

Returning home to the island

Artists who moved to the mainland have new exhibits in Makiki Heights

By Steven Mark
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You can leave Hawaii, but you can never leave it behind.

That is the sentiment by two artists from Hawaii, Alison Moritsugu and Lynne Yamamoto, who have installations in the garden of Honolulu Academy of Arts' Spalding House (at the old Contemporary Museum site).

Moritsugu and Yamamoto now live on the East Coast and have recently had exhibits open there, but curator Inger Tully wanted to bring them back because "they're still working in ideas about Hawaii and Hawaii histories." Tully obtained a grant that allowed them to come here and develop installations for the garden.

Moritsugu, a Punahou graduate who lives in upstate New York, chiefly does landscape painting and sculpture. She identified with the history of the Spalding estate as the home of a wealthy family that would have had house help — maids, cooks, gardeners, drivers. Her mother's family served in those roles for a family on Kauai.

"I wanted to do a piece that kind of recognized them since they lived in the shadows of this bigger family," she said.

Since Moritsugu's family also has a background in fishing, she used a set of four fishing nets — representing her paternal and maternal lines — as a latticework for knotted patterns. Each shape represents a member of the family, with 167 people represented, dating back to her great-grandparents.

"At the opening my aunts and uncles were asking, 'Which one is me?'" Moritsugu said.

Although she used commercial nets for the latticework, she taught herself how to weave nets in traditional Hawaiian fashion.

"It kind of started out where I wanted to re-create the net-tying experience, and then I began to realize, 'I'm in the 21st century, there's different materials.' So the project kind of evolved and became more about the patterning that I was applying to the net."

Moritsugu used more than two miles of twine for the project, called "Memory Hiki Ami," which comprises more than 150,000 knots. University of Hawaii art students and her husband helped.

"It's a very Zen thing to tie knots," she said. "It's very tedious, but there's sort of a meditative quality to it and somehow just the act of tying these knots, it ties me back to my ancestors who did a similar kind of handiwork."

Yamamoto, a Roosevelt High School graduate who now lives in Massachusetts, created "House for Listening to Rain," a small shelter with a corrugated iron roof. It is a radical departure from her typical work, which she said features "ephemeral" materials like paper or hair.

The idea for the shelter stemmed from her attempt to find an appropriate studio space and an interest in plantation houses in Hawaii.

"I knew that the shelter had to have this kind of roof, because something that's so wonderful and creates such a powerful memory is the sound of the rain on this kind of roof," she said.

Yamamoto wanted to ensure that visitors could still see the Spalding estate garden, so rather than having



Alison Moritsugu, in the foreground, works with University of Hawaii students knotting patterns into a fishing net for her work "Memory Hiki Ami." The knotted patterns represent members of her family stretching back four generations.

Photo: Brandon Kwai-Huk Ng

solid walls, the shelter is screened in by fine mesh on all four sides.

"It's a way to be inside but still outside," said Yamamoto, adding that her own sensitivity to mosquitoes also figured into the design.

For building supplies, Yamamoto went to Re-use Hawaii, a business that recycles building materials. She found boards from a single house for the structure and recycled tongue-and-groove

fir flooring for the floor. With the floorboards angled slightly in relation to the structure's frame, the floor helps guide the visitor's view toward the garden, she said.

The structure went up in June, so it has not yet undergone the rainy season. At the opening, museum officials used a hose to re-create a rainstorm. Yamamoto was able to experience authentic rainfall in it just once — the day before she left for the

mainland — but she is hoping for a reprise.

"To me, (rain) really speaks of home in many ways," she said. "Whenever I came back, especially when I've left the mainland in the midst of winter, I get off the plane and it's the feeling of moisture in the air and remembering that it rains just about every day at some point and how beautiful that is."



Lynne Yamamoto's "House for Listening to Rain" recalls plantation-style houses that had corrugated metal rooftops. It overlooks the garden at Spalding House.

ALISON MORITSUGU AND LYNNE YAMAMOTO

On exhibit: Spalding House garden, Honolulu Museum of Art, 2411 Makiki Heights Drive

When: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesdays to Saturdays and noon to 4 p.m. Sundays

Cost: \$5 to \$10

Info: www.honolulu-museum.org