

## Art and Activism An Exhibition About Change at Schaefer International Gallery

September 19, 2019 by Jen Russo



The current show at Schaefer International Gallery titled “Art & Activism” is one of my dearest. Rather than acknowledge activism at a very broad level, each of these artists in the show presents a specific point of view. This helped me digest their activism into workable bits, and I could relate to them all even though each work and the mediums by the artists were so different. I asked Neida Bangerter, gallery director at the MACC, about how she put together this unique show.

“Shortly after the 2016 election of Trump, many people in our country, certainly Hawai’i, plunged into shock,” says Bangerter. “The political crises caused an overwhelming sadness as things changed so quickly we could not keep up. Administration policy shifts, social issues on healthcare, women’s rights, gun violence, and the ugly resurgence of racism just became overwhelming. I thought about the need for people to express angst and to be able to talk about issues. My original working title was ‘Controversy.’ That became too simple. Activism was a

broader thematic concept and almost a call to action. It seemed natural to organize an invitational exhibit to feature artists who use a platform of activism in their work and who can articulate ideology about the need for change. These artists are specific and rare.”

She started thinking about it approximately three years ago, and penciled in the dates to reserve space in the gallery.

“I started with an anchor piece by Sandow Birk and Elyse Pignolet called ‘American Procession,’” says Bangerter. “I had seen this piece and many other works of Sandow’s through Paul Mallowney who is the printer and publisher. I have wanted to show Sandow on Maui for years now. He and Paul worked on their first project together, ‘The Leading Causes of Death in America,’ at the Hui Press which he started at Hui No’eau Visual Arts Center. It seemed like the perfect time with American Procession and two of his Monument Series to come here.”

‘American Procession’ is clearly the political piece here with the entire back wall filled with two marching parades of political players, liberals to the right and conservatives to the left, but both moving toward the center panel that shows “a landscape of scattered debris” inspired by iconic American architecture. The who’s who in the progressive panel called “lefties” versus those representing the conservatives are all listed by name, and analyzed by the artists in an essay and booklet hanging on the wall. There is so much political knowledge here it makes my head spin, and it is not as straightforward as it may seem. I think I need to request a copy of that booklet.

“Paul was a great help and consultant on the exhibit and also led me to Kanani Miyamoto, a student of his, who is riffing on the impacts of colonialism and unfair treatment of women also pulling from her multi-ethnic heritage,” says Bangerter. “I invited Paul as an artist, not printer, to give him the opportunity to create some work of his own.”

Miyamoto’s expression is in large-scale work; she has created the collage of giants. It spreads beautifully over walls and windows. I wonder if the size of this scale is to compensate for the lack of female, Polynesian, and ethnic works in the Eurocentric views of art history. Her work called “Disrupting the Gaze” is reclaiming a narrative for women in art. Her striking woodcuts combined with cut paper and painted elements tell a story of her non-acceptance of Gauguin’s colonialist exploitation of Polynesian women and evokes my own thoughts of how many one-sided stories has art history told at the brush of a white man.

Where Miyamoto’s work gets in your face, Mallowney’s retreats into quiet introspection. You have to duck down through a hobbit doorway and climb inside with his work. It’s a meditation. “My installations are a nod to the Buddhist and Zen ideas of ephemerality and change, the embracing of being vulnerable, and the deeply risky act of creating” says Mallowney. “To me, art should be activist – artists have often been active antagonists. They hold up the mirror to society and society doesn’t always like what it sees.”

Fiber artist Orly Cogan’s installation checked my own ideas of being a feminist, and what that means in our contemporary society. Her body of work tells us that although women have been worshipped as goddesses in and of art, we are rarely in charge of what that art looks like.

“Orly Cogan is a textile artist based in New York,” says Bangerter. “I have followed her career for 10 years and also thought she would bring strong content in women’s issues, feminism, and sexuality.”

The juxtaposition of Cogan's vintage table cloths, children's bedding, and old embroidered spreads with her own goddess gaze of nude women, naked men, strong women, and Disney princesses embroidered over, above, and around them, rewrites the narrative of being a feminist. I am left re-assessing what my own feminism means. Embroidery is often viewed as women's work, and here it is giving power to women to control how they are portrayed. The needle and thread become the movement to be liberated.

Abigail Romanchak's work was the most haunting.

"Abbey Romanchak is always on my radar as one of the leading conceptual contemporary artists on Maui, with keen awareness in her attention to Indigenous issues, being of Hawaiian heritage," says Bangerter.

As the Maui artist in this lineup, her art sung the song of native birds. She worked with Pat Leonard at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology to create sound spectrograms translated into collagraph prints. Before even putting on the headphones that sits in the room with her work, I could immediately tell these were the songs of our rare endangered birds.

"The staggering loss of native Hawaiian bird species that has occurred in these remote Pacific islands has inspired my most recent body of work," says Romanchak. "I am particularly interested in the efforts being made to save Hawai'i's remaining native forest birds. There is an immediate need to prevent further loss of Hawai'i's native biodiversity."

Her piece titled "Kani Le'a" ("A Distinct Sound") sets several collagraphed songs together, fading into a sad blackness at the bottom. The lack of these songs, the expression of extinction, the great loss to the community, is felt staring into that darkness. It's not a place I want to be, much less live.

Bangerter says you can decide how each of these works translates into a thought provoking activism.

"The overall focus of this exhibition will enhance public awareness and encourage thoughtful process and engagement in social and civic discussion, about complex issues we face today," says Bangerter. "I hope people sit in the gallery and think about how important it is to be present and alive, and bring their friends and family in to talk about what they see."

Art & Activism: An Exhibition About Change In the Schaefer International Gallery, August 25-October 31, 2019

Wednesday, September 18, 10:30 – 11:30am -Maui artist Abigail Romanchak will give a walkthrough in the gallery to talk about her ideas and approach to printmaking.

Wednesday, October 16, 1:30 – 4:30 pm – Kanani Miyamoto and Paul Mallowney will discuss their work in the gallery, followed by a demonstration at the UHMC campus art department.

Schaefer International Gallery  
Open Tues – Sun 10am-5pm  
One Cameron Way, Kahului, HI 9793  
Maui Arts and Cultural Center