

HALENA KAPUNI-REYNOLDS

Exhibition Review: *Project Banaba*, Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum

Abstract

Exhibition Review: *Project Banaba*, curated by Katerina Teaiwa, Yuki Kihara, Joy Enomoto, Healoha Johnston, and Pūlama Lima. Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Kaiwi'ula, O'ahu, Hawai'i, November 4, 2023–February 18, 2024.

Keywords: Banaba, Hawai'i, Bishop Museum, phosphate, art exhibition



Figure 1. Katerina Teaiwa, *Body of the Land, Body of the People*. Hessian sacks with calico appliqués and historical photographs printed on voile. Photograph courtesy of the author

Project Banaba is a multimedia exhibition that brings together government records, archival footage, and oral histories to tell the history of phosphate mining and the resulting environmental catastrophe on Banaba (previously known as Ocean Island), a Pacific island formerly part of the Republic of Kiribati. Paired with this colonial history are familial photographs, contemporary art, music, and poetry that speak to the displacement of Indigenous Banabans from their homeland, as well as the resilience of their diasporic communities. *Project Banaba* was originally

conceived by Dr. Katerina Teaiwa as part of her PhD research while she was a student at the Australian National University in the early 2000s.¹ Whereas her dissertation became a scholarly monograph titled *Consuming Ocean Island: Stories of People and Phosphate From Banaba*, *Project Banaba* represents the ongoing life and movement of her scholarship, modeled on public dissemination, collaboration, and creative-relational praxis.² The exhibition opening at Bishop Museum, held on November 3, 2023, paid tribute to Teaiwa's sister, the late Pacific studies scholar Teresia Teaiwa, and included performances by Brigham Young University–Hawai'i's I-Kiribati Dance Club; mele (music) by Jonathan Kay Kamakawiwo'ole Osorio and Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio; and poetry readings by Lyz Soto, Carol Ann Carl, No'u Revilla, and Brandy Nālani McDougall.

This is the fourth iteration of *Project Banaba* and the first to be shown outside of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Whereas Teaiwa is the creative force behind the exhibition, Yuki Kihara has served as the lead curator since the exhibition was first shown at Carriageworks in Sydney (November 17–December 17, 2017).³ An integral component to the curatorial strategy for *Project Banaba* is Kihara's efforts to work with other curators and exhibition venues that are located "along the same routes as the mined phosphate rock . . . where Banaban phosphate rock, or manufactured fertiliser from Banaban phosphate, is applied to farm soil."⁴ Thus, Bishop Museum's *Project Banaba* included the participation of in-house curators Healoha Johnston and Pūlama Lima, as well activist-artist Joy Enomoto, who was invited to co-curate the show. Through this place-based curatorial strategy, each iteration of the exhibition is adapted to include interpretive elements connecting its venue's location to phosphate extraction on Banaba—elements that I discuss later in this review.

Project Banaba features three installations by Teaiwa. *Body of the Land*, *Body of the People* consists of suspended hessian sacks printed with key events in the island's history juxtaposed with twentieth-century photographs of Banaban ancestors printed on voile (Figs. 1–2) intended to illuminate the violent impact of phosphate extraction on Banaban life and culture. In addition to quotes and images, the reverse sides of the sacks include haunting calico appliqués shaped like limestone pinnacles; these represent the skeletal remains of the island due to extraction activities. The pinnacle shapes also appear as frames for key labels and are painted on three exhibition walls (Figs. 1–3). As murals, they looked to me like snow-covered pine trees, and I found them to be a distraction from other exhibition elements. A printed handout, featuring a dialogue between Teaiwa and her co-curators, aids in explaining why the pinnacles are a prominent motif in the exhibition: they were "picked up" by the exhibition designer (Michael Wilson) and

graphic designer (Susan Yamamoto) as a “central motif” identified over numerous planning conversations and meetings.⁵ While this explanation of the pinnacles is offered in the brochure, there is no explanation of them in the exhibition labels. One wonders how visitors who did not see or choose to read the brochures interpreted these pinnacles.



Figure 2. Katerina Teaiwa, *Body of the Land, Body of the People*. Hessian sacks with calico appliqués and historical photographs printed on voile. Photograph courtesy of the author



Figure 3. Katerina Teaiwa, *Mine Lands, For Teresia*, 2017. Multimedia installation. Photograph courtesy of the author

The second installation, *Mine Lands, For Teresia*, is a three-screen video featuring an approximately seven-minute montage of footage from the early twentieth and twenty-first centuries layered with sound and poetry (Fig. 3). The installation is inspired by Teresia Teaiwa’s 1995 poem “Mine Land: an Anthem,” a commentary on Banaban displacement and loss of land to mining that evokes the colonial dynamics between various officials, migrant workers, and Banabans. An example of what visitors can see and hear during the montage is the Kiribati national anthem sung by children on Tabiteuea—the home island of Teaiwa’s grandmother, which provided many mine workers to Banaba. The song—when paired with the video’s footage of Banaban performances, colonial officials overseeing mining operations and interacting with laborers, and scenes of life on Banaba—evokes the complicated and limited political and economic sovereignty of Banabans, who were forced to become part of Kiribati by the colonial administration overseeing the island and the Gilbertese government.⁶



Figure 4. Katerina Teaiwa, *Teaiwa’s Kainga*, 2017–ongoing. Multimedia installation. Photograph courtesy of the author

The third installation in the exhibition, *Teaiwa’s Kainga*, is conceptualized as a “photographic reef” (Fig. 4). In it, colonial-era photographs of Banaba and its peoples are juxtaposed with pictures of Teaiwa family members, many of whom live on Rabi Island in Fiji, where Banabans were relocated following Japanese occupation during World War II. The photographs are installed on a backdrop

depicting an island scene of palm trees, coastal foliage, the horizon, the ocean, and the sky. At the center is a portrait of Teresia Teaiwa. To its left is a quote from her poem “In my Ideal Pacific” that reads:

In my ideal Pacific
my ancestral island of Banaba
or Ocean Island in the central Pacific
would not have been mined
into a moonscape oblivion
by the British Phosphate Company

To the right of her portrait is a quote from Ted Rowlands, UK Parliamentary Undersecretary, that reads: “. . . Australia, New Zealand and Britain had together created the island’s present predicament. All three governments had rendered it totally uninhabitable for their own benefit.” The juxtaposition of these texts is jarring, underscoring Teaiwa’s desire for a past and present for her ancestral homeland that is different than the one that we remember and see today. Lastly, visitors can hear a song composed by Jon Kamakawiwo’ole Osorio, Lyz Soto, and Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio in honor of Teaiwa by standing under a sound dome—an auditory companion to the visual critique offered through the photographic reef.

In addition to Katerina Teaiwa’s installations, the exhibition includes other elements that reflect its ongoing evolution as it travels to different venues. Featured prominently in the center of the exhibition is a mannequin dressed in a Cook Islander dance skirt by Caren Jane Rangi and wearing a neckpiece and headpiece made of acrylic beads by Roselyn Corrie Teirei (Fig. 5). Although the neckpiece and headpiece lacked curatorial interpretation, a quote from Rangi explains that she made the skirt in 1982 from phosphate sacks sourced from the Ravensdown phosphate factory, which processed phosphate from Banaba and Nauru.⁷ At Bishop Museum, the mannequin stood on a black pedestal situated on a historical map of Banaba. Conceptually, the mannequin’s placement on the map reminded viewers that, although Teirei is part of the Cook Islands diaspora, Rangi’s skirt is part of Banaba’s story, for it exists because of the “interconnected histories of extraction and labour between Cook Islands, Aotearoa, Banaban & Nauruan lands,” as the artist states in her quote. Other objects featured in the exhibition included four kamari neckpieces by Banaban artists Aroiti Tane and Temaea Nanton (Fig. 6). These were not displayed as elaborately as the dance skirt, being simply laid flat on black fabric in two display cases; they seemed to be an afterthought rather than an integral component in the exhibition.



Figure 5. View of mannequin installation in *Project Banaba* featuring a Cook Islander dance skirt by Caren Jane Rangi and neck and head pieces by Roselyn Corrie Teirei. Photograph courtesy of the author



Figure 6. Kamari neck pieces by Aroiti Tane in display case. Photograph courtesy of the author



Figure 7. Writing desk featuring interactive materials related to Hawai‘i’s participation in phosphate mining on Banaba. Photograph courtesy of the author

Finally, there are four exhibition elements that connect *Project Banaba* to Hawai‘i. In addition to the previously mentioned song for Teresia Teaiwa by Jon and Jamaica Osorio in the photographic reef, the installation *Mine Lands, For Teresia* included a lumpy seat made of two fertilizer sacks representing the Hawaiian Fertilizer Company, a commissioned statement written in the Hawaiian language by Paige Okamura, and a display area that featured a writing desk and information related to Hawai‘i’s participation in phosphate extraction on Banaba in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Fig. 7). Through poetic Hawaiian prose, Okamura’s statement—which is on an exhibition wall panel and in the previously mentioned handout—provided a brief cautionary tale of Banaba’s colonial history and the extraction of its land and people. In reflecting on this history in relation to Native Hawaiians, Okamura ends with a question for readers to ponder: “I mea aha ka lāhui Hawai‘i, ke ‘ole ka ‘āina? (What is the Hawaiian people without land?)” In contrast, the writing desk featured photocopies of primary source materials and a vintage rotary telephone with an audio recording that offered visitors an opportunity to learn more about Banabans and I-Kiribati laborers who were brought to Honolulu. This part of the exhibition highlighted the relationships that these laborers made with Native Hawaiians and the return of a few laborers to Banaba in 1903. The primary source material is an excellent addition to the exhibition, but I found the overall display and setup of the area as an interactive

station—especially the recording via the telephone—to be out of place with the introspective design and overall aesthetic of *Project Banaba*.

In conclusion, Bishop Museum’s iteration of *Project Banaba* offers visitors an opportunity to witness a violent colonial history of extraction and displacement that has left Banaba degraded and lacking in freshwater resources. In many ways, it relays a warning about the unsustainability of extractive capitalism in Oceania. However, rather than presenting Indigenous Banabans as victims of external forces and empires, Katerina Teaiwa’s scholarly and artistic approach successfully combines archival and contemporary materials to juxtapose this history with intimate images of Banaban life, poetry, and art. Teaiwa terms this approach “remix,” referring to the numerous ways that images, sounds, objects, and texts made in different contexts and for differing reasons are brought together to reveal both a difficult history and the ongoing presence and vitality of Banaban communities across the Pacific. Just as the exhibition “gives form to the sense of remix that researching this history creates,” its ongoing evolution as it travels is another form of “remix” aimed at bringing local collaborators and community members into the fold.⁸

Lastly, the inclusion of Hawai’i-specific elements in the exhibition fervently reminds viewers that this is not just a story about a people from a distant island, but rather a story where Banaban and Hawaiian histories intersect with one another in surprising and unexpected ways. Although there were a few design choices that seemed to not fit with the larger aesthetic of the installations, the exhibition and its narrative proved highly impactful overall. All that is left to be said is: Where will *Project Banaba* travel to next?

Halena Kapuni-Reynolds is the associate curator of Native Hawaiian history and culture at the National Museum of the American Indian. Kapuni-Reynolds’s scholarly interests center around Native Hawaiian art and music, place-based research, and Hawaiian museology. Most recently, he co-authored a chapter with Noelle M. K. Y. Kahanu titled “Native Hawaiians and the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum: Historical Reckoning, Truth-telling, and Healing,” in the 2024 volume U.S. Museum Histories and the Politics of Interpretation: Never Neutral. In addition to his professional and scholarly work, Kapuni-Reynolds recently joined the board of the Hawai’i Council for the Humanities, where he is supporting the development of the NEH-funded Pacific Islands Humanities Network, which aims to cultivate further conversation and collaboration between humanities organizations in Hawai’i, American Sāmoa, Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands.

Notes

¹ Katerina Teaiwa and Yuki Kihara, "Project Banaba: A Dialogue on Exhibition Collaboration and Methods," *Pacific Arts: Journal of the Pacific Arts Association* 22, no. 1 (2022): 84.

² Katerina Teaiwa, *Consuming Ocean Island: Stories of People and Phosphate From Banaba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

³ Other previous venues include MTG Hawke's Bay Tai Ahuriri in Napier, New Zealand (April 4–September 1, 2019), and Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery in Auckland (March 5–May 29, 2022).

⁴ Teaiwa and Kihara, "Project Banaba," 85.

⁵ Healoha Johnston, "Artist and Curator Dialogue: Ancestors, Solidarity, and Re-growing Islands," *Project Banaba* exhibition brochure (Honolulu: Bishop Museum 2023).

⁶ Katerina Teaiwa, email to author, December 21, 2023.

⁷ The Ravensdown phosphate factory continues to exist and now processes phosphate from places including the Western Sahara.

⁸ Teaiwa and Kihara, "Project Banaba," 83.