

KAILI CHUN

The Āpuakehau Stream, its Role in Waikīkī, and *Muliwai* (2022)

Abstract

Artist Kaili Chun discusses her sculptural installation Muliwai (2022), located in Waikīkī Market, Honolulu, O’ahu, Hawai’i. A muliwai is an estuary formed at the intersection where the wai (fresh water of the mountains) meets the kai (salt water of the sea). Chun reflects on the importance of the muliwai ecosystem that sustains plant, animal, and human life; how urban development has impacted this rich environment; and the need for people to recognize the interconnectedness of all things and their responsibility of environmental stewardship. The site-specific sculpture connects viewers to the memory of this place in Waikīkī and invites us to reflect on our relationship with nature and appreciate the delicate balance that sustains life.

Keywords: *Kaili Chun, Hawai’i, contemporary art, sculpture, environmental stewardship, environmental ecosystems, Waikīkī, site-specific art, water, food systems*

Famous is the Āpuakehau stream, an essential lifeline that once flowed through the ahupua’a (land division) of Waikīkī, from the verdant mountains to the thriving ocean. This stream was not merely a body of water but a vital force that breathed life into the land and its people. As it traversed from the heights of the mountains, it gathered strength and vitality, eventually giving birth to the abundant muliwai (estuary). This estuary, laden with gifts of life-giving food, filled the ōpū (stomachs) of our people. We offer our deepest gratitude, or mahalo, to Āpuakehau for sharing its many treasures, sustaining the land, and nourishing the community.

The Importance of the Muliwai

The intersection where the wai (fresh water of the mountains) meets the kai (salt water of the sea) is where one finds the muliwai. The muliwai’s unique, brackish water is a critical habitat that sustains a rich and nutritious ecosystem, vital for

fish, sea creatures, and limu (seaweed) and provides these essential aquatic resources to the people of the land for sustenance. The muliwai is more than a mere ecological niche; it is a cornerstone of the ahupua‘a system. This ancient Hawaiian system of land management connected every aspect of nature into a cohesive whole, embodying a harmonious balance between land and sea, people and nature.

The Ahupua‘a System and Environmental Harmony

The genius of the ahupua‘a system lays in its ability to create a sustainable and self-sufficient environment. Prior to the privatization of Hawaiian lands in the mid-nineteenth century, Native Hawaiians designed each ahupua‘a, a division of land that stretched from the mountains to the sea, to be self-sustaining. The ‘Āpuakehau stream, flowing through the ahupua‘a of Waikīkī, was a perfect example of this system in action. It connected the upland forests, agricultural fields, and coastal waters, creating a continuous flow of resources and energy. This interconnectedness ensured that every part of the ahupua‘a worked in harmony, supporting the needs of the people while preserving the natural environment.

In this system, the muliwai played a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance. By filtering the fresh water before it reached the ocean, the muliwai purified the stream and prevented pollutants from entering the marine environment. This process ensured that the waters reaching the ocean were clean and supportive of marine life, therefore protecting the delicate coral reefs and other marine ecosystems that were, and still are, vital to the ocean’s health. Moreover, the muliwai served as a nursery for fish, birds, limu, and plants, allowing all to flourish by ensuring a continuous and robust supply of fish and other resources for the community. The careful management of these resources reflected the wisdom and ingenuity of the kanaka maoli (Native Hawaiian people), who understood the importance of living in harmony with nature.

Artistic Reflections of the Muliwai and Ahupua‘a

In tribute to the rhythmic flow of the muliwai, my artwork titled *Muliwai* (2022), located in Waikīkī Market, Honolulu, O‘ahu, Hawai‘i, has undulations that highlight the ebb and flow of lunar and tidal connections. The interplay of light and shadow

in the artwork captures the dynamic nature of the muliwai, mirroring the constant movement and change inherent in this vital ecosystem.

Located adjacent to stairs leading from the ground level of the residential tower housing the Waikīkī Market to the second-floor market itself (Fig. 1–2), *Muliwai* is integrated into the space rather than just hung on the wall. The ‘Āpuakehau stream ran through this site and the muliwai formed where it met the ocean near the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. In this work, I refer to the stream’s connection and relationship to the muliwai. While planning the piece, I thought about the flow of water in the ‘Āpuakehau stream and the subtle undulations of that water, as well as those of the ocean and surf. The reflection of light upon water changes throughout the day and night; similarly, the piece’s appearance changes from one vantage point to another. This effect is partially captured in the reflection of light on the hammered copper pieces (Figs. 3–4). Through their movement up and down the staircase, people can connect to the movement of water as their visual perception of the artwork shifts. When I stand on the stairway looking toward the street, I see the piece reflecting light one way, and when I look from the street toward the staircase, I see a very different view. It is similar to looking toward the source of the stream, the po‘owai (the channel of the stream), and then looking toward the place where it opens up to the ocean, the muliwai. The work also does this physically, where the wider height of *Muliwai* opens toward the ocean.

The natural world no longer exists in Waikīkī as it once did. Waikīkī was originally a highly prized region with rich resources of food, water, and pleasure (surfing), but is now predominantly “reclaimed” land that was filled in with the dredged material removed when building the Ala Wai Canal. All the fish ponds that used to exist in Waikīkī are gone. The three major rivers and streams that used to flow through the area—Pi‘inaio, ‘Āpuakehau, and Ku‘ekauanahi—have been diverted underground. These rivers once created the muliwai that served the region, but do not have the same impact on the environment as they once did. Additionally, the sand on the beaches of Waikīkī is mechanically replenished every few years—via large pipes that pump sand in from deeper waters offshore—to accommodate the tourist economy on which Hawai‘i is heavily dependent.

Waikīkī Market, where *Muliwai* is located, is a busy grocery store that represents Hawai‘i’s diverse food cultures. I connect Waikīkī Market as a source of food. Of course, it is not an agricultural or fishing entity, per se, but it does serve and provide food for residents and visitors alike. It is, perhaps, the new “muliwai” of our time, where people find sustenance. There is irony in this function, in that it is not a traditional reciprocal entity that works with the land, but I hope the

artwork will stimulate awareness of the transformation of this area by conjuring the undulations of the original muliwai, both literally and metaphorically.

Muliwai serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of all things. Just as the ahupua'a system connected the mountains to the sea, the artwork connects the viewer to the memory of this specific site in Waikīkī and invites us to reflect on our relationship with nature and to appreciate the delicate balance that sustained life in the ahupua'a. The artwork's flowing lines and organic shapes echo the natural forms found in the muliwai, reinforcing the idea that art and nature are deeply intertwined. I desire that both residents and visitors alike pause and consider the transformation of these lands from food-providing resources to a highly developed touristic environment that has displaced most Native Hawaiians and has changed the climate and environment of Waikīkī forever. Waikīkī was once populated by Native Hawaiians, who now make up only 21% of the total population of Hawai'i. I hope this artwork will help keep the memory of this once-thriving environment alive in some fashion, perhaps inspiring curiosity about the history and genealogy of the place.

Celebrating the Legacy of 'Āpuakehau

Through the careful stewardship of the land and water, Hawaiians created a sustainable system that supported both the people and the environment. Today, as we reflect on this legacy, we are reminded of the importance of living in harmony with nature and of the enduring value of the ahupua'a system. By honoring the gifts of the 'Āpuakehau and the muliwai, we celebrate a rich cultural lineage and a vision of sustainability that continues to inspire us. Mahalo e 'Āpuakehau, for your many treasures and for teaching us the true meaning of interconnectedness and stewardship.

Kaili Chun is a sculptor and installation artist based in Hawai'i. Her works address ideas of containment and exposure, agency and restraint. Her processes and materials transform physical spaces into unique environments that comment on contemporary issues. She often constructs narratives through symbols and objects that address the impact of historical events on the present day. Chun's diverse training includes a BA in architecture from Princeton University, where she also studied ceramics with Toshiko Takaezu; an MFA from the University of Hawai'i–Mānoa (UHM); and an apprenticeship with master canoe-builder and woodworker

Wright Elemakule Bowman Sr. She is currently in the Doctor of Architecture program at UHM and a faculty member in the Art Department at UHM.



Figure 1. Kaili Chun, *Muliwai*, 2022. Plywood and copper installation, Waikiki Market, Honolulu, Hawai'i. Photograph courtesy of Stacy Kamehiro



Figure 2. Kaili Chun, *Muliwai*, 2022. Plywood and copper installation, Waikīkī Market, Honolulu, Hawai'i. Photograph courtesy of Sean Marrs



Figure 3. Kaili Chun, *Muliwai* (detail), 2022. Plywood and copper installation, Waikīkī Market, Honolulu, Hawai'i. Photograph courtesy of the artist



Figure 4. Kaili Chun, *Muliwai* (detail), 2022. Plywood and copper installation, Waikīkī Market, Honolulu, Hawai'i. Photograph courtesy of Stacy Kamehiro