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Aloha Nō and the Power of Healing in Contemporary Hawaiian Art: An Interview with Meleanna Aluli Meyer and Noelle M.K.Y. Kahanu

Abstract

In a three-part interview, J. Kēhaulani Kauanui engages multimedia artist, visual poet, and educator Meleanna Aluli Meyer, and scholar, curator, and writer Noelle M.K.Y. Kahanu. They discuss the Hawai'i Triennial 2025 (HT25): Aloha Nō*, the state's largest thematic exhibition of contemporary art in Hawai'i, the Pacific, and beyond. In the first segment, Kauanui engages Kahanu and Meyer regarding their connection through friendship, related kin ties, and the Hawaiian art scene. In the second segment, Meyer discusses her vision for and creation of her installation work* 'Umeke Lā'au: Culture Medicine *and how it relates to her longtime art practice. In the third segment, Kahanu discusses her trajectory as a curator and how that artistic labor is connected to her ongoing work in relation to the Hawaiian community.*

Keywords: *Hawaiian art, cultural politics, Hawai'i, curation, Kānaka Maoli, Hawai'i Triennial, Meleanna Aluli Meyer, Noelle M.K.Y. Kahanu*

On March 12, 2025, J. Kēhaulani Kauanui interviewed multimedia artist, visual poet, and educator Meleanna Aluli Meyer and scholar, curator, and writer Noelle M.K.Y. Kahanu (Fig. 1). Kauanui was in Honolulu to take in the offerings of the Hawai'i Triennial 2025 (HT25): *ALOHA NŌ*, the largest periodic exhibition of contemporary art in Hawai'i. The works were on view for seventy-eight days across collaborating exhibition sites on O'ahu, Maui, and Hawai'i Island. A few days prior to the interview, Kahanu, one of three curators of HT25, accompanied Kauanui to Honolulu Hale—the official seat of government for the City and County of Honolulu and the site of the chambers of the mayor and city council. Honolulu Hale served as the site for Meyer's installation *'Umeke Lā'au: Culture Medicine* (2025, Figs. 3–5). The piece is a large-scale, sculptural 'umeke (calabash) with accompanying audio enunciating the names of tens of thousands of Kānaka Maoli

(Native Hawaiians) who signed the Kūʻē Petitions in 1897 protesting a proposed treaty of annexation before the US Senate at the time.[1] Meyer worked with numerous collaborators on the design, construction, and engineering of the piece.

The interview was conducted in three parts. In the first segment, Kahanu and Meyer speak of their connection through friendship, kinship, and the Hawaiian art scene. The second segment features Meyer discussing her vision and creation of *ʻUmeke Lāʻau: Culture Medicine* and how it relates to her longtime art practice. In the third segment, Kahanu reflects on her trajectory as a curator and how that artistic labor is connected to her ongoing work in the Hawaiian community. The interview highlights the beautiful ways in which Kahanu and Meyer have served as lifelong advocates for and practitioners of Hawaiian culture and the arts.

Part 1: "As with Anything Meaningful in Hawaiʻi, It's Relational": A Conversation with Noelle M.K.Y. Kahanu and Meleanna Aluli Meyer

J. Kēhaulani Kauanui (JKK): I'd like to begin by asking you two to speak about your connection and collaborations prior to HT25.

Noelle M.K.Y. Kahanu (NMKYK): We have a very deep, lively, long, and extraordinary working relationship that goes back at least to 2004. At [that] time, I had started curating a series of exhibitions at the Bishop Museum.[2] I contacted Meleanna about doing a mural for a temporary exhibition. It became a community-based effort that involved painting forty separate boards to create one mural, [titled *Hoʻohuli: An Overturning, A Change*]. The community effort involved many students, from middle school to college. In fact, one of those students was Meleanna's nephew, Kanaka ʻŌiwi [Native Hawaiian] curator Drew Kahuʻāina Broderick, when he was just in middle school.

Meleanna Aluli Meyer (MAM): We worked over a series of weekends. Two fellow Native Hawaiian artists, Carl Pao and Solomon Enos, attended some of the work sessions, during which we collected images from each participant. I had done smaller mural projects with the State of Hawaiʻi and artist residencies, but never this kind of project in terms of scale. The collaborative mural became the focal piece of the exhibition space in the [Bishop Museum's] Long Gallery. That was in 2004. Four years later, we collaborated on another project.

Figure 1. Noelle M.K.Y. Kahanu and Meleanna Aluli Meyer, Honolulu, Hawai'i, March 12, 2025. Photograph courtesy of J. Kēhaulani Kauanui

NMKYK: I was one of a team of people working on the renovation of Bishop Museum's Hawaiian Hall, which eventually opened in 2009. There was a large empty space on the third floor above the staircase. It was the end of the [exhibition] narrative; we had just taken folks on a huge journey, and I wondered

what we were leaving them with. It finally occurred to me that the [2004] mural would be perfect and, miraculously, it had not yet been purchased by anyone.

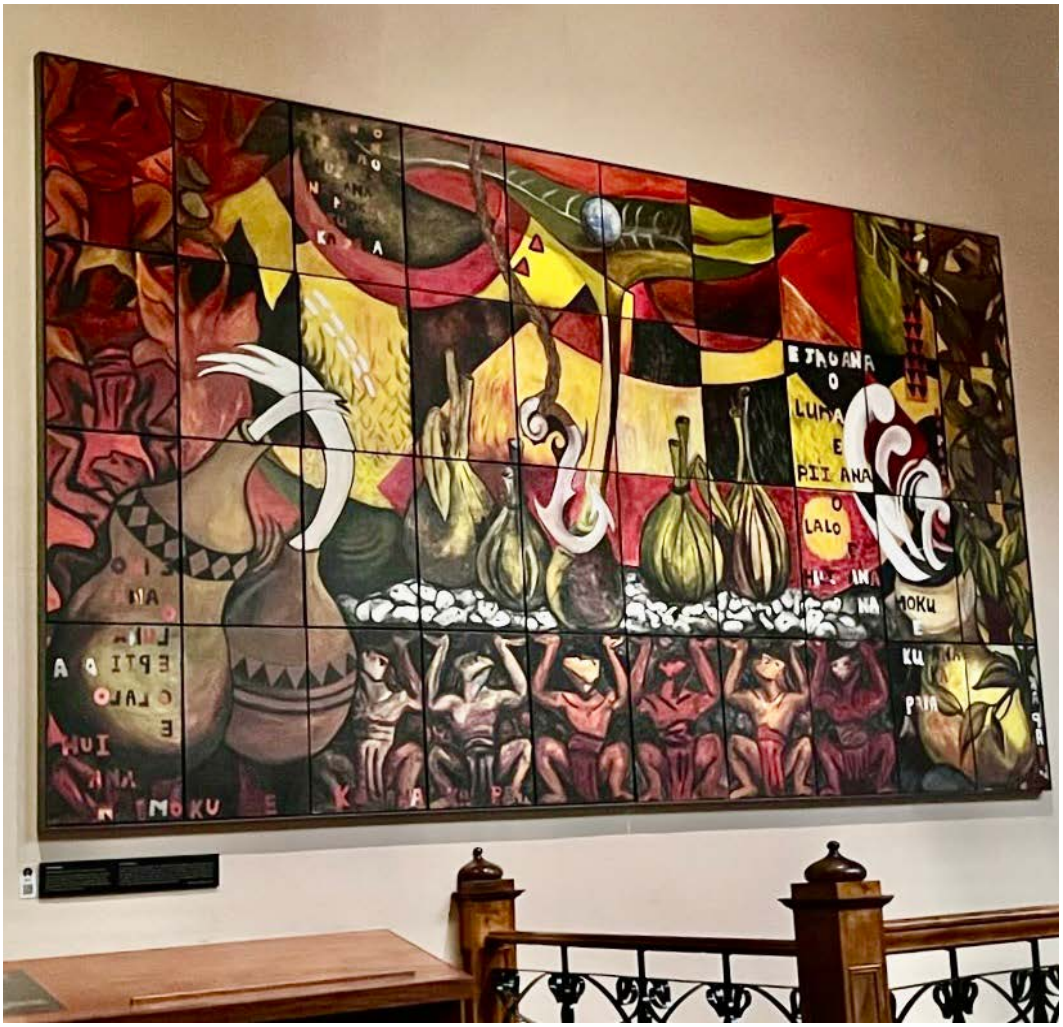

Figure 2. Meleanna Aluli Meyer (project organizer and lead artist), *Hoʻohuli: An Overturning, A Change*, 2004. 10 x 16 ft., mural. Hawaiian Hall, Bishop Museum, Honolulu. Photograph courtesy of Noelle M.K.Y. Kahanu

MAM: And so, the forty boards [making up] *Hoʻohuli: An Overturning, A Change* were installed in Hawaiian Hall (Fig. 2). The color palette—reds, yellows, and blacks—adhered to an Indigenous or Maoli sensibility. Together, the boards told a story of deep cultural significance, with the ipu [gourds] and ʻahuʻula [feathered capes] in the background representing the aliʻi [chiefs], images of fire and

destruction, the pūʻolo [bundled offerings] on the paepae [platform], as well as Mānaiakalani [the demigod Maui's fishhook].

NMKYK: The mural was prophetic and uncanny, foreshadowing something we had yet to realize. Incorporated into the mural was the prophecy chant of Kapihe: "E iho ana o luna, e piʻi ana o lalo, e hui ana nā moku, e kū ana ka paia. That which is above shall come down, that which is below shall rise up, the islands shall unite and the walls shall stand firm."[3] Kapihe's words became the final statement of the permanent exhibition. We are stronger and more united, not in spite of our past, but because of it.

MAM: *Hoʻohuli* was my very first large community mural project. It was difficult because I didn't anticipate how long it would take or how many people would participate, including groups of students from various schools. There were about twenty-five of us at the beginning. The lead artists—Enos, Pao, as well as artists Al Lagunero and Harinani Orme, and I—created the master sketch. By the next weekend, there were sixteen participants left. The weekend after that, there were nine, and after that, there were four. I realized that we needed to finish the mural, so we committed to completing the work, pau pono [completely done]. This was our first mural endeavor, and it began our association as artists and led us to continue working together.

I say "yes" to things that I haven't done so everything is a new adventure. When Noelle asks me to participate in a project, I always enthusiastically agree because I can count on our friendship, her great ideas, and her sense of care. I trust that she would never throw me under any bus, and that's huge.

NMKYK: For me, it seemed like the Bishop Museum was closed to the community, like an ivory tower. It was the place that held kūpuna [ancestors] and their archives hostage. The institution required people to justify seeing materials that actually belonged to them. It was a place that reflected a history of animosity, resentment, hurt, and ʻeha [sorrow]. When I was finally in a position where I could throw open those doors, I invited people in to reanimate the collections. In Hawaiian Hall, we installed museum objects and artifacts in the exhibitions. In other cases, we featured contemporary work. Creating the permanent exhibitions were about building that sense of trust and comfort with community members. I'm most proud of the fact that when we held the opening for Hawaiian Hall in 2009, artist-

activist ʻĪmaikalani Kalahele came into the space and said, "For the first time, Hawaiian Hall feels Hawaiian."

MAM: Not only did Hawaiian Hall feel Hawaiian, but we also felt welcomed. As contemporary artists included in the exhibition, we were part of, and integral to, the moʻolelo—the story, the history—told in the exhibition. Noelle had insight about doing work that was contemporary in a context that was unfamiliar to us, and we felt great comfort as artists to be with kūpuna objects, study them, and have conversations with them. I remember making those pōhaku [stones], the poi pounding pieces [tools to mash cooked taro]. It was such a thrill to open that cabinet, but it was also intimidating to see a couple hundred stone poi pounders from as early as the seventeenth century. It left an indelible realization of, "Wow, this is not only a place for us, but a place that offers research to affirm who we are." Noelle did things there and invited us in as contemporary artists. It was cutting edge. I'll never forget it. Since then, I've had nothing but fun with all of this because I've felt like I belonged, which is unusual in that kind of anthropological space. We know those are dustbins of history, but no longer are they exclusively that.

JKK: What position did you hold at the time, Noelle?

NMKYK: I started at the Bishop Museum in 1999 under a Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act grant to identify unassociated funerary objects. After that work was completed, I ended up in collections as a project manager for a federal grant that allowed us to work with other museums like the Peabody Essex Museum; the Alaska Native Heritage Center; the Inuit Heritage Center in Barrow, Alaska; the New Bedford Whaling Museum; and the Mississippi Choctaw. I'm grateful I was able to do all this work with other Indigenous communities. We had a great synergy and created new programming based on these interactions.

However, I would say the key was when Bishop Museum allowed me to do exhibitions in the Long Gallery due to that earlier mural program. We then started on a journey to include more contemporary artwork in the early 2000s with the first Kū exhibit that paid homage to the temple image of Kū, deity of governance and warfare. Prior to this, Kū had been removed from permanent display for several years due to conservation reasons. This exhibition celebrated his return to Hawaiian Hall. In the Long Gallery, we planned a contemporary exhibition where

we invited artists to create work that considered Kū's dynamic nature. Those changing exhibitions took off from there, and we did two to three a year until I left in 2014. I was also in the museum's education department for a while; by the time I left, I was director of community affairs. In my fifteen years at the museum, I worked with at least a hundred Indigenous artists who, in some way, shape, or form, got to have their work featured in the Long Gallery. We also started Maoli Arts Month and took the concept out into the community during the month of May. For a couple of years, from 2006, we were in multiple galleries in downtown Chinatown, with five to six galleries all filled with Kanaka ʻŌiwi art, which was a thrill.

MAM: It was really a thrill to move out of the museum and into galleries—into a place where people could see Native Hawaiian art versus the Waikīkī garbage that gets peddled as Hawaiian art. That was exciting.

NMKYK: We started the Native Hawaiian Arts Market—our version of the Santa Fe Indian Market—in 2006. I just had so much fun, and it was a great run, but it did not last long after I left the museum. The PAʻI Foundation, established to preserve and perpetuate Native Hawaiian arts and cultural traditions, has carried it on in some fashion, but never to the extent we had at Bishop Museum.[4]

JKK: I appreciate you narrating your trajectory here and the specific interventions and contributions to open up more space. Shifting gears here, tell me about the lead up to HT25.

NMKYK: As with anything meaningful in Hawaiʻi, it's relational. I would add that one of my best friends is Moana Meyer, one of Meleanna's sisters, which makes our relationship not just one of artistic collegiality, but a familial one.

MAM: In other words, Noelle is like another sister. As an artist, I could always count not only on the friendship, but on whatever she was up to because she's kind of the dreamer-schemer, and I'm the one that says, "Sure, I'll do whatever you want me to do, because I want to play in the sandbox too."

NMKYK: Meleanna has also drawn me in along the way to moderate events, etc., which have given me the opportunity to bear witness to the magic that she has

been a part of. We could spend hours just talking about her murals and the way they have transformed our artistic landscape. I feel lucky to be in her orbit and that we get to bear witness to each other's magic.

MAM: And it is magic! It's all about creativity and figuring out how to interface with the community better to tell our stories. That's exciting for me, because that's how I get to tell stories, which ultimately lead up to the HT25.

NMKYK: Meleanna has traveled so much. She'd been to Paris and Palestine and had just come back from the Sharjah Biennial in the United Arab Emirates. As a member of the HT25 curatorial team, we thought about who in the arts community could contribute to our major theme, "Aloha Nō," in a transnational context. Our initial thinking was to approach Meleanna and see how she might address transnational solidarity, a theme that is evident in her muraling practice. But the great thing about the curatorial process of HT25 was the meeting between the artist and the three of us curators: Wassan Al-Khudhairi, Binna Choi, and I. We asked Meleanna, "What are you interested in? What are you doing?" And she went deep with ʻike Hawaiʻi [Hawaiian knowledge and vision]; a twenty-two-foot-plus sculpture was not on anybody's radar!

MAM: I declined at first, wondering what could even fit at Honolulu Hale, the proposed exhibition site. I thought it was too big a space to hang art or project film on the wall. But then, in a sit-down with the three curators, I shifted to a radical idea that Honolulu Hale had potential. Such a large space needed something very large to match it. I went in four or five times to study the space, and I looked at what other folks had done before. I thought, "I've got to go big with room to fool around and negotiate with," and planned for a new piece.

JKK: Could you say more about how you decided on a massive ʻumeke lāʻau—a calabash medicine bowl?

MAM: I happen to love large works, whether it's a [Claes] Oldenburg piece, [an Isamu] Noguchi, or [a Henry] Moore. I was very interested in sculpture when I was a kid, and I did a lot of little maquettes and little things. When I was twelve years old, my mom got me a kiln and said, "Don't burn down the house and just go out there and keep yourself busy." So, all people need to do is give me something to

do that I want to do. I've always wanted to do something like this sculpture in the deep recesses of my heart.

NMKYK: *ʻUmeke Lāʻau: Culture Medicine* is a brilliant and beautiful construction (Figs. 3–6). It also evokes kaona, metaphorical layers of meaning. When you look at the various HT25 exhibition spaces, you start to see the connecting points. For instance, the Capitol Modern exhibition includes an archive case displaying Rocky Kaʻiouliokahihikoloʻehu Jensen's carvings as well as a little pamphlet on *Artistic Alana*, the first exhibition of Hale Nauā III, Society of Maoli Arts, held in 1976. It was also the first time contemporary Native Hawaiians exhibited in Honolulu Hale. Fast forward fifty years later and there, in the same space, is the ʻumeke.

Figure 3. Meleanna Aluli Meyer, *ʻUmeke Lāʻau: Culture Medicine*, 2025. Mahogany veneer, stained plywood, oak, amplified audio, 22 x 8 ft. Installation at Honolulu Hale, Honolulu, as part of Hawaiʻi Triennial 2025: *Aloha Nō*. Photograph by Lila Lee. Courtesy of the artist and Hawaiʻi Contemporary

MAM: Here we have this epic ʻumeke holding space, which I think is the best representation of the persistence of ea [sovereignty] in an occupied land. You can

just sit there and watch the government operate all around it; the business of Honolulu is happening around this elephant in the room, which is this ʻumeke that is loving, light, and sturdy. In other words, we are not going anywhere.

NMKYK: The metaphors are not lost on any of us. It's extraordinary because it's a stealth piece—you don't expect it. I mean, the vast majority of people do not expect to see anything because they're not going there for art. They're going there for business, or doing something awful like paying a property tax, which is, I think, why the space works as a venue for HT25 and for the ʻumeke.

Figure 4. Meleanna Aluli Meyer, *ʻUmeke Lāʻau: Culture Medicine* (detail), 2025. Mahogany veneer, stained plywood, oak, amplified audio, 22 x 8 ft. Installation at Honolulu Hale, Honolulu, as part of Hawaiʻi Triennial 2025: *Aloha Nō*. Photograph by Lila Lee. Courtesy of the artist and Hawaiʻi Contemporary

MAM: What's exciting about this ʻumeke is that I wanted to have the voices of all our ancestors. Initially, I was going to [project] the Kūʻē petitions of 1897 protesting US annexation on all the walls, but then it would have been a distraction. So, I approached one of my theater director friends, Dr. Tammy

Haili‘ōpua Baker, who ended up reciting all the names of those who signed the petitions to create an audio loop. This part of the project ended up being the most complicated because it was difficult to decipher the handwritten names of the more than 38,000 signatures from the Kū‘ē petitions. The Apana ‘ohana [extended family] typed all those names of over 500 pages a few years ago so that we could more easily identify the names of our kūpuna. We wanted to invoke and invite our ancestors so that anyone who entered the ‘umeke could hear their names. And that way, the kūpuna were invited back into this space. The whole thing is more than magic; it’s divine.

Figure 5. Meleanna Aluli Meyer (left) and J. Kēhaulani Kauanui inside Meyer’s *‘Umeke Lā‘au: Culture Medicine*, 2025. Mahogany veneer, stained plywood, oak, amplified audio, 22 x 8 ft. Installation at Honolulu Hale, Honolulu, as part of Hawai‘i Triennial 2025: *Aloha Nō*. Photograph courtesy of Noelle M.K.Y. Kahanu

NMKYK: It was brilliant to situate the doorway on the backside. For the majority of the people who happen upon it, they don’t even know that you can go in it (Fig. 5). You first experience it as an ‘umeke, and don’t know until you come around it that one can actually enter it [see Faris, Fig. 10, this issue]. It’s situated due east, where it should be.

MAM: That is where the kaona [layered meaning] continues with the ʻahu, the altar form of the entrance. As it is situated there, it is a portal.

NMKYK: It's a conversation.

Figure 6. Meleanna Aluli Meyer, *ʻUmeke Lāʻau: Culture Medicine* (detail of pewa), 2025. Mahogany veneer, stained plywood, oak, amplified audio, 22 x 8 ft. Installation at Honolulu Hale, Honolulu, as part of Hawaiʻi Triennial 2025: *Aloha Nō*. Photograph by Lila Lee. Courtesy of the artist and Hawaiʻi Contemporary

JKK: Meleanna, could you speak to the theme of HT25*: Aloha Nō*, and how you took that space and reordered it with your work?

MAM: This work is the most concrete manifestation of *Aloha Nō*, in terms of the pewa [a wedge used for mending bowls] covering the outside and the inside (Fig. 6). The pewa, or patch, represents healing. How are we addressing the fractures

and the fissures in our communities, in our lives, in our families? How can artists function as pewa? How does artwork function as pewa?

NMKYK: The average person asks, "What is this?" and enters the space. Then, there's something that physically, spiritually, and mentally changes. I mean, how many times can you walk *into* art and have an immersive experience, and have it change you almost at a genetic level—like shifting on a molecular level?

MAM: And it happens not because of one artist. It happens because of the collective energy of all who have touched the piece, because there were many who did. In a piece like this, my teachers would ask me what the function of an ʻumeke is. It isn't just something to eat out of. We can share in its healing by utilizing it and being contained by it.

For example, Aunty Lynette Kahekili Kaopuiki Paglinawan—cultural practitioner, social worker, and healer known especially for her work in the Hawaiian art of hoʻoponopono [conflict resolution]—looked at it and went, "Oh, my God, this place! This is a Hawaiian place for healing and repair." She is a beloved teacher, so to have her acknowledge and express her satisfaction is what we aspire to, because we don't have many of these precious beings still with us. We don't have many of these elders left, so to have Master Carver Sam Kaʻai and Aunty Lynette able to be present and share their delight and affirmation has been a dream come true. That's all I really needed. And then it got better, because all we've done is share time with different children from different communities—Micronesian, Black, Hawaiian communities—I mean, everyone who wants to come is invited.

JKK: That's also very Hawaiian in that it's very inclusive. Could you say more about the function of the pewa?

MAM: They're fishtails. They're even called band-aids or butterfly patches. Pewa are critical for objects made of wood. It's a repair technique that is found not only in Hawaiʻi, but other places. Oftentimes, that new piece, the pewa, is made of a different, stronger material, so it would be another wood.

NMKYK: It is not meant to hide the flaw or to cover it up. It is almost a kind of beautification of that which was broken. Metaphorically, it means we have to be

stronger than the chaos around us. The artists are pointing out that there's cracks everywhere—we are being delusional if we think this current climate should be normal. This is the way in which I think the artists of HT25 have, through their practice, really spent time not only identifying what is so fundamentally problematic in our society, but also offering solutions, hope, and healing. As we were planning the triennial, co-curator Wassan Al-Kudhairi, reminded us to consider what the world would look like when we opened in February of 2025, with a new president. But I don't think we could have imagined this—the continuation of the war in Ukraine, genocide in Palestine, our economy in shambles. So, in that sense too, pewa is so important to think about.

I feel like the artists that came for the opening felt very nurtured, and maybe a Palestinian artist could not have had an exhibition in a state building anywhere else other than in Hawai'i at this moment in time. So, I think there's a way we were able to create a curatorial vision with the right artists at the right moment for what is necessary in this time, which makes this triennial exceptional.

MAM: I just felt like a Hawaiian artist. I felt comfort, relief, and permission to just go wherever I really wanted to go. I certainly didn't expect to go the direction I did, but I'm so happy I did. It's been the most exciting creative event for me because I'm finally able to have that time—since I'm not totally tied to a workday—to begin to really deepen my art practice.

JKK: Beautiful. Mahalo to you both.

Part 2: "We Are Containers for Spirit": Meleanna Aluli Meyer

JKK: How long have you been practicing art?

MAM: I've been an artist my whole life. Some energy made this—it isn't as if this comes from nowhere. It's not like I ever thought I was any great artist, that's for sure, but I was curious and loved to make things with my hands and loved everything about nature. So, it was a natural thing for somebody like me who really needed to find another way into education, you know, being dyslexic and not knowing it, being a slow reader, and being all these other things. We're called neurodivergent now. I think that's extraordinary, because we're missing at least half of our children because they have so many gifts and talents, but they're not

accepted nor properly recognized, supported, or channeled. So, we're missing what they really have to offer. That's why I'm an educator, and why I do what I do. Because I have to.

I recently took part in the first Maui Biennial in 2023 and in a Kanaka Hawai'i exhibition at the Maui Art Center the year before that. Also, I was invited to the Sharjah Biennial in 2022, and presented a film, *Mauna Kea: Sacred Mountain, Sacred Conduct*, in 2023, which was made as an offering—just like *'Umeke Lā'au: Culture Medicine*. The 'umeke is an offering to our community to help do the work that we did at Mauna Kea, to help do the work through and with the 'āina [land]. We need to do our healing. It's been extraordinary because the work then speaks for itself. It has its own mission, its own kuleana [responsibility and attendant prerogative] to do whatever it's going to do with people who encounter it or interact with it.

JKK: What was it like for you to shift from painting or filmmaking into wood working and design? Here I'm thinking about the sheer scale of the 'umeke project, and what went into your decision to create that and not something else.

MAM: 'Umeke hold all our valuable things for protocols: the waters, the salts, the 'ōlena [Hawaiian turmeric]. It also holds what we drink such as 'awa [also known as kava, *Piper methysticum*], our lei hulu [a lei made with feathers for the head or shoulders], or, most importantly, our poi [taro paste mixed with water] that families eat. So, it's just natural and so rich in metaphor. I've always had a fascination with 'umeke, and I have a little book that we wrote in the community twenty years ago called *'Umeke*, which says that "we are 'Umeke."[5] That was the message of Hale Makua, another beloved teacher who was also a healer. His mana'o [beliefs] and mo'olelo [tradition, stories] were that we are all beings—like bowls of light.

If you're going to be a bowl of light, you are also acknowledging energy and spirit and the dark moments that appear as rocks in your bowl when the light dims. All you have to do is turn your bowl over and get rid of the rocks, but your light will always be there. The metaphor, the kaona, of the 'umeke means we are containers for spirit. We are containers.

JKK: Could you say more about the reception of this particular work within the local and international art community, with your peers who see you do this kind of work, and the reception from the public when they see it in that space?

MAM: My goodness, I don't think anyone ever expected that sculpture. I was trained as a photographer with a design and printmaking background, but I didn't like design very much, and it didn't necessarily like me. I gravitated to printmaking with a beloved professor at Stanford and then I was with extraordinary photographers. Then I went into film because there's such a dearth of our stories being told in so many areas.

My first film, *Puamana* (1989), was about my Aunty Irmgard Farden Aluli.[6] Earlier, in 1987, I met the brilliant, wonderful, and famous Les Blank here in Hawai'i. He asked me, "Have you ever made a film before?" and I said, "No." But that didn't stop me, because when you're well-trained, you can. You can choose to call the things that you know will be important to you, and then spend the rest of your life unlearning the things that were not helpful. And I think that is the case for many of us who were Western trained because you spend a lot of time jettisoning things that don't serve you in community work.

None of these things are coincidental. They're very much purposeful and deliberate and meaningful, because, as Aunty Irmgard said, the work must have the function right. Beauty is in and of itself extraordinary and important, but for that mana [life force energy and power] or deeper 'ike Hawai'i, we must do the work, not only to be beautiful, but to serve a purpose. That's how you know things also grow their mana. It's like a canoe: If you've ever paddled in a beautiful canoe, there's nothing more extraordinary because it holds memory. It's organic. It's not a fiberglass piece. It's alive, it's fragile. It's a metaphor for us. It's just incredible.

JKK: Beautiful. Where will the 'umeke go next?

MAM: This 'umeke was invited to go out to Kapolei, the second city on the island of O'ahu, and will be there until October 2025. And my dear, beloved uncle, 'Anakala Sam Ka'ai, who lost the majority of all his life's work in the Maui fires, invited it to be shown in Lāhainā, Maui. I want to honor his wish and see if we can get *'Umeke Lā'au* reinstalled in situ, in that place of catastrophe and horror, because then it will really be able to do its work as I imagine it to do.

Someone else asked for it to go to Canada, to the Six Nations [a First Nations reserve in Southern Ontario], and it was also recently invited to Rapa Nui [Easter Island]. I first want the piece to do its work in Oceania, and then, if it's still intact after a few of these wild adventures, to travel to a place like Canada, because we all need healing and that is exactly what this culture medicine is meant to offer. It's not "like" medicine, but it *is* medicine. The piece itself is our culture. It is us. We can be our best selves, not only in terms of repair and aloha nō, but with conscious intention of mālama [care and balance]. So, the ʻumeke is just a demonstration and manifestation of that.

JKK: Would you speak to the audio aspect included with the sculpture?

MAM: The audio part is extraordinary, because I wanted to invite all our ancestors into the ʻumeke. As you know, our history is such that ninety-plus percent [of the Kanaka Maoli population in the islands at the time] signed a document against annexation called the Kūʻē Petition. My grandfather was seventeen years old when he signed that. So, it's personal—as art should be. This affects me, everything about those times plays a role in my own history. So that is why, for me, the arts exemplify some of my deepest fears, my deepest hopes—what art is supposed to do.

All of these thousands and thousands of names from the Kūʻē petitions were read into an audio track. The next part was to create a proper audio loop so that people will be able to acknowledge, "Oh, my kūpuna are here! They are here for me!" This is yet another way—orally, sensually, sensorially—to invoke that sixth sense that we all have: our intuition and instincts to heal. Because if people were to hear their ancestors' voices, there's a profound connection that can happen, and just to know that they are being invoked is enough for people to understand, "This is healing." This is an example of that in its best form, and another reason why the arts are critical.

It's affirming, and it again proves to me that belief, faith, hope, and aloha are the alchemy that creates not only beauty, but beyond that, the potential for healing in very significant ways. And my practice has really been for me and my children to get through some very, very difficult times in my life so that I can give my moʻopuna [grandchildren] the best of what I hope for them. That is what I dream about and hope for.

Part 3: "An Inclusive Archipelagic Approach": Noelle M.K.Y. Kahanu

JKK: I'd like to start by asking about your trajectory from the Honolulu Biennial to the Hawai'i Triennial, and your role as a curator within these mega-spaces, putting Hawai'i on the map in terms of contemporary art in many ways.

NMKYK: About ten years ago, in the fall of 2014, there was a prologue exhibition called *Chain of Fire.* As part of that, the Honolulu Biennial Foundation sponsored a series of panels. The topic was an inquiry as to how Honolulu might benefit from a biennial in the face of understandable skepticism, and I thought, "Oh, yeah, one more big event, and we're just the backdrop, serving tables." A big event like that may be a platform for other international and national artists, but we had to ask how local artists and the Hawai'i community would benefit. And so, *Chain of Fire* was meant to show how Hawaiian and other Pacific artists could stand on the same footing as other internationally recognized artists, a fledgling effort to test the waters. And then, two years later, we had the first Honolulu Biennial (in 2017).

The organizational structure started out as the Honolulu Biennial Foundation, a nonprofit formed to support the biennial. That organization transformed into Hawai'i Contemporary; it was the same board organized around the same intent, but they realized they needed to expand beyond Honolulu to have a more inclusive archipelagic approach, meaning all of Hawai'i. Therefore, Hawai'i Contemporary is the organization that supports what is now the Hawai'i Triennial. We are now in our fourth iteration, not including the prologue exhibition—2017, 2019, 2022, and now 2025. This is the first time I've been involved other than in an advisory role in 2019.

I think there are always conversations and skepticism around these kinds of art biennials/triennials, which are not unique to Hawai'i. These art events are monstrous and often exploit local labor; rarely is there collaboration or inclusion of the local artists or arts community. We had to pause and ask, "Do we really want to do this?" But I think the Hawai'i-based model works in the sense that for every year there was always somebody on the curatorial team that was based here. During the first year in 2017, it was Ngahiraka Mason, a Māori curator living in Hawai'i, while Fumiyo Nanjo from the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo served as the curatorial director. This model exemplified the importance of a local/Indigenous connection. Then, in 2019, Nina Tonga from Aotearoa/New Zealand was the lead curator, and Josh Tengan (who is from Hawai'i) was the assistant curator. In 2022, Broderick was the local/Kanaka Maoli associate curator alongside Dr. Miwako

Tezuka; Dr. Melissa Chiu was the curatorial director. In each of those circumstances, it was always hierarchical and the Hawai‘i person technically served under the artistic director.

HT25 is the first time that the curatorial team was nonhierarchical; all three lead curators worked by collaboration and consensus. We—Wassan Al-Khudhairi, Binna Choi, and I—had never worked together. Hawai‘i Contemporary invited people to apply [to be] a curator and we did not speak to each other in advance of what we’d individually submitted. I don’t know how many others made presentations or were being considered, but, when it came down to the three of us, given our different strengths and weaknesses, it was clear we had an opportunity to create something new as three women of color who would work by consensus to create something we were interested in and proud of doing.

I had never been involved in anything contemporary at this level. You know, I had fifteen years of experience in a cultural ethnographic museum, the Bishop Museum. I will be the first one to say that I was clearly out of my element but both Binna and Wassan had curated triennials and biennials before, and they compensated for my lack of experience. The other important thing is that Wassan ultimately moved to Hawai‘i. We could not have done it without her, especially at the end. At times, curating became a full-time job, even though it was presented as a part-time position.

I’m still a little on the fence as to whether we can create a model that’s not based on a certain level of exploitation, where the staff is working ten to twelve hours a day at the end. But again, it’s not unique. However, does that make it right? And is there a better alternative? How do we, for example, avoid one more boozy cocktail-party mixer/donor event? Instead, how do we get people to the lo‘i [taro patch]? How do we have the artists just do an ‘āina day [land restoration]? Even with the best of intentions, these things became logistically impossible. For me, that was a little heartbreaking. On the other hand, there were genuine connections that were made between artists and folks in our community that are meaningful.

We got closer to an alternative model through our decentralized approach, but it was not exactly what I was hoping for. Maybe that’s the thing—maybe with every version we can get a little bit closer to this alternative model. But, then again, you have a new executive director every time, and new curators too. So, is the Hawai‘i Triennial even capable of evolving? Or is it just reborn as a new, different version of itself? I don’t know. What I do know is this: there weren’t really any marquee artists in this, and some people, especially younger generations,

found that so refreshing. We included so many artists that I had never heard of before. Then we had another portion of the community that felt that we weren't international enough, who wanted the "marquee artists," but these are the curatorial choices. And given that the board chose this curatorial collective, they must have believed in a different model, right?

JKK: How did the three of you come to work together?

NMKYK: I think Hawai'i Contemporary individually made offers and then invited us to meet each other over Zoom. In the lead up to HT25, we had a lot of face-to-face opportunities. We got to know each other in person, which was so critical because we had never worked together before. We also traveled to meet artists, did 'āina [land]-based work, got our feet muddy in the lo'i together, and went swimming at Hāpuna Beach. It was important in facilitating meaningful conversations over shared meals.

JKK: Would you say more about the *'Ai Pōhaku* exhibition? I would imagine that played a huge role in you getting selected, especially since it was such an important and sizable contribution and intervention.

NMKYK: Yes and no. I was one of three curators for *'Ai Pōhaku: Stone Eaters,* a multi-sited exhibition held in venues across the University of Hawai'i [UH] system that opened in mid-2023, but the HT25 curatorial decision was made prior to that. Nonetheless, I learned so much and it was a seminal moment if we project into the future and look back on the key moments or exhibitions within the contemporary Native Hawaiian arts movement. It was a model based on taking the criticism to the very site of the crime. When you're applying for grants, the venues could be anywhere, but it was a major decision to have the exhibition within the UH system.

We required a letter of commitment from UH and we did get that, but I don't think the administration really knew what they were in for. I do think they understood that there would be a critique about the lack of Indigenous presence at a so-called "Hawaiian place of learning." Over twenty years had passed since the previous large-scale exhibition of contemporary Hawaiian art there, but I don't know if they fully appreciated the sharpness of the critique.

There was a Native American/Native Hawaiian Museum Services Grant program out of the Institute of Museum and Library Services that provided up to $100,000. Curators Josh Tengan, Broderick, and I sat around and conceived of this project, which would go on to receive funds from other sources as well. We got the grant, but due to the pandemic, it was pushed off for one year. In the end, there were almost forty artists in six venues. The sites included the Commons Gallery and the Art Gallery at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, the East West Center gallery (which is not UH, but is still connected to the campus), Windward Community College, Leeward Community College, and Kapi‘olani Community College.

JKK: So, that was a massive undertaking that must have amounted to gaining such vast experience.

NMKYK: If I am to be one-hundred-percent honest, it happened because of the young male energy of Drew and Josh. I am the “Auntie” after all. I just turned sixty this year! With all the physical labor and the catalog writing, in no way would I assert that there was equity in labor among the curatorial team for *‘Ai Pōhaku*. But what did I bring? I introduced older artists into the mix. There are ways in which we’re all contributing names for consideration, and these reflect our relationships within the community. Not just because maybe they’re willing to say yes because of who is asking, but because you’re genuinely interested in either what they’re addressing or how they’re doing it, or both, right? And then with Drew and Josh, both considered how artists relate to one another within the exhibition space. For example, in the main UH gallery, even though they were on opposite sides of the room, there was a visual through-line from the work of ‘Īmaikalani Kalahele to [that of] Cory Kamehanaokalā Holt Taum, which represented their mentor-mentee relationship. With Taum, his painting had a direct reference to the British explorer James Cook arriving in Hawai‘i during the time of the Makahiki, and the very next painting was Char Sinclair’s painting of an imu [underground earthen oven]. The kaona [hidden, multilayered, or metaphorical meaning] of that was very funny, if you knew what you were looking at. Co-curating is an interesting process, and it’s a reflection of people’s working relationships. And then there is knowing people’s strengths and the skill of offsetting each other’s weaknesses.

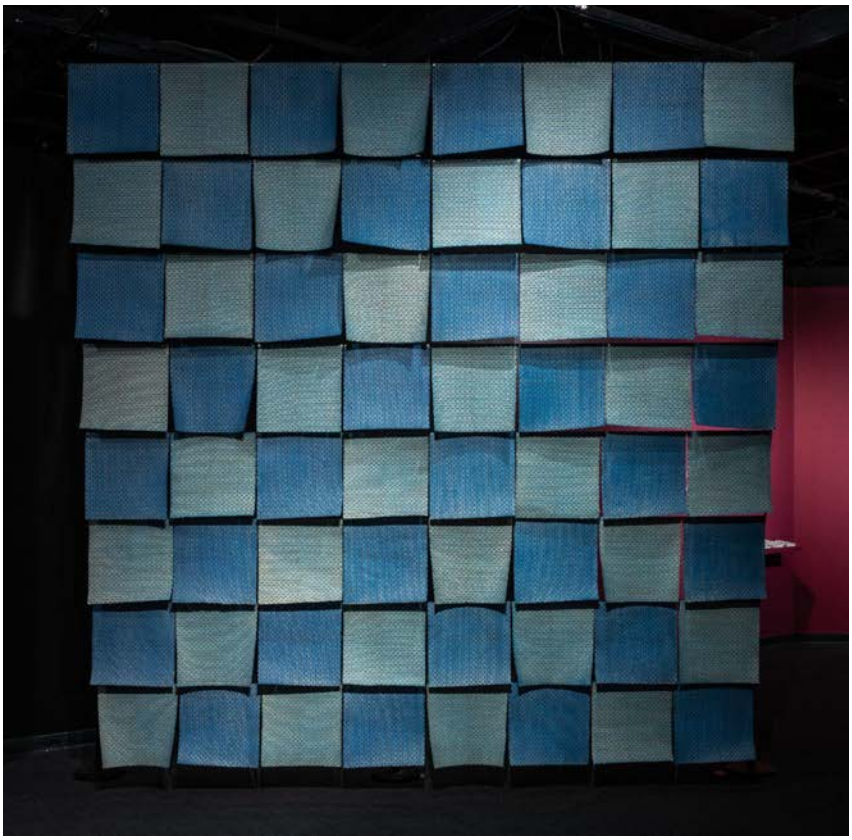

Figure 7. J.D. Nālamakūikapō Ahsing,*ʻĀinamoana*, 2025. Ohe kāpala on hau paper, metal structure. On view at Bishop Museum, Honolulu, as part of Hawaiʻi Triennial 2025: *Aloha Nō*. Photograph by Duarte Studios. Courtesy of the artist and Hawaiʻi Contemporary

JKK: Segueing back to HT25, what would you say is so unique about this particular iteration, beyond the working relationships that were nonhierarchical and consensus-based? You're bringing a Hawaiian perspective, with Kanaka and Pasifika artists, and that knowledge. I'm hoping you can speak to how that fits into the bigger picture.

NMKYK: Curatorially speaking, we really fought to have the title be in ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi. [The title of the] Hawaiʻi Triennial 2022 [was] partly in Hawaiian: *Pacific Century: E hoʻomau no Moananuiākea*. So, at least there was a Hawaiian tagline. This was really what we wanted to do. With *Aloha Nō* for HT25, it was a matter of not being scared of appearing to exploit aloha [as a Hawaiian word for love, peace, and compassion, among many other meanings]. Adding the nō is what made the difference. Without the kahakō, a diacritical mark above a vowel to show that it is pronounced with a long sound, folks might have easily misunderstood our intention, implying that we had "no" aloha, as opposed to "nō," which does the

opposite and operates to intensify aloha. There was a circular conversation that we had with others and ourselves. In the end, I would say that we settled on it after going to Maui and hearing people talk about the need to share aloha, but also to defend it.

That, then is the *Aloha Nō*, right? The aloha no, and the aloha nō? And also, what does it mean to be loved too much? Where and how do we set our own limits? We're not the only ones that experience all of these challenges of colonial impositions and commercial exploitation. Once we settled on it, there was so much that *Aloha Nō* allowed us to explore. How did we understand Aloha Nō and its ability to translate across geography and cultural distance? Whether it's transnational solidarity or just understanding that the fate of Okinawa is the fate of Hawai'i is the fate of Puerto Rico, what does that look like in an exhibition? How do we select artists that are willing to engage with these themes and threads in a way that illuminates not only their circumstance, but the circumstances of others' rights? It's all connected.

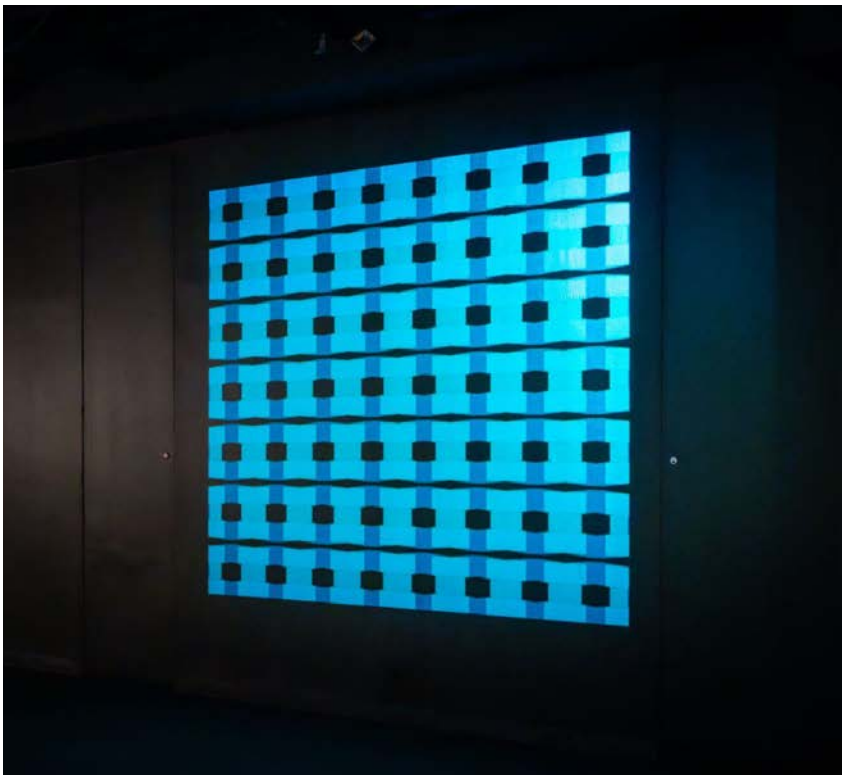

Figure 8. Sione Faletau, *Tau'a'alo*, 2023. Single-channel video, stereo sound. On view at Bishop Museum, Honolulu, as part of Hawai'i Triennial 2025: *Aloha Nō*. Photograph by Duarte Studios. Courtesy of the artist and Hawai'i Contemporary

Figure 9. John Pule, *Hao*, 2024. Acrylic on canvas, 2 x 2 m. On view at Bishop Museum, Honolulu, as part of Hawai'i Triennial 2025: *Aloha Nō*. Photograph by Duarte Studios. Courtesy of the artist and Hawai'i Contemporary

The one thing I learned from *'Ai Pōhaku* was the importance of developing a theme for each venue. For example, the *'Ai Pōhaku* gallery at Windward Community College (Gallery 'Iolani) was all women artists. If you went to Koa Gallery (at Kapi'olani Community College), it was all kāne [men]—except for one wahine [woman] carver, Puni Jackson—but clearly it was a male-centered exhibition. In that sense, I think it reinforced the way that we could be really deliberate about the venues and the themes and the artists. But some artists could go anywhere, they could go into multiple venues. They could address demilitarization at Leeward Community College, or they could go to the Bishop Museum and explore colonialism and collections. That's just a whole lot of conversation and feedback, "Oh, what about this person? What about that?" At the Honolulu Museum of Art, we explored women and healing. And then, you see the magic happens, like at Bishop Museum and how Jonathan Day Nālamakūikapō Ahsing's hanging of hau [hibiscus tree] paper (Fig. 7) is in direct conversation with

Sione Faletau's patterned kinetic video installation (Fig. 8). And then we put Nalamakū's hau paper next to John Pule's painting called *Hao* (Fig. 9). There are just all these ways in which the magic happens—some of which you plan for, and some of which just happens.

Thinking about agendas is a tricky thing—nobody really wants a curator who is going to come in like a bull in a China shop and just run rough-shod over everything. But at the same time, if I didn't think our community would benefit, then why would I do it? There's a way in which, at least for the curator on the ground—and maybe I can only speak for myself—you want to ensure that there is not just a platform for outside artists, but for our artists here. Creating meaningful opportunities for engagement—not just for Hawai'i-based artists but also Kanaka artists.

Meleanna Aluli Meyer would never have had this opportunity, as backbreaking as it was and as magnificent as it turned out to be, unprompted by a triennial. We wouldn't be here right now having this conversation. So, in terms of my role, I ask how to best advocate for the community and artists within it in a way that takes into consideration broader things.

Figure 10. Installation view of archival material and sculptures by Rocky Ka'iouliokahihikolo'Ehu Jensen. On view at Capitol Modern, Honolulu, as part of Hawai'i Triennial 2025: *Aloha Nō*. Photograph by Duarte Studios. Courtesy Hawai'i Contemporary

This is the first time that the triennial chose somebody posthumously. Most triennials or biennials won't because they're really interested in new work. But for whatever reason, we had never done it before, and I think there was a bit of a struggle as to how we could relate the work of renowned master carver Rocky KaʻiouliokahihikoloʻEhu Jensen to *Aloha Nō* (Fig. 10). I had to propose why it would work, and at some point, I thought, if I can't make the case, then why am I even doing this? At the heart of things, you know why you're doing it. He gave his life to laying the foundation for contemporary Native Hawaiian art, and I worry that this new generation doesn't even know who he is.

If we had not selected him, I don't even know what I would have done. That's how strongly I thought about it. He is the manifestation of what happens when, for fifty years, someone fights for the ability for Hawaiians to express themselves with their own contemporary visual aesthetic language. Oh, you can do a lauhala hat made of pandanus leaves, or make kapa cloth from the wauke [paper mulberry plant], or you can carve an image that replicates a museum's collection piece, but you're not allowed to change the form? You're not allowed to make a contemporary Hawaiian face with a wide nose, or a figure based on an akua hulu manu [feathered war god], but with silver teeth? The triennial becomes the opportunity to have that conversation. Rocky also could have gone almost anywhere: Bishop Museum, or Honolulu Hale, because that was the site of some of their first exhibitions, and there would have been a full circle, a return fifty years later to the site of their first exhibition. But at the same time, the lesson from *ʻAi Pōhaku* was to take the critique to the center of the scene of the crime, to the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts (SFCA, now called Capitol Modern). Even they have changed, and the SFCA has collected way more Kanaka art in the last five years than they have in the fifty years prior. It's both a testament to a fraught history, but also a commitment to turning the page on that. And so, it's not all bad.

These issues are related to the consequences of systemic racism, which *ʻAi Pōhaku* so well-articulated. Rocky did not participate in the show, but we borrowed something from SFCA. He was still alive when we mounted *ʻAi Pōhaku*, and every time I gave a tour, I sang his praises as the groundbreaking artist that he was and how he started the contemporary Native Hawaiian arts movement (Fig. 11). And I wish, if he had said yes, and he had flown to Oʻahu to see what was happening, it would have made a difference in the choice he made to take his own life. Or maybe not. I don't know, and I suppose one exhibit doesn't change fifty years of oppression, abuse, and heartbreak.

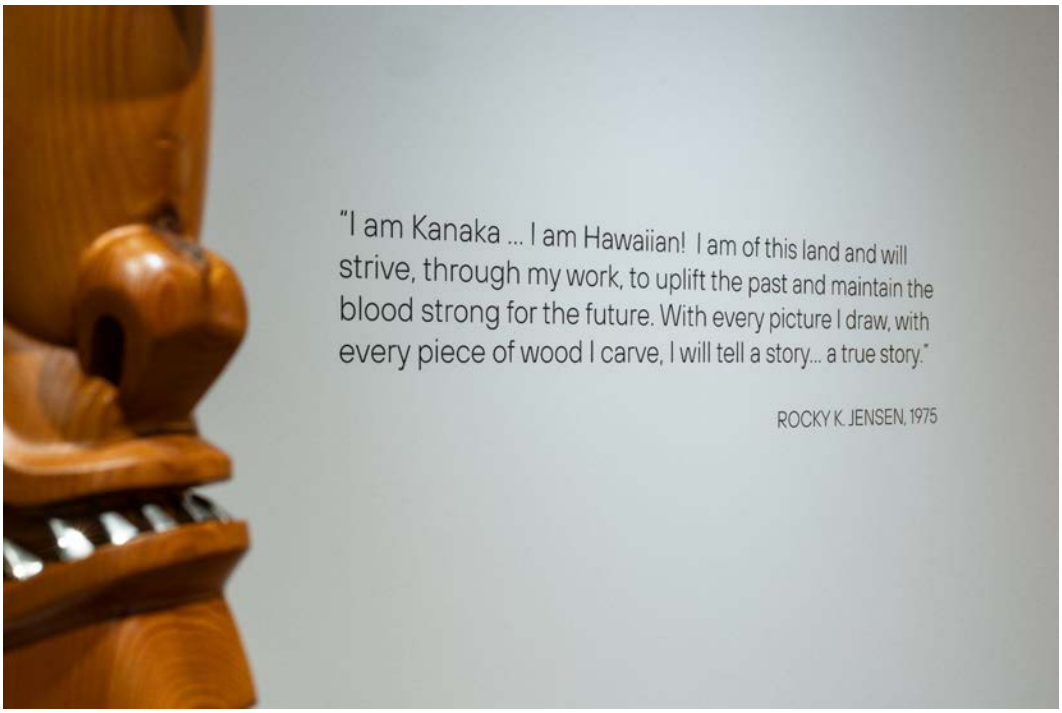

Figure 11. Quote by Rocky KaʻiouliokahihikoloʻEhu Jensen on the gallery wall at Capitol Modern, Honolulu, as part of Hawaiʻi Triennial 2025: *Aloha Nō*. Photograph by Duarte Studios. Courtesy of Hawaiʻi Contemporary

We're able to utilize HT25 as a platform to address systemic racism and its real-world consequences. We can look at artwork like that of Sonya Kelliher-Combs's really thoughtful piece about suicide and make those connections. That is the heart of the matter. That's what the triennial means to me. How are we addressing our own issues as a community, as a sovereign nation? How are we offering ourselves a language of hope and healing? But you don't get there until you're addressing the fracture—acknowledging that this is a problem.

To go back to the point that we're a great platform for national and international artists to come to Hawaiʻi, but if we're not even addressing this huge issue of the lack of appreciation and awareness and understanding of Hawaiian visual art, then is it worth it? We celebrate hula and Hawaiian music, but is there a celebration of Hawaiian visual art? There is none. We tried to do it with the Maoli Arts Month and the MAMo awards, but it ran its course.

Then there's the video about Rocky by David Kalama included in HT25. On the one hand, I could have worked with him and approached it like, "Okay, let's edit this out, or maybe that's too strong. Or let's not do that, or what about this?" But in the end, I just wanted Kalama to create a piece about one of his best friends,

to show who Rocky really was—the good, bad, the ugly, as well as the frustration and the brilliance. I wanted it really raw, seeing that his struggles were palpable and powerful.

JKK: Any closing thoughts on HT25? It's such an astounding achievement.

NMKYK: I like hearing what people are saying about the triennial, because you can only do your part, and then you put it out into the ether. Is it doing what we hoped it would do? It seems to me that people are really getting it, that there is an understanding of the thoughtfulness, and the deliberativeness of artists selected in conversation with each other, in relationship to the venue and the themes. There is no kind of randomness, like in a lot of these group exhibitions. How do they relate to one another, and why here and why now? So, I hope that when we look back on it, that this was a successful moment for the triennial, but also for the community and for the artists who have participated.

Noelle M.K.Y. Kahanu (Kanaka ʻOiwi/Native Hawaiian) is a fifteen-year veteran of the Bishop Museum in Honolulu, Hawaiʻi, where she developed scores of exhibitions and programs. She worked on the renovation of Hawaiian Hall (2009), Pacific Hall (2013), and the landmark E Kū Ana Ka Paia *exhibition (2010). She has a law degree from the University of Hawaiʻi and previously served as counsel to the US Senate Committee on Indian Affairs in Washington, DC, where she worked on issues affecting Native Hawaiian, Native American, and Native Alaskan communities. She is currently an associate specialist in public humanities and Native Hawaiian programs in the American Studies Department at the University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa. Since 2023, she has been the acting director of the museum studies graduate certificate program. Her current research and practice explore the liberating and generative opportunities when museums "seed" rather than cede authority.*

J. Kēhaulani Kauanui is a budding art curator, seasoned radio producer, and established scholar-activist who situates her work in critical Indigenous studies, settler colonial studies, critical race studies, and anarchist studies. She is the Eric and Wendy Schmidt Professor of Indigenous Studies and Professor of Anthropology in the Effron Center for the Study of America at Princeton University. Kauanui is the author of two monographs: Hawaiian Blood *(2008) and* Paradoxes of Hawaiian Sovereignty: Land, Sex, and the Colonial Politics of State Nationalism *(2018). She also has an edited book titled* Speaking of Indigenous Politics: Conversations with

Activists, Scholars, and Tribal Leaders *(2018). She is one of the six co-founders of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (founded in 2008) and was the recipient of the Western History Association's 2022 American Indian/Indigenous History Lifetime Achievement Award.*

Meleanna Aluli Meyer (Kanaka ʻOiwi/Native Hawaiian) is an activist, educator, filmmaker, and visual artist based on the island of Oʻahu, Hawaiʻi. An award-winning artist and educator, she considers herself a translator of visual media and a visionary in the way she weaves culture, reconciliation, healing, and support of ʻike Hawaiʻi (Hawaiian knowledge) into her work on various platforms and media. She earned a BA in design/photography from Stanford University, and a masters in educational foundations from the College of Education at the University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa. She is also a Borelli Prize winner and a former East-West Center Fellow, Asian Pacific American Women's Leadership Institute Fellow, and Salzburg Fellow. Meyer's deep dives into culture and the arts have been a lifelong and ongoing passion, not just of Hawaiian culture, but of cultures of the world that hold her interests.

Notes

[1] For a pathbreaking study on the petitions, see Noenoe K. Silva, *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to U.S. Colonialism* (Duke University Press, 2004).

[2] Also known as the Hawaiʻi State Museum of Natural and Cultural History, the institution was founded in 1889 by Charles Reed Bishop (1822–1915), a businessman and philanthropist, in memory of his late wife, Princess Bernice Pauahi Bishop (1831–1884).

[3] Kapihe lived during the time of Kamehameha the Great and delivered the prophecy in the early nineteenth century. Today, it has become important in politically mobilizing Kānaka Maoli.

[4] Vicky Holt Takamine founded Pua Aliʻi ʻIlima (PAʻI) in 1977. See https://paifoundation.org/.

[5] Rebekah Luke and Meleanna Aluli Meyer, eds., *Umeke Writings: An Anthology* (Na Kamalei K E E P, 2008).

[6] Les Blank, Meleanna Meyer, and Chris Simon, dirs., *Puamana* (1991, Les Blank Films).