

UCHINANACHU



LAURA KINA

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2016

Laura Kina: *Uchinanchu*



W. Keith and Janet Kellogg University Art Gallery
California State Polytechnic University, Pomona
3801 W. Temple Ave. Pomona, CA 91768

February 27 - April 23, 2016

On view as part of *Transnational Lives in Motion: The Art of Laura Kina and Việt Lê*
Co-curated by Mary Yu Danico and Michele Cairella Fillmore

EVENTS

Opening Reception: Sat., Feb. 27, 2016, 4-7pm

Artists' Symposium:

Thurs., Feb. 25, 2016, 1-3pm

At Bronco Student Center, Ursa Minor

CONTACT INFO

Kellogg University Art Gallery & Huntley Gallery

Kellogg Gallery: 909-869-4302

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UCHINANCHU ARTIST STATEMENT

My artwork focuses on themes of distance, belonging and cultural reclamation. I start with autobiographical impulses and draw inspiration from popular culture, textile design, personal and community photographic archives and oral history interviews. I collect these images, stories, and histories, and I see what is missing, what is not being told, what is not obvious, and I go hunting for it. I am interested in the overlap, fusion, disjuncture, or vibration that happens when I bring back the missing pieces and put them together.

Uchinanchu is the Uchinaguchi (Okinawan) language word for “Okinawan.” *Uchinanchu* features new textile-based paintings in which I, as a mixed race, yonsei, Uchinanchu, consider my proximity and distance to Asian American, white, Okinawan diaspora, and indigenous identities and communities. Using the form of a patchwork quilt as a starting point, the works simultaneously reference rural southern craft traditions I learned from my maternal great-grandma, Japanese boro quilts and Hawaiian quilts that refer to my paternal cultural heritage, and contemporary feminist and craft art practices.

Fragments of t-shirts appear in each work and trace return migrations to the similarly colonized island locals of Hawai’i and Okinawa. These quilt/hybrid paintings additionally function as family portraits and pay homage to specific Okinawan American activists, artists, and academics and Okinawan diaspora communities in Hawai’i and Los Angeles and my location of Chicago. The t-shirts, which I solicited from friends and family and recycled from my own archives, document group affiliations such as Honolulu Marathon finishers, Okinawan Association of America members, and participants in the Worldwide Uchinanchu Festival. These are combined with colorfully painted iconic and celebratory symbols of a globalized contemporary Hawai’i (e.g., *SPAM* and *Hello Kitty*) and Okinawan culture – shisa lions, bingata style flowers, andagi (Okinawan doughnut) – as well as symbols of contested histories, spaces, and bodies such as the hajichi tattoo tradition or the endangered dugong.

Taken together, the works are about islands of diaspora and explore themes of transnational family ties and heritage tourism, mixedness, ethnic pride and solidarity, military and colonial histories, and current geopolitical military/environment issues in Okinawa and Hawai’i.

Also included in the exhibition is a 2012 quilt/painting *Omiyage*, which tells my father’s story of forgiving his absent father. This four-panel piece is set against the backdrop of our family’s history of Okinawan sugarcane plantation and military service in Hawai’i.

I would like to thank my family along with artist Denise Uyehara (Arizona), author Lee A. Tonouchi (Hawai’i), scholar-activists Mitzi Uehara Carter (Miami) and Ryan Yokota (Chicago) and members of the Okinawa Association of America, especially Allyson Nakamoto and Joey Yoshimasu Kamiya (Los Angeles), for their donations of t-shirts for this project.

This exhibition and catalog have been funded in part by a 2016 grant from the DePaul University Research Council and the Kellogg University Art Gallery an the Weglyn Endowed Chair for Multicultural Studies.



Laura Kina studio



Orion, 2016



Hanagasa, 2016



Hello Kitty, 2015



Dugong, 2015



Hajichi, 2015



Andagi, 2015



Shisa Lion and Shaved Ice, 2015



SPAM, 2015



Finisher, 2015



Dare, 2015



I Speak English, 2015



No Justice No Peace, 2015



Hapa, 2015



Basketball, 2015



Saimin

He left the house when I was a sixth grader and when he was at home, he wasn't home very much. I could come up with very little I can remember my father with and one was eating a bowl of saimin soup at a restaurant. He wasn't a man of a lot of words. We did things together. I remember we worked in the sugar cane field but as far as talking, I can't remember too much...except one thing. He taught me to drive way before I was to even think about driving. He said, "Look to where you wanna go, not where you don't wanna go."

Omiyage, 2012 (panel 1 of 4)



Kameichi

He missed different highlights in my life - high school, college, medical school, didn't hear from him for my marriage or any of our children. When our fourth child was born I felt the Lord said, "This is an opportunity to honor your father. Name your son 'Kameichi' after your father."



Omiyage, 2012 (panel 2 of 4)



The last time I saw my father I visited him in Hawai'i and was surprised when I went into his home to see the picture of my son was in first place. All of us were behind... background. My son must have been 2 years old but I knew when I saw that, we had made a connection, that he had sensed that things were going to be OK and I felt things were going to be OK with us.



Air Force

My son just graduated from officer's candidate school. He is getting started in his career as an Air Force pilot and I told him, "You carry the name of my father and I am proud of you for what you are, for what you are becoming. I know my father would have wanted to be like you if he had the opportunity and the support."

Omiyage, 2012 (panel 4 of 4)

TRANSNATIONAL LIVES IN MOTION

Since the 1780s,¹ America has metaphorically been referred to as a “melting pot”—a perhaps overly optimistic reference to “the welcoming of people from many different countries, cultures, races, and religions, all hoping to find freedom, new opportunities, and a better way of life.”² The exact term melting pot became popularized in the United States after it was used as a metaphor describing a fusion of nationalities, cultures and ethnicities in Israel Zangwill’s 1908 stage play titled *The Melting Pot*.³ More recently, the true and logistical results of immigration and the social understanding of the “immigrant experience” has evolved toward a more accurate portrayal of embraced transnationalism, not fused assimilation. The early 20th “melting pot” gave way in the 1990s to the “salad bowl” metaphor, referring to mixtures of various “ingredients” that keep their own individual and distinct qualities and characteristics, but maintain a sense of common national identity in, and for, their country of residence.⁴

As a daughter of South American immigrants—born first generation “United Statesian” American—I experienced the integration of two cultures, languages and traditions, simultaneously, at a very young age. My experience is that both metaphors of “pot” and “bowl,” are not an exact representation of the immigrant, assimilatory, cultural blending as described. Instead, the migratory experience is perhaps more like an amalgamation of the two—or what Homi K. Bhabha coined as a “Third Space.”⁵ Thus we, as transnationals, become a combined concoction of harboring our individual ethnic pride, culture and traditions from “the home country,” while embracing a “new home beacon” of new systems, culture, traditions, and often new language, with numerous challenges likely never expected. To complicate things further, there are the many instances of multi-ethnic immigration—such as when two individuals of different cultures inter-marry and migrate, or their offspring migrate—into a new country, resulting in secondary, or tertiary, layers of culturalization. It is with all the integration of these components that a personal identity is formed as part of the “transnationalist” experience.

In the joint solo shows in *Transnational Lives in Motion: The Art of Laura Kina and Việt Lê*, as my co-curator Mary Yu Danico and I wrote, the artists examine,

“...the ways in which Asian American transnationals construct and reconstruct the fabric of their identities based on their location, space and time. From mixed-race identities with global connections, to communities who seek refuge in the U.S. from the legacies of wars, this exhibit highlights a few issues, which impact immigrant, refugee, and multi-racial ethnic communities living transnational lives.”⁶

Việt Lê’s video art installation includes his recently completed trilogy *lovebang!* which transects the topics of Asian pop-culture, hip-hop, sex, homo-eroticism and being transgender, with struggle and war, nostalgia and heartbreak. Artist Laura Kina addresses many of the multicultural, multi-ethnic, mixed-race, hapa, multi-geographical, multi-lingual, multi-generational relationships through her new body of work, *Uchinanchu*.

As a curator and art historian, I passionately believe that art and society are reciprocal. Art cannot be separated from the culture that constantly and repeatedly transforms it, nor can the effects of society leave art impervious to its changes. The effects of society and culture, in turn, influence the individual members of the society within it on a personal level. It is by one’s own social and cultural experiences that personal identity is then established. Therefore, it is essential to view art, not within an ethnocentric vacuum, but as a functional part of all societies and cultures, and on an individual level, as it relates to personal identity. Art must be seen as a window for understanding the “other”: other people’s cultures, their histories, religions, traditions, philosophies, social roles and lifestyles. This, in turn, generates discussion, which can help to better understand cultural issues and differences, and to better understand our own.

Through my curatorial choices, I often attempt to open doors to other cultures and subcultures by making associations that connect to our own “American” culture. By creating this interaction, it is my hope to form a link in the mind of the viewer that can be related to personal experience as well as generate an opportunity for healthy discussion regarding pertinent issues. All of my exhibition concepts are

meant to create an awareness of individuals, or groups of individuals, who are under-represented or deviate from the majority. Issues that evolve from the shifting world environment, advancements in technology, and the effects of these on the world (its environment and its people), the emergence of subcultures, social integration and assimilation, social change in forms of interaction and communication, the shifting of gender roles and lifestyle choices, political and sociological evolution, and the repercussions and individual identity that develop as a result, are some of the foundations used by me to build exhibitions upon. It is only through common understanding, knowledge, tolerance and acceptance that we can overcome differences, survive and endure as a peaceful society of the human race. And, I adamantly believe, it is through the universal language of visual art that this can be successfully achieved.

THE ART OF LAURA KINA: UCHINANCHU

In her new series *Uchinanchu*—meaning “Okinawans” in the Okinawan language known as Uchinaguchi—artist Laura Kina cleverly combines aspects her mixed-race, Japanese American and Euro-American heritage, and Pacific (Hawai’i, Los Angeles), Pacific Northwest (Washington state) and Midwestern (Chicago) affiliations. Having her own multi-traditional, multilingual and multireligious life experiences, Laura Kina, expresses her sense-of-self as a mixed-race, *hapa*⁷ descendant of specifically Okinawan heritage, while brought-up “American” in the US in the 1980s and 90s. A unique point of view develops from her work that is poignant and powerful, insightful and thought-provoking, and often, ironic and humorous as she returns to the lands of her ancestors, Hawai’i and Okinawa not as Kama’āina or “local,” (Kina’s family came to Hawai’i from Okinawa starting in 1912 as sugar cane plantation laborers), but as a tourist to visit family and more recently for work. Through the process of this circulation she also creates transpacific and transnational networks of affiliations.

In her artwork, Kina amalgamates the traditions of hand-painted Asian, specifically Okinawan and Hawaiian motifs, with traditional female textile- and quilt-making (aka traditional women’s work), together with contemporary westernized, “Americanized” and “Amer-Asian” pop-culture references through the use of the ready-made, or “found-object T-shirts”, she has herself owned, noticeably used, and/or vehemently sought out from family or members of the Okinawan diaspora. Every painted motif, every emblem included, every fabric used, each graphic and logo identified, is loaded with symbolism, iconography and/or allegory.

Kina’s artworks, like jigsaw puzzles or the carefully laid-out patterns of a dress, demonstrate how the assimilation of her multiple cultures (both patriarchal and matriarchal) fold meticulously into one personal, yet collective, journey. Formulated into colorful, large-scale tapestries, she references Asian and Asian-American pop, hip-hop and rock music, colorful food and bright-hued decorative arts, politics, Hello Kitty cartoons (aka branding), Asian clothing and stereotypical food brands, ethnic communities’ and organizations’ logos, sporting events and festivals, both Okinawan and Hawaiian. Kina often juxtaposes, or combines, these “pop” fabrics with other textiles that are also loaded with meaning: denim, being quintessentially American; khakis, quintessentially representing US military; with antique kimono fabrics; decorative Okinawan textiles; *palaka*-style plaids and patterns reminiscent of Hawai’i Territory (1858–1959) plantation era work clothing; traditional Hawaiian floral and botanical prints; sometimes Hawaiian “kitschy tourist” prints; with recycled, re-purposed (environmentally-friendly) fabrics. She uses old artist studio smocks smothered with the pigments of her previously created artwork, as well as the crisp, white, canvases free-of-pigment, as symbolic nods to her chosen path as the artist painter she is—often a controversial career choice in traditional Asian communities and families.

Kina references geographical locations that relate to her experiences, and reflects upon the histories of her peoples—often quite tragic—including the Asian and Pacific Islander diaspora. Her artworks ponder the melancholy of ancestral tourism and beautiful passion of ethnic pride. Having learned how to quilt from her maternal great-grandmother from Tennessee who was a seamstress, she forges

connections to patriarchy, women's work and the role of the female within Asian society, to her own personal "American" history and the importance of family. Furthermore, Kina addresses the sensitive issues of the Japanese occupation of the island of Okinawa particularly in the mid-1800s, forced suicides during World War II, and Okinawa's US military-occupied post-war aftermath. She does not, however, reflect upon this sad history with well-deserved anger or hatred, but instead, as a gentle observer, a sharp-tongued humorist, or a historian, with Mark Twain-like wit. In *Orion*, for example, centered across a patchwork of *aloha*, *bingata* and *bashofu* kimono fabrics and t-shirts of an iconic *shisa* lion and Ishigaki Island lizards, Kina conjoins a *kariyushi* style shirt worn by Okinawan activists from Los Angeles for an *Uchinanchu* festival with a U.S. Air Force jacket. Above this hybrid shirt-jacket, paper lanterns with the popular Okinawan beer Orion dangle recalling simultaneously both a bar entrance and a string of Buddhist Obon festival lanterns. But in between the lanterns are World War II era Japanese grenades—the very same type Okinawan civilians and soldiers were forced to use to commit suicide during the Battle of Okinawa.

A t-shirt by itself, that generally would have stood alone with a deep or controversial message about stereotypes, is now in fact, grouped "among friends" in a way that reloads a new message, often with greater truth, sarcasm, or "turning-the-tables" humor. Often with her work, Kina flips a stereotype on its head, raising the question: "Perhaps the reverse is true as well?" By bringing into question many stereotypes' origins and validity, her work sheds a light on how easily we can reverse and hopefully obliterate it, while seamlessly equalizing us all in the world's playing field.

The result of this body of work is a self-portrait, a family tree, a portrait of a community, or groups of communities, affected by the world, history and the effects of transmigration. Like a kaleidoscopic mosaic, *Uchinanchu* is a communal family portrait, a multi-layered, multi-family album—a scrapbook of Asian American *hapa* history.

Michele Cairella Fillmore
Co-curator
*Transnational Lives in Motion:
The Art of Laura Kina and Việt Lê*
W. Keith and Janet Kellogg University Art Gallery
Cal Poly Pomona, 2016

¹ Crèvecoeur, a Frenchman, in 1783 was noted as saying in reference to America: "Here individuals of all races are melted into a new race of men."

² Joyce Millet, *Understanding American Culture: From Melting Pot to Salad Bowl*. 1999-2014 Cultural Savvy. www.culturalsavvy.com. Jan 2016.

³ Wikipedia. Entry for term "Melting Pot." en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melting_pot. Jan 2016.

⁴ Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*. Pantheon Books. 1990.

⁵ Homi K. Bhaba, *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

⁶ Curatorial Statement co-written by Mary Yu Danico and Michele Cairella Fillmore.

⁷ *Hapa* is a term used to describe a person of mixed ethnic heritage. The term originates in Hawaii from the Hawaiian Pidgin word for "part" or "mixed". In Hawai'i, the word refers to any person of mixed ethnic heritage, regardless of the specific mixture. Bernstein and De la Cruz (2009), p. 723: "Thus, for locals in Hawai'i, both hapa or hapa haole are used to depict people of mixed-race heritage."

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Riverside, California in 1973 and raised in the Pacific Northwest, Laura Kina is an artist based in Chicago. Her artwork addresses Asian American and mixed race identities and histories with a focus on Okinawa and Hawai'i diaspora. She has exhibited nationally and internationally in galleries and museums including: the Chicago Cultural Center, India Habitat Centre, India International Centre, Nehru Art Centre, Okinawa Prefectural Art Museum, Rose Art Museum, Spertus Museum, and the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience. Her exhibition *Sugar/Islands: Finding Okinawa in Hawai'i – the Art of Laura Kina and Emily Hanako Momohara* was recently on view at the Japanese American National Museum with an exhibition catalog published by Bear River Press.

She is Vincent de Paul Professor of Art, Media, & Design at DePaul University, co-editor of *War Baby/Love Child: Mixed Race Asian American Art* (University of Washington Press, 2013), co-founder of the biennial Critical Mixed Studies conference, and a reviews editor for the *Asian Diasporic Visual Culture in the Americas*. She is working on a forthcoming anthology *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art* (University of Washington Press) and illustrating *Okinawan Princess: Da Legend of Hajichi Tattoos*, written by Lee A. Tonouchi (Bess Press).



Image credit: Kiam Marcelo Junio

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

- 1. Orion**
58.5 x 71 inches
Acrylic on canvas, inkjet transfer, assorted fabrics, 2011 Uchinanchu Taikai shirt worn by delegates from the LA Kenjinkai donated by Ryan Yokota, Air Force uniform
2016
- 2. Hanagasa**
57.5 x 73 inches
Acrylic on canvas, denim, camouflage from Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines uniforms
2016
- 3. Hello Kitty**
57 x 56 inches
Acrylic on canvas and denim, assorted fabrics, t-shirts from the artist's daughter Midori Aronson
2015
- 4. Dugong**
57 x 60 inches
Acrylic, patchwork quilt, assorted fabrics, t-shirts from Allyson Nakamoto, Joey Yoshimasu Kamiya and members of the Okinawan Association of American
2015
- 5. Hajichi**
60 x 59 inches
Acrylic on canvas, patchwork quilt, t-shirt from Denise Uyehara
2015
- 6. Andagi**
52.5 x 54 inches
Acrylic, patchwork quilt, assorted fabrics, t-shirts from Lee A. Tonouchi, Mitzi Uehara Carter, Denise Uyehara, Allyson Nakamoto, Joey Yoshimasu Kamiya and members of the Okinawan Association of American Los Angeles
2015
- 7. Shisa Lion and Shave Ice**
60 x 59 inches
Acrylic on canvas, assorted fabric, t-shirts from the artist's daughter Midori Aronson
2015
- 8. SPAM**
60 x 60 inches
Patchwork quilt made from jeans, bingata fabric, assorted fabrics, t-shirts from the artist and her daughter Midori Aronson
2015
- 9. Finisher**
59 x 60 inches
Acrylic on canvas, fabric, t-shirts from the artist's parents George and Diane Kina
2015
- 10. Dare**
54 x 57 inches
Patchwork quilt made from jeans, flannel shirts, artist's old studio t-shirts circa late 1980s
2015
- 11. I Speak English**
60 x 59 inches
Acrylic on canvas, assorted fabrics, artist's old studio t-shirts circa early 2000s
2015
- 12. No Justice No Peace**
56 x 50 inches
Acrylic on canvas and denim, artist's old t-shirts circa early 2000s. FAAIM cat logo usage courtesy of Foundation for Asian American Independent Media.
2015
- 13. Hapa**
32.5 x 58 inches
Acrylic, patchwork quilt, assorted fabrics, artist's old t-shirts circa 2003-2013
2015
- 14. Basketball**
32 x 120 inches
Acrylic, patchwork quilt, assorted fabrics, t-shirts from the artist's cousin Dawn Yoshioka.
2015
- 15. Omiyage**
4 panels 30 x 30 inches each
Acrylic on linen, embroidery, patchwork quilt
2012



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