawaiian landscape, which Wendt says is “absolutely marvelous and unusual,” is also a conspicuous motif throughout his work, particularly the Ko’olau Range (Fig. 4).³

The way in which Wendt utilizes both words and color in his paintings demonstrates a powerful fact: the visual arts and writing are connected; they are overlapping and complementary elements in the creative process. In explaining his dual engagement with both art forms, Wendt states simply, “I’m now a poet who uses color.”⁴ Over the last three decades, Wendt’s writing has provided critical insight into the Pacific Islander experience. Now, through “writing” in color, he offers us a new perspective—and it’s just the beginning.

An Interview with Albert Wendt

On a balmy August evening, a large crowd of people jostled for space in downtown Honolulu’s Louis Pohl Gallery to attend the opening exhibition of highly acclaimed Sāmoan novelist Albert Wendt. Titled *Le Amataga: The Beginning*, the exhibition comprised twenty-seven paintings and marked Wendt’s first public showing of his artwork. I met with Professor Wendt in 2007 to discuss the exhibition and his passion for the visual arts. The following excerpts are taken from a longer interview.

Mārata Tamaira (MT): Many people are familiar with you in terms of your novels and poetry, but what many don’t realize is that for many years now, you have been expressing yourself through the visual arts. How long have you been involved in the visual arts, and what inspired you to pursue this artistic medium?

Albert Wendt (AW): I’ve always loved art anyway, visual art, and when I was a boy, I did a lot of it. But, when I went to New Zealand, to the high school there, they wouldn’t let me do art. If you were sort of a bright student . . . you had to learn Latin (laughs). So, for five years I did Latin at this high school, while some of my friends did art—and I envied them a lot. And then I went to teachers’ training college, and I spent three years doing art there, which I loved very much, with Selwyn Muru and Sandy Adsett, and other Māori painters and artists. And after I left training college, I decided to concentrate on my writing. So, throughout university I didn’t do much art, I just did my writing. However, my love of art continued because I followed the development of art in New Zealand and the Pacific very

closely . . . It wasn't until the year 2000 that I began to do art again—I couldn't stop it (laughs). The urge to do it just came upon me; it was like a flood, and I couldn't deny it anymore. So, I went up the road to the French Art shop on Ponsonby Road [in Auckland, New Zealand], and I bought pencils, crayons . . . and I went home, and I spent nearly three months teaching myself how to draw again . . . I'm still teaching myself how to draw now.

MT: You've resided in Hawai'i for the last three and a half years. How has Hawai'i inspired your artwork?

AW: The shift to Hawai'i has been really tremendous. When I shift to another country . . . I write myself into the country. I use my writing to try and describe how I feel about the country. So, when I came to Hawai'i, I now had two ways of doing it: I can write . . . but I also decided I would start painting . . . When we got here, I had brought with me two small, ready-made canvases . . . so those were the two first canvases I painted here. Those were my first two paintings, since the 1960s. And when you saw the exhibition, that's the first one and I wrote it in Sāmoan and it's a tribute to the Ko'olau mountains, five minutes from my house. And while I was drawing the Ko'olau and doing these first paintings, I was also writing a very long poem called "The Ko'olau," which I read out at the end of the night at the exhibition. So, I was doing three things: teaching myself how to draw, painting, and then writing my poems. And those two small paintings then turned into, over the last three years, to twenty-seven paintings, ranging from small to quite large. And those were the paintings that I exhibited in this exhibition. They've all been done in Hawai'i. Hawai'i I find ideal to make art in. It's because even though I'm very committed to the Hawaiian political struggle, I'm also distant from it, because it's not my country. So, I can participate in that, but I can also distance myself from it and look at the country and paint. I find the landscape of Hawai'i absolutely marvelous and unusual. I also find the climate here ideal for painting. I can spend day and night painting just with my lavalava on and look at the Ko'olau, and the light is ideal. At this stage in my life, I only want to paint and draw. People say to me, "Don't you do other art things?" I say, "No, I don't have the time." I mean if I was young, I would try to do ceramics [and] sculpture, to find out what I'm good at doing. But I've always loved painting and drawing, so that is what I'm going to do, I just don't have the time to explore the other genre[s] of art.



Figure 4. Albert Wendt, *Ko'olau 4*, 2005. Acrylic and metallic pens on canvas, 36 x 24 in., Pao-Tamaira Collection. The text reads: "In the language of black moonlight / these mountains dream of / the first Kanaka Maoli / who loved + named them / the Ko'olau forever." Photograph by Carl F. K. Pao. Courtesy of the author

MT: What were your feelings about the exhibition?

AW: It was quite a privilege to have my first public exhibition . . . It's my first exhibition, so it's like publishing my first book. But in this case, it's more public. You know, you publish a book and people take it home and read it privately, right? So you don't see their reaction. The only reaction you see is when people critique it or write reviews on it or write essays on it. But you don't see the average reader's reaction to your book. However, once you put your twenty-seven paintings up in a gallery, it becomes very public. And, if you're there you can watch the reactions by people to the paintings and the impact on you is immediate. I was quite fearful about the exhibition and the reaction of the people . . . But the opening was a lovely family get-together.

MT: How does writing inform your painting and vice versa?

AW: I've used the stuff I've learned from writing poetry and novels [and] combined that with using color and shapes, so really what I've done is I'm now a poet that uses color and I combine that with language. And that's really the challenge for me now: How do you get a balance between written language and color and shape. And I know what's going to happen—the art itself, by me exploring it, will take me to wherever it's going to go. And at the moment, I feel very good about where it's going.

MT: Your poetry is a prominent feature of your artwork. Do the words come to you as you paint, or are they conceived of ahead of time?

AW: I thought I could just simply take some of my poems, which have already been published, and put them on the canvas—very difficult, I found. You're predetermining what is going to be on the canvas before you actually work it—you're actually predetermining the language—and then you are trying to force it onto the canvas and combine it with color. I found it's very difficult. Sometimes it's worked. Some of the paintings in the exhibition are from previous poems, but most of them are poems, which I make up as I do the paintings . . . I like it this way as I'm painting because you see it visually. When you alter it, you visually see the whole thing alter . . . I've always believed that when you alter something in the reality, you alter the whole reality but now I can actually see it on the canvas. I mean, by

putting another color there the whole unity of the canvas changes. And if you alter something here, you've got to balance it with something there. It's similar to what you do when you are writing. But I love it this way—this is visual.

MT: In what ways does your artwork offer you a freedom of expression that your writing does not?

AW: It gives you another dimension to work with, especially when I use words as well . . . but you see, you run into that problem again of making sure that the color goes with the wording. Sometimes they don't go, but you keep working at it. It's exactly as I do in my writing. I love revising my work, which is exactly what I do in my painting. I mean I can paint quickly, and then I sit there, and I alter it a bit . . . and then change the whole thing, which is what I do in my writing anyway.



Figure 5. Albert Wendt, *Untitled*, 2006. Acrylic and metallic pens on canvas, 30 x 36 in., Pao-Tamaira Collection. Photograph by Carl F. K. Pao. Courtesy of the author

MT: How has Kanaka Maoli art inspired your own work?

AW: I've been lucky in Hawai'i, because Kanaka Maoli art here is enjoying a renaissance, and the contemporary art of Hawai'i is very powerful stuff, and I've learned a lot from it. Similarly, I think the same of contemporary Māori art in New Zealand and contemporary Pacific art . . . Without the art of the Kānaka Maoli, I don't know what kind of art they'd produce here—it would be just like mainland American art. Kanaka Maoli art is bringing something unique, which is theirs and which belongs to this place.

MT: So, do you think art is a medium through which Indigenous voices can be heard?

AW: Art is only a part of the whole drive by our peoples to decolonize themselves and to get our own ways of expression out there, instead of being dominated by foreign ways of looking at the world. But we've also learned from them . . . We've taken acrylics, which were invented in the West, and used them in our own way.

MT: In many ways, the title of your show, *Le Amataga: The Beginning*, has an air of auspiciousness. Where to from here?

AW: Reina and I are retiring from academic life. That doesn't mean we're retiring from life. All it means is we'll be staying in Ponsonby in Auckland and continuing on with our work. For instance, I'll continue my painting, and we will watch our grandchildren growing up. And it'll give us a lot more time to do our own work. *Le Amataga*—I called the exhibition that because it was my first public exhibition. But how I got there, it's not really a beginning, because I've always loved art, and I still love art in a very passionate way. In fact, when I paint now, I feel more absorbed in it than when I write and some of my publishers are worried that I might stop writing and do art (laughs). I have a novel, which I have to finish before we go back to Aotearoa. But it will be just another phase at reinventing myself, like most artists, well, most people, not just artists. Somewhere along the line, we find something new that we love and that's the direction we take. The word "reinventing" is a sort of a big word, but most of us do it. We do it to survive. We do it to survive according to the things we love. And, making art for me, I really love it.

A. Mārata Tamaira is an independent Māori researcher and writer who hails from Aotearoa New Zealand. She has ancestral ties with the central North Island tribe of Ngāti Tūwharetoa and the subtribes of Ngāti Turumakina and Ngāti Tūrangi-tukua. She holds a PhD in gender, media, and cultural studies from the Australian National University and has written widely on contemporary Hawaiian and Pacific art. In 2023, she completed her first children’s picture book manuscript, which is currently under peer-review, and she is working on her first novel. Tamaira’s creative work focuses on her Māori heritage and traces the links between ancestral connections, the power of place and memory, and the transformative quest for identity and belonging.

Notes

¹ This interview was first published in the July–September 2007 issue of the Center for Pacific Islands Studies newsletter, *Pacific News from Mānoa*.

<https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/581e3276-ad32-49a0-a81b-3b58aefca822/content>.

² Albert Wendt, personal communication, 2007.

³ Wendt, personal communication.

⁴ Wendt, personal communication.