

ART



Deb
Aoki

Hawaii Craftsmen 30th Annual Statewide Exhibition

Through Sept. 28
Academy Art Center, 1111 Victoria St.
10 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. Tuesday through
Saturday, 1 - 5 p.m. Sunday
Free

Like the Kauai Society of Artists, Hawaii Craftsmen sought the input of an outside juror for its annual statewide exhibition. In this case the juror was Vicky Halper, associate curator of the Seattle Art Museum. But like Art Kauai '97, this show is relatively small because of the juror's rigorous selection criteria (only 68 pieces were selected out of more than 200 submitted from all islands).

In Hawaii's somewhat insular art community, jurors from outside the local art hierarchy give artists an opportunity to see their artwork through new

eyes. Considerations of local politics, trends and artists' past accomplishments are irrelevant to an outside juror. In theory, the art is judged on the sole merits of the work.

I'll admit the work in this exhibit is fascinating in its diversity, but this doesn't make it any less awkward to walk through such a sparse sampling of Hawaii craftwork.

Make no mistake, there is a lot of impressive craft technique on display. Helen Friend's *laua'e* fern quilt and Chris Silva Lowrey's blown-glass vessel with "bamboo stalk" stopper are examples of finely honed skill. R.W. Butt's huge curly mango wood bowl is remarkable for both the beauty of the wood and the *tour de force* turning that was required to make this three-foot-deep bowl.

There are also some witty pieces that combine craftsmanship with humor. Robin Riccio Hackman's kimono pieces together scraps of crisp corporate attire — like pin-striped Brooks Brothers dress shirts and silk ties — for a clever commentary on East-West business relations. Frank Sherrif's cast bronze "Karma Blender," with its graceful wings, blender base, Chinese dragons, Indian fire halo and Las Vegas dice also elegantly satirizes its Eastern and Western origins. Kauai artist Douglas Britt used aluminum spice cans, a toy ironing board frame, found wood and primary colors to make a charmingly child-like toy boat with timeless appeal.

Most of the work is high-caliber stuff, but in light of the many works that were rejected, a few pieces are puzzling be-

cause of their apparent ordinariness.

Perhaps that's my regional bias showing, because I've seen some of these works (or similar ones) year in and out.

Halper stressed that her selections were primarily based on "formal impact," but some of her choices show she was equally swayed by work that tweaked traditional ideals of art and craft. Kit Cameron's trash art required neither painstaking skill nor rare materials. But her "Soap Dish" made me laugh out loud when I realized that the tiny bowl was not glass or ceramic, but made of soap bar scraps. It was harder to see the craftsmanship in Cameron's "Prayer Flags," a strung-up set of coffee-stained paper towels mimicking Chinese funeral money and Tibetan prayer flags. Clever, yes. Provocative?

Yup, that too. But to include it and reject other worthwhile entries in a showcase of fine crafts technique? A head-scratching mystery.

Given that one of the primary goals of Hawaii Craftsmen is education, a major oversight in this exhibit's installation is the missing descriptions of the media or techniques used by the artists. This omission is particularly glaring in cases where an explanation would have enhanced the viewers' appreciation of the artwork shown.

Many artists use native woods and materials, such as Sara Nunes Atabaki's sinuous palm branches held together by wing nuts and bolts; Lynn Weiler's koa "Canine Table: Stud/Bitch" with its carved canine feet and cast aluminum condom, diaphragms, and birth control pill cases; and Nick Bleeker's kamani log bench.

In Bleeker's case, the title ("No Parking Curbstone Bench") and flecks of paint on the stone legs gave a hint of his bench legs' unorthodox origins — street curb stones, once painted no-parking red. Upon recognizing this juxtaposition of the stone next to the rare native wood, I gained a new appreciation for Bleeker's bench for its subtle environmental commentary.

Juried shows are like the weather: Everybody complains about them, but nobody knows what to do about them. For all the grouching about the size of this year's show, chances are that next year's show may well have too many works, and works rejected this year may find their way into next year's exhibit. Hope, like art, springs eternal.

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