

Inspired by threatened idyll

Painters, photographers celebrate a Windward paradise

By Marcia Morse
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ALOHA HO'OMALUHIA III, paintings by Jonathan Busse, Adella Islas, Michel Kaiser, Noreen Naughton, John Wisnosky and George Woollard, and photographs by Francis Haar, Wayne Levin and Duane Preble. Ho'omaluhia Botanical Park in Kaneohe. Through May 25. (Hours: 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily.)

The Impressionists knew it, and most generations of artists since have rediscovered it for themselves — there is simply nothing like painting and drawing from nature while being in nature.

Working in the open air celebrates both the immediacy and the totality of sense impression. Not just the eye but one's whole being becomes receptive to the qualities of air, light and environment, and to the moment-by-moment changes which they reflect.

Working in nature may begin with a kind of holistic, sense-oriented experience, but it often carries with it a conceptual intent as well. Artists who embrace nature, who make it the visible subject of their work, do so for a wide variety of reasons. Their attitudes about nature often become the "hidden agenda" that is ultimately far more significant.

The pilgrimage to the countryside in the late 19th century was propelled in part by theories of optics and aesthetics — the exquisitely transitory nature of light, the *sine qua non* of vision — but it could also be said that nature provided a mirror for a sense of social climate as well. Nature was the haven for the noble savage, the presocial being; nature was the antidote for late Victorian oppression or for a growing sense of urban confinement.

Nature's role as a field in which various human issues may be played out persists even now, though the issues have changed and escalated. Artists working in the islands must generally come to terms with nature at some level, in some way and at some time in their work — whether or not it is made explicit.

In terms of purely aesthetic issues, the struggle may involve the fact that no synthetic palette can rival nature's colors; no perception, however devoted, can capture its profusion and minutiae. Enjoyment of nature may in fact preclude its more reasoned and dispassionate analysis. But the more critical issue is, increasingly, the politicization of nature. Art has long been a tool of social commentary; it has also become a tool of environmental notation.

"This the third year that a group of island artists has worked in and exhibited at Ho'omaluhia, the City and County botanical park located at the end of Luluku Road in Kaneohe. The park, nestled at the foot of the windward Ko'olau, surrounded by banana patches and born, in part, of a flood control project, is an idyllic setting that seems a distillation of extra-urban perfection. It is not totally rural — you are still aware of powerlines and roadways, and it is maintained for hiking and camping — but it presents an accessible taste of wildness.

The park has provided inspiration for a core of artists whose ranks have grown each year; this year their collective sensibility has crossed an important threshold. Ho'omaluhia has changed from site to symbol, and this is tellingly seen both in the work of those who have continued to use the park as a focal point, and in the more recent inclusion of some with the specific intent of commentary and criticism.

The work of Noreen Naughton is closest to the ideal of traditional open-air painting and includes both close-focus observation of individual elements ("African Pandanus," "Fan Palm" I and II) as well the panoramic view of the "Ho'omaluhia" series. Naughton's work in oil conveys a freshness of perception and a delight in the physicality of the material.

Photographer Francis Haar, who has joined the group this year, covers somewhat the same range of viewpoint in classically structured work. A similar site-orientation is seen in the work of Adella Islas, though her visual interests tend more to expressive use of color shapes (as in "Pali Study" III and IV) and her palette is surprisingly low key.

George Woollard pushes the issues of abstraction even further in his watercolors that take full advantage of this medium to revel in the moist and atmospheric qualities of the environment; works such as "Painted Cliffs" or "Rising Mists" give a wonderful palpability to the very air.

John Wisnosky is also a master of this reality of the seemingly intangible, and works such as "Rain with Farms" and "Sundae" take full advantage of the magic of transparent medium on white ground to give a sense of landscape emerging from the mist.

Michel Kaiser's "Na Ko'olau" series (like Monet's haystacks) seems to record changing times of day and weather as reflected in distinctly different color harmonies.

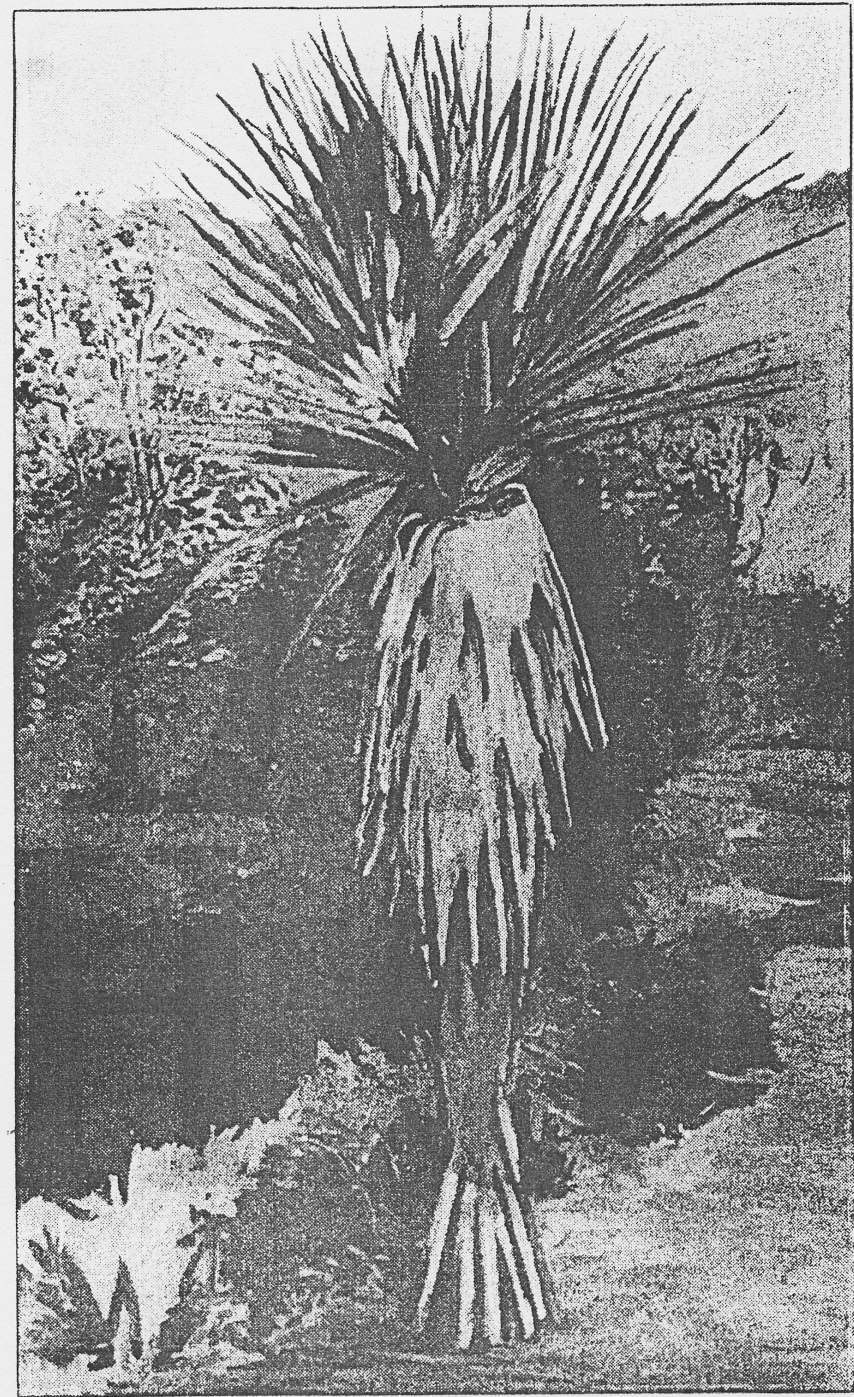
Jonathan Busse's work, like that of Naughton, possesses a sense of freshness and astute observation. However, both Kaiser and Busse, as well as newer members — photographers Duane Preble and Wayne Levin — have developed work with a much more explicit message.

Combining vision and speculation, Kaiser's "Hikina A Ka La Ma Olomana" utilizes the medium of collage to superimpose a highway on the windward panorama; Preble employs the resources of photography to do much the same thing in "Model of H-3 from Haiku Valley" and "H-3 from Ho'omaluhia."

In what is probably the most inventive work in the exhibition, Busse superimposes a three-dimensional construction suggestive of a tall-piered roadway over a bucolic landscape vista. In "Your Move" the viewer has the option of swinging this construction to the side — like opening a door — in order to view nature unfettered. "Too Late — Please Don't Touch" locks this structure firmly in place; the resulting frustration of not being able to see, even on a small scale, is all too real.

The work of Wayne Levin most convincingly achieves a fusion of the concerns of vision and commentary. Even though they are black-and-white photographs, an ironic underplaying of the lush chroma of the natural setting, the work has an intention and an intensity that is notable in the context of this exhibition. The structural premise of Levin's work is straightforward, even obvious; the series, entitled "Ripping the Land," juxtaposes sections of the natural environment (usually seen in close-up detail) with fragments of roadways and embankments. The torn edges of one section playing against another transform this literal structure into a metaphor of discontinuity and dislocation.

The fact is, Ho'omaluhia is at risk — both the parkland itself and the vistas it provides would be irrevocably altered by the construction of the proposed highway system H-3. Artists have the power to create visual answers to the questions that begin "What if . . . ?" Despite the delight that they, and we, may take in their powers of vision, there is also sadness in the thought that, having paved paradise, all we might have left are the pictures.



Noreen Naughton's "African Pandanus" focuses on a single, breathtaking plant at Ho'omaluhia park.

