

Sean Connelly, *Thatch Assembly with Rocks (2060s)*, 2017,
installation view, Foster Botanical Garden, Honolulu;
image courtesy the artist and Chris Rohrer



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Welina mai ke
aupuni o Hawai‘i
Greetings from the Hawaiian Kingdom



Sama Alshaibi, *Wasl (Union)*, 2016, video still, from the project 'Silsila'; image courtesy the artist and Ayyam Gallery, Beirut and Dubai

In early March 2017, I travelled east of Honolulu to He'eia to visit the restored lo'i along the Waipao river and the nearby heiau and hale pili maintained by the Papahana Kuaola organisation. This was my third visit to the island of O'ahu, but the first time in the embrace of the mountains and valleys. With Sama Alshaibi and Sean Connelly, both Honolulu Biennial artists, I swam in the fresh waters, my toes touching the smooth river stones and smelling the fresh light raindrops bring sustenance to the forest and kalo plots nearby.

The opening week of the 1st Honolulu Biennial was unlike every major art biennial I've attended or heard of. Warm, generous and down-to-earth, I met the Biennial artists, curators, staff, board, volunteers and other local artists and curators. Through the program of studio visits, talks and performances activating the Biennial sites, many of the artists, curators and writers gathered most days and nights. This is what happens in all biennials, but the incredible genuineness and accessibility of the interactions, the positivity and islander warmth of the relationships made and sustained, and the future focus of all our conversations truly made this Biennial special. The next edition will benefit immensely from being delivered in at least three of the important languages of the archipelago: 'Ōlelo Hawai'i, Japanese and English.

Connelly's work, *Thatch Assembly with Rocks (2060s)* (2017), stands in a clearing under the tallest trees in the Foster Botanical Garden just north of Chinatown. The work utilises lo-

cal renewable resources – wood, local loulu thatch and rocks – to upturn the usual spatial considerations in the built environment. The artist is questioning the inevitability and linearity of hale pili and hale loulu being replaced by plantation houses, dingbat apartment blocks and million-dollar condominiums in a rapidly gentrifying Honolulu. Instead, he imagines a structure as part of the future recovery of ahupua'a, including customary land and water use areas from mauka (mountain) to makai (seaside).

The interconnectedness of water scarcity, security and climate trauma across our planet is presented in Alshaibi's evocative and poetic single-channel work, *Wasl* (2017), displayed in the Biennial Hub, a huge warehouse space in Kaka'ako. This work is no less a call to action for viewers, placing us in wetlands drying into deserts, low-lying islands being swallowed by rising seas. We are carried in the embrace of seductive lands and waters on screen, to deeply consider the impact of industrialised nations and multinational corporations on human and non-human cultures and ecologies. With wasl meaning union in Arabic, the work binds us all in our ongoing responses to attenuated climate traumas as Earth's waters continue to flow despite political, gendered or class borders.

Jane Chang Mi presents a single-channel underwater archival video by United States surveyors of Pu'uloa (Pearl Harbor) in *The Eyes of the Gods* (2017). Pu'uloa has been a significant cultural site long before the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom by American planters and merchants in 1893. Home to pearl and



Drew Kahu'aina Broderick, *Billboard I. (The sovereignty of the land is perpetuated in righteousness)*, 2017, installation view, 1st Honolulu Biennial, 2017; neon, vinyl; image courtesy the artist and Honolulu Biennial Foundation; photo: Chris Rohrer

fish aquaculture practised by Kanaka 'Ōiwi for centuries, this important food basket became a nexus of United States military presence, the site of the 1941 bombing by Japan, and ongoing dumping of military refuse. The years of farming sugarcane and fruit also led to pesticide and fertiliser run-off right into Pu'uloa, further contaminating the once-healthy ecology. The work leaves the viewer to imagine if these murky waters will once again see balance in relationships between people and place, or if current colonial capitalism and militarism will survive the challenges of the coming centuries.

Sovereignty over images and territory lies at the heart of the immense work by Drew Kahu'aina Broderick, *Billboard I. (The sovereignty of the land is perpetuated in righteousness)* (2017). An imposing image with a neon coconut tree and 'Vacancy' sign in the top left, it is a cropped reproduction of George Carter's *Death of Captain Cook* (c. 1783), and remembers the violence by Captain James Cook and his sailors that resulted in 17 Kanaka 'Ōiwi deaths, including the Mō'i Kalani'ōpu'u, at Kealakekua Bay on Hawai'i island in 1779. This work starts and ends with where we are and how we find ourselves here. Broderick is known for interventions critical of historical photographs and paintings, as well as assemblages of T-shirts and other accessories that reiterate the tropical paradise trope for tourist and military consumption. Part of a long lineage of local artists remediating ongoing colonial capitalist and militarised violence on 'āina, on 'ike and on kōnaka, the billboard calls to relations of Kanaka 'Ōiwi in

other unceded yet occupied territories across the Moananuiākea.

In recent times in Hawai'i, the Indigenous sovereignty movement has gained incredible momentum; the mutual acceptance among diverse ethnic communities contrasts with the fearful white majority on the United States mainland. The title of Broderick's work is the common English translation of *Ua mau ke ea o ka 'āina i ka pono*, spoken by the Mō'i of the unified islands, Kamehameha III in 1843. A multiplicity of meanings in 'Ōlelo Hawai'i are carried by this mo'olelo: pono being a state of balance, care and wellbeing of the people and the land, usually translated as righteousness.

The emphasis by Biennial curators Fumio Nanjo and Ngahiraka Mason on island-centred thinking, of connected nodes instead of Eurocentric centre-periphery, means we imagine and actualise shared sovereignties, shared intimate relationships to our world. In times of aggressive settler colonial activity and capitalist military deployment around the world, the 1st Honolulu Biennial focuses on local perspectives to demonstrate that decolonisation, that renewing of cultural flows are indeed possible in this space and time.

The 1st Honolulu Biennial, 'The Middle of Now / Here', is exhibited in various venues until 8 May 2017; see online dictionary *Nā Puke Wehewehe 'Ōlelo Hawai'i* for translations: webewehe.org; the author's travel to Honolulu was supported by the MADA Curatorial Practice program.