

**GAZELLAH BRUDER**  
with an interview by Stacy L. Kamehiro  
***Restitution to Our Oceans—to our Pasifika I, II,  
III, and IV***

**Abstract**

*Gazellah Bruder is an artist based in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. She presents four paintings she created while an artist-in-residence (August to October 2025) in the Leipzig International Art program at the Leipziger Baumwollspinnerei in Germany. In an artist statement, Bruder describes how her paintings are inspired by conversations surrounding complex subjects—colonization, de-colonization, identity, and restitution—and presents a critique of the devastating human impact on the earth’s oceans and ocean life. Her work calls for restitution to the oceans. Then, in an interview with art historian Stacy L. Kamehiro, Bruder discusses the four paintings and her artistic process in detail.*

**Keywords:** *Oceania, Papua New Guinea, contemporary art, colonization, de-colonization, identity, restitution, oceans, environmental degradation, climate change*



Figure 1. Gazellah Bruder, 2025.  
Port Moresby, PNG. Photograph courtesy  
of the artist

## Artist Statement

During my 2025 artist's residency through the Leipzig International Art program at the Leipziger Baumwollspinnerei in Germany, I produced a series of four paintings titled *Restitution to our Oceans—to our Pasifika, I, II, III, and IV*. These works were inspired by conversations surrounding very complex subjects: colonization, de-colonization, identity, and restitution.<sup>1</sup>

Many Indigenous societies have experienced cultural atrocities under colonization, including the removal of their cultural history and heritage. Restitution of precious artifacts to their original owners is an overwhelming process that requires the participation of institutions, governments, and civil society. Although I lack precise knowledge of the complexities of restitution procedures, I was completely astounded when confronted by the sheer magnitude of the subject of restitution and did not know how to process it. It took a lot of deep thought on how best to express my understanding. Human problems can seem impossible to fix and require a lot of work and time to resolve. Therefore, I felt it necessary to re-focus and look at the issue of restitution from a different perspective.

I thought of my position as a Pacific Islander and where I come from: Papua New Guinea. I considered the ocean and people's impact on life in the ocean. The human species can be very destructive; as a collective, it has plundered nature. We have failed to use our earth sustainably. Nations have thrived on destructive practices that humans feel entitled to—practices that have contributed to climate change and global warming. The negative consequences of our greed are evident on our lands, and also in our waterways, our lakes, our rivers, and our oceans. We continue to colonize the oceans—over-fishing them, using destructive fishing methods, and polluting with our trash. With deep-sea mining, the worst is yet to come. Life on earth is at our mercy. Do we have time to fix the damage we have caused? The future looks bleak.

History has shown how much we have failed in our dealings with each other as human beings. Have we thought, even for a moment, about who fights and speaks for the tens of thousands of species we share this planet with? Who will speak for all life in the ocean? Who will make restitution to them, and how? Let us consider restitution to the oceans—all life on earth depends on this. It is my hope that my paintings will provoke and inspire us all in the fight to protect our oceans.

## Interview with Gazellah Bruder by Stacy L. Kamehiro

**Stacy L. Kamehiro (SLK):** *Thank you for sharing your new and important work with Pacific Arts! Please tell us about your process in creating the Restitution to Our Oceans—to our Pasifika series.*

**Gazellah Bruder (GB):** My work always starts with my feelings about a story or a conversation I have in my mind. The paintings express deep, chaotic, and often troubling, overwhelming feelings. I start with a quick sketch to capture an image of these feelings and then—like carving out a rock to find the sculpture—through painting, I look for the story and reveal it.



Figure 2. Gazellah Bruder, *Restitution to our Oceans—to our Pasifika I*, 2025. Acrylic on 300psm printmaking paper, 56 x 76 cm. Courtesy of the artist

**SLK:** *Your paintings feature specific animals, such as turtles, yellow tang fish (*Zebbrasoma flavescens*), nautiluses, and manta rays. Is there a special significance of these forms of sea life for you?*

**GB:** I depict the turtle as a symbol of the people of whose land touches the warm water of the Pacific Ocean, especially those people who have historically been colonized or are still colonized. The turtle represents the survival of Indigenous cultures, societies, and practices—sea turtles travel far and wide, from the moment they hatch to when they return to their home beaches years later to nest and create a new generation.

Tang fish clean parasites off large sea creatures like turtles and whales. They are featured in one of the paintings (Fig. 1) as a representation of the countless colonizers who picked off the resources from their Pacific colonies to benefit their own coffers. They extracted resources at the expense of the original inhabitants who become subservient to the colonizers.

The nautilus shell and manta ray represent rare beauty and the mysteries of the deep that have yet to be discovered. All life on earth is precious, and yet the ocean is held ransom by human activity. It is our responsibility as human beings to intervene to save and protect our warming Pacific Ocean. We must protect our ocean to save all life on earth.

**SLK:** *Some of the animals appear as opaque, silhouetted forms. Is there a reason you paint some of the sea life (especially the turtles) in this way? Are they akin to “ghost” figures—especially because so many of the Pacific marine turtles are endangered species that are threatened with extinction?<sup>2</sup> Or might they be signaling future life—life that we hope is to come but is uncertain?*

**GB:** Yes, these represent all life: lived, living, and still yet to come.

**SLK:** *Please tell us about the arched patterns found in painting II (Fig. 3) and the arched and crosshatch patterns found on the rays’ bodies in painting IV (Fig. 5).*

**GB:** There are many common motifs in traditional patterns across Indigenous visual cultures throughout Pasifika. The patterns I used in these paintings represent the ripple of time, cultural continuity, and the current of the ocean and its waves that connect many Pasifika people. The crosshatch pattern is found in the weave of our traditional houses, mats, and fishing nets. Despite globalization and global warming, our Indigenous cultures and lifestyles continue to thrive. We have co-

existed with nature, but now this symbiotic and balanced existence is in danger of being altered forever.



Figure 3. Gazellah Bruder, *Restitution to our Oceans—to our Pasifika II*, 2025. Acrylic on 300psm printmaking paper, 76 x 56 cm. Courtesy of the artist

**SLK:** *Would you comment on your color choices? Although the blue and greens in painting II (Fig. 3) correspond to the ocean environment, the bright purples, reds, and oranges seem to indicate something else, like danger.*

**GB:** The color choices are not accidental. The blues and greens are the beautiful calm cool waters of the ocean. The colors grow warmer: from purple and green hues to orange, representing heightening climate change and global warming, until they become a “red hot” warning—a call to action for humanity. We have long colonized the ocean; our activities on land are mirrored in their impact in the ocean. We must take responsibility for our actions and be accountable to our environment lest we lose sight of the bigger picture: of how all elements of the earth are connected, wreak more destruction upon our ecosystem, and, ultimately, suffer the consequences of our actions.

**SLK:** *The acrylic paint you used appears to have been very liquid, very fluid—it almost resembles watercolor. Were you going for a specific effect? Also, the way the paint that forms the environment for the sea life is applied suggests urgency. Are you intending to show chaos and violence in the ocean through your color choices and painting technique?*

**GB:** I enjoy working with acrylic paints because the colors are intense and remain vibrant when dry. Watercolor does not have the same bright finish and may fade over time. For practical reasons, I also used acrylic because I did not want the paints to run if the paper accidentally got wet after completion.

The style I used to portray this “conversation” about the ocean relates to my attempt to relinquish my control over wet paint and wash techniques. The ocean cannot be tamed—it can be violent, wild, passionate, unpredictable, and beyond our comprehension. I deliberately chose to make it look chaotic. I applied diluted paint onto wet sections of the paper and while the paint was drying, I blew air across wet puddles and moved the paper in various directions to spread the paint, using salt to add textured effects. A lot of the beautiful transitions in forms and colors were almost organic and unplanned. I then simply looked at the paper when it was dry to “find” my characters in each piece.



Figure 4. Gazellah Bruder, *Restitution to our Oceans—to our Pasifika III*, 2025. Acrylic on 300psm printmaking paper, 76 x 56 cm. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 5. Gazellah Bruder, *Restitution to our Oceans—to our Pasifika IV*, 2025. Acrylic on 300psm printmaking paper, 76 x 56 cm. Courtesy of the artist

**SLK:** *The paintings seem to include gestural effects in the way the paint is splashed onto the paper. Your own body and actions (activism?) are very present. Was this something you were thinking about—perhaps responding to your own call to act to protect our oceans?*

**GB:** The idea of my being a “conservation artist” was really born unintentionally. Most of my work for the past twenty-seven years has focused on the female form, specifically the female torso, as the epitome of life.<sup>3</sup> I was inspired by the annual Hiri Moale Festival that celebrates Motuan culture, languages, and traditions in the Central Province of Papua New Guinea.<sup>4</sup> Part of the celebration features the Hiri Hanenamo, in which young women demonstrate their knowledge of Motuan culture and their commitment to preserving Indigenous heritage. The women wear grass skirts that sway with their movements to welcome the arrival of the Hiri Lagatoi—large sailing canoes famed for their ocean voyages in complex historic trade networks. In two of the paintings in the *Restitution to our Oceans—to our Pasifika* series, I subtly depict a female form (Figs. 4 and 5) to emphasize the presence of Mother Nature, the connection of humanity and the environment, and peoples’ responsibility to protect the environment and therefore ourselves.

My feeling the need to act is also inspired by my father. I have always loved painting turtles and see in the turtle the spirit of my father.<sup>5</sup> He was wise, refined, and kind—virtues that I aspire to. I am not the most courageous person or a born leader, but I also am not a follower. I am a nonconformist who has always striven to use my art to create conversations. I am not an aggressive or confrontational human being and in the face of violence, I run for the hills—I always thought of myself as a coward. In terms of human rights, I have always hidden behind my work to express my thoughts. I never tagged nor saw myself as an activist. I suppose my work through the years created this persona of someone who actively participates in conversations that matter. Activism for me came slowly and subtly.

My experience during my three-month artist residency through the Leipzig International Art program was profound in such a way that I had no choice but to take a stand. I can no longer sit on the fence, playing it safe. I finally realize how complex and so much bigger than me these discussions on colonization, decolonization, and participatory restitution are. I couldn’t visualize how to express and participate in this conversation without feeling like an imposter and ignorant. I thought deeply and it was emotionally traumatizing for me. It was then that the connections between the ocean, life in the ocean, my existence as a member of a former colony, and my personal experience became clearer. I wanted to address human colonization of the ocean and how we human beings have caused so much

havoc to other species of life who cannot speak for themselves. It was in imaging this “voicelessness” that I was deeply moved to speak and become part of a growing voice for all life in the ocean. I don’t know if anyone will hear or care about my voice, but I do believe that we all play an important role in this “war.”

**Gazellah Bruder** is of mixed Mekeo and Tolai parentage of Central and East New Britain, respectively, and was born in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. The complexities and expectations of being raised within the opposing structures of a patriarchal and matriarchal society significantly impacted her and her siblings. The cultural and social contrasts created a sense of alienation for her, inspiring her passion to find an identity and a place to belong. Art has been that safe place for her. She earned several degrees from the University of Papua New Guinea: a certificate in visual arts (1995), a diploma in fine arts in printmaking (1997), a BA in art and design with a minor in anthropology (2010), and a BA with honors in visual anthropology (2012), for which she wrote a thesis titled “Tolai Women and Tabu Shell Money Today.” She has worked in arts and media industries for twenty-seven years and has participated in over sixty-five major exhibitions. She held her first solo print exhibition in 2014 and is working toward her second solo exhibition in 2026.

**Stacy L. Kamehiro** teaches in the Department of History of Art & Visual Culture at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her research focuses on colonial Hawaiian visual and material culture. Her recent work attends to the politics of art organizations following the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy; the place of overseas travel in King Kalākaua’s efforts to maintain Hawai’i’s independence; the roles of Hawaiian featherwork as cultural affirmation, political statement, and historical subject; and US empire and art history. Her current book project, *Objects of the Nation: Hawai’i at the World’s Fairs*, examines collections and exhibitions of Hawaiian material culture and natural history in local and international contexts.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On other works by Gazellah Bruder that focus on the environment, see Marion Struck-Garbe, “Artists Concern: Visualising Environmental Destruction in Papua New Guinea,” *Pacific Arts* 20, no. 1 (2021): 88–104.

<sup>2</sup> There are numerous species of turtles in Oceania threatened with extinction, among them green turtles, hawksbills, loggerheads, leatherbacks, flatbacks, and olive ridleys. See “All Sea Turtles in the Pacific Threatened with Extinction, Report Reveals,” Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, September 4, 2025, <https://www.sprep.org/news/all-sea-turtles-in-the-pacific-threatened->

[with-extinction-report-reveals](#). In her paintings, Bruder features one or all these turtle species, often merging features of the various turtles together. The turtle images represent Indigenous Pacific Island peoples and their survival. Gazellah Bruder, personal communication with Stacy L. Kamehiro, January 1, 2026.

<sup>3</sup> For discussion of two of Bruder’s paintings that focus on the female form, see Stacy L. Kamehiro, “Gazellah Bruder, *Goddess I Am* and *Feeding the Gods of Melanesia*,” in *Smarthistory*, March 31, 2025, <https://smarthistory.org/gazellah-bruder-goddess-i-am-and-feeding-the-gods-of-melanesia/>.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the Hiri Moale in the context of Indigenous sovereignty, see Peter Phipps, “Performing Indigenous Sovereignties across the Pacific,” in *Touring Pacific Cultures*, ed. Kalissa Alexeyeff and John Taylor (Australia National University, 2016), 258–62.

<sup>5</sup> For additional discussion on the significance of turtles for Bruder, see Struck-Garbe, “Artists Concern,” 96.