



Every picture tells a story

Schaefer exhibit showcases distinct 'eye' of photogs Melissa Ann Pinney and Ai Iwane

ART

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“Girl Transcendent” by Melissa Ann Pinney and “Island in My Mind, Fukushima” by Ai Iwane are running concurrently through Aug. 17 at the Schaefer International Gallery at the Maui Arts & Cultural Center in Kahului. Admission is free. Gallery hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays, holidays excepted. Exhibit may be open before/during intermission for select Castle Theater events. For more information, visit www.mauiarts.org or call 243-4288. Shown in photo: Exhibition entrance; Melissa Ann Pinney photo.

At first glance, the concurrent photography exhibitions on view through Aug. 17 at the Maui Arts & Cultural Center’s Schaefer International Gallery in Kahului appear to be in stark contrast. One is vibrant color portraiture, the works smartly composed and framed. The other, quiet in black and white, features panoramic photos tacked to the walls. Upon closer inspection, and then wider reflection, the similarities should become clear. The tie that binds is potency — of both the artists and of their subjects.

“Both (artists) have strengths as women,” says Gallery Director Neida Bangerter of artists Melissa Ann Pinney and Ai Iwane. *“And right now, women need to support other women, to recognize their strengths and talents. Both have years of knowing their subjects, and have dedicated their time and energy to concepts they view as important.”*

Bangerter describes Pinney as a *“photographer who is invisible, the subjects are not focused on her.”*

Spend some time in front of each photo — if you’re like me, you’ll become absorbed in the story and speculate on what the subjects are thinking, and what they’d probably like to say.

Based in Evanston, Ill., Pinney has an impressive resume. Her work is included in the permanent collections of many major museums around the country including the Art

Institute of Chicago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and more. She has published three books of her photographs; the latest is *“TWO”* (2015). She’s been coming to Maui to windsurf for 25 years. This is her first exhibition in Hawaii.



“Julia,” 2017; Melissa Ann Pinney photo.

Pinney’s 30-year body of work is informed by her childhood.

Growing up in a large Catholic family where female ambitions were discounted, her life changed when she read *“The Lives of the Saints.”*

“I found stories that sustained me,” says Pinney in her artist’s statement, *“accounts of young women whose rich and ardent inner lives became beacons for my own budding life as an artist.”*

Indeed, girls and women of all ages are at the heart of her show, *“Girl Transcendent.”* Girls as superheroes — their beach towels, as in *“Julia, 2017,”* the curtains behind them or their homemade Halloween costumes standing in for capes. Pairs or groups of girls and women deep in conversation, laughing, at play — sisterhood on display through the strength and regal dignity of *“The Freeman Sisters, 2014”*; or the mother-daughter bond of *“Leila & Jennifer, 2011.”* Pinney met that fabulous duo at Maui’s Costco store. She arranged to photograph them in a more natural setting the following day.

The photograph that has mesmerized me from the time I first saw it is *“Kiara & Emma, 2001.”* Two six-year-olds: one white — Emma, the artist’s daughter who figures in much of

her work— one brown. Both are beautiful with subtle cat-who-ate-the-canary expressions on their faces. I was fortunate to walk through the show with Pinney, and when she told me the back story, I loved this photo even more.



“The Freeman Sisters,” 2014; Melissa Ann Pinney photo.

“We were going to the beach. I found Emma and Kiara in the living room painting themselves, painting their skin. When I asked them what they were doing, they said, ‘We want to look like sisters. We want to sit on the beach looking exactly alike.’ I knew I had to take them outside and photograph them.”

Out of the mouths of babes . . .

Two island worlds converge in *“Island in My Mind, Fukushima,”* Ai Iwane’s collection of technically spectacular and affecting panoramas. The inhabitants of both those worlds — Hawaii and Japan — have a particularly attuned sense of place. So do Iwane’s photographs.

She has been coming to Hawaii for the summer Bon dance festivals since 2006. In the summer of 2011, she met a group of 30 teenagers hosted on Maui by the Aloha Initiative program, which provided the citizens of Japan affected by the triple disaster in Fukushima in March 2011 with a warm and welcome home in Hawaii. It was the first time she had encountered anyone from Fukushima since the earthquake, tsunami and accident at the Tokyo Electric Power Company’s Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant.



“Leila & Jennifer,” 2011; Melissa Ann Pinney photo.

“As soon as the song ‘Fukushima Ondo’ started to play, they got up to dance. I realized the song really did come from Fukushima,” Iwane recalls. “The words of that song are about the land, who the people are, what they did, the rice they grew, their lives, their sense of place. That song connects me with Fukushima and Hawaii.”

That connection is what you see in her stirring photographs.

It was that same summer that she found a large-format, 360- degree rotating panoramic camera called a Kodak Cirkut. It had been used by Maui’s Harold Nagamine (founder of the Nagamine Photo Studio in 1931) to take group photos at the Jodo Mission in Lahaina after memorial services. Rick Shimomura, Nagamine’s grandson and current owner of the studio, offered to let Iwane borrow the camera.

After a watchmaker in Fukushima helped her refurbish it, she learned how to use it. A small woman, she traveled the post- disaster area hauling a 50-pound, unwieldy piece of equipment and, after taking many dozens of images, meticulously pieced together an astounding body of work portraying the contaminated land, the lives of the still-evacuated survivors and their ancestors.

That unending mass of weeds in the first panorama — *“Futuba, Fukushima, 2015”* — looked very different before the disaster. It was a rose garden, a 15-acre home to more than 700 species of beautiful seasonal roses. Beloved by residents and visitors alike, it represented life itself to Katsuhide Okada (pictured in the center of the next panorama on display), the man

who tended it for decades. Does he look heartbroken . . . or potent?



“Kiara & Emma,” 2001; Melissa Ann Pinney photo.

Could those really be cherry blossoms lining the desolate roadways in *“Iitate, Fukushima”*?
Yes.

“When a school or a road or other public site opens, it’s traditional and significant to plant cherry blossoms along with well wishes. It’s also the way people in Japan mark the changing seasons,” Iwane explains.

Seiichi and Takiko Shigihara in *“Iitate, Fukushima, 2016”* stand together in their greenhouse, 21 miles from the crippled power plant. Many of their relatives have moved on, built new homes. But Seiichi feels a deep responsibility to his ancestors and promises to continue to take care of this land. Take a good look at his face. Despair? Or potency?

Eighty-thousand people are still displaced as a result of the nuclear disaster at Fukushima. Displaced, too, from the front pages soon after the accident; the message of this amazing exhibition is that we need to remember those people and their places.

I’ve been weighing whether to recommend turning left or turning right when you enter the gallery. I don’t think it matters. You will realize a feeling of hopefulness either way. I do suggest taking one final glance back at *“Kiara & Emma.”*



Katsuhide Okada at his Futaba rose garden, "Futaba, Fukushima," 2015; Ai Iwane photo.

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Roadways with cherry blossoms in "Iitate, Fukushima," 2016. Photo courtesy Schaefer International Gallery