# CONTACT

2014–2019

# ART FOR UNSETTLING TIMES

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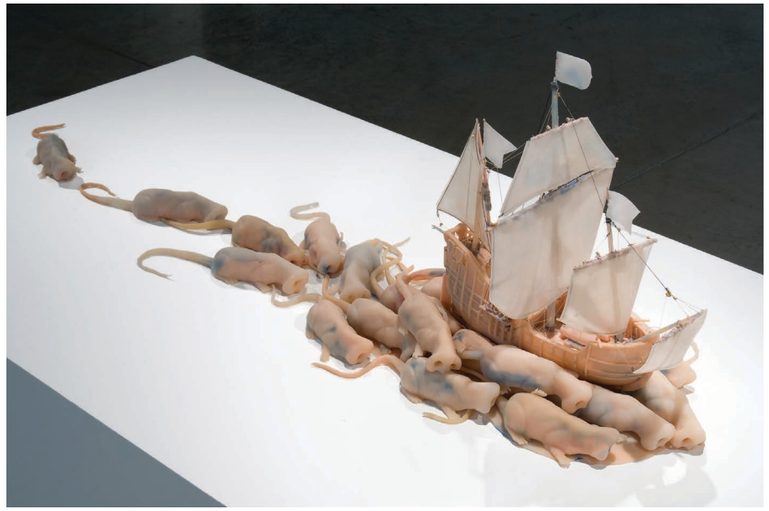

Scott Yoell, *Sometimes It Came by Road, Other Times It Came by Sea*, 2008.

## May 2020.
## Honolulu, Hawai‘i.
## These are unsettling times.

It’s hard right now to concentrate on the task at hand, which is to write this essay on the “state of the arts” in Hawai‘i. This should be an easy task. As a settler aloha ‘āina[1] arts educator and arts organizer working at the intersection of the Hawai‘i art scene and the global art circuit, I have long celebrated the important role that Hawai‘i and Hawai‘i’s artists play in building momentum for key issues of our times: re-indigenizing and decolonizing; racial, class, gender, and sexual equity; peace-building, and environmental repair.

*CONTACT* has been a landmark local exhibition series in achieving this “state of the arts.” It is one of the most carefully organized intercultural spaces yet conceived for highlighting the work of Kānaka Maoli/Native Hawaiian, kama‘āina, and settler contemporary artists alike in Hawai‘i’s recent art history. This is especially because the format of the exhibition, each year with a different theme and pair of curators, consciously asked artists to make art with intense reflection and consideration toward the meaningfulness of the intercultural space of “contact.”

I’ve attended all of the exhibitions and seen each iteration grow richer over the years. I’ve had my students submit work, create photo archives and write art reviews. As I’ve witnessed its parallel development alongside the arrival of the “global arts scene”—in the form of the Honolulu Biennial (now the Hawai‘i Triennial)—I am affirmed by the standards that *CONTACT* has set for critically reflective art making in Hawai’i. In conjunction with the Honolulu Biennial, but also in comparison to it, the intimacy and focus of *CONTACT* (especially in the way it has used site-specific interventions in Waikīkī Hotels in 2018 and the Mission Houses in 2019) made intercultural issues even more resonant, and the impact for art community conversations more lasting. It has certainly enlivened the global conversations happening on the Honolulu Biennial stage.[2]

1
I use the term settler aloha ‘āina as defined by Noelani Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua: “settler aloha ‘āina can take responsibility for and develop attachment to lands upon which they reside when actively supporting Kānaka Maoli who have been alienated from ancestral lands to reestablish those connections and also helping to rebuild Indigenous structures that allow for the transformation of settler-colonial relations.” Noelani Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua, *The Seeds We Planted: Portraits of a Native Hawaiian Charter School*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2013): 154. Candace Fujikane also usefully clarifies, “settler allies can practice aloha ‘āina in this broader nation-building process while recognizing our own positionality in histories of settlement.” Candace Fujiikane, “Mapping Wonder in the Māui Mo‘olelo on the Mo‘o‘āina: Growing Aloha ‘Āina Through Indigenous and Settler Affinity Activism,” *Marvels & Tales* v31, n1, (2016): 45-69. See Hamilton Faris, “Honolulu Biennial: Middle of Now|Here” *The Contemporary Pacific* v. 30, no.1 (2018). Hamilton Faris, “Double Sunsets,” in *Our Ocean Guide*, eds. Map Office (Lightbox Pub., 2017). Hamilton Faris and Machida, “Restructuring Place in Hawai‘i: A conversation with Jaimey Hamilton Faris, Margo Machida, Sean Connelly and Lynne Yamamoto,” *Art Journal Open*, August 3, 2017. Hamilton Faris, *CONTACT 3017*, “Finding Futures of Hawai‘i,” *Summit*, April 7, 2017.

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I’m thinking of two instances in particular, but there are many more. The first was a conversation hosted by Maile Meyer featuring Solomon Enos and Sean Connelly during HB 2017 in which their work on Hawai‘i futures for *CONTACT 3017* animated the Honolulu Biennial themes. The second was the way in which ‘Īmaikalani Kalāhele, a consistent participant in *CONTACT*, was honored as the poetic inspiration for the HB 2019 theme “To Make Wrong / Right / Now.”

So what is so unsettling about this moment that makes it hard to generalize about the "state of the arts" in Hawai'i? As I write this, COVID-19 has brought a great "pause" to social, political, and economic life around the globe. The state of the arts on a local and global scale is in serious flux. While my sentiments above remain roughly the same, I feel that the stakes for art, for this essay, are now even higher. It's not just that art exhibitions have been put on hold, but that creatives are part of a huge and growing class of precariously employed contract laborers hit hard by the full-scale collapse of the economy. Yet the cultural and relational work that artists do is actually more vital than ever as COVID-19 has (again) brought to the surface the racial and economic inequities of our current system. Communities of color, including Kānaka, Native American and Pacific Islander communities on Turtle Island/North America and in Hawai'i, have been especially vulnerable to the virus because of underlying health conditions exacerbated by inequities of access to health care and economic safety nets.[3] This situation is rooted in the ongoing historical and institutionalized effects of colonization and racism. Protests, incubated by social isolation and economic uncertainty and sparked by police brutality, are erupting across the U.S. Finally, deeper broader conversations about everyday militarisms, white privilege, and interracial healing are becoming visible in mainstream media and politics.

The recent global pandemic "pause" has become an important interruption and opportunity for reflecting on the negative impacts of a global economy still steeped in colonial and racialized logic. It has also resurfaced strong cultures of care and recognition. The arts community has creatively rerouted major grant initiatives and is rapidly working on ways to create virtual and hybrid spaces in which art can continue to play a central role in healing trauma; using opportune fissures in the current economy for building new potential futures; as well as simply finding ways to connect with each other beyond fear-inducing and divisive cultural spaces.

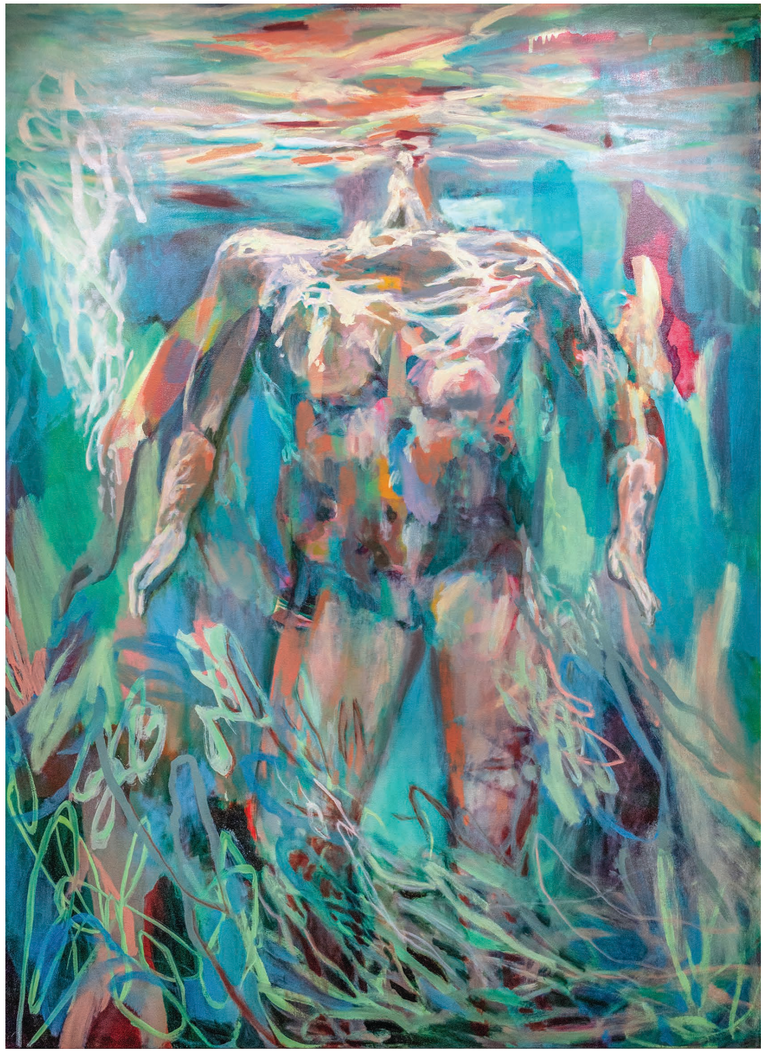
These are unsettling times to be sure. And with this pause that has put everything, including my concentration, into flux, I can actually see more clearly that this is the opportunity I've been waiting for—a space to articulate how *CONTACT* has already been preparing us, not for a certain "state" or status quo, but for making art in unsettling times, for making art *for the express purpose* of unsettling times. Over its six-year run, it has asked viewers to attend to the multivalence of heavy words (like contact), as well as to reevaluate images, histories, relationships, and potentials. It has already opened up the question about what truly *unsettles* us. It has already asked us to find value in the notion of *unsettling*. I'll return to the fuller implications of unsettling in a moment, but first, I'd like to address the potential resonance of *CONTACT* during COVID-19.

I can't help but think that if *CONTACT* had happened this year, it would have been the perfect platform to deal with the complex historical and cultural implications of our current situation–one in which we have been asked to have "no-contact" in order to stall a global pandemic. How would artists have meditated on this current situation in relation to past pandemics in Hawai'i, especially the spread of diseases (including cholera, typhoid, smallpox, and tuberculosis) during the initial contact period in Hawai'i that killed hundreds of thousands of Hawaiians?[4] In thinking about what "contact" means in this current moment, there is a strong sentiment that visitors can show their aloha by leaving or not even coming to Hawai'i at all, a reversal in a long history of land appropriation and cultural colonization. Tourism has come to a halt. What do we do with this situation of no-contact? How will we understand the shift that takes place when contact is again allowed because the "health of the economy" outweighs the "health of the community?" How can we imagine a different kind of future beyond this false dichotomy?

I remember a few pieces in past *CONTACT* exhibitions that already began to address this entanglement in terms of Hawai'i's history of contagion: from the inaugural *CONTACT* of 2014, Scott Yoell's strange sculpture, *Sometimes It Came By Road, Other Times It Came By Sea*, of a schooner surrounded by translucent resin molds of rats with grafted human noses "offered similes of plague and invasive dogmas."

3
https://www.civilbeat.org/2020/05/hawaiians-pacific-islanders-confront-high-rates-of-covid-19-in-many-states/
https://www.hawaiipublicradio.org/post/native-hawaiians-pacific-islanders-face-higher-rates-covid-19-1#stream/0

4
B. E. Hope & J. H. Hope, "Native Hawaiian Health in Hawai'i," *Californian Journal of Health Promotion*, Special Issue: Hawai'i, v1(2003): 1-9. See also Doug Herman, "Historical Perspective on Epidemics in the Islands," March 25, 2020. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/shutting-down-Hawaii-historical-perspective-epidemics-islands-180974506/



Nanea Lum, *Papahānaumoku*, 2017.





For the 2015 exhibition, Kazu Kauinana created a kou wood sculpture called *Maka'āinana*, an abstract reflection on the early contact epidemics that eradicated 84% of Native Hawaiian commoners. The piece celebrated his lineage as part of "the people who tend the land." In his artist statement, he promised to "endure with an awareness of the world around us, education, participation, and Aloha!" In 2016, Solomon Enos made a piece called *I have Seen the Enemy and It is Us*, handmade casts of mosquito-inspired humanoid figures—a reference to avian malarial infection that decimated native bird populations, as well as a visual metaphor for consumerism as infection. It is a complex piece, as with all of Enos' work; full of nuanced meditations in which he reconsiders his own historical and emotional entanglement in colonial-capital systems.

In the context of COVID-19's attention to social distancing, and looking back at how the missionaries placed blame for the spread of disease on Kānaka, it is also worth revisiting pieces like Meleanna Meyer's digital photo collage, *Hā 'Ole / Breath, No* from 2016. In her statement, she asks, "How can I know you? Have a relationship with you if we cannot even exchange breath? This is how I will come close enough to know something about you. Worlds wide apart, yet not. Not so foreign if we're able to share the intimacy of proximity of—breath."

*3017*'s futurist theme allowed artists to consider disease as part of the anthropogenic transformations of the climate—pandemics as non-linear effects of deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and accumulated toxicities in bodies. Hal Lum's painted abstraction, *Microscopic Guides into the Future*, and Ashley Huang's stone and found object piece, *Our Body's Burden*, referenced the interrelations between our bodies and the environment. The call to think about life in one thousand years allowed others to imagine Indigenous futurity outside the framework of global capitalist catastrophe thinking—futurity cultivated across generations who continue to survive the environmental and health disasters unfolding over the last centuries. Nanea Lum's oil painting on canvas *Papahānaumoku* reaches to the past to imagine watery

futures, while Bob Frietas's sculpture *A Lasting Legacy* likens ongoing generations of people who have made Hawai'i home to the pōhaku (stone) moving through time and space.

*CONTACT 2018* featured site-specific interventions in Waikīkī as a cultural "contact zone" between visitors and Hawai'i's "host" culture(s). Artists took over the lobbies of the Royal Hawaiian Center, the Sheraton Waikīkī, and the whole top floor of the Surfjack Hotel (among other spaces), to address histories of cultural cross-contamination operating through the tourist industry. Various artists and cultural groups, including Jill Harris and Thomas Koet, Hālau Hula Ka Liko O Kapalai, and 'ULU'ULU: The Henry Ku'ualoha Guigni Moving Image Archive of Hawai'i, responded to the lei giving tradition as it has been distorted through the lens of touristic fantasy. Other artists focused on the hospitality industry's invisible labor force. Ara and AJ Feducia occupied a room in the Surfjack with a video installation featuring the daily work of Filipina maids making beds, clearing liquor bottles, and cleaning toilettes. During the exhibition the maids came in the evenings to sing karaoke, including *Dahil Sa'yo*, a popular Tagalog folk song. *Dahil Sa'yo*, meaning "because of you" was also the title of the installation. Working on multiple levels of humor, hope, and critique, the installation was exemplary of that year's show as a whole. Reflecting back on these pieces in the time of COVID, it is especially clear how capital economic imperatives to create packaged or "sanitized" experiences for visitors has hindered visions of sustainable futures for the "host" culture(s) on the islands.

In *CONTACT*'s 2019 iteration, a site-specific intervention at the Hawaiian Mission Houses Historic Site and Archives, artists activated the space with nighttime projections on the exterior of the building to express the liveliness and survivance of cultures within and beyond dominant capital-colonial systems. Responding to the three 19th century structures that served as homes and workplaces for the first Protestant missionaries who arrived in Hawai'i during the 1820s, Nicole Naone and Mitchel Viernes created an outdoor projection, *He Kalaoke no Mākua*, with recovered footage from the 1983 Mākua Valley evictions. Alec Singer,





Ara Laylo and AJ Feducia, *Dahil Sa'yo*, Surfjack Hotel & Swim Club, 2018.

in collaboration with dancer Madelyn Biven, presented a haunting of the missionary grounds in *Floating on Your Grave*, 2019. The large translucent and lively bodies transcended the loaded architectural history of the Mission Houses.

These pieces, in conversation with one another, make me appreciate the work that *CONTACT* has done as a creative space in Hawai'i. Yes, it witnesses violent aspects of the history of contact, as when disease has been used as a weapon for colonization (and continued institutional racism). But at the same time, the exhibition has also upheld other meanings of contact—especially the idea of the space of "milieu" created when artists conjoin and interface with each other on such difficult issues. As one of the curator/jurors, Ngahiraka Mason (*CONTACT 2015*), put it, *CONTACT* provides an opportunity for artists to exercise their "relational ambitions." I think it is a strong phrase—"relational ambition." Not just practicing relation with each other, or with Hawai'i's past, but also with the rest of the world. What can Hawai'i teach a global audience about the milieu of creative contact zones? What needs to be dealt with in the here and now


Nicole Naone and Mitchel Viernes, *He Kalaoke no Mākua*, 2019.

Alec Singer with Madelyn Biven, *Floating On Your Grave*, 2019.

5
Eve Tuck, forward in Leigh Patel, *Decolonizing Student Research* (Routledge 2016): xii.

6
Tuck, citing Patel, *Decolonizing Student Research,* xiii.

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*Artists of Hawai'i* has gone through many transformations over the years, but the framework has perpetuated the problematic myth of "inclusivity" of multicultural politics, while almost entirely excluding Native Hawaiian artists and customary arts practices from its rosters. For more on the complexity of the "local" see a good review of the literature in Keiko Ohnuma "'Aloha Spirit' and the Cultural Politics of Sentiment as National Belonging." *The Contemporary Pacific*, v20, n2 (2008): 365-394.

together? How can we learn to live with a certain amount of irresolution and tension, yet also be clear about what is pono?

I see *CONTACT*'s curatorial efforts—in its open calls that shape difficult dialogs and in the behind-the-scenes work it has done to help artists realize nuanced layers of meaning in their pieces—as creating an "aesthetics of unsettling" for the art community. I mean "aesthetics of unsettling" in much the same way Critical Race and Indigenous scholar Eve Tuck talks of decolonizing education and research as a "pedagogy of pausing"—as "intentionally engaging in a suspension of one's own premises and projects, but always with a sense of futurity."[5] Pausing, she says, is a productive interruption to settler colonial ways of being, doing, and knowing. Pausing allows us to see how settler and settling logic trains "people to see each other, the land, and knowledge as property, to be in constant insatiable competition for limited resources."[6] In terms of art spaces, pausing, interrupting, or "unsettling," especially in a suspended milieu with others, is about ungrounding territorial impulses, giving access to multiple points of view, reviewing how official narratives have shied away from the important work of witnessing the past in its fullness. Unsettling helps to understand the "wicked problems" of the present as part of the infinite problem chains recurring in any unequal power dynamic.

In embracing the process of unsettling, *CONTACT* has moved the arts and culture conversation in Hawai'i to new internationally relevant dimensions. The name itself, in comparison to the long-running local annual exhibition *Artists of Hawai'i*, says volumes in this regard. *Artists of Hawai'i* is the title of the annual state art exhibition hosted by the Honolulu Museum of Art, formerly the Honolulu Academy of Arts, and has been in existence since 1949.[7] *Artists of Hawai'i* appears to propose cohesion, but it actually elides the deep rifts and ongoing historical tensions just beneath the surface of the art scene by lumping together very different positions of belonging in Hawai'i. That is, the "of" immediately signifies and conflates: ....Indigenous to, born in, residing in, local to, based in, diaspora... of ... Hawai'i. The phrase, instead of dealing with different ethnic and racial histories or trying to

come to terms with the legacies of colonization and plantation labor, actually perpetuates daily identity contestations. While the opportunity of *Artists of Hawai'i* has been important for artistic careers and for artists to work on self-defined projects, *CONTACT* has invited artists to grapple with this history head on. To be a part of the show often means making a visual statement that is consonant to the artist, while also reflecting their positionality and responsibility to history and to the ʻāina of Hawaiʻi.

In this respect the aesthetics of unsettling isn't solely focused on a damaged past, but also gives equal attention to cultivating desires for intermingled futures in shared growth and understanding. As Eve Tuck proposes in another essay, that means first and foremost acknowledging "complexity, contradiction, and self-determination of lived lives,"—fleshing out personhood in survivance for Kānaka.[8] And then, in the context of Indigenous and non-Indigenous alliance and peace building through *aloha ʻāina* in Hawaiʻi, it means finding ways for all who currently live in Hawaiʻi to relate to the land, ocean, sky, and elements in an "unsettled" state.[9]

From my position, without a genealogical connection to the *ʻāina*, but nevertheless with a love towards it, unsettling means to see the world not as territory, property and resource, but instead as nature's flowing energy needing constant attention and care. I think of the elemental as it animates and connects us. The sun moves the trees and plants, the moon pulls the tides, the winds transport the seeds, the water quenches the land, its fruits energize us. In this "pause" of the frenetic global economy (what Tuck is identifying as the logic of settler-colonialism) perhaps we can all now better concentrate on a different kind of energy and movement that needs attending to—the movement of our affiliation with one another through our shared commitment to the place that sustains us. This is the positivity of unsettling.

Many pieces over the years of CONTACT exhibitions have shown viewers the opportunity for joy in transformation and transition if we simply pay attention to the elements. It is hard not to honor them all in this space, but let me name just a few: Russell Sunabe's lusciously painted vibrant abstract oil

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Eve Tuck, "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," *Harvard Educational Review* v79, n3 (Fall 2009): 416.

9
See Goodyear-Kaʻōpua, fn 1.

Chris Ritson, *Mushroom Painting,* 2018.

paintings have celebrated Hawaiian nā ʻaumākua, including 2016 *New Spirit Rising*, in which a spirit shark hovers over an altered seascape.

Chris Ritson's ongoing fungi experimentations (mycelium inoculate wood, trash, or some other substrate) offer meditations on growth through composting what we perceive to be dead. Kauʻi Chun's mixed media sculptures, sometimes of rusting metal, sometimes of weathered wood, have likewise asked viewers to focus on processes of subtle transformation of their elements. One piece, a collaboration with a soundtrack by Kamuela Chun, called *Moʻokūʻauhau O*

Rebecca Maria Goldschmidt, *Laing: Wisdom or Smart or Learning?*, 2019.

*Kumulipo / Kumulipo, Wā ʻEwalu*, 2017 related decomposing material to new growth and ever changing lineages. In CONTACT 2019, Rebecca Maria Goldschmidt's *Laing: Wisdom or Smart or Learning?*, 2018, a Filipinx-inspired weaving, and Page Chang's *Kapa Pukapuka*, 2019, about the process of transforming wauke into fine kapa textile, were mounted together in the bedrooms upstairs in the Mission Houses. The Indigenous fibers practices intervened in the gendered civilizing narratives structured by the domestic spaces.

Also for the 2019 show, Hawaiian fiber artist Marques Hanalei Marzan, reconstructed a hale waiea on the grounds of the Mission Houses. It "unsettled" the history of Christian territorialization of Hawaiʻi by rebuilding this important Hawaiian ceremonial house used in protocol on heiau on the missionary grounds. The ropes in the hale acted as a spiritual conduit. Marzan's textile work aligns with many Oceanic practices in which the rope, or ʻaha, is the continuity that holds past, present, and future together—its materiality also





binding human understanding to the dynamic environment. The construction is called *Edge of Tomorrow*, and it made me return to the statement that Marzan wrote for another piece of his from *CONTACT 2015*. This was for a work called *Innovation to Tradition*:

> The world knows how to be, moving with its surroundings, binding and unraveling itself, finding balance in the storm and creating realms anew. All we must do is to be prepared and willing to allow those moments to take hold of us. The strands that bind us together are always reaching out, looking to bind new ties and connections. Remembering that our choices determine the growth and stability of our rope is vital. We must all choose.

In so many different media, these artists are all expressing how their interactions with ʻāina remake them daily. The elements never settle. They always insist on our dynamic relation to the earth and each other. And so should we. As Marzan notes, binding has the strengthening and stabilizing force we need. That is, we become stronger through our interface with each other and the world. With these connections, we can relinquish claims of ownership, and stances of competition. Braiding, binding, and interface allow a sustaining relation to the environment outside the notion of settling. These are some of the lessons of aloha ʻāina. Considering the state of the (art) world, it is important to remember the value of unsettling as movement in milieu—how to unravel or let go of damaging constraints and when to connect well and rightly.

unintended outcome of the gathering was a much-needed kaumaha, an expression of sadness, and community catharsis, about the lack of representation of Kānaka ʻŌiwi artists in Hawaiʻi's art institutions. Also present in the group was justified anger over the lack of support for Hawaiian art and artists in our homeland—an important reminder of work that remains to be done. Airing these sentiments and revisiting points of historical trauma and pain fostered some resolution and resolve. The visiting curators agreed: creative talent was evident, and the artists themselves communicated the willpower to commit to something more ambitious. Over the next five years, a variety of creative efforts came to fruition, buoyed by collective witnessing and participation. As a community of Kānaka artists and organizers, we had lots to express. The gathering was a starting point, a necessary place to come together to recognize our own capacity. *CONTACT* was one of many initiatives generated in response to the 2012 *ʻIKE LEʻA* Symposium.

JOSH TENGAN: In January 2014, I moved home to Honolulu after spending my college and graduate school years abroad. In the spring, an artist friend invited me to attend the opening for the inaugural *CONTACT* exhibition at the Honolulu Museum of Art School.

Even before setting foot in the building, visitors were confronted with some of the harsh realities of living in Hawaiʻi. *Root Structure (Model Home)* by Les Filter Feeders (a collaborative duo, Keith Tallett and Sally Lundburg, from Hawaiʻi Island) suspended from an old banyan tree fronting Linekona. The installation consisted of a series of tent-like tarp forms, echoing the makeshift structures of displaced communities, spread across the rapidly developing urban core of Honolulu, and just across the street at Thomas Square.[3] In an adjacent shower tree, their *Tarp Bloom (Kakaʻako)* grew. Waves of blue, gray, and black tarpaulin unfurled over branches, tethered to the land to hold their shapes. Later, I learned that the artists traded out new tarps for old used tarps from the growing tent cities in Kakaʻako and that the works were commissioned by the exhibition organizers.

The experience continued into the Main Gallery, where much of the artwork found on the walls was equally

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Protestors part of (De)Occupy Honolulu—the local chapter of the larger Occupy Wall Street movement—camped on the sidewalk along Thomas Square from 2011-2012. In response to a suit brought against the City & County of Honolulu in U.S. Federal Court by the protestors, Honolulu's legal counsel stated: "This case is about a mixed bag of self-absorbed social protesters—recent Mainland transplants—who have seen fit to pitch their tents, invoke King Kamehameha's law, and drag bulky item pickup junk furniture and other personal property on the sidewalk fronting one of Honolulu's most historic and culturally significant public parks, which was established to commemorate the restoration of the Hawaiian monarchy in July 1843, 170 years ago." (Civil Beat, "(De)Occupy Honolulu 'Mixed Bag of Self-Absorbed Social Protestors," City Says," May 16, 2013, https://www.civilbeat.org/2013/05/de-occupy-honolulu-mixed-bag-of-self-absorbed-social/.)





Peter Shepard Cole, *Mickey Discovers Hawaiʻi, First CONTACT*, 2014.

confrontational, culturally responsive, and timely. For someone returning home, *CONTACT* facilitated an important internal discussion—for locals, by locals—raising the idea: Hawaiʻi itself is negotiated and determined by those who live here and call this place home.

While my introduction to *CONTACT* was as an outsider—someone who wasn't part of the organization responsible for the exhibition or the art communities it supported—Hawaiʻi was and is my home. I have living connections to this place. If we are the product of our genealogical and geographical connections, I am Hawaiian through my mother. I was born at Kapiʻolani Medical Center for Women and Children and raised up the road in Pauoa with my father's ʻohana and hānai by my third-generation Portuguese grandma and my second-generation Okinawan grandpa. My return meant reconnecting with these people and places in myriad ways. Following the exhibition, I navigated my way through a web of relationships, to the organizers of the *CONTACT* exhibition, eventually working for Maile at Nā Mea Hawaiʻi. And, in 2015, I began managing the production of the exhibition on behalf of Puʻuhonua Society.