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Past, Present, Futures: Telling Indigenous Stories through an Urban Art Aesthetic

Abstract
Indigenous muralists across the Pacific have adopted urban art aesthetics as a strategic means of asserting ongoing presence, celebrating cultural traditions, and articulating visions of Indigenous futures. This research note examines two murals by Hawaiian artists Carl F.K. Pao, Cory Taum, and Solomon Enos that were included in the 2021 Bishop Museum exhibition POW! WOW! The First Decade: From Hawaiʻi to the World*. Through urban art's accessible visual language, these artists assert an enduring Indigenous will to self-define, ground their work in ancestral knowledge, and articulate temporal visions that span past, present, and multiple futures.*

Keywords: *Bishop Museum, Hawaiʻi, Indigenous muralism, Kanaka Maoli, POW! WOW!*

> *We must write . . . we must paint . . . we must create our own ways of understanding. We are re-writing, re-scripting, re-imagining history. It is simply our version of the truth and when we speak it we are changing our future because we are able to define our past and present.*
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> —*Manulani Aluli Meyer*[1]

Urban street art has grown into a dynamic global phenomenon since its origins on the streets of Philadelphia and in the subway tunnels of New York City in the second half of the twentieth century. It emerged as a social justice response to the waves of destruction sweeping through poor minority neighborhoods as entire blocks were demolished to make way for highways and the sprawling suburbs of middle-class America. Out of harsh conditions including dislocation and dispossession, crews of malcontented inner-city youth took up magic markers and later aerosol cans to "write" messages of resistance on cities' concrete and metallic surfaces. By the 1980s, graffiti, tagging, and muralism had evolved into a distinctive collective visual aesthetic alongside other forms of urban performance

such as hip-hop, rap, and breakdancing. Today, visual urban art is one of the most highly accessible and democratized genres of contemporary art expression in the world.

In addition to its popularity and prestige, urban art has become a tool of empowerment for Indigenous communities, particularly in the effort to speak truth to power in the context of ongoing colonialism. For example, for First Nations Secwepemc youth living on reservation lands in the Kamloops region of south-central British Columbia, urban art is a means through which they can leave their "visual tracks in the landscape"—asserting the ongoing presence of First Nations people in Canada and in defiance of a history that has been marred by systematic dispossession, displacement, and genocide.[2] In this case and many others, urban art is not simply an expression of "art for art's sake." As Cherokee poet Marilou Awiakta contends, Native artistic creations are an expression of "art for *Life's* sake."[3]

In Indigenous communities across the Pacific, urban art has provided a similar platform for Indigenous artists to tell their stories. Large-scale murals, in particular, have become prevalent across the Pacific region as artists and communities seek ways to assert their ongoing presence in their ancestral places of belonging, revive and celebrate their unique histories and cultural traditions, and articulate grievances in response to the colonization of their homelands. For example, Aboriginal artist Reko Rennie's 2013 mural *Welcome to Redfern*—on a Victorian-era building in the Redfern neighborhood of Sydney, Australia—stands as a lasting tribute to local Aboriginal history and the continuing presence of Aboriginal communities in the area. The mural is rendered in black, yellow, and red—the colors that have come to represent the Aboriginal people of Australia—and pays tribute to Aboriginal leadership through portraits of key historical figures, such as Pemulwuy, an eighteenth-century clan warrior who led resistance efforts against white colonists. In 2015, Ngāi Tūhoe activist and artist Tame Iti teamed up with Pākehā street artist Owen Dippie in Aotearoa to produce the mural *Ma Mua a Muri, Ka Tika (The People of the Past Have Things to Say to the People of the Present)*. It features a larger-than-life image of Hokimoana Tawa, a respected kuia (elder woman) of the Tūhoe tribe. The mural is located in the small Bay of Plenty township of Taneātua—considered the gateway to Te Uruwera, the ancestral homeland of the Tūhoe people. This placement is an empowering counterpoint to the fact that the area was the site of the "Tūhoe Terror Raids" of 2007,[4] and enables the mural to function as a celebratory touchstone for tribal identity.

While the above mural projects attracted a great deal of media and public attention, most urban artistic interventions in the Pacific occur less conspicuously at the grassroots level. In Guam, for instance, as part of the "We Are Guam" campaign during the early 2000s, local CHamoru villages were encouraged to create murals to celebrate the distinctive stories and histories of their communities.[5] In Tahiti, over the last couple of decades murals have served in urban communities as a visual vehicle for conveying social and cultural messages, as well as to boost self-esteem among Tahitian youth who, due to the increasing urbanization of their home islands, risk becoming untethered from their cultural roots and sense of identity to ancestral place.[6]

Hawaiʻi has witnessed its own efflorescence of Indigenous muralism. Over the past decade, POW! WOW!—an international alliance of graffiti writers and street muralists founded in 2010 by Hawaiʻi-based artist Jasper Wong—has brought this movement to wider public awareness. John "Prime" Hina, Matt Ortiz, Kahiau Beamer, Keoni "Pufftronic" Paʻakaula, Kai Kaulukukui, and Haley Kailiehu are just a few of the artists within the growing cadre of Kanaka Maoli muralists in Hawaiʻi. These and other Native artists fuse Indigenous knowledge, motifs, and stories with contemporary global artistic styles, characterizing what writer Māhealani Dudoit describes as a uniquely Hawaiian aesthetic that "reaches towards the past . . . in order to translate our traditions into the language of today."[7] The murals by Native Hawaiian artists Carl F.K. Pao, Cory Taum, and Solomon Enos featured in the exhibition *POW! WOW! The First Decade: From Hawaiʻi to the World* (Bishop Museum, Oʻahu, 2021) deserve particular attention for the way they embody the contiguous connection between past, present, and, as we will see, futures.

Panta rhei (Life is flux). So wrote the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus. The phrase is more popularly known as the oft-used adage "Change is the one true constant." This constitutes the central theme of Carl F.K. Pao's and Cory Taum's collaborative mural *Kaiwiʻula* (Fig. 1). In the mural, the artists recollect the eighteenth-century Battle of Kaiwiʻula (The Red Bone), which was fought between the chiefs of Oʻahu and Maui on the very land the Bishop Museum was built on. The artists' goal was not simply to recall an historical event that reshaped Island politics, but to explore how the same land that saw a bloody battle was transformed, during *POW! WOW!*, into a site of collaboration, idea exchange, and the cultivation of positive social consciousness through art. Pao and Taum use the Battle of Kaiwiʻula as a counterpoint to violence to highlight the kind of ethically motivated change they want to see in a world that is beleagured by injustice, war, environmental degradation, and—recently—a global pandemic. "Change can

come about in countless ways," states Pao, "War is one of those ways, but so is art."[8]

Figure 1. Carl F.K. Pao and Cory Taum, *Kaiwiʻula*, 2021. Installation view in *POW! WOW! The First Decade: From Hawaiʻi to the World*, Bishop Museum, Honolulu, 2021. Acrylic on drywall; 18 x 24 ft. Photograph by Carl F.K. Pao. Courtesy of the artists

Kaiwiʻula visually explodes with a bold palette of red, purple, green, orange, and aqua that is reminiscent of 1980s graphic art. While the work has clearly defined large circular and arching forms that serve as key compositional coordinates for the piece, some of the shapes between the larger elements have been treated in a more expressionistic manner. This can be seen in the incomplete sphere located just off center of the piece that is painted in a mixed palette of purple, aqua, red, yellow. As Pao states, this represents the piko (center) of the entire mural and functions as a portal to the past.[9] Three orbs with black and white vertical stripes—created using yellow masking tape (Fig. 2)—anchor the piece and represent the past, present, and future. Each orb is enveloped by the maka (mouth) forms that are prominent in Pao's visual vocabulary and which represent the open mouths of the Hawaiian kiʻi images that were used in ritual ceremonies

to hold offerings to the god Kū. The mouths also connote sacredness and serve as a barrier of protection for the orbs.

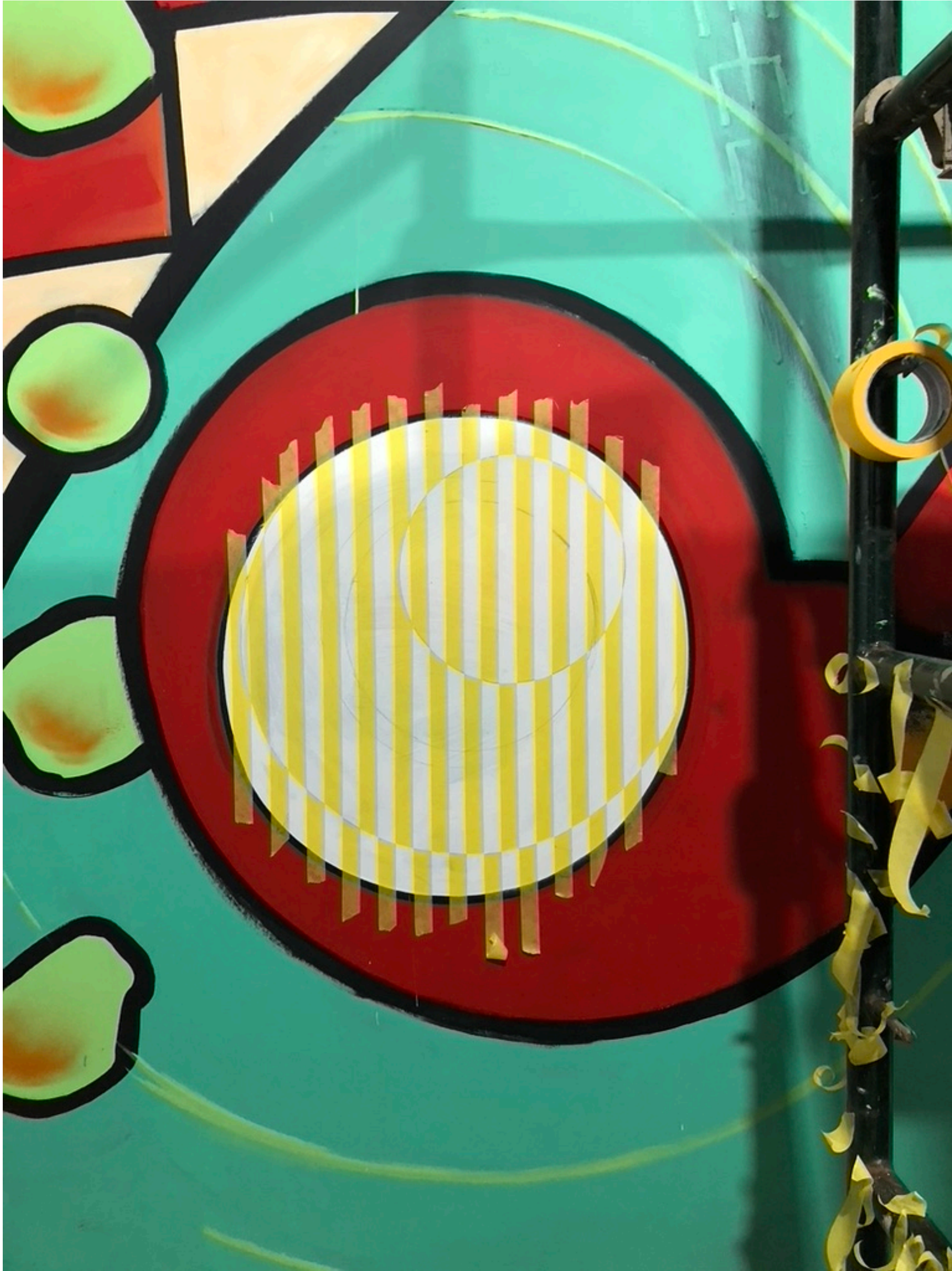

Figure 2. Detail of *Kaiwiʻula*, 2021, showing the artists' use of masking tape to create white vertical stripes on orbs that will be painted black. Photograph by Carl F.K. Pao. Courtesy of the artists

Kaiwiʻula is also informed by the natural world.[10] For example, the arched green elements each have five maka that recall the new shoots of a fern. The heʻe (octopus) motif—a series of black crenelated forms that weave in and out of the central space—represents the search for knowledge. Fields of alternating red-orange chevrons and of purple and aqua stripes resemble the kupukupu, a fern native to Hawaiʻi; like the shoots of the fern, they signify growth and thriving.

A series of four yellow triangles was inspired by shark-tooth tattoo designs that are associated with protection.[11] A makakua (literally "eyes of god") commands attention: black and white triangles create a quartered square within a purple circle. This symbol represents primordial ancestral power that governs all. Renderings of petroglyphs—representing the link between the past and the future—make notable appearances at the center and right-hand side of the piece. "The mural draws on the ancient petroglyph fields that are found throughout Hawaiʻi," states Pao, "but [*Kaiwiʻula*] also serves, in its own way, as a new kind of petroglyph field—albeit a two-dimensional one."[12] Here, the ancient and the new are imbricated realities activated within a singular space.

Finally, in the background of the piece are areas of red (ʻula), a color that signifies sacredness in Hawaiian culture. Its use in the mural represents the ancestral land on which the Bishop Museum stands, the blood that was spilled on it during the Battle of Kaiwiʻula, and the blood that ties the global collective—people yearning to see and initiate compassionate change in a world of flux—together. *Kaiwiʻula* simultaneously reaches into the past while being attentive to the concerns of the present. It is not a call to arms as with the battle so long ago, but to social action and awareness.

In his mural *From Islands to Islands, From Stars to Stars* (Fig. 3), Solomon Enos expands on his longtime project of mapping a sweeping history of futuristic Hawaiians, who over many millennia have advanced from journeying from island to island to exploring the stars and the wider multiverse as intergalactic voyagers. In his visual moʻolelo (stories/histories), the artist-storyteller seamlessly merges his Native Hawaiian cultural identity with his deep and abiding interest in science, sci-fi, and fantasy to create his own brand of Indigenous science-fiction visuality. His primary influences include Carl Sagan, Kurt Vonnegut, Robert E. Howard, Frank Herbert, Arthur C. Clark, Ursula K. Le Guin, and the inimitable J. R. R. Tolkien.[13]

Figure 3. Solomon Enos, *From Islands to Islands, From Stars to Stars*, 2021. Latex house paint on drywall; 12 x 18 ft. Photograph courtesy of the artist

According to Enos, the central cobalt-blue figure in the mural represents one of many Mother Ships that are part of a larger fleet of sister vessels dispatched from the sentient planet Honua, a planet like Earth but where Indigenous cultures did not suffer the fate of colonization and instead thrived untouched.[14] A profusion of green pods containing plants, humans, and other life forms streams from the mouth of the Mother Ship and is released into a bright red extraterrestrial realm where they are destined to seed life into a new world.

From a technical standpoint, the mural is masterfully executed. Enos's use of a complementary color scheme—a simple palette of blue, green, and red—produces a striking visual effect that allows each element in the mural to inhabit its own space while being fully integrated into the whole. The artist also captures the illusion of depth and movement through his strategic placement and rendering of the individual components within the composition. The Mother Ship and the pods appear as animated beings soaring into the viewer's space. Through this ambitious feat of visual alchemy, the viewer shifts from being a passive spectator to an active participant in a celestial seeding event.

Through the visual motifs Enos uses and the themes they activate, he infuses his mural with a Hawaiian cultural sensibility. The release of new life from the Mother Ship's mouth, for instance, bears striking resemblance to the story of Haumea, a principal goddess in the Hawaiian pantheon who births her progeny from her brain and other parts of her body. Further, the theme of life springing forth in abundance from a single progenitor also ties in with the Hawaiian Kumulipo, an eighteenth-century cosmological and genealogical chant that recounts the creation of all living things in sixteen epic wā (epochs). In the Kumulipo, life is generated from the night: "Hanau ka pō/The night gave birth." This kind of parthenogenic delivery of life into the world, whether through sentient beings of the natural world or the gods, is common in creation stories throughout the Pacific.

The deep curvilinear lines on the right side of the Mother Ship's forehead, cheek, and chin are reminiscent of Hawaiian carving traditions of the past, specifically the beautifully sculptured Kū temple images, one of which is in the Bishop Museum's collection. Broadening our analysis to include the wider Pacific, we could also link the facial markings to Aotearoa and the rich tattooing traditions of the Māori.

The pod forms in the mural serve as conduits for the embryonic life force of plant and animal biota that, once seeded on the new world that they have been sent to populate, will give rise to a sustainable system that is in harmony with the multiverse. The crescent form of each seed pod visually echoes the Hawaiian niho palaoa (carved whale tooth), which signifies genealogical connections and chiefly rank. The pods also summon connections to other Pacific ancestral art forms, including the elegantly carved waka huia of Māori culture, used as receptacles for storing treasured heirlooms, as well as the magnificent elongated and arching prows of Tahitian ancestral war canoes. On this last point, the pods recall the familiar Pacific narrative of long-distance voyaging and migration, only these waʻa (canoes) are destined to reach the shores of islands that rise not from an Earth-born ocean but from the depths of an ever-expanding and infinite cosmic sea.

The visual stories that Pao, Taum, and Enos advance in *Kaiwiʻula* and *From Islands to Islands, From Stars to Stars* offer a frame of reference that privileges a Native worldview both grounded in tradition and open to change. Where Pao and Taum reach into the past and translate it into the visual language of the present, Enos reaches for the future, or—perhaps more accurately—many futures. Ultimately, the kind of work these and other Indigenous artists are forging can best be understood—as this paper's opening epigraph attests—as an enduring will to self-define and represent a "version of the truth" that, when articulated

through the vehicle of an urban art aesthetic, brings Indigenous pasts, presents, and futures into clear view.

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Notes

[1] Manulani Aluli Meyer, "Hawaiian Art: A Doorway to Knowing," in *Nā Maka Hou: New Visions*, ed. Momi Cazimero (Honolulu Academy of Arts, 2013), 13.
[2] Marianne Ignace, "Tagging, Rapping, and the Voices of the Ancestors: Expressing Aboriginal Identity Between the Small City and the Rez," in *The Small Cities Book: On the Cultural Future of Small Cities*, ed. W. F. Garett-Petts (New Star Books, 2005), 310.
[3] Daniel Heath Justice, "Seeing (and Reading) Red: Indian Outlaws in the Ivory Tower," in *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities*, ed. Devon Abbott Mihesua and Angela Cavender Wilson (University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 109.
[4] In October 2007, police raided several Ngāi Tūhoe (Tūhoe tribe) communities across Aotearoa New Zealand on suspicion of illegal firearms possession and the operation of paramilitary training camps. A number of people were arrested, including Tame Iti. The raids were widely regarded as racially motivated, and in 2014 New Zealand Police Commissioner Mike Bush issued a formal apology to the Ngāi Tūhoe people. For more, see Natalie Mankelow, "Police Apologise to Tuhoe over Raids," Radio New Zealand, August 13, 2014, https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/251999/police-apologise-to-tuhoe-over-raids.
[5] See Peter Brunt et al., *Art in Oceania: A New History* (Yale University Press, 2012).
[6] Brunt et al., 452.
[7] D. Māhealani Dudoit, "Carving a Hawaiian Aesthetic," *ʻŌiwi: A Native Hawaiian Journal* 1, no. 1 (1998): 22.
[8] Carl F.K. Pao, conversation with the author, November 30, 2021.

[9] Carl F. K. Pao, conversation with the author, January 27, 2025.
[10] Carl F. K. Pao, conversation with the author, December 2, 2021.
[11] Carl F. K. Pao, conversation with the author, December 2, 2021.
[12] Carl F. K. Pao, conversation with the author, November 30, 2021.
[13] A. Marata Tamaira, "Frames and Counterframes: Envisioning Contemporary Kanaka Maoli Art in Hawaiʻi." PhD diss., Australian National University, 2015.
[14] Solomon Enos, conversation with the author, November 2, 2021.