

# WAR BABY / LOVE CHILD

Mixed Race Asian American Art Edited by Laura Kina & Wei Ming Dariotis



## Hawaiian Cover-ups:

### An Interview with Adrienne Pao

*Born in 1975 in Oakland, California, ADRIENNE PAO is a mixed Native Hawaiian photographer based in San Francisco. She received her MFA degree in photography from San José State University in 2005 and is full-time faculty and curriculum coordinator in the online photography program at the Academy of Art University. Her work has been widely published and exhibited, including recent shows at Wave Hill Glyndor Gallery in the Bronx, New York; the Balcony Gallery in Kailua, Hawai'i; the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco; Recoleta Cultural Center in Buenos Aires, Argentina; and Caixa Cultural in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.*

*Adrienne Pao met with Laura Kina in Chicago, Illinois, on February 13, 2010, to “talk story” about her Hawaiian Cover-ups photographic series.<sup>1</sup>*

ADRIENNE PAO: I grew up in El Cerrito, near Oakland, California. We moved to Richmond shortly after that, and then to El Sobrante, a little unincorporated town in the middle of Richmond. My mom and dad divorced when I was four.

I went to Hawai'i at least once a year with my dad. When I got older, I started spending summers. Everybody in the extended family lived together outside of Honolulu in Kailua, which is not touristy. It's a smaller town—beautiful and pretty relaxed, not the fast pace of Honolulu.

My dad is an architect, that's his trade, but he is an artist. He gave me one of his old cameras when I was fifteen or sixteen. I was a really good student in high school, but I was bored, so I started using the camera . . . it became something that I was passionate about, it became something that I could ask the questions with, and there was never an answer. I started going to Albany Adult School. They had a darkroom class—you could pay fifty dollars and use their facilities. There was a teacher, in his eighties, who had been my dad's teacher a long time ago. It wasn't really a class, but he would be there to tell you how to do things, if you needed it.

LAURA KINA: Is your mom an artist?

AP: She is a psychotherapist. My grandmother was a concert pianist, and she performed in vaudeville and at Radio City Music Hall, which was so unusual for women during that time. My dad is the native Hawaiian side, and my mom is French and

English. My mother's father was also really artistic, and he did these funny and beautifully drawn comics. Just recently, she started showing me amazing drawings she does while watching TV.

My mom was sent to BYU [Brigham Young University] in Utah for college, but she wasn't Mormon. She did not like it. She left by transferring to BYU in Hawai'i; then she transferred to University of Hawai'i. My mom and dad met in a class at University of Hawai'i. She was very lonely. Things had happened to her, and she really needed a centering person. She met my dad and became part of the family, moved into one of their apartments and was taken care of, so she feels very close to everybody there. She was visiting Tutu up until she died.

LK: How do you identify yourself?

AP: I identify as "multiracial." People will ask me the question "What are you?" and I always wonder where that question comes from, but I don't mind it because I get curious, too, about where people are from and what their ethnic background is. I'm part Native Hawaiian, English, French, and Portuguese—a little bit of German, too.

LK: Do you have ties to any particular community?

AP: I identify with the Hawaiian community, but mostly in relationship to my family. When I'm in California, I don't really go to Hawaiian festivals. I definitely have that culture as a prominent force in my self and my own life.

LK: Do you ever address mixed heritage in your artwork?

AP: Absolutely, all the time. As an artist, I need to place myself, because that's how I locate myself within the work. I always consider that I am a part Native Hawaiian person, born and raised in California. When [I'm in Hawai'i,] I'm definitely part of Hawai'i and Hawaiian tradition and Hawaiian family and all of the things that go along with that. However, I'm also an outsider. I can see through that lens. I can see the beauty, I can see the paradise, I can see the rapture in that place. Everything for me is always the experience of insider and outsider at the same time.

I set up a framework for *Hawaiian Cover-ups*, both conceptually and technically. It was usually the top two-thirds or half of the frame that was very seductive and beautiful and something occurring in the bottom half of the frame where I'm being covered up by fish skin or palm fronds or something identifiable as a Hawaiian iconic object. I represent something that's buried or being covered up or not being looked at. Not always negatively. Sometimes there's just history or stories or things that are underneath that aren't necessarily known, and that's not a negative thing, either—that's just multilayers.

LK: In your photographs, your phenotype is startling: you're very light-skinned. I'm wondering what role that plays in your work, and in real life, in terms of being accepted as an insider or outsider?

AP: In Hawai'i, it's considered more attractive and desirable to be dark-skinned, so everybody wants you to get tan. My mom is blue-eyed, blonde-haired, very light, and my dad is dark, dark hair, darker skin, and I came out completely light-skinned. There's a total mix in our family, the whole range—*Family Portrait* is what a contemporary Hawaiian family looks like. There's a whole range of skin colors, skin tones. The ethnic makeup of people there is very specific to that place. I notice when I'm with my family members, I'm treated like a local; out by myself, I'm treated like a tourist.

LK: When you're in California presenting work about Hawai'i, do people think, "Oh, this is some white lady making work about this" or . . . ?

AP: I don't know because nobody's ever said that to me. Whenever I'm talking about the work, I state my place at the very beginning so people understand, although people ask me, "What are you?" But I think also because my last name is Pao, they're like, "Wait, are you Chinese?"

LK: What are your associations with war?

AP: My tutu was born in 1916—there was still a queen in Hawai'i at that time [Queen Lili'uokalani, the deposed last queen of the Hawaiian Kingdom, died in 1917]. My tutu lived through World War II in Hawai'i. She was a hula dancer and danced for the president, and I think she would dance for troops sometimes, too.

LK: Why was she chosen or chose to dance in front of the troops?

AP: She was a very beautiful woman—like a glamorized Hawaiian. Tutu's mother died shortly after childbirth, so she was raised partially by Auntie Keahi [Julia Keahi Luahine Sylvester], one of the last Hawaiian hula dancers who practiced traditional methods, and trained as a young girl by Auntie Keahi—who I'm named after—along with her cousin Iolani Luahine, who became one of the greatest dancers in the islands. Tutu was married and had started a family by World War II and the attack on Pearl Harbor. She remembered hearing the planes flying over, as the family was living close to Nu uanu Valley. My grandfather was employed at Pearl Harbor at the time and was summoned to work.

LK: Do you feel that your work references war?

AP: I'm working so heavily with colonization, a by-product of war. I use World War II iconography. Soldiers would buy postcards of the hula girls who were usually not Native Hawaiian; they were either lighter, so that they had a non-Native look, or they were Hawaiian-looking but not necessarily Hawaiian.

I'm addressing family portraits, and I'm amazed how infused visual iconography from World War II is with contemporary part-Hawaiian people. I'm fascinated that people will embrace the colonizer's history even though they're not happy about the turn of events, but there's so much infused in Hawaiian culture that people take own-

ership of it. When you take ownership of a colonized space, it re-empowers it, in a way. But it supports it, too. There's a fine line, and I'm interested in that space.

LK: Can you talk about your *Hawaiian Cover-ups* series, specifically *Lei Stand Protest / Lei Pua Kapa* (2004) (plate 19)?

AP: I've actually gone back and forth on the title of *Lei Stand Protest*. I'm not "anti-lei stand." Leis are incorporated into our family—we use them, we love them. I feel like that's a protest about the commodification of culture.

LK: That is the lei stand coming out of the Honolulu International Airport?

AP: Yes. I kept thinking about all these objects that had immediate identification with Hawai'i, and leis were one of the first things. There're all those lei stands at the airport.

LK: You pull your car off to the side road, you buy one, and greet your visitors.

AP: Yes, it's tradition. Usually, that's where the locals buy leis to go greet family members or whoever is coming. We buy leis there even for larger family events.

LK: My question is about the position of insider or outsider.

AP: That space is both of those. I talked a lot with lei stand owners and asked if it would be okay if I photographed myself there, and they were really into it. They thought it was funny and really fun to arrange the leis on me, and they let me borrow leis to do it. I also was with my family members. We came over a period of a couple of days and got to know them. They were definitely the insiders working on the process, the laboring, of making a lei, selling a lei.

LK: Your protest is not gathering any attention, so that to me reads as very humorous. Was that intentional?

AP: Absolutely. There's always humor—the performance, the element of playfulness is essential. That's number one for me.

LK: And *Searching for Roots at the International Marketplace / A'a Kapa* (2004) (plate 20)?

AP: I'm covered up with banyan tree roots. There's a huge banyan tree in the International Marketplace where people buy all these goods. They're not even goods from Hawai'i; they buy all these tourist things. It's in Waikiki, it's just bustling, it's crazy, things are lit up, there's a banyan tree in the middle, which is what I'm leaning against.

LK: You and I just watched Anne Keala Kelly's film *Noha Hewa: The Wrongful Occupation of Hawai'i* (2010). The idea of your ancestors' bones physically in the land and reclaiming the land, lying down on the land—those are really serious issues in terms of race. Are you playing with those in your pieces?

AP: I was thinking about being a person sleeping through this massive infrastructure and tourist thing that's happening all around me and within all of these crazy

levels of occupation and commodification taking place. I titled it *Searching for Roots* with a couple of different interpretations: how I think about tourism, how you're searching for your own sense of self in a place. And then I think about where I look for roots.

LK: Tell me about *Sunset at Sunset Beach / Napo'o 'ana o ka I' Kapa* (2005) (plate 21).

AP: I needed to photograph it at Sunset Beach at sunset, because it's all about replication. There are about three hundred postcards of Hawaiian sunsets making up the blanket covering me. I stopped in every drugstore that I found. I thought it would take me days to find that many postcards to make a huge blanket, and it just took three hours because there are so many interpretations of sunset.

LK: How has your work been received?

AP: There're so many different levels. There's the first level: for me, the most important thing was dealing with my family on this project and how they received it. They came and helped me. Now we have memories of these experiences; they were so crazy, so funny and kind of grotesque sometimes, but you know, we all did it together. That was my first priority, so we have memories of it. The second is dealing with the public in that space and making sure everybody felt comfortable. And then there's putting it into the public. It's been shown in Hawai'i and in San Francisco at the Museum of the African Diaspora and at SFMOMA Artists Gallery, and there are some writings about it. That's been really positive for me because it's been placed in a context either with Hawai'i associations or with diasporic associations, and I think that's a perfect context for it.

*Transcribed by Marco Cortes, 2010*

## Resources

Cooks, Bridge. "Beneath the Paradise." *Exposure* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 27–32.

Morgan, Eleanor. "Camp Attack: Californian Artists Present Tent Dresses with a Political Twist." *Dazed and Confused* 2, no. 66 (October 2008).

Pao, Adrienne. "New America Now." National Public Radio, San Francisco, February 2009.

**WAR BABY / LOVE CHILD** examines hybrid Asian American identity through a collection of essays, artworks, and interviews at the intersection of critical mixed race studies and contemporary art. The book pairs artwork and interviews with 19 emerging, mid-career, and established mixed race/mixed heritage Asian American artists, including Li-lan and Kip Fulbeck, with essays exploring such topics as Vietnamese Amerasians, Korean transracial adoptions, and multiethnic Hawai'i. As an increasingly ethnically ambiguous Asian American generation is coming of age in an era of "optional identity," this collection brings together first-person perspectives and a wider scholarly context to shed light on changing Asian American cultures.



"**WAR BABY / LOVE CHILD** is an interesting, original, and innovative project that expands the field of Asian American studies by using visual art as a point of entry and analysis for the discipline."

**Mark Johnson**, editor of *Asian American Art: A History, 1850-1970*

"One of the strengths of this original volume is its holistic combination of interviews with premier fine artists along with the textual, historical, and scholarly context provided by established and emerging scholars in Asian American Studies."

**Nitasha Sharma**, author of *Hip Hop Desis: South Americans, Blackness, and Global Race Consciousness*



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BACK COVER TOP: Albert Chong (Jamaican-American, 1958) *A Product of Colonial Mentality: A Portrait of the Artist 1979/2010*, 2010. Photo transfer on marble tiles, 48 x 48 in.  
BACK COVER BOTTOM: Adrienne Pao (American, 1975) *Lei Stand Protest / Lei Pua Kapa*, 2004, Lightjet Print, 36 x 30 in.