

ART & ACTIVISM

AN EXHIBITION ABOUT CHANGE

SANDOW BIRK

ORLY COGAN

KANANI MIYAMOTO

PAUL MULLOWNEY

ELYSE PIGNOLET

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Maui 
Arts & Cultural Center

SCHAEFER INTERNATIONAL GALLERY

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“How does one really make art about social injustice, political activism, the terrible state of affairs in the world today? How does it not just become another form of cacophony in the echo chamber, speaking to nobody and saying nothing?”

- Paul Mallowney

Activism Today

Two of the hallmarks of historical thinking are the ability to understand context and synthesis: placing events or sources within the broader framework of time and place and making connections between various historical issues across time periods and locations. Artists are our memory holders. Our conscience. Our guides to making these connections. Art has the power to bring the marginalized, erased, and forgotten back to the center of attention. Art can impact us from the inside out. Sandow Birk and Elyse Pignolet, Orly Cogan, Kanani Miyamoto, Paul Mallowney, and Abigail Romanchak bring their subjects out of the shadows and demand to be seen, acknowledged, and reckoned with. It is cathartic for both the artist and the viewer.

Activists in Hawai‘i today are working on many fronts – education, land use, sustainability, discrimination and equity, reclamation of sacred spaces, and a refocusing of our relationship to our natural environment. As you explore the Maui Arts & Cultural Center’s *Art and Activism: An Exhibition About Change*, consider how the power of politically driven art affects us all.

Sandow Birk & Elyse Pignolet

Sandow Birk and Elyse Pignolet are Los Angeles-based visual artists whose work reflects social issues, current events, and contemporary American culture, as well as the history of art. Their *American Procession* is an enormous print project that plays off the *Procession of Princes*, a massive mural on the exterior wall of the Dresden Castle in Germany (1870) and the concept of heroism. Two 17-foot long woodblock prints represent opposing sides of the political spectrum, spanning US history from the colonies to the present day. The work offers an approach to rethink ideologies on the left and the right of the political spectrum. A third joining piece depicts debris of Americana – symbolic in placement.

The White House, a traditional symbol of democracy, is simply a propped-up façade. Liberty’s torch has fallen on the right. Above it, a noose. *Do Black Lives Matter?* Power plants forewarn of climate destruction, and the triumphal arch pays tribute to only the US dollar. How long can the mighty dollar hang from the crumbling arch?

Police cars allude to spiraling crime, the electric chair to our broken prison system. Satellites and speaker systems conjure images of big brother and limits on personal freedoms. A broken tank and a devastated landscape, our rural past fading in the distance.



American Procession (center panel), 2018, woodblock print
 Front and center is "A landscape of scattered debris." Courtesy of the artists, Catharine Clark Gallery, and Mallowney Printing, San Francisco.

The history of the United States is the story of conflicts between interest groups. *American Procession* prompts conversations on how a country so divided can find common ground to tackle immense problems. On the left, Birk and Pignolet focus on individuals who defied expectations and pushed through boundaries: politicians, athletes, authors, musicians, public servants, philanthropists, environmentalists and labor leaders, those who refused to be marginalized, fought for social justice, and continue to advocate for political and economic equality. On the right, conservative preservers of "tradition" who have pushed back against social and cultural transformation of the nation. Front and center is disappointment in the disintegration of American triumph and achievement. As progressives from history march to

the right and conservatives march to the left, the mural beckons us to question whether there is a way to meet in the middle and tear down the wall that divides.

American Procession is as much a commentary of where we are today as a country as it is about the courageous individuals who helped to push the boundaries of where they think we should be, and in turn, where Birk and Pignolet as the artists think we should be.

Both sides of the political spectrum are filled with individuals who identify as part of a cultural movement towards very differing views of the American Dream: While the right side is building a wall, the left is armed with a surfboard, paintbrush and can of spray paint, the ultimate call for art as activism.

Birk and Pignolet note:

The people we chose to include were intended to not be the most obvious, in hopes to facilitate more of a discussion as to why this person was listed and not others. The two panels are designed to play off each other as opposites. The leftists aren't just marching towards the right, but they are marching towards the "future", while the right procession is marching towards the "past". Where the lefties are striding forward led by surfers and artists and a child on a skateboard, the righties are going backwards, and coming to a halt.



American Procession (left panel), 2018, woodblock print. “Lefties.”
 Courtesy of the artists, Catharine Clark Gallery, and Mallowney
 Printing, San Francisco.

A Brief History of the Political Spectrum

The association of liberals with the ‘left’ and conservatives with the ‘right’ originated in the French Revolution. After Louis XVI’s absolute monarchy was overthrown in 1789, the new National Assembly met to determine the powers Louis XVI would retain as a constitutional monarch. Royalists favoring retention of the monarchy and supportive of aristocratic privilege sat to the right of the aisle, and those sharing a more representative and democratic view of the constitution sat on the left. (In the end those who decided Louis should lose his head prevailed by one vote.) The more radical the views, the farther left of the aisle one sat, and the more reactionary the view, the farther right, until the far-right were eliminated during the Reign of Terror and those with conservative views moved towards the center out of self-preservation. Based upon this simple seating arrangement, the left/right divide was born.

In the early 20th century the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ became widely associated with political ideology across the globe and the terms were used as slurs for opponents, “republicans” (akin to democrats today) sitting on the left and “conservatives” on the right. These terms were later adopted in the United States and we see the legacy of this as the more conservative Republicans sit on the right side of the aisle in Congress and Democrats and liberals sit on the left.

The terms ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ continue to evolve, and the *American Procession* explores this complexity. For example, the first character on the left-wing procession is Tisquantum, more commonly known in American history texts as Squanto. He crossed the Atlantic three times and spoke English and French and multiple native languages, and the Pilgrims certainly could not have survived their first winter without his guidance. However, Tisquantum was distrusted by other indigenous leaders, as they wearily managed the presence of the Europeans and balanced

the power dynamics of Native American alliances. Did Tisquantum's assistance to the Plymouth Plantation colony settlers and his efforts at compromise lead to long-term harm for Indigenous populations? Fast forward 240 years. Indigenous groups had been displaced, driven out, and in many cases, destroyed. The United States had become the dominant power in North America, but the Union was crumbling.

President Abraham Lincoln (a member of the Republican party when it had more liberal connotations) is another hero mythologized on the left, but he did not start his political career supporting the abolition of slavery. Students often learn that Lincoln emancipated the slaves, but not that he only emancipated slaves in the Confederacy, over which he had no control. Lincoln was a pragmatist and did not start out as a progressive. The Emancipation Proclamation, while clearly correct on moral and ethical grounds, served a practical purpose to galvanize support for the Union.

And consider Gertrude Stein, revered as the mother of modernism and the Avant-Garde movement. Yet, as a Jewish-American lesbian who lived in pro-Nazi Vichy France during WWII, do her supporters question her passive acceptance of Nazi occupation of France, or her endorsement of Vichy Marshal Philippe Pétain? Were her politics as progressive as her art? Do we tend to give a free pass to those whose work we admire, and whose political leanings are closest to us, regardless of the context in which they wrote? Does it matter?

On the right-wing, how do we reconcile the inconsistencies of founding father Thomas Jefferson who was both a proponent of free speech, authoring both the Declaration of Independence and Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, but who was also slave holder and believed in the civilizing effect of American expansion into indigenous lands. What truths do we hold to be self-evident in the 21st century?



Sandow Birk and Elyse Pignolet at work on American Procession

Orly Cogan

Art existed long before the written word. Some of the first prehistoric cave art depict reclining nude women. The *Venus of Willendorf*, created more than 30,000 years ago, is a small female nude figurine that could fit into the palm of the hands of the Paleolithic peoples who carried and worshipped her. Over time the goddess figurines in the earliest societies transformed from objects of worship and a celebration of reproductive powers to repressed eroticism. Although long the subject of art, historically women had little chance to represent themselves in art exhibitions. Orly Cogan's body of work helps us to examine shifting societal expectations of women, explore common archetypes and stereotypes, and enables us to better understand preconceived notions and hang ups about sexuality, feminism, gender roles, and lifestyle choices.

Cogan's "thread drawings" build stories into fabric. She honors the traditional labor of women's work – spinning fiber for cloth, weaving, needlework, and sewing – not only the traditional work of pre-industrial women but also a means by which to forge new class relations during the 19th century Industrial Revolution. In the 1820s, textile production was one of America's most important industries and was dominated by females: Factory girls in Lowell, Massachusetts represented better possibilities for women, opening up new means for personal

independence and economic contributions. Factories both liberated and exploited women. When the Lowell factory owners tried to cut wages in 1834 and 1836, the female employees did not demure as expected but went on strike to demand better pay and assert themselves. The textile industry gave women their first entry into politics, and in the process, they began to question societal expectations and notions of "true" womanhood.

Cogan refers to her work as an "update on female stereotypes and struggles." Bringing women into the forefront of art – telling their own stories both as the artists and as the subject matter – revolutionizes our understanding of the family, the processes of economic change, and distribution of power. The *19th Century Cult of True Womanhood* prescribed female roles to the kitchen and nursery, and women who rejected these roles were seen as unnatural. The irony is that Cogan transforms the needles and thread once given to women to keep their idle hands busy into tools to resist patriarchy. Cogan chooses subject matter challenging the idea of women as passive, revisiting conventional notions of femininity, and at the same time her chosen medium of fiber arts is a nostalgic honoring of women's work, past and present.

The choice of medium is a political act in and of itself, crafting by hand in our fast-paced technological world. Cogan examines women's roles in contemporary culture, fiction and history with whimsy and serious subject matter. It is the task of the viewer to decode these cultural values through reflections of their own experiences.

Power of Women

Cogan's feminist fairytale weaves fictional characters such as Cinderella, Snow White, Princess Leia, and Wonder Woman with real-life activist superheroes Harriet Tubman, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Frida Kahlo, Stacey Abrams, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, and Anita Hill among others who have resisted and confronted patriarchy and racism. In the background a faceless woman politely drinks her cup of tea, a young girl covers her eyes with her hands, and another child unabashed by her nakedness, defiantly extends her fist to the audience. These juxtaposed female archetypes highlight the mixed messages of who our female role models really are. Cogan's delicate detailed stitching is laced with powerful messages: *Me, Too, but not you, my child.*



*Power of Women: POW, 2018
hand-stitched embroidery, appliqué,
and paint on vintage bed linen*

The inclusion of a child perched in front of a laptop computer begs the question: How are young women receiving their messages regarding self-worth today? Has social media done more harm or good?

Sexuality in Western culture had not always been suppressed; there was little secrecy about sexual practices

nor shame about talking about the human body at the beginning of the 17th century. By the 19th century, Victorian bourgeois values confined sex to the home, initiated stringent codes regulating sexuality, and public discourse about sex and gender became all but silent.

Crimson Tide forces taboo and stigmatized topics out in the open: menstruation, female sexuality, gender control, and reproductive power. Cogan's work dares you to look and sit with a discomfort: A woman covering her breast, a man standing in front of her vagina, blocking the flow of a menstrual cycle. This woman is large and vulnerable, directly engaging the viewer. Is the look on her face one of pleasure? Hurt? Disappointment?

How does this work impact your own understanding of sex and sexuality? Cogan's menstrual blood flow resembles an extravagant ball gown. Do we honor and embrace the change from girlhood to womanhood as a rite of passage to be celebrated, or shamed?



*Crimson Tide, 2018
hand-stitched embroidery*

Kanani Miyamoto



Kanani Miyamoto in her Portland, OR studio

Kanani Miyamoto is reclaiming the narrative for women in art. Miyamoto's hybrid skill set combines large-scale woodblock prints, screen prints, cut paper, and hand painted elements that let us wander through her fluid organic spaces, as she leads us through the complexity of intergenerational trauma and impacts of colonialism. Her imagery draws from Japanese Buddhist folklore, riffing on issues of her European, Hawaiian, and Japanese heritage.

Miyamoto explains, "As I carve and print and cut, I go over in my head the stories I'm trying to tell with these installations and never really settle on an exact composition. All of the individual prints are rolled up and taken to the site of installation, and this is where things come to life."

Her work *Disrupting the Gaze* is a visceral reaction to the paintings of 19th century French painter Eugène Henri Paul Gauguin, and his eroticized use of the Polynesian female figure. It is a direct response to the recent 2019 exhibition, *Gauguin: A Spiritual Journey*, at the De Young Museum in San Francisco.

"Indeed, I saw in the district young women and girls tranquil of eye, pure Tahitians ... All indeed wish to be taken, literally, brutally taken, without a single word."
- excerpt from Noa Noa, the journal of Paul Gauguin

As a female artist of Hawaiian ancestry, Miyamoto struggled with the Eurocentric traditions in art history she was taught, lacking representation of Polynesian and indigenous arts and culture.

In this mixed-media installation she reverses the social and historic context of Gauguin's "colonial gaze" and his



misogynist privilege of patriarchal colonialist power exploiting innocent young Tahitian women. Miyamoto's non-acceptance of this fame and "disruption of the gaze" is part of a renewed scrutiny

Disrupting the Gaze (detail)
2019, carved woodblock

led by feminists and the women's movement calling men out on their bad behavior, and also by museums who are addressing the immoral lifestyles of artists in their collections.

How do we judge Gauguin? Do we condone his bad behavior or praise his contribution to art history and the groundbreaking shift he made from post-impressionism, leading the way to expressionism? Do we insist that art institutions offer an alternate point of view to the romanticized vision of the indigenous female?

Influences on Miyamoto's career include performance artist James Luna, video artist Pippilotti Rist, and Kanaka Maoli photographer Kapulani Landgraf. She is drawn to contemporary artists who create visually complex environments that give viewers an immersive experience, and artists who address issues of personal identity and cultural authenticity.

The "street art movement" of the 1990s, which promoted a new culture based on punk music, skateboards, spray paint, and graffiti was another influence and has evolved into a global movement that continually redefines history and shapes dialog in activism or dissent. A few notable urban artists such as J.R., Banksy, and Swoon, have all successfully incorporated printmaking, stencil, and paste up in their cutting-edge monumental works. Kanani Miyamoto has joined the ranks of these artists with stunning compositions that transform the gallery space and a significant statement about feminine power and strength.

Paul Mallowney



*Jizo I, 2019
etching and drypoint*

Paul Mallowney comes from a family of printers and publishers; it is in his blood. Printmaking is itself a form of activism and has long been a vehicle for political art; visual imagery is appealing and accessible, relatively inexpensive to reproduce, and information can spread rapidly to a large audience.

“Christianity, Buddhism, the American Revolution, Communism, Socialism – any and every ‘ism we can name ultimately owe their propagation to the technological advances of the printing processes throughout millennia.” Moveable type was used in Korea and China long before Gutenberg brought it to western culture. The earliest printing traditions are traced to China’s Han Dynasty in the

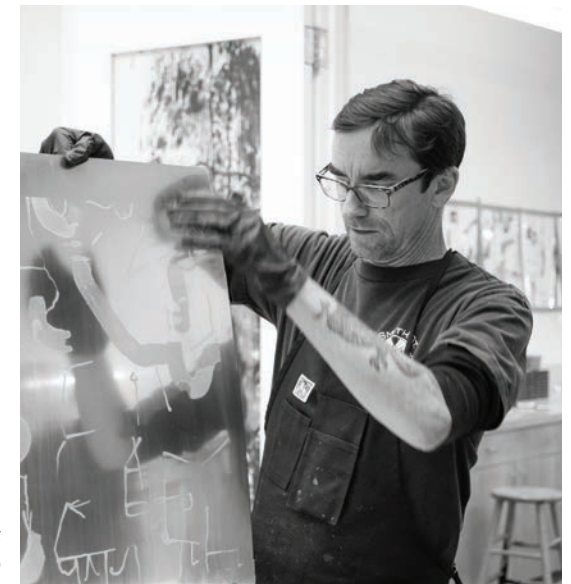
early 200s, and printing techniques were later transmitted to Europe in the 13th century via returning crusaders through Muslim controlled Iberia.

Mullowney's work reflects both the traditions of eastern and western printmaking, but especially the Japanese themes of Buddhism, Shinto, Noh and Kabuki Theater, tattooing, and the iconography that informs these traditions. Mullowney's work includes large-scale woodcuts and etchings that are created in many iterations and colors by printing on different thin handmade Japanese papers, which are then pasted directly to the gallery walls in a days-long action leading up to the exhibition opening. The progression involves spontaneous placement of the imagery while color and composition are worked out in a meditative process in a public space. The multiple becomes installation. The process of doing becomes activism. Says Mullowney, "My installations are a nod to the Buddhist and Zen ideas of ephemerality and change, an embracing of being vulnerable, and the deeply risky act of creating. To me art should be activist; artists have often been active antagonists. They hold up the mirror to society – and society doesn't always like what it sees."

Artists can antagonize through non-action as well. Prayer, meditation, and copying the heart sutra can be a form of activism, says Mullowney. "Making iterations of the jizo [Japanese deity that protects travelers and gives power to those in dangerous places] is a form a prayer. In traditions of scroll copying, it can bring me to a state of calmness in the storm. From that calm I can reach out

and act." Mullowney's work includes seed syllables from Sanskrit mantras, characters that Buddhists believe have the power to protect, to save, to create, and destroy. Used in meditation practice, practitioners believe these move great energy in the viewer. Mullowney's activism aims to move people at the energetic and subconscious level, not through visual stimulation alone. "Art viewing must be neither passive nor static. The artist has a role and the viewer has a role. This participation is what drives culture, and the engagement can ultimately help heal our souls, society, nation, and the planet."

To experience Mullowney's creations, we must enter through a short doorway and physically humble ourselves. From a place of quiet reflection, Mullowney beckons us to consider: Can art actually change anything until we first change ourselves? When things get dark and cold, and threatening, what practice do you reach for to save your soul?



Paul Mullowney in his San Francisco, CA studio

Abigail Romanchak

In the late 19th century, Scott Barchard Wilson, author of *Aves Hawaiiensis: The Birds of the Sandwich Islands*, collected, cataloged indigenous bird specimens, and studied their natural habitats. He was aided in his research by King Kalākaua, and collaborated with ornithological artist F.W. Frohawk, who made the hand-colored lithography prints for the book. Shortly after the book was published in 1890-1898, birds that were prized by Hawaiian feather artisans, specifically the Mamo and the O’o, would disappear forever. One-hundred twenty years later we have to question – how did the biodiversity for native birds change so quickly?

For this exhibition, Maui artist Abigail Romanchak brings an awareness to the extinct, extant, and endangered birds of Hawai’i through their songs. Working with Pat Leonard at Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Dr. Patrick J. Hart at University of Hawai’i Hilo, she incorporated her research of sound spectrograms that measure frequency and pitch into two new



Abigail Romanchak
printing her work

works of meticulously arranged collagraph prints that interpret these soundwaves into a visual language.

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

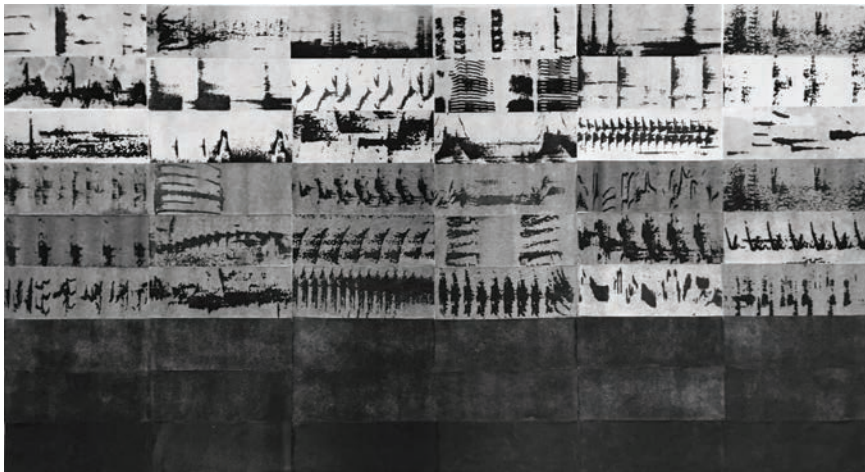
Kāhea (A Call) highlights the steep decline of the ‘Ākohekohe and Kiwikiu, two of Maui’s most endangered bird species. They are part of the Hawaiian Honeycreeper family, which play important ecological roles as pollinators, seed dispersers, and insect-pest consumers in most Hawaiian forests.

Unfortunately, they are also the most threatened bird groups in the world. Over half of the original 65 Honeycreeper species have gone extinct since human arrival to the islands over 1000 years ago, and more than half of those remaining are endangered. The primary reason for the continued decline of Honeycreepers is mosquito-transmitted diseases such as avian malaria and avian pox-virus.

Because mosquitoes are not native to Hawai’i, the Honeycreepers lost most of their natural resistance to mosquito-transmitted diseases over time. Most Honeycreepers today can only be found in high elevation forests above approximately 4500 ft. in elevation where it is too cold for mosquitoes to live.

Kani Le'a (Clear Distinct Sound) presents a larger grid of 42 bird species – 23 non-endangered and 19 endangered – placed strategically as if in flight with their unique bird songs represented in a monochromatic gradation of inks that echo their degree of scarcity. Unfortunately, as temperatures rise with global warming, mosquitoes are slowly invading these last refuges for the birds and most Hawaiian Honeycreepers such as the iconic 'I'iwi, Kiwikiu, and 'Ākohekohe are predicted to go extinct within our lifetime unless something is done to reduce the impact of mosquitoes. As stewards of Hawaiian forests, how can we ensure that future generations will continue to hear the song of the Hawaiian Honeycreepers?

Abigail Romanchak puts out the kāhea for us all to contribute to preserving our fragile and interdependent ecosystem. Listen clearly. We cannot survive without it.



Kani Le'a (Clear Distinct Sound) (detail), 2019
collagraph print on sekishu paper

Acknowledgements

The opportunity to present *Art & Activism* has enabled us to assemble an accomplished group of artists from across the U.S. who investigate the capacity of art as activism in an age of heightened urgency.

This timely exhibition encourages thoughtful process and engagement in civic discussion as a platform for a better understanding about the complex issues we face today. As we open our minds to the opinions and ideas of others, we expand our ability to be tolerant and engage in the process of learning and well-being.

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