



Doug Britt, *Tipping Point* (2014), Acrylic on canvas

Encounter of the Third Kine

Contact at the Honolulu Museum of Art School

by Kóan Jeff Baysa

Wonderfully installed and curated by Maile Meyer and Momi Musick, the *Contact* exhibition at the Honolulu Museum of Art School at Linekōna in Hawaii evinces the highly talented yet globally under-recognized art community that thrives in relative isolation in Hawaii, America's 50th state. 'Contact' implies a binary interface, a meeting of two fronts, and the exhibition opens itself to larger discussions about cultural explorations: native and alien, human and nonhuman, of hierarchical relationships, of proselytization, and of hegemony. Various works are based on traditional materials, techniques, gods and traditions, exposing ways in which acculturation acts as a filter, and how artworks can function as inkblot tests,

open to multiple readings.

Several works stand out in setting the tone for the exhibition, exemplifying the issues and impacts of contact. Doug Britt's painting, *Tipping Point* (2014) depicts a large commercial vessel dwarfing and imperiling a manned outrigger canoe in its path, a confrontation with an impending physical and metaphorical collision between vastly disparate cultures and technologies. The painting, *R2 Kalo* (2013), by Aaron Kawai'ae'a is a mashup image of an iconic futuristic cinema robot and a Hawaiian food staple set in a landscape of taro fields against a celestial backdrop. In legend, Haloa is the taro plant that grew from the buried body of its deceased sibling of the same name. The taro,

kalo in Hawaiian, is the basis for much of Hawaiian culture and a source of sustenance that also represents the original ancestor of the Hawaiian people whose numbers and health dwindled as a result of contact with visitors bearing trade and diseases. Scott Yoell's *Sometimes it came by road, other times it came by sea* (2008), is a realistically flesh-toned sculpture of Christopher Columbus's lead ship, the *Santa Maria*, on the backs of rodent bodies with large human noses. The work's interstitial character alludes to the transmission of infectious agents attributed to odor and comments on global explorations with the unwitting consequences of new cultural encounters. The population was estimated at between 250,000 to 1 million when Captain Cook sailed into Kealahou in 1778. By 1848 Hawaiians numbered 88,000.

After rising seamounts became landmasses, the islands remained uninhabited by humans until the arrival of Polynesian long-distance navigators settling in as early as AD 300. Subsequent to the arrival of Polynesians to the Hawaiian Islands, the misnamed "discovery" of the island chain has been arguably attributed to several European and even Chinese explorers. In 1804, the first Eastern European contact occurred when two Russian ships, the *Nadezhda* and the *Neva*, visited O'ahu and Kaua'i. Fort Elizabeth on Kaua'i remains as evidence of Russia's brief presence. Despite newly found evidence in Amsterdam that supports the idea that the Spanish arrived in the islands in 1542, it is generally accepted that British Captain James Cook was the first European explorer to encounter the islands. On January 18, 1778, he and his crew, while attempting to discover the Northwest Passage between Alaska and Asia, encountered the islands naming them the Sandwich Islands in honor of one of his patrons, John Montague, the Earl of Sandwich. He sailed past O'ahu and landed at Waime'a on Kaua'i,

On his third and fatal return voyage to the islands, Captain Cook's appearance was serendipitously

coincident with a feast for the Hawaiian god Lono. From one recounting, the native people misread the incursion of Captain Cook at Kealakekua, considered the sacred harbor of Lono, as the prophesied return and incarnation of that same Hawaiian god. The illusions of the deified status of the visitors were shattered when one of the crewmembers died. Captain Cook was killed in a subsequent battle at Kealakekua Bay. *Death of Cook* (2014) by Cory Tau is an acrylic and spray paint painting from the viewpoint of the temple above Kealakekua Bay, where a priest prepared Captain Cook's bones to be returned to his ship to be transported back to England. The deity, Lono, is one of four principal gods along with Ku, Kane and Kanaloa, who is symbolized as an octopus and appears on Jared Pere's exquisitely carved wooden paddle, *Te Mana O Kupe*. The paddle is emblematic of voyaging and exploration, linking Pacific cultures. The stylized monkey pod wood carving of a canoe paddle, *Kanaloa's Lament* (2013), is Kawika Eskaran's embodied rant and rail against relatively un-heralded chemical

spills spoiling Hawaiian waters in 1932 (oil, Moloka'i), 1984 (jet fuel, O'ahu), 1987 (fuel oil, Ka'iwi Channel), 1989 (oil, Moloka'i and Lana'i) and 2013 (molasses, Honolulu harbor).

The mythological word for the first man is *tiki* in Maori culture, *ti'i* in Tahitian, and *ki'i* in Hawaiian. These large humanoid carvings often served to mark the boundaries of sacred and significant sites. Ku, also known as Kukailimoku, is the god of war, and depicted in a virile state in Kau'i Chun's earth and gesso painting, *Kukailimoku: Before the Castration*. Contact and cultural pollution extends into the Hawaiian pantheon. Tiki culture is the term presently used to describe the degraded California-born commercialized fetishization of these figures, produced in Asia and commonly found as kitschy items in tourist traps. Chris Ritson's *Kanaloa Crystalline Cast* (2014) creates a form of the god from a plastic ki'i purchased at a mainland-based giant chain store. A mold of the figurine, cast in bismuth, consequently became invested with crystals, a metaphorical and physical conversion. Similarly appropriated,



DREW BRODERICK, GOD OF MONEY, 2014, Bronze. Ed. 1/3



Left: Aaron Kawai'ae'a, R2 Kalo, 2013, acrylic on canvas. Right: Scott Yoell, Sometimes it came by road, other times it came by sea, (2008), silicone, plastic, resin



Nicole Naone, *Progress*, 2014, repurposed surfboard forms

The God of Money (2014) in bronze by Drew Broderick is derived from a \$15.99 tchotchke from the 12" *Hapa Wood Tiki Statue Series* found in a ubiquitous store chain, sold with the promise that "it will bring good fortune to those around you." In contrast are the more abstracted works of Jerry Vasconcellos and Nicole Naone that carry as powerful messages as the ki'i. In the first artist's basaltic form, *New Esthetic* (2014), the hard edges of rectilinear forms are revealed/concealed within the original organic mass, reflecting pre- and post-contact shifts. Naone's repurposed surfboard form, *Progress* (2014), similarly structures organic materials into an array of multi-faceted shapes. These protrude from the wall into space, subtly allegorical of transformation and change.

This important and commendable exhibition is much more expansive in concepts and issues than the small number of works included in this short article. On certain walls, the works

appeared cramped, but because of the talent displayed and issues addressed, it would have been quite difficult to decide which work to edit out. A video created by Mary Babcock, Mark Kadota, Robert Reed, and Rex Vlcek (originally created for the exhibition *Timezones*), suffered from being washed out by ambient light and may have been better presented on a large monitor. However, these comments are more curatorial advisories rather than criticisms. One of the many significant contributions of this exhibition overall to the discourse of contact is the acknowledgment of the intrinsic and complicated problems of authenticity and the authorship of what are considered historical truths, recitations that are often perpetuated without review or challenge. That "history is written by the victors" is certainly held up to the light and subject to challenge, being debunked, rewritten, and reclaimed.



Jared Pere, *Te Mana O Kupe* (2010), totara wood, nephrite jade



Cory Tau, *Death of Cook*, 2014, acrylic and spray paint