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What the Island Provides: Island Sustainability and Island–Human Relationality

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Art curated by CHRISTOPHER LYNN
and FIDALIS BUEHLER

Last summer, I started learning how to ku‘i kapa, to pound kapa, what is often translated into English as “bark cloth.” While it is true that kapa is made from the bark of the wauke (paper mulberry), “bark cloth” connotes a rough and unpliant material. Finished kapa, on the other hand, is soft and grows softer as it is worn and made to conform to the unique contours of the human wearer’s body and heat. Making kapa is a laborious process that begins with careful planning to ensure that the wauke is the right size and thickness to be harvested and that there will be enough sunshine, access to water, and time to ferment the fibers and complete the pounding process. From harvesting to drying the kapa can take weeks, and the pounding of the kapa (two sessions are needed, once before fermentation and once after) can take hours depending on the size and number of the finished pieces. Once the finished kapa is dried, it is then ready to be decorated with ‘ohe kapala (bamboo stamps) and plant dyes (if the natural light coloring of the kapa, which may or may not have been made with a watermarked design, is not preferred). My kumu, Lufi Luteru, a Hawaiian-Samoan fiber artist, shared that her own kumu, Maile Andrade, said it was important to be mindful of how we speak around the kapa and to have pleasant thoughts as we do every part of the work. In fact, every part of our work, from harvesting to ku‘i, begins with oli (chants) to recognize the gods of the ‘āina and to show gratitude. This is because our words and thoughts affect our relationship with the plant; our mana, our spirit and life force, is imparted into the plant and the plant responds. Humans and plants, along with all other parts of the island, are kin and intricately connected, and so we must always be aware of how our behavior may affect the environment.

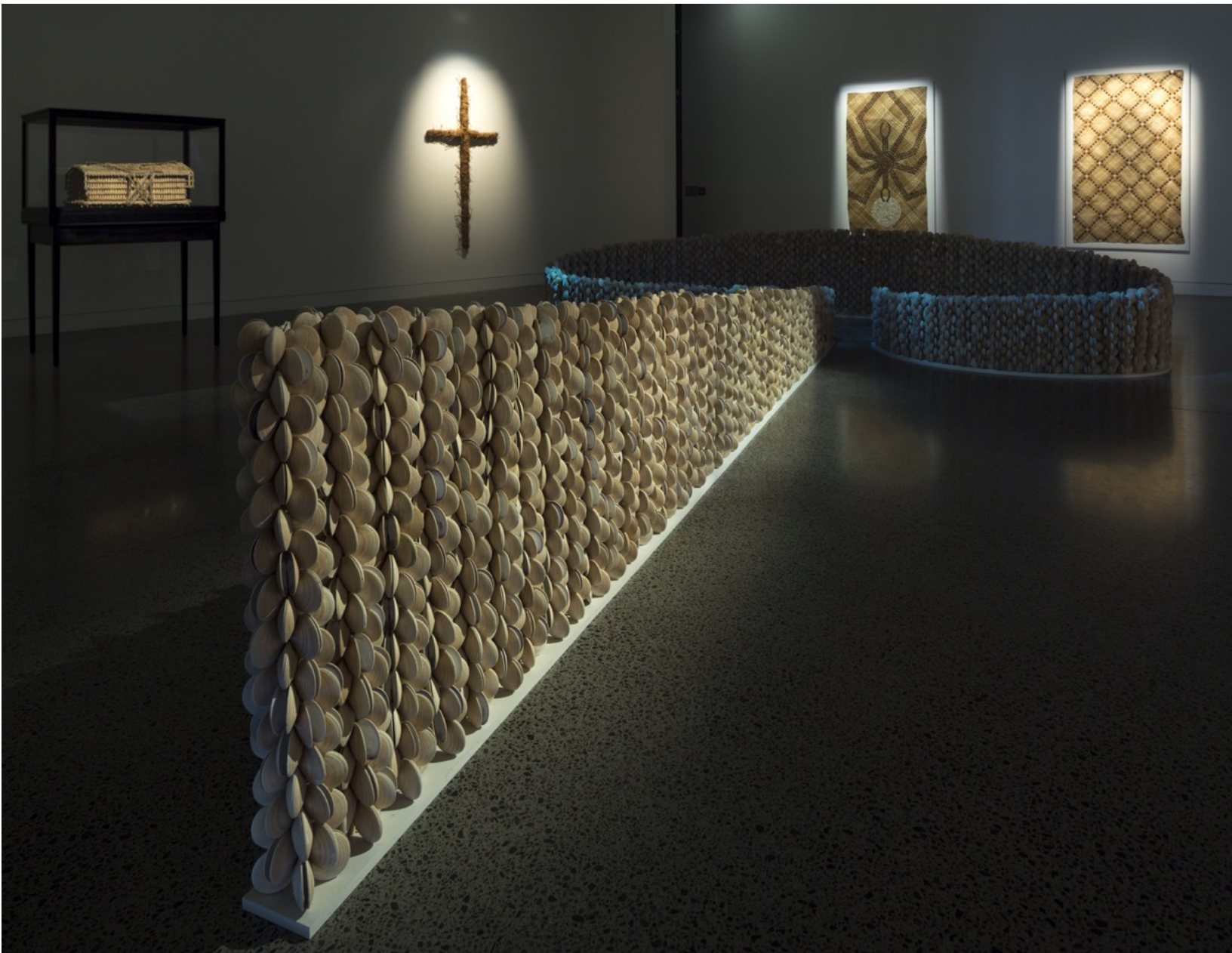


Figure 1. Chris Charteris, *Te ma (Fish trap)* (installation view, in foreground), 2014, ringed venus shells, nylon, wood, 181 × 291 × 31.5 in. (4600 × 7400 × 800mm). Collection of the artist, photo by Samuel Hartnett.

This same island environmental ethic, what I refer to here as “island–human relationality,” is implicit in the artworks featured in this *JTAS* Special Forum: Chris Charteris’s *Te ma*; Maile Andrade’s *Hana ka Lima*; and Ibrahim Miranda’s *Isla laboratorio o 7 maravillas* or *Island Laboratory of 7 Wonders*. Each artist is an islander: Charteris (Fijian and I-Kiribati) is from Aotearoa/New Zealand; Andrade (Kanaka ‘Ōiwi) is from Mākāhā, O‘ahu, in Hawai‘i; and Miranda is from Cuba. Integral to island–human relationality is approaching every part of the island as sacred and as ancestor. Doing so entails seeing humans as part of and not separate from the island. Mehana Blaiçh Vaughan, a Kanaka ‘Ōiwi scholar and environmentalist, explains that the Hawaiian word “hō‘ihi, literally ‘to make sacred,’ means to treat something with reverence or respect. Fishing stories from the northern coast of Kaua‘i describe fishermen’s and women’s kuleana to maintain respectful, reciprocal relationships between people and resources, which together constitute community. Here, people are part of, not separate from, the natural environment.”¹ If we follow island–human relationality in embracing our interconnections and kinship with the island and in treating the island with hō‘ihi as a sacred ancestor, then we must also adopt an ethic of island sustainability, receiving what the island provides, while also ensuring the island is not exploited or abused for its resources. Environmental ethics is a major theme in Pacific Islander and Caribbean art, and this is clear within this *JTAS* Special Forum’s featured artworks. Art functions as a space through which one may promote sustainability,

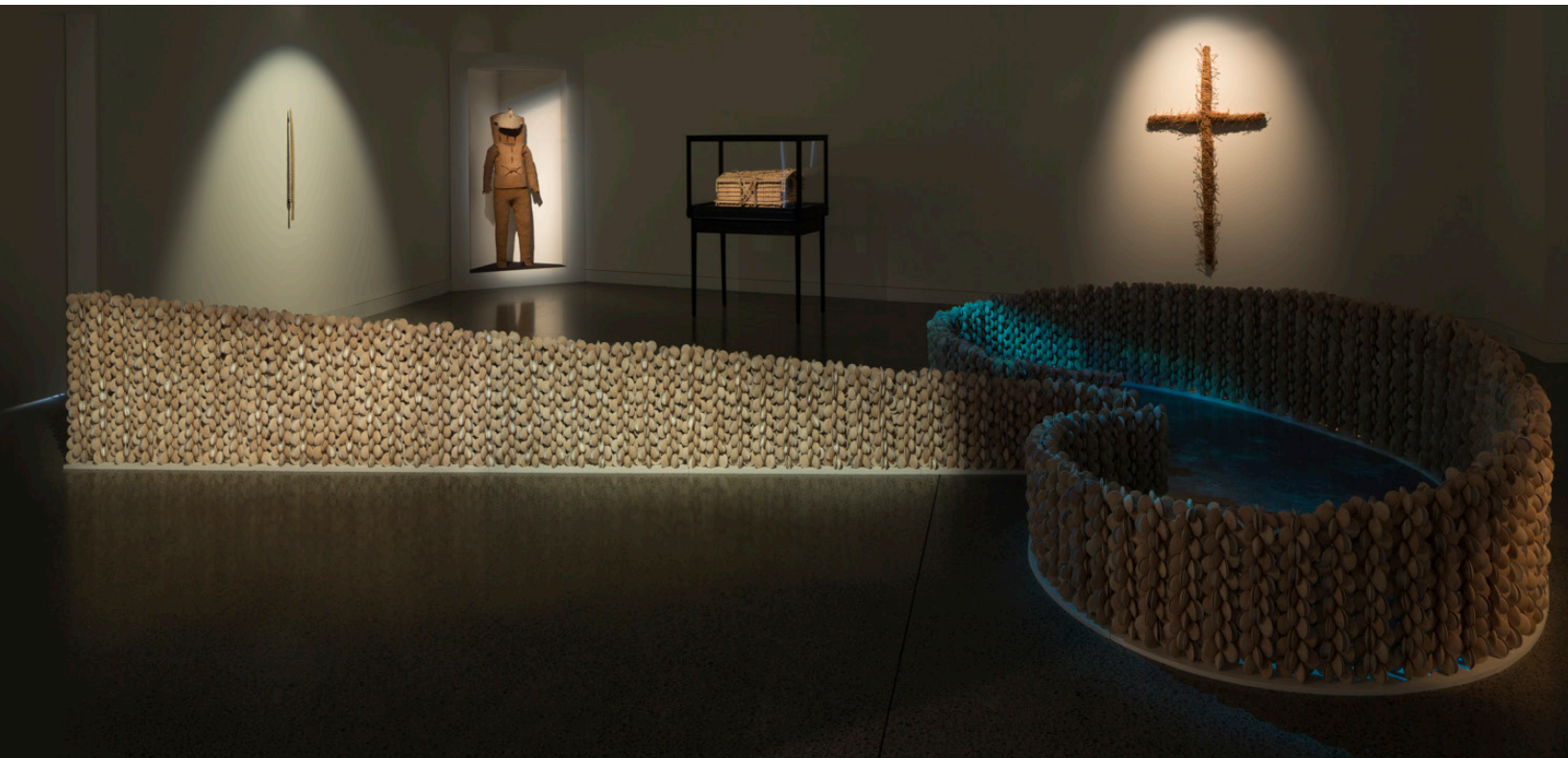


Figure 2. Chris Charteris, *Te ma (Fish trap)* (installation view, in foreground), 2014. Collection of the artist, photo by Samuel Hartnett.

critique capitalist extractivism and other forms of exploitation, and to imagine a new–old future for wider understanding of island–human relationality.

Chris Charteris’s *Te ma* exhibited as part of *Tungaru: The Kiribati Project* in 2014. The installation, which is comprised of ringed venus clamshells arranged in columns, is thirteen shells in height and measures seven hundred and forty by four hundred and sixty centimeters. *Te ma* is translated from Kiribati as “the Fish-trap” and is modeled after the larger fish-traps built near the shores of the islands of Kiribati. The *ma* are impressive and unique structures, not only for their size, shape, and materials (they are fashioned out of coral columns), but also for their adherence to island sustainability. They are designed to allow fish to enter during the high tide, when the fish come closer to shore to feed. As the tide goes down, the larger fish are trapped, while smaller fish are small enough to still leave the trap and return to deeper water. As part of island–human relationality, the *ma* represents the fish that the island can provide, and humans must then limit their consumption accordingly. Respecting this kinship ensures the future health and abundance of the fish, and no life is wasted, which happens with industrial fishing. In his own practice as an artist, Charteris collects art materials from the beach, using only what has been discarded by its original plant and animal inhabitants. In this way, his process as well as his art honors and recognizes his kinship with the island on which he lives (Aotearoa) and with the islands of his ancestors (Kiribati and Fiji).

Maile Andrade’s *Hana ka Lima*, the title of which may be translated as *Work with the Hand* or *The Hand Works*, is a print that appears to be woven. The title alludes to ‘ōlelo no‘eau (proverbs) that collectively emphasize the importance of focusing on working with one’s hands, perhaps in silence, as in *hana ka lima, pa‘a ka waha* (work the hand, close the mouth), or to establish the connection the work has to providing food for the body, as in *hana ka lima, ‘ai ka waha* (work the hand so the mouth may eat). Two hands appear at the center of a frame, which itself is comprised of various designs and also printed so as to suggest wovenness. The fingers of the hands at the center comb through malleable natural fibers (which could be makaloa, ‘ie‘ie, lauhala cut into thin strands, or perhaps fermented or softened strips of wauke). Though the actual plant fiber is unclear, what is clear is the intimate human–plant relationship Andrade emphasizes as being most prominent in her work with her hands. Andrade is an artist who works with various media, though primarily with natural materials. Grace Bonny describes Andrade’s work as aiming “to explore nature, spirituality, culture,” among other themes. Like Charteris, her artwork and process are resonant with island–human relationality, as she produces “her own raw materials and dyes for her artwork”² and is mindful of her thoughts and words as she works with island materials. And, as her kumu have surely imparted this ethic of hō‘ihi to her, her teaching of this ethic to her students (and those students to their students), promises this ethical human–island relational practice remains central to all the work we do with our hands.



Figure 3. Maile Andrade, *Hana ka Lima*, print, edition of 16. Courtesy of the artist.

Ibrahim Miranda's *Isla laboratorio o 7 maravillas* or *Island Laboratory of 7 Wonders* was completed in 2012 and is a thirteen-color screenprint and woodcut measuring forty-four by fifty-seven and a half inches. Resonant with other mappings he has done, it shows Cuba central and large, though the many other smaller islands of the Cuban archipelago (including more than four thousand islands and cays) are featured in scale. Other nearby Caribbean islands and archipelagoes are also featured

on the map—the Bahamas, Cozumel, Jamaica, and the Cayman Islands, for example. Miranda’s mapping truncates, however, larger islands and continents within the frame, namely the Florida peninsula of North America, Mexico of South America, and Haiti, clearly privileging Cuba and the smaller island–oceanspace. The islands and all of the human names for parts of these islands (many colonially constructed) are superimposed over wood—perhaps a wood native to Cuba, which, though painted blue to signify the ocean space connecting these networks of islands, is clearly visible. The wood grain that shows through the blue wash suggests the movement of water, ocean currents, between the islands while also implying the connection through water between wood, a material of land that is fed and holds water, and the ocean.

The islands and oceans of Miranda’s mapping are to scale, while the “seven marvels”—including Stonehenge, the leaning tower of Pisa, China’s Great Wall, and Macchu Picchu—are grossly exaggerated in size, together linked to cover the entirety of the island. Of the seven marvels Miranda superimposes on Cuba, nearly all are foreign landmarks, excepting the *bohio*, the palm–thatched roof house, placed at the bottom of the chain on the southwestern end of the island. First developed by the Taino, *bohio* are traditional homes that embody island–human relationality as they use only natural materials sourced from the island—the roof is made of tightly woven *yagua* palm leaf, and the walls are made of native woods (including *yagua*). The *bohio* survived industrialization and modernization and continues to be used as housing in rural areas and alongside tenements in working-class neighborhoods. In referring to the *bohio* as one of seven marvels alongside the other more famous human constructions, it is possible that Miranda is waxing ironic or sarcastic. However, given the overall tone of lightness and playfulness of the piece, with its bright colors and centering of Cuba and its surrounding archipelagoes, it seems more likely that Miranda is sincere in marveling at the *bohio*, which truly belongs to Cuba, with its ancient roots, Indigenous-informed island sustainability, and coming wholly from the island and its people. Miranda’s “marvelous” island of Cuba, therefore, is marvelous, not necessarily for its large, ancient structures, but for its continuity and island sustainability, as evidenced by the *bohio*, and for always providing for the needs of its people.

Much of the literature of archipelagic or island studies has focused on the relationality between islands or between islands and continents or between islands and oceans. This work has been critical to challenging damaging views of islands as insular, isolated, and dependent and islanders as backward, simple, and primitive. Recently, Jonathan Pugh called for these fields, however, to trouble “the rather reductive tropes of island vulnerability, adaptation and resilience” that “reduce the figure of the island and indigenous subject” and have abounded rhetorically within global discussions of climate change to conveniently absolve capitalism’s role in severe ongoing threats to islands and humans.³ Island–human relationality turns to examine relationality between the island and the human and recognizes the importance of learning from Indigenous islander knowledges, not as a romanticized exercise, but as



Figure 4. Ibrahim Miranda, *Isla laboratorio o 7 maravillas* (Island Laboratory or 7 Wonders), 13-color screenprint/woodcut, edition of 50, 44 × 57.5 in (111.8 × 146.1 cm)
Copyright Ibrahim Miranda, images courtesy of Couturier Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

an urgent global undertaking. Further, island–human relationality, rather than being focused on adaptation and resilience, is anticapitalist at its core and emphasizes an ethic of sustainability, as the island–human kinship must be privileged above all else, and inevitably it is the island that leads this relationship because of its prominence as revered ancestor. As Miranda’s, Charteris’s, and Andrade’s artworks and processes demonstrate, the island provides, the human marvels.

Notes

¹ Mehana Blaich Vaughan, *Kaiāulu: Gathering Tides* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2017), 17.

² Bonny Grace, “Fine Art Focus: Maile Andrade,” *Design Sponge*, December 2015, <http://www.designsponge.com/2015/12/fine-art-focus-maile-andrade.html>.

³ Jonathan Pugh, “Relationality and Island Studies in the Anthropocene,” *Island Studies Journal* 13, no. 2 (2018): 105.

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