

Unexpected Harmony

Solo Shows at Hui No'eau feature Sidney Yee, Kevin Omuro and Scott Groeniger

This summer, Hui No'eau Visual Arts Center features solo exhibitions by three of Hawai'i's most unexpectedly harmonious artists. Maui painter Sidney Yee's large turnip-themed paintings will be paired with Maui sculptor Kevin Omuro's abstracted organic porcelain forms, and Oahu photographer/digital artist Scott Groeniger's photo collages and digital images. Although the themes of visual layering and cultural identity can be seen to tie the three artists together, the ways in which each artist goes about addressing these themes, and the ends to which they are led, could not be more disparate.

by Courtney Biggs

Sidney Yee and Kevin Omuro's artistic collaboration started in the unlikeliest of ways: from the dentist's chair. Omuro, who is a dentist by trade, initially knew Yee as a patient before transitioning into collaborators. Omuro explains, "I was doing pottery at the community college . . . and I knew Sidney taught art, so I thought 'Oh, why don't I hire you to help me take this to the next level?' Eventually, the hire part didn't really happen, and we just developed a friendship."

It was during this friendship that Yee noticed that Omuro's sculpted forms had begun to resemble the turnip paintings that Yee himself had been experimenting with, and so Yee suggested that they show the work together.

The works are a natural balance for each other. Omuro's sculptures are mostly made from porcelain, with a few exceptions of stoneware, and are fired at low raku-heat temperatures of around 1,800 degrees. The finished sculptures take on the organic, tuberous form of an abstracted turnip, although Omuro notes that for him, the interest is more in the aesthetic resonance of the piece than in the root vegetable's form itself.

Omuro's palette favors whites and pale pastel ranges of earth tones. The simplicity of the color and effect serves the work well to emphasize the form of the object itself over color, especially well highlighting the shadowy effects of light upon the tuberous shapes.

The color for each sculpture is created by a naked raku method, in which, instead of glazes, color is derived from the things that are placed to bake in proximity to the sculpture inside the kiln. Color is burnt



KEVIN OMURO

onto the porcelain in light browns, oranges and sometimes pink, with large areas of white.

When asked about the unlikely choice of the turnip for the exhibition, Omuro explains, "It's really a show about nothing, but we're trying to take a very ordinary thing in daily life, something very innocuous and plain, and hopefully transform it into something that might interest people when they come to the show."

For collaborator Sidney Yee, the interest in the turnip form is a symbolic one. Yee uses acrylic paint on board or canvas to create rows of the bulbous vegetable with layered color and image in his series. Yee describes the works as "light-hearted creation that started off with just painting something very simple and innocuous, and evolved into something to symbolize my culture and some of the things that are important in my life."

Unlike Omuro, for whom form is the primary emphasis for his sculpture, for Yee, form dictates a deeper



OUT OF THE GROUND, 18" x 5" porcelain (naked raku), by Kevin Omuro



TAKE NOTICE OF SAFE:
MANUFACTURING BUDDHA
(detail), 43" x 72"
archival pigment print
by Scott Groeniger

personal and cultural significance to his work. He uses Chinese newspaper fragments, traditional Chinese cloud motifs, joss paper and a pervasive deep red paint to refer to his Chinese heritage.

Yee's emphasis on his Chinese motifs is part of a larger interest in self as defined by heritage. Yee notes, "I guess it really is about acknowledging your past and the values that you carry with you. . . . In the beginning of your life, you want to be your own individual. But as you become more knowledgeable and more mature, you realize that

there is a part of you that is beyond what you have created, that is really part of a greater sense of belonging to the past."



Unlike both Yee and Omuro, the third artist featured demonstrates a notable lack of interest in the purely physical domain of tactile and textured end product. Scott Groeniger utilizes photography and digital imaging to capture themes of consumption in the global marketplace, environmental

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SIDNEY YEE

SOLO EXHIBITION
2011

Sidney Yee & Kevin Omuro;
Scott Groeniger

Through July 23



Hui No'eau Visual
Arts Center
in Makawao



Open Monday
through Saturday,
10:00 am–4:00 pm



CONFORMING #1, 12" x 16", acrylic by Sidney Yee

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collapse and the cultural disconnect of the foreigner.

At the Hui, Groeniger is exhibiting three bodies of work, all taken from his stay in Taiyuan, China, a small city of 3.5 million where he taught graphic design and digital imaging over the course of five years. Groeniger favors digitally manipulated photographs in multilayered compositions, often combining several found and photographed elements, and occasionally drawn elements as well, rendered in a uniform palette of black, white and red.



SCOTT GROENIGER

Groeniger's first body, titled *40-60*, was created shortly after his arrival in Taiyuan in 2005. It features notions of Buddhism, specifically in relationship to the contemporary landscape of consumption in China. Groeniger notes, "Looking back on this, it seems like I'm being accusatory of China because here I am comparing this with these high cranes and these wires and these symbols of the Buddha on the side of coal-burning power plants, but really it's more about the export of western lifestyle to China."

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In his second body, titled *Future History*, Groeniger further explores his earlier themes, while shifting the emphasis toward a noted tension between past and present in China. *Future History* consists of a portfolio of 12 digital photo collages, all completed during 2009. He had already lived in Taiyuan for several years by the time he completed *Future History*, and this added level of cultural familiarity is clear in his exploration of the multiple layers of cultural history as being so layered that they become obscure to the outside observer as an indication of disparate temporal periods.

The third body of work Groeniger is showing at the Hui, titled *Take Notice of Safe*, is his final series from his period in China. *Take Notice of Safe* is both more personal than his earlier works, and simultaneously more global. The imagery employed stretches from the crane-and-tower-ridden landscape of contemporary China under construction, to signs of provincialism and privilege from his native suburbs of Columbus, Ohio, to the Saudi Arabian oil refineries that are so integral to keeping the rest of this global marketplace in motion. In *Take Notice of Safe*, Groeniger is increasingly critical of his own perspective in the commercial exchange system that he criticizes. It is also the body that most overtly addresses themes of resource scarcity and environmental decay fundamental to this society of consumption.

Groeniger comments on this final body, "I come from a very plain-Jane suburb in Columbus, Ohio, a place that very much needs the Chinese economy to continue to produce inexpensive items that we consume. And we need them to manufacture, and that's the end of that. It's very much a them/us relationship, which I'm not comfortable with. . . . It's just not a relationship that can last." ■

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