

BLUE



HAWAII'I

LAURA KINA: BLUE HAWAI'I

January 27 - March 3, 2015

Opening reception: Thursday, January 29th 4:30-7:30pm

Artist Talk: Monday, March 2, 2015 5:30-6:30pm

Location: New Jersey City University

Hepburn Hall, Room #202

2039 Kennedy Boulevard

Jersey City, NJ 07305

All events are free and open to the public

Harold B. Lemmerman Gallery

Hepburn Hall, Room 323

2039 Kennedy Boulevard

Jersey City, NJ 07305

Tel: 201-200-3246

Hours: 11:00am - 5:00pm, M-F, and by appointment

http://www.njcu.edu/Harold_B_Lemmerman_Gallery.aspx

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EXHIBITION STATEMENT

You won't find Elvis or surfboards or funny umbrella-topped cocktails in my dystopic Blue Hawai'i. Drawn from family albums, oral history and community archives, these ghostly oil paintings employ distilled memories to investigate themes of distance, longing, and belonging.

Featuring new works and a selection from my ongoing *Sugar* series (2009-present), the setting is my father's Okinawan sugarcane field plantation community, Pi'ihonua, on the Big Island of Hawai'i near Hilo. My obsession with blue was inspired by the indigo-dyed kasuri kimonos repurposed by the *Issei* (first generation) "picture bride" immigrants for canefield work clothes, and colored by stories of *hinotama* (fireballs) shooting from the canefield cemetery into the night sky. *Blue Hawai'i* echoes the spirits of my ancestors and shared histories of labor migration.

My primary source images span the early 1900s to 1950s, from a period of hard manual labor in sugarcane fields up to the Americanization of WWII *Nisei* (second generation) and postwar *Sansei* (third generation). But my transpacific vision grew from my travels with my father. In 2009, I accompanied him back to his hometown community in Hawai'i to interview him along with other *Nisei* and *Sansei* about their memories of plantation life. In 2012, my father and I travelled to Okinawa on a similar trip, collecting stories of heritage and history. I learned of my grandmother and great aunts having been *Kibei Nisei*, i.e., sent to Japan for their education and that in the devastation of WWII and the Battle of Okinawa, four family members were killed—two by forced suicide.

As U.S. relatives ceased to use the Okinawan dialect of Uchinaguchi or standard Japanese, stories like these were lost. In *Blue Hawai'i*, I work to reclaim these histories via reanimated traces from old photographs and present-day vestiges visible in paintings such as "Okinawa—All American Food" and "Black Market," which capture the remnants of war and a continued American military presence in contemporary Okinawa. Risking distortion, misreading, nostalgia and erasure, I fully engage in the messy business of memory, collapsing time and space into one "Blue Hawai'i."



ISSEI, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2011



KIBEI NISEI, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2012



CANE FIRE, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2010



PALAKA, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2010



OBON, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2010



POWER LINES, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2013



GRAVES BY THE SEA, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2013



BLACK MARKET, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2013



OKINAWA - ALL AMERICAN FOOD, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2013



FIRE DRILL, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2013



UNTITLED (OKINAWA) 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2013



SOLDIER BOYS, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2013



PI'IHONUA, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2013



BEFORE THE WAR, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2013



FAMILY PORTRAIT 1, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2013



FAMILY PORTRAIT 2, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2013



FAMILY PORTRAIT 3, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2013



JUNIOR POLICE ORGANIZATION, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2013



BASEBALL TEAM, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2013



CANEFIELD WORKERS, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2013



CITIZENSHIP TRAINING CLASS, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2013



JAPANESE LANGUAGE SCHOOL, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2013



ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, 30 X 45 IN., OIL ON CANVAS, 2013

OKINAWAN DIASPORA BLUES

By Wesley Ueunten

I have long tried to make sense of my “diasporic existence” and see a parallel with artist Laura Kina’s similar journey to find a sense of place and identity. Like Kina, in the wake of a collapsing economy and shortage of jobs my ancestors left Okinawa to immigrate to Hawai’i in the early part of the 20th century as sugar plantation laborers. Kina’s artwork, however, has revealed to me even more complicated dimensions of this *Uchinanchu* diasporic existence. Her paintings remind me that we are both in a space between the popular images of Hawai’i and Okinawa and the material realities of those places. Like Laura’s father I was born and raised in Hawai’i. Behind the popular “Blue Hawaii” aloha images of paradise is the real history of Native Hawaiians being displaced, exploited, and nearly exterminated by outsiders. The most ambitious and powerful of those settler-colonizers brought in tens of thousands of other outsiders – immigrants to be laborers on their sugar plantations – from impoverished and/or colonized parts of the world, including southern China, western Japan, Korea, the Azores and Madeiras, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Okinawa. Like Laura, I have gone to the homeland of Okinawa to find my roots, only to find that Okinawa has become Japan’s equivalent of Hawai’i as a tourist mecca. The blue ocean is the dominant motif of virtually every Japanese tourist agency brochure that advertises low-cost tours in Okinawa. Behind the “Blue Okinawa” image, however, is the reality that Okinawa is the site of 73% of the American bases in Japan. Okinawa makes up about 0.6% of the total landmass of Japan.

In her exhibition statement Kina writes, “Risking distortion, misreading, nostalgia and erasure, I fully engage in the messy business of memory, collapsing time and space into one ‘Blue Hawai’i.’” I share in the messiness as I am inspired by Laura’s work. This inspiration risks distortion, misreading, nostalgia and erasure in my interpretation of her work, but also opens up greater possibilities in the construction of memory clouded by shame while enabling the linking of Hawai’i and Okinawa in a shared colonized history.

Okinawan diasporic time is marked by shame. There is the shame of being brown people who came to produce white sugar for white people, of speaking Pidgin English rather than “standard” English, and the shame of not being “real Americans.” There is the shame of being uncouth and backward “Ryukyuan” who do not speak proper Japanese and have strange customs. I am often told that the various forms of shame that I talk about are things of the past as if discrimination no longer exists. I would beg to differ, but even if discrimination was a thing of the past, memories of shame color our present.

When I view Laura’s paintings, it is the color blue, which elicits my feeling of shame, the literal melancholic blues that lives persistently in Okinawan diasporic time. It is a shame that I have inherited from my Okinawan grandparents and from my Hawai’i-born parents and it is probably the same shame that I pass on to my own children. In Kina’s indigo blue oil paintings based on old family and community photos from Okinawa and Hawai’i, I see the stoic expressions of bearing the shame, but not losing to it. In works such as *Issei* (2011), which is a simultaneous portrait of her “picture bride” immigrant

great-grandmother and her great-great grandmother who died in the Battle of Okinawa, their *gaman* expressions are worn like a protection against defeat, like the *kimono*, *yukata*, work clothes, uniforms, aloha shirts, and “American clothes” they wear to protect them from the cutting leaves of sugarcane stalks or the sharp stares of both Japanese and American assimilationist practices.

In collapsing time and space in her work, Kina is painting not only generational memories that she has not lived first hand but also, to borrow the term from Ann Cvetkovich’s conception of trauma, an “archive of feeling.” Her work has awakened a memory of my own grandmother. A memory that is tinged with shame and sadness for not being able to traverse the layers of cultural and linguistic differences that stood between us when she was alive, but a memory of light and spirit just waiting to burst forward below the dark blueness.

*Tossing and turning
In the darkness waiting for a brand new day
Spirit woman with tattooed hands
From a land invaded by the north
Growing what she could not eat
Eating what she did not grow.
All in the name of a far away emperor*

I was the youngest of Baban’s grandchildren. She was my maternal grandmother who had come to Hawai’i from Okinawa in the 1910s to join my grandfather. Her migration to Hawai’i was only a few decades after the former Ryukyuan Kingdom had been forcibly annexed by Japan in 1879. The annexation of the Ryukyuan Kingdom into the modernizing nation-state of Japan plugged the island people into a larger global system. Japanese government administrators, military personnel, educators, and businessmen poured into Okinawa. If not for the Ryukyuan Archipelago’s geopolitically strategic location, it seems doubtful that Japan would have bothered to annex the small resource-poor islands. However, the fact that sugarcane could be grown in Okinawa was icing on the cake. Okinawa became a sugar-producing region for mainland Japan. Sugar was grown as a cash crop so that Okinawans could buy consumer goods from Japan and pay off their debts and taxes that went to the Japanese mainland.

I suppose that when one region takes over another by force, the main task is to figure out what to do with the people who are the original inhabitants in the acquired region. Our own country carried out policies of genocide on Native Americans. At least on the level of cultural genocide, what happened to Okinawans was similar to what happened to Native Americans. It seems so familiar when I read about the “kill the Indian, save the man” philosophy of the “Indian Schools” that prohibited Native American school children from speaking their own language or practicing their culture.

In Okinawa, while land reform, electoral politics, and other modernization efforts lagged behind the rest of Japan, the Japanese education system was implemented in Okinawa very rapidly. By the time that my grandmother was born in 1893, most Okinawan children were in schools, where they would be punished for speaking the Okinawan language and expected to worship the Japanese emperor. A large wooden tag with the words 方言札 (hōgen fuda), or “dialect tag,” was placed around the neck of school children who spoke in the Okinawan “dialect.” The tag symbolically relegated the Okinawan language to the inferior status as a backward “dialect” of Japanese, while corporeally ingraining a sense of shame and fear in generations of Okinawans for speaking their own language and being their own selves.

Physical genocide did take place on Okinawa. Japan’s leaders knowingly caused about a fourth to a third of Okinawa’s population to perish in less than 3 months during the Battle of Okinawa when they used Okinawa as a buffer to hold off American troops heading toward “Naichi” (mainland Japan) or Japan proper in 1945. Laura’s “Before the War” and “Soldier Boys” paintings depict relatives in Okinawa who were conscripted as children to fight Americans and to commit suicide in the end to protect and serve the emperor that they were forced to revere in school. In some cases, Okinawans were executed by Japanese soldiers under the suspicion of being spies for the Americans because they spoke in the unintelligible Okinawan language and because many had actually spent time in Hawai’i and other parts of the U.S. as immigrants and, therefore, had questionable loyalty to Japan in the eyes of the Japanese military.

When Baban was a young girl, she and her friends tattooed their hands, trying to recreate the traditional “hajichi” tattoos that older girls and women had on their hands. By the time that they tattooed their hands, however, the Japanese government had outlawed hajichi for its backwardness and barbarity. My grandmother was an outlaw.

*Coming to a land
Overthrown by business men
Working for a dollar a day
Field woman with calloused hands
Working from whistle to whistle
Growing what she could not eat
Eating what she could not grow
All in the name of a manifest destiny*

My Okinawan *nisei* (2nd generation) mother who was born on Kaua’i, grew up with the taunts of Naichi *nisei* children. One of the childhood insults that survived in many Okinawan *nisei* memories probably due to its rhythmically concise efficiency in conveying meanness: “*Okinawa ken ken, buta kau kau.*” “Okinawa Ken,” meaning Okinawa Prefecture, is the name that the Japanese government gave the former Ryukyuan Kingdom. “*Okinawa ken ken*” seems to be a play on that name, but

I think there is an added connotation that although Okinawa may be a prefecture of Japan, Okinawans are not really Japanese. In fact, when the first Okinawans who came to Hawai'i in 1900, Naichi Japanese (who had begun arriving in 1885) called them "Japan Pake" or "Japanese Chinese."

Now the *buta kau kau* part. *Buta* is the Japanese word for pig, while *kau kau* is the Hawaiian creole word for "food" or "to eat." The phrase points out that Okinawans eat pig, which seems innocuous now. However, until quite recently in Japanese history, eating meat from four-legged animals was stigmatized. In Japan, the practice of killing of animals as well as collecting human waste, leatherwork, undertaking, and other "dirty" work was relegated to "Buraku" castes labeled by such words as "Eta (full of filth)" or "Hinin (non-human)." So "*buta kau kau*" really has a longer and deeper historical and social context that points to Japan's caste system that still exists today. The proof of its existence is in the unwillingness to talk about the issue and to treat it as if it has disappeared. That is, avoidance of present issues of discrimination in Japan (and elsewhere) is the most obvious indicator that the issue is alive and well. I recently visited an urban area near Takarazuka where "Buraku" people have historically resided and are still predominant. While walking into the area, I noticed a cemetery and crematorium for the small settlement. My host explained that many "regular Japanese" still do not want to be burned and buried with discriminated caste members. One thing to consider is that the concepts of the Japanese emperor as a sacred symbol of Japan or that of a "pure" Japanese race depends on having people to do dirty work and people who represent "dirtiness." I remember my mother telling me that growing up Okinawan meant that she wished could wash away the feeling of being dirty.

Streaks of light through the darkness

From a spot on the horizon

She greets this quiet explosion

Tattooed hands together

Nirai kanai, teach my children to find you.

Nirai kanai, teach them to look sideways.

Nirai kanai, I go back to you again.

Nirai kanai, I go back to you again.

As I remember – or perhaps, recreate – my grandmother in her last days restlessly waiting to get up to pray to the morning sun rising over Kaua'i, I imagine a much longer history and tradition of women and men like her from Okinawa, and possibly the rest of the world, looking toward the horizon to a new day being born. Nirai kanai, the source of life and sustenance and the place where gods resided, was commonly believed to be far to the east toward where the sun rises. Maybe I am too idealistic in imagining that this horizontal ontology was not bound by the idea that all good things come

from a heaven up above and that people of higher rank, income, education, or level of purity are superior. I imagine that it did not emphasize the separations between people as we do when we envision the world from a top-down cartographic perspective that looks at nations separated by boundaries and borders or islands separated by bodies of water. I imagine that it did not give power to self-aggrandizing ethnographic ideas that “(lessor) others” “belong to” different (inferior) cultures or to an idea that the “Far East” or the “Orient” is a strange, evil, backward, barbaric, and terroristic place.

Laura’s work draws out unarticulated and contradictory feelings. Wistful longing for an idealized past of a “pre-colonized” culture and warm “pre-postmodern” community connections is evoked along with a realization that this idealized past has been constructed on a heteronormative generational framework, which itself is built upon such binaries as heaven/earth, pure/impure, Occident/Orient, American/Oriental, loyal/disloyal, and straight/queer.

I find inspiration Laura’s work for it helps identify the blueness that I strive to burst though. In the blueness, however, is something that fuels naïve idealism and hope against all odds. I stare at *Graves by the Sea*. Blue sky scratched by power lines and a metal barrier between the graves and the viewer. Departed souls encased in concrete tombs pushed up against each other. They are testament of the reverence for ancestors and tradition in Okinawa that contradicts the reality of the lack of space on Okinawa. Vegetation between the tombs strives to reach the sun. There is a strong and powerful message that the ancestors and land are telling us through Laura’s work.

I end this essay at a time when I have just returned from a trip to Washington D.C. with an Okinawan delegation that was making a direct appeal against plans by the U.S. and Japanese governments to push ahead with construction of a new U.S. Marine Air Station on the clear blue waters of Henoko despite strong opposition by Okinawans. Under pressure and promises of more money by the administration of Japanese Prime Minister Abe, on December 27, 2013 Okinawan Governor Nakaima agreed to approve of the landfill construction at Henoko. Because Nakaima was elected on a campaign promise to not allow the new base to be built in Okinawa, his approval ratings plummeted in Okinawa immediately. Then, on January 19, 2014, the anti-base mayor of Nago, which Henoko is a part of, was reelected by a large margin over his opponent who was backed up by the Japanese government who promised large sums of money for Nago if he were elected.

We met with U.S. officials, think tanks, one Senator, and staff of several other Congress members to press our case. At this time, both the Japanese and U.S. governments are stepping up their attempts to push past unyielding local Okinawan opposition to build a U.S. Marine Air Station in Henoko, which is on the northern part of Okinawa. Henoko is the site of a large thriving coral reef, turtle spawning grounds, seaweed beds, and an already endangered species of dugong. The blue ocean of Henoko will be no more if this plan goes through.

Most of the officials, politicians, and researchers we met in Washington D.C. had made up their mind about new base construction at Henoko saying that it is the best plan for the U.S.-Japan security arrangement and for the security of Pacific Asia. However, what the delegation was trying to get across to deaf ears was that Okinawans have stopped the construction for 18 years by placing their bodies in front of ships and equipment coming to start construction.

Old people, as old and tiny as my Baban in my memories of her, have come to sit on the beach everyday in quiet but unrelenting resistance to American Manifest Destiny and Japanese fatalistic dependency on that Destiny. In the blue space between the popular images of Hawai'i and Okinawa and the material realities of those places is a lot more emotion than Orientalistic modes of perception can detect and a lot more commotion than colonial power can hold back.

- Wesley Ueunten, February 6, 2014

Wesley Ueunten is associate professor of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University. A third generation Okinawan, he was born and raised in Hawai'i and spent a total of 9 years in Okinawa and Japan learning Japanese and Okinawan languages, studying Okinawan music, and working as a translator and English teacher. He received his PhD in Ethnic Studies from UC Berkeley.

Postscript December 16, 2014

It is now in reaching the one-year mark since Okinawan Governor Nakaima approved the landfill construction at Henoko. Last month, he lost in the gubernatorial election to a candidate that promised to stop the Henoko base construction project. About a week before the election, I was at an event in Kyoto, Japan where there was discussion over a Ryukyuan independence manifesto that a friend of mine recently published. My initial reactions to such talk about independence was not all that receptive as it conjured up images of dogmatic and even rabid nationalism and the replication of the very vertical social structures that have oppressed Okinawans in the first place. However, listening to (and later reading) the well-thought-out arguments of my friend, I began to entertain the idea that, regardless of whether or not I completely agree with independence or not, such a clear position is perhaps necessary as it points out Okinawa's continued colonized status. My friend's call for independence has been often criticized as "unrealistic," but in reality, Japan and the U.S. are pushing forward against deep-rooted Okinawan resistance to a new base in Henoko. God forbid any bloodshed in the clash between Okinawans and Japanese police and with American military forces, but the reality of such a situation is always close at hand in Okinawa. Ironically, it was President Reagan who in 1986, the "Year of the Flag," proclaimed that the blue in our own American flag stands for "vigilance and justice," but such words ring empty when heard from an Okinawan perspective.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Laura Kina is Vincent de Paul Professor of Art, Media, & Design at DePaul University and “hapa, yonsei, Uchinanchu.” Born in Riverside, California, in 1973 to an Okinawan father from Hawai’i and a Spanish-Basque/Anglo mother, Kina was raised in Poulsbo, WA, a small Norwegian town in the Pacific Northwest. She received her MFA in Studio Art from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 2001, where she studied with noted painters Kerry James Marshall and Phyllis Bramson. She earned her BFA in Painting and Drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1994 and was inspired by her teachers Michiko Itatani and the late Ray Yoshida. The artist currently lives and works in Chicago, IL.

Kina’s artwork deals with themes of distance and belonging and her research is focused on Asian American and mixed race identity and history. Her artwork has exhibited across the United States and in India and Japan including at the Chicago Cultural Center, India Habitat Centre, Nehru Art Centre, Okinawa Prefectural Art Museum, the Rose Art Museum, the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Spertus Museum, and the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience. Her solo exhibitions include *Sugar* (2010), *A Many-Splendored Thing* (2010), *Aloha Dreams* (2007), *Loving* (2006), and *Hapa Soap Operas* (2003).

She is also the coauthor, along with Wei Ming Dariotis, of *War Baby/Love Child: Mixed Race Asian American Art* (University of Washington Press, 2013); cofounder of the biennial DePaul Critical Mixed Race Studies conference; and cofounder and managing editor of the *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies* through University of California Santa Barbara. The National Endowment for the Arts funded her curation of “War Baby/Love Child: Mixed Race Asian American Art” at the DePaul Art Museum and the Wing Luke Museum. In 2012, Diversity MBA Magazine selected Kina as one of the “Top 100 Executive & Emerging Leaders Under 50” in the U.S.

Blue Hawai’i Past Exhibitions:

February 21, 2014–March 27, 2014

The Martha and Robert Fogelman Galleries of Contemporary Art

University of Memphis

Department of Art

Art and Communication Building

3715 Central Ave.

Memphis, TN 38152

Tel: 901-678-2216

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Installation view “Laura Kina: Blue Hawai’i” University of Memphis.



BLUE HAWAI'I
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