WILL & GRACE:
AN UNNATURAL HISTORY OF HAWAI'I

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Artwork is not complete until someone looks at it – really looks at it, enough to see more than just “art.” The first, crucial, unifying theme of my thesis exhibition, “Will & Grace: An Unnatural History of Hawai‘i,” at the University of Hawai‘i-Mānoa Commons Gallery, is that it grab the public’s increasingly fractured attention. This may seem so obvious as to be not worth mentioning, but I know that 90 percent of what I see in art exhibits does not engage my attention for more than a second – and I am as receptive to art as any casual visitor to the Commons Gallery.

That is why I favor figurative work: because people identify with it automatically, as long as it is not isolated on a pedestal, where it reads as “art” and calls forth a generic (usually contemplative) approach. Figures in an environment express a relationship, so that the viewer forgets about her reaction and naturally focuses on the piece itself. Narrative frameworks transport us from the “real” world, in which we are the main players, to the position of audience, where we anticipate with less wariness and prejudice, like children. In the pause before a story is told, or as a movie begins, the viewer is as undefended as he will ever be. This gives the work its best chance to set its own terms.

I do not take my role in this spectacle lightly. Never mind that viewers will repay disappointment or delight with the candid immediacy of children – rotten tomatoes or applause. Once you invite a viewer into the space of fiction, every element is read as part of the journey. Break that spell, and attention shifts to the viewer’s own reactions. As long as you hold an audience in your spell, you enjoy a rare power, along with the opportunity to use it wisely.

The question then becomes not only what you do with this power, but how you, as the creator, acknowledge it. My background is in journalism, a profession that justifies its necessity on self-congratulatory evidence of “the power of the press.” News narratives wear the cloak of transparent truth, although they are obviously
mediated by an authorial hand. The press in America has institutionalized the evasion of authorial responsibility under a code of conventions formulated to represent "objectivity." Artists do not have this luxury. Artwork is understood to be a personal invitation, and thus runs the risk always of seeing its effects projected onto the artist herself. So the artist, unlike the journalist, must acknowledge her role in some way, because audiences today are too savvy — having been fooled and manipulated in too many ways for too long — not to look behind the wizard’s curtain.

There are several ways to handle this quandary. You can suck up: Invite the viewer to share your (often ironic or critical) inside view. Or you can be enigmatic, and risk alienation. I have opted for the latter course, because my motives are sincere. Irony is a bankrupt position, post-9/11. Artists are foolish to pretend they do not have power, or to refuse this power, when the stakes are so great. Certainly they become ridiculous when they ignore everything that has happened — the course of history, including art history — and adopt the pose of the wizard behind the curtain. My invitation to suspend disbelief does not deliver an easy or satisfactory conclusion — at least, I have done my best to prevent that from happening. I present my dioramic world and step aside; the viewer does the rest. Of course, I cannot control every reaction. But I will answer to all of them.
The Installation

The exhibit consists of two dioramas installed in a hallway darkened by black walls. The dioramas are not visible on entering the gallery (Figure 1). Visitors see the exhibit title and, around the corner, a screen set into the wall, approximately 5 feet by 3 feet, playing a looping video of storm-tossed waves against a patch of sky. At the end of this wall is a paragraph of text introducing the subject of the exhibit, where viewers turn and enter a darkened hallway.
At the end of this darkened hallway are the two dioramas, one set into each corner (Figure 2). Their viewing windows are about 6 feet high by 9 feet across, but they are installed at different heights. The one on the left is nearly at floor level, so that one looks down at the scene. The one on the right is raised a couple of feet off the floor, so that one looks up at its “ceiling.” The only lighting comes from the scenes themselves.

![Figure 2. Exhibit, interior view.](image)

The lower diorama, on the left, shows the interior of a church, with arched windows that suggest Kawaiaha‘o Church in Honolulu, founded by missionaries in the early 19th century as the “Protestant mother church of Hawai‘i.”¹ There are four rows of pews, and on the back wall hang portraits of two Hawaiian regents: Princess Victoria Ka‘iulani and King William Lunalilo. In the third pew sits a

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¹ “Kawaihao is a Protestant showplace,” Honolulu Starbulletin 6 June 2004.
female figure, her hands in prayer position (Figure 3). She measures about 2 feet tall standing up. She wears a floor-length moss-green satin dress and black velvet cape in Victorian style, and a simple haku lei over her cascading curls. She also wears an enigmatic smile.

Figure 3. Female, left diorama.
A rooster perched on one window sill (Figure 4) looks out at the same ocean video projected on both sides of the rear-projection screen. As this is the sole source of light, the church interior is somewhat dim.

![Figure 4. Rooster, left diorama.](image)

The diorama on the right is much brighter, although it appears to be the inside of a cavern (Figure 2). Sculpted walls of yellow, orange, and red narrow to a small opening at the top, where a bright light illuminates a figure standing on the floor of the cavern, a man holding a book that on closer examination appears to be a Hawaiian Bible (Figure 5). He is also about 2 feet tall, and looks up toward the light source, from whence issue the sounds of sirens, explosions, jets flying overhead, and helicopters hovering. One also hears the dripping, trickling water of an
underground cave. In fact, the man is standing just inside a pool of dark water.\(^2\) He is barefoot, and wears only dark wool pants with an improvised rope belt.

\(^2\) The water had to be partially drained during the exhibit because of a leak, and is thus not visible in the illustrations.
Contradictory cues

Diametrical contrasts between the scenes lead some viewers to conclude that the church represents heaven, while the man stands in a fiery volcanic hell. But the division is not so neat. While the ocean rages outside the church windows from the perspective of a storm-tossed ark, the water in the volcano is still, dark, and quiet—hardly hellish. The light, however, is bright in the volcano, subdued in the church. Of the two figures, the woman’s features appear more masculine (Figure 6). The designs on her dress hem and her free-flowing hair suggest that she is some kind of witch. The man in the volcano wears a much softer, open expression (Figure 7). His Bible says he is a man of the cloth. In other words, if the scenes represent heaven and hell, the figures do not “belong” in their respective environments. A missionary properly belongs in Kawaiaha'o Church, whereas a witch draws her power from the untamed forces of Nature.

Figures 6. Detail, female.

Figure 7. Detail, male.
Islands, in the Western imagination, have long been associated with the feminine, a convenient formulation for the conquering powers that gave their lust the sympathetic look of mutual attraction: the bare-breasted Eden, passively welcoming the civilizing, orderly interventions of the well-endowed Western explorer and entrepreneur. But there is a flipside to this coupling, as with all polarities. The cavernous feminine obscures a fire unseen and still untamed by the rational, technical, textual science that has driven the chariot of time for 600 years. Today, as man stands confounded not only by nature, fate, and fortune, but especially by his own ingenious devices, the island deity awaits her time, and that time is now.

Figure 8. Wall text.

The introductory text and title also point to a reversal, this time of conventional hierarchies (Figure 8). In Hawai‘i, the missionaries who brought Christianity to the islands are understood to have successfully supplanted the indigenous pagan belief system, paving the way for modernization. However, the modern-day sirens, explosions, etc. that form the aural backdrop to the scenes call to mind the destructive, self-defeating aspects of a Cartesian worldview more than its triumphs. Moreover, the introductory text suggests that the sacred feminine ultimately will triumph over the Church, so that one might wonder whether the female figure – though she appears to accept her usurped position – has some role in the man’s distress. He appears trapped, his preaching having no visible effect. While he might be presumed to represent the “conquering powers” of the “well-endowed Western explorers and entrepreneurs,” his face reflects something closer to abdication; in
fact, historical evidence suggests most missionaries ventured forth in the sincere belief that their altruistic ambitions had celestial support, even at the cost of their lives. The witch figure, by contrast, appears more calculating.

Finally, many viewers will recognize the title “Grace & Will” to be a reversal on the contemporary television sitcom “Will & Grace,” about a gay man and straight woman who are partners in a graphic design business. The program broke ground as an unabashed prime-time portrayal of gay lifestyle and culture. As an exhibit title, “Grace & Will” not only underscores some ambiguity about the male-female positioning of the figures, but also plays on the religious or philosophical meaning of the words, and the ontological debate about fate versus free will. One might notice, however, that a witch hardly corresponds with the traditional meaning of “grace,” and a Christian missionary is not supposed to embody “will,” but rather the renunciation of will in the service of God.

The historical setting for the scenes is also intentionally ambiguous. Kawaiha’o Church was built in the late 1830s, while King Lunalilo and Princess Ka‘iulani, whose portraits hang on the back walls, did not rule until the last quarter of that century. These regents share a hybrid status between ancient and modern Hawai‘i. Ka‘iulani, the product of a Scottish immigrant and a Hawaiian royal, grew up graciously adept in both native and Western culture. “Elegant in sumptuous European-style dress and adorned with jewels, the young princess epitomized a hapa-haole style of beauty that captured the imagination of the American public” on an 1893 trip to Washington, D.C. Similarly, King Lunalilo, who had birthright to the throne on his uncle’s death, insisted that he be elected by the people. He greatly admired the principles of Western democracy and capitalism, and even incurred the wrath of his subjects by allowing U.S. military use of Pearl Harbor in exchange for Hawai‘i’s free access to the American sugar market. Both regents have names that reference the otherworldly: Lunalilo means “so high as to be lost to

sight”,⁴ Kaiulani, “the highest point of heaven.”⁵ I chose them from the many ali‘i whose portraits hang on the walls of Kawaiaha‘o Church to underscore a resistance to monolithic readings of what the main tropes in the dioramas – Hawai‘i, Christianity, nature, gender, grace, and will – represent.

**Stylistic ambiguities**

The iconographic mutability of the piece extends also to the style in which it is made, and demonstrates that the main point of the dioramas is not explicitly to address issues of cosmology or Hawaiian history. Indeed, the viewer’s expectation that the dioramas must serve a didactic or persuasive function – as dioramas typically do in museums, churches, and other exhibits – or that the artwork carries a unified “message,” end up frustrated by the many stylistic and iconographic incongruities.

Museum dioramas strive for realism. Like waxworks, they encourage the suspension of disbelief in the service of illustration.

Such exhibits tell no stories as such. Rather, they are tableaux – frozen moments in time and space ... which instruct by their existence.⁶ To serve the purposes of this kind of substitute imagery, and for all its counterparts – panoramas, dioramas, movie spectaculars, TV documentaries... – high degrees of accuracy in transcribing natural appearances are requisite.⁶ My dioramas clearly do not illustrate anything real, however, nor does their style stake any claims on a realistic depiction of “how it might have been.” So while

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dioramas in general reference museum displays, the fanciful settings of these dioramas call to mind more closely the department store window display.

Dressed windows also serve a rhetorical purpose, of course: Store displays are by definition a vehicle for promotion. But the language of advertising entails quite a different act of interpretation than a museum exhibit. In order to distinguish and sell a product or idea as delivering more than its competitors, modern advertising has developed a complex semiotic code that nearly everyone has learned to apply unthinkingly to visual appeals of all kinds. Specifically, the language of advertising is governed by the framing of meaning. To recognize or “read” an ad is to

recognize a framework or context within which meanings are rearranged so that exchanges of meaning can take place. The motive of the advertisement becomes part of the unspoken framework within which we attempt to interpret particular combinations of meaning. Without such an understanding, we would be baffled by the arbitrary photographic juxtapositions....

Goldman’s analysis of the language of advertising goes on to explain that “[t]he semiotic reductionism necessary for producing a currency of commodity-signs involves transforming complex meaningful relations into visual signifiers. It then turns the relationship between signifier and signified into one of equivalence, so that the visual signifier can be substituted for the signified of the product.” In other words, we understand from ads that an image of a woman leaping for joy is equivalent to the image of the perfume bottle in the corner of the page – the associations all inhere in the framework of selling. Frames and framing devices, with their coded instructions for interpretation, have become so pervasive in modern communications that they constitute what Goldman calls a “visual language system” of “semiological chains.” Standing before scenes that mimic promotional window displays, the viewer of my dioramas might reasonably attempt to apply the

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8 Ibid., 6.
9 Ibid., 66.
visual codes of advertising, reifying the objects with mythical value – hence the common identifications with heaven and hell.

But there is a third possible reading, related to this last. Ad symbolism works because it draws on a widely understood cultural code, as John Berger notes: “Publicity relies to a very large extent on the language of oil painting.... [I]t is the last moribund form of that art.” Advertising, he says, is essentially nostalgic, selling the utopian ideal – our reference for which is always in the past – through “vague historical or poetic or moral references” that are all the more effective for being “imprecise and ultimately meaningless.” Vagueness serves the credibility of advertising because its truthfulness “is judged not by fulfillment of its promises, but by the relevance of its fantasies to those of the spectator-buyer.” The visual language of advertising, in other words, transports us on the wings of symbols from the present moment to the eternal realm of myth and dream, the always-deferred utopian future. It reifies contingent, temporary qualities, imbuing everything with timeless essence. This brings me to an even more substratal stylistic reference made by the dioramas: the essentialist symbolism of religious statuary, and its modern displacement as kitsch.

In our time, classical figure sculpture placed on gallery pedastals – what most people think of as art – has been taken out of its original social context and taken on the mythic, symbolic status of the religious icon, making it a goldmine of semiotic ambiguity for advertising. Its style is typically an ideal realism, while the material used – bronze or stone – has come to stand for an object invested with anima or “soul.” When this code of representation is broken in sculptural works, intentionally or circumstantially, we call the resulting discordance kitsch.

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11 Ibid., 140.
12 Ibid., 146.
13 It is worth noting that Greek statuary was discovered only in the last century to have been brightly colored. The association of classicism with the monochromatic purity of bronze or marble was thus, to some degree, arbitrary – though not the less useful for that.
Much has been written in our time about kitsch, from disparaging diatribes by modernist critics such as Clement Greenberg to postmodern emphasis on its redemptive aspects, based on the art theories of the postwar Frankfurt School. Kitsch is appreciated by the postmoderns for the very reasons it was disparaged by modernists, who responded to the teleological deformations of capitalism by seeking refuge in universal human values. Postmodernists, who see in such universal claims a justification for the hierarchical status quo, welcome in kitsch a truth unmasked – that the commodity’s claims on mythic absolutes have failed.

Kitsch is the attempt to repossess the experience of intensity and immediacy through an object. Since this recovery can only be partial and transitory, ... kitsch objects may be considered failed commodities. However, in this constant movement between partially retrieving a forfeited moment and immediately losing it again, kitsch gains the potential of being a dialectical image: an object whose decayed state exposes and deflects its utopian possibilities, a remnant constantly reliving its own death... 

Not all kitsch objects offer access to a redemptive, dialectical truth. Nostalgic objects that simply play to sentiment, like the cartoonish figurines of puppies and children advertised in limited editions, operate on the closed reference system of the symbol. Nostalgic kitsch “denies both present and past in the interest of its own cravings”; it “is static, it doesn’t move, it just oscillates back and forth between the glorified experience and its subject.” It remains stuck in the hope for an imagined past.

Olalquiaga describes the contrasting effects of the three-dimensional scenes popularized in Victorian decor, such as snow globes, aquariums, artificial grottoes, panoramas, and dioramas – what she calls melancholic kitsch. As narrative, such

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16 Ibid, 122.
utopian miniature worlds highlight “time, however suspended, [as] the underlying motif.”17 Rather than stopping to worship before the eternally revered symbol, they move, like allegory, “toward ... a narrative based on a symbol’s disintegration, simultaneously erasing and anecdotally maintaining that symbol’s primary meaning.”18

The allegorical takeover of the symbol does not replace one hierarchy with another, but rather displaces that attribute of essence which for so long bound things ... to origin instead of history. Allegories’ peculiar dismantling and reconfiguration of symbols enable them to carry out a powerful demystification, potentially providing a dialectical image.... [Thus] one can understand how, after having been emptied and frozen by commodification, unconscious memories can still emerge with new meanings.19

In other words, a commodity can become a kitsch object on various levels – either presenting a utopian ideal as an object to be possessed (as in advertising), or evoking the failure and loss of that ideal, and thus opening a way to move forward in the present.

I have digressed on this topic because the figures in “Grace & Will” will be read stylistically as kitsch – though they are not commodities, strictly speaking. Since the piece was created expressly for an art exhibit, it assumes a self-conscious awareness of style that does not accomplish quite the same temporal transcendence as kitsch. I would say that the style *imitates* kitsch, or makes reference to kitsch, as a crucial part of its subject matter. Its juxtaposition of symbols calls attention to how symbolic referents are understood and used — that is, politically – a semiotic level shared by the advertisement, the symbol, and the commodity as artwork. Specifically, “A construction of history that looks backward, rather than forward, at the destruction of material nature *as it has actually taken place,* provides dialectical

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17 Ibid., 122-3.  
18 Ibid.  
19 Ibid.
contrast to the futurist myth of historical progress (which can only be sustained by forgetting what has happened).”\textsuperscript{20} The mythic, in other words, ultimately dictates that humans are powerless to influence the essential, the eternal, what is written, the will of the gods.\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{Political ambitions}

Representation is the core issue by which art enters the political arena in the postmodern age, and representations of Hawai‘i have become, by their very nature, politically charged. Postcolonialist discourse dissects how the power to control representations of the Other serves to construct and maintain existing hierarchies.\textsuperscript{22} In the case of Hawai‘i, for example, images of hula girls and loincloth-clad “natives” that proliferated in the West at the turn of the 20th century, when such dress was no longer current, helped to construct “the primitive,” a necessary complement to the modern Christian West.\textsuperscript{23} Such narrative tyrannies – part of the machinery of colonialization – were not, as we know, completely effective. Suppressed for more than a century, Hawaiian customs, beliefs, and language continued to survive and are regaining prominence today.

Such partial, contingent, and incomplete transitions of power do not easily lend themselves to symbolic representation, however. Art of the Hawaiian movement for decolonisation shows the risks of simply reversing symbols established by the West:

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{20} Olalquiaga, 95.
\textsuperscript{22} The seminal reference is Edward Said’s \textit{Orientalism} (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), which traces how dominant discourses about the Orient served to create an Other by which the West has defined itself (as superior, rational, etc.).
\end{flushright}
In attempting to give the Western-constructed “primitive” a voice, indigenous artists often resort to the same oppositional, black/white strategy as their colonial counterparts, positing a “pure” ancestral era uncorrupted by outside influence. This serves to further naturalize the dichotomies they construct. An anthropologist says of the currently popular political uses of “strategic essentialism” that while “this valorization ... of the previously devalued qualities attributed to [disempowered groups] may be provisionally useful in forging a sense of unity and in waging struggles of empowerment.... it perpetuates some dangerous tendencies,” as it ignores (1) connections across the divide and how the sides define each other; (2) differences within each category; (3) how experiences have been constructed historically and changed over time. “[I]n the most extreme cases,” Abu-Lughod notes, “these moves erase history.” This strategy always draws its strength, at base, from a return to the mythic.

I hope these various explorations of representation point to the clear connection between what we call the style of artwork, and the political and social purposes it serves – usually not overtly. In the contemporary era, for example, the spread of advertising codes to promotional vehicles such as the media, entertainment, and public institutions – has turned all representation ipso facto into rhetoric. Postmodern art that simply reverses what was valorized in modernism risks upholding the very strategies it seeks to deride. “Not even satire ... is immune from a process it may seek to destroy through laughter. And the same can be said of other forms of critique as well. Once we are communicating at all, and especially in public, and therefore in a medium that is promotional through and through, there is no going outside promotional discourse.”

“Grace & Will” will inevitably read first as rhetoric – a tendency I have

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encouraged with the introductory text, which sets up a dichotomy between colonizers and colonized, Enlightenment-era epistemology and nature-based cosmologies, “masculine” and “feminine” modes of being and knowing. The ominous suggestion of an imminent reversal of power only serves to support the hegemonic generalization of such tropes as “feminine” and “masculine,” aligning the peaceful, yielding, feminine, pagan Hawai‘i against the aggressive, masculine, rational West. The viewer is primed to see this dramatic conflict illustrated allegorically as in a museum exhibit, underlined by overt contrasts such as light and dark, quiet and loud, male and female, sitting and standing, heaven and hell.

What the viewer does see, however, are theatrical sets staged with dolls, built in what appears to be a sincere expenditure of labor. A child might see it as a simple invitation to enter the world of myth, and take the scenes as narrative displays designed to evoke awe. To adults, they can only be fantastic. In the context of an art exhibit, they show the artist’s dedication to a bizarre vision that represents neither familiar images of Hawai‘i nor a subjective, expressionistic meditation on it.

**Conscious intentions**

“Grace & Will” is, in fact, a provisional response to the problems of representation that I have raised. It seeks to validate subconscious knowledge – which partakes of, but does not belong to, either the rational or mystical – while remaining conscious of the political dimensions inherent in its subject matter and the subjective positioning of its maker. As an outsider, I cannot pretend to represent Hawai‘i or the Hawaiian, and my representation does not make any claims to truth or authenticity – as I hope its humble construction makes clear. Rather, the piece grows out of a subjective engagement with my environment, with all its felt ambiguities. The subject “Hawai‘i” naturally includes its history of colonization, (ongoing) Christianization,
and commodification of its culture. But these things, represented as monolithic, say nothing new. So while the piece evokes the symbolic, it tries to present it paradoxically, to transcendental ends.

To begin with, the witch in church is clearly an anomaly. A witch is not welcome in church, and her pagan beliefs would make the church a hostile environment. But she is not entirely out of place in Kawaiaha’o Church, the “Westminster of Hawaii,” because the missionaries built this church at a time when much of the native population still held animistic beliefs, and the Hawaiian royals themselves – while often represented today in opposition to the missionaries – straddled both worlds. To wherever Christian missionaries went, in fact, they had to convert the native population from indigenous, pagan beliefs. This process was rarely complete. In parts of Latin America, for example, remnants of the pagan belief system continue to thrive, clothed in the forms of Christianity. It is in the churches of Mexico and the American Southwest that I was first captivated by the doll-like santos dressed and redressed with the seasons, the fusion of a Spanish statuary tradition interpreted by native craftsmen. This mestizo art reflected reciprocal influences in the society at large: Missionaries used pagan deities to aid in conversion, equating a local goddess, say, with the Virgin Mary; but native populations, too, would “convert” Christian symbols such as Jesus, the Holy Ghost, and the cross into forms that allowed covert worship of their ancestral deities.

Raymond Williams has pointed out that hegemony, while always dominant, is never total or exclusive: “At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in the society.... as indicative features of what the hegemonic process in practice had to work to control.” Williams emphasizes the importance of understanding hegemony as a transformative process.

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26 Jane Desmond notes in her study of the imagistic construction of a “primitive” Hawaiian at the turn of the century: “The Native Hawaiian population (especially the elite class) was, in some ways, almost too ‘modern’ to sustain this dichotomy. They were highly literate and often part Caucasian, and most were Christian” (466).

27 Williams, 113.
that must continually assimilate the cultural formations it works to suppress. What
he calls residual cultural elements "may often be seen as the personal or the private,
or as the natural or even the metaphysical. Indeed it is usually in one or other of these
terms that the excluded area is expressed, since what the dominant has effectively
seized is indeed the ruling definition of the social."\(^{28}\)

In representation, these suppressed elements may be understood as that part of the
symbolic order that is not entirely conscious, and that gives symbols a certain
instability (whence the occasionally disastrous ad evoking unintentional references).
Williams calls these residual elements "structures of feeling" to distinguish them
from formal world views or ideologies. "We are talking about characteristic elements
of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and
relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought,"
appearing as "[t]he unmistakable presence in certain elements in art which are not
covered by ... other formal systems" but that generate the unique category of "the
aesthetic."\(^{29}\)

The spooky, masculine-looking witch in church is designed to tap into such a
feeling. One sees in her the wisdom in deciding to assimilate, rather than resist, a
vastly superior force as a form of cultural survival: "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em."
Capitulation, an archetypally feminine strategy, has been used successfully by native
groups, including Hawaiians, to keep a thread of their culture alive - which is why it
makes more sense to find a witch praying in church, for example, than a missionary
in a coven.\(^{30}\)

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 125.
\(^{29}\) Ibid., 133.
\(^{30}\) Interestingly, during the year I was building this show, a novel sweeping the bestseller lists that I
alternative reading of the Renaissance master's religious works that makes secret reference to a
historical figure suppressed by the Catholic Church: Mary Magdalene as wife, apostle, and spiritual
companion to Jesus, an embodiment of the sacred feminine. The *Mona Lisa*, Brown suggests, with her
androgynous face and mysterious smile, makes covert reference to this suppressed past. I believe the
book has resonated so strongly in our time because the increasingly violent ascendance of paternalistic
fundamentalisms points - in much the way that Williams describes - to the shadowy presence of what
must have been suppressed.
The missionary preaching in a volcano as Armageddon rages outside also points to incomplete colonization, this time of subjective experience. The dominance in modern-day Hawai‘i of the tourism industry, the U.S. military, and ubiquitous commodity culture would seem to testify to incorporation or trivialization of any archaic remnants of nature-based local deities. Yet many contemporary “accidents” in Hawai‘i continue to evoke a poetic sense of retribution for colonial excesses, along the lines of “It’s not nice to fool Mother Nature.” To take just one example, the 1999 Sacred Falls rockslide illustrates that truth can be stranger than fiction. A majority of the eight people killed and 50 injured in Hawai‘i’s worst recorded rockslide were military and tourists; the slide happened on Mother’s Day, at a place considered sacred to Hawaiians. One heard whispered at water coolers and among “ordinary folk” the next day nervous jokes about a supernatural force at work, while what Williams calls “the dominant” – government, the media, technical experts, etc. – answered the shock in the language of geology, jurisprudence, questions of land tenure, and clichéd narrative frames about the heroism of rescuers, none of which proved equal to the haunting aura of the event itself. No satisfactory response was found to this disaster except to close the park and conclude that volcanic ledges are inherently unstable. In the long run, science – like the missionary with his textual support – cannot entirely control responses about meaning, the “why,” in the face of the sublime.

In terms of evoking the subconscious, the style of my figures – which I have called something like an imitation of kitsch – deserves some explanation, for they are neither entirely realistic nor unrealistic, sentimental nor serious. As dolls in an illustrative scene, they most closely resemble children’s book illustrations, partaking of the mythopoetic, while the visible elements of construction refer prosaically to the real, much like the unresolved element in the Sacred Falls story. As adults, we feel this disturbing paradox inherent in dolls: They are not meant to replicate the real, but to *double* it. Perhaps this is why they serve so effectively in Spanish colonial art as religious icons, no matter how prosaically dressed: It is understood that they stand in
for a relationship that cannot be represented – not to another human, but something equally present. I have aimed for what is called in postmodern discourse “simulacral” signification, representation of the “unpresentable in the presentable.”

[T]he tableau vivant ... captures something of the uncanny, repetitious, or “retro” ... structure of the simulacrum. [Its] representational desire lies in the pleasure of producing a copy that elides and eludes the original not simply by displacing it but by doubling it; an image that “catches its breath” to appear still, dead, fixed, in order to infuse the tableau with life and exceed the presence of imaging itself; a reproduction of similitude where the surface of the scenario is the signifying side of a “difference” that consists in substitution and subversion at the same time.31

This approximates the melancholic experience of kitsch: allegory that draws attention to the process of signification itself.

Finally, while the dioramas’ setting in a dark, hallowed space and the doctrinal solemnity of the artist’s statement support a fantastic, oneiric setting, I have tried to disrupt the hushed silence proper to a church, museum, or library with the incongruous introduction of contemporary sound and video. A painted backdrop is more typical of dioramas, consistent with reference to utopian time. Movement is out of place in this static world that is nonetheless interrupted here by the “real time” of film and recorded sound. The sirens, gunfire, and explosions belong to the world right outside the art gallery, and shatter the timeless space of the mythic with references to television, cinema, news media, and the content they carry: current events, terrorism, the growing sense of danger and insecurity that forms the psychic backdrop to our everyday experience – exploiting the associations already established to religious and political symbols. Rather than encourage contemplation at a safe remove, the piece aims to trigger an immediate emotional and perceptual response that works against complacent or “easy” interpretations by scrambling symbolic referents allegorically.

pointing to the rich subconscious terrain that grounds our conceptual certainties.

Conflict, paradox, and competing paradigms characterize Hawai‘i’s position geopolitically and historically, and point to the larger phenomena of rapidly accelerating change that is felt at every level, from policy-making to personal identity. When faced with competing philosophies or systems, the temptation is to take sides – a tendency that can be exploited stylistically through art and other forms of image-making. Contemporary artists reject the appeal of modernism at their peril: Closed symbolic systems, whether reinforced or reversed, fence off experience in the institutionalized realms of government, the media, the church, or the art gallery, leaving much unexamined in the realm of the subjective.

This is why I have attempted to foreground the subconscious and the way it legislates our living relationship to the past, but in a direction that I hope is more liberating than limiting. Rather than reinforce essentialist dichotomies of good and evil, weak and strong, eternally fought via abstracted absolutes and universals, the piece seeks to encourage a dialectical relationship between the real and imagined, the historic and the mythic. Symbolic meaning, as Benjamin notes, is arbitrary and has no theoretical foundations in history; it remains an expression of subjective intention. Dialectical engagement with myth opens a space between the failed utopias of the past and the mythic dimensions of the present that allow for true transcendence, in which we may understand and act – that is, create – as the subjects, rather than the objects, of history.

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Conclusion

After the five-day thesis exhibition, the dioramas were taken to Sandy Beach and burned (Figures 9-11). Their role as spectacle complete, they could have no social purpose but as potential commodities. Although the work had taken nine months of planning, design, and construction, it seemed to make no real difference in the end how many people saw the results, since the impact of artwork has no measure in our society unless it is expressed economically or politically.

Often the artist measures her “return” on labor by the price its results fetch on the market. But this clearly injects the artwork into a capitalist logics that cannot be separated from the content of the work itself – often to ironic results. What status
does the artwork have as a critique when it offers itself for bid? As with contemporary journalism, the critique itself becomes part of the package that helps to maintain the social order.

Figure 10. Dioramas burning.  Figure 11. Windswept conflagration.

Under these circumstances, I cannot fathom what artwork can be, as object, if not a gift or personal fetish. So I have tried to conceive of my work as a cycle of creation, exhibition, and destruction, rather than the production of objects. In valorizing the beauty of destruction, I take my inspiration from the Surrealists, who sought to evade and elude the commodification of art through a science of the irrational. At the dawn of the commodity age, they would roam the streets of 19th-century Paris, ready to find meaning – or its subversion – in odd juxtapositions and coincidences, often devising games of chance and arbitrariness to multiply their delight. Flashes of beauty and insight, like the purposeful destruction of work laboriously built, activate the present moment in a way that is being robbed from us as every aspect of life falls increasingly under the law “time is money.”
The preeminence of money, and its logical end, the quest for world domination, disguise the truth that all labor is wasted in the end. We die, objects crumble, and in the end none of it matters at all. In nature, beauty is ephemeral; indeed, beauty is impermanence. What strikes us as sublime about achievements like the pyramids or cathedrals is not so much that they endured, as that generations of workers devoted their lives to building them. If the artwork itself is not reduced to dust – “wasted” – then the artists who created it are.

Art is completed by being seen, but is it created to be seen? I’m no longer sure. In the fantasy-wish that makes art of my life, it grows out of energy and love, as flowers bloom and then wither – for no reason.


