

Seattle-based artist Mario Lemafa examines how native island identity is represented and commodified in his exhibition, "last\_resort." Lemafa, who is of Samoan and Maori descent—a detail that seems both central and tangential to the work—expresses concern about erasure, whiteness, and colonization through the physical and metaphorical qualities of cleansing products as they relate to indigenous presence. In doing so, he generates a radical redefinition of vacation culture.

*aitu 01* and *aitu 02* are two brightly colored Hawaiian shirts that the artist selectively bleached hanging side by side on white wire hangers. *aitu 01* depicts an island sunset behind a sandy beach. Palm trees dot the shoreline while white hibiscus flowers float within cloudless turquoise sky. The shirt's entire left side has been whitened with bleach, its striking colors reduced to a paler palette like a Polaroid still developing.

*aitu 02*, the artist's other altered shirt features a different Hawaiian pattern. A garish pink hue saturates the majority of the garment where Lemafa used bleach to fade the shirt's floral, fish-filled print. At the center, a circle of unbleached pattern remains where rainbow parrotfish swim against a black background. If you stand at just the right angle in front of the work, it appears as though the fish are swimming off the shirt to the darkness inside.

These works speak to the encroachment of whiteness on non-white identity. Take the titles, for example. "Aitu" is the Samoan word for troublemaker or malevolent ghost. In Maori it can mean sickness, calamity, demons or misfortune. The paler bleached parts of the shirts bring primarily Caucasian expectations of the vibrancy associated with Hawaiian culture to the conversation. These works serve as a reminder that much of Hawaii's identity as a tropical idyll was determined from its white colonial history. Referencing their own historical relationship to how whites see native residents, the Hawaiian shirts serve as a metaphor for how Hawaii, Samoa, and other Polynesian islands are bought and sold as the ideal vacation retreat. Emanating this duality, *aitu 01* and *aitu 02* encourage a reinterpretation of hegemonic beliefs about islander identity that align whiteness with goodness and blackness in opposition.

bell hooks writes about this phenomenon in her essay "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination." She argues that white people "do not imagine the way whiteness makes its presence felt in black life, most often as a terrorizing imposition, a power that wounds, hurts, tortures, a reality that disrupts the fantasy of whiteness as representing goodness."<sup>1</sup> The bleached shirts call attention to the way that whiteness erases aspects of non-white identity and imposes a perverse framework around which non-white consciousness is formed; the imagined landscapes and the exoticized hues of the aloha shirt haunt the way that indigenous islanders are seen, not as self-defining autonomous beings but as objects behind a whitewashed screen.

Lemafa's *Island Gurl Haunt* posters speak to this whitening as well. The posters portray grey hibiscus flowers so light against a white background that the absence of color is more noticeable than the floral pattern itself. The patterns were sourced from a commercial artist in California who was

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<sup>1</sup> Hooks, bell. "Representing blackness in the White Imagination." *Cultural Studies*. Ed. Lawrence Grossberg. London: Routledge, 1992,. 338 - 346.

charged with creating a motif that would link Hawaii with resort culture in the minds of vacationing Americans. By re-appropriating commercialized “island” imagery, Lemafa once again calls attention to the ways in which whiteness and erasure continue to colonize non-white identity.

Take, for example, *haole whiff*. The artwork is a collection of tiny glass bottles that contain cleansing, whitening and tropical-scented products ranging from crystal clear liquid to hot pink viscous fluid. They are arranged across a white bench, encouraging the viewer to sit and sniff each one. One vial contains the hair-bleaching product Sun In, another holds tropical-scented air freshener liquid. There’s Hawaiian Tropics suntan lotion, lemon juice, Sriracha hot sauce, coconut shampoo and algae, among others—all scents associated with ideas of the tropics. But one can’t help but notice how far removed the scents are from the source they attempt to imitate, having been processed and synthesized and re-presented in a capitalist context.

Some scents are easily identifiable while others are elusive, confusing or even biting. The coconut shampoo seems derivative in the way that laboratory-made odors can only approach the nuanced scent of a fresh coconut drupe; the air freshener is acerbic and overwhelming without its time-release diffuser.

The physical reactions that the whiffer experiences seem an apt metaphor for the ways that the product manufacturers have sold the public on what it means to be tropical. The word *haole*, after all, is slang for someone who is non-native Hawaiian and has a similar connotation to words like *cracker* or *honky*. Is it any surprise, then, that these vials lead to a sensory second-guessing? The meaning of these scents—if scent can have meaning—seems to come through a switchboard of associations tangled in misunderstanding and misrepresentation. The scent of suntan lotion in the context of Lemafa’s exhibition brings with it a reminder of family vacations on sandy beaches and the less talked-about impact that tourism has on native identity, made more visible through the artist’s work.

Mario Lemafa’s thoughtful critique of whiteness is also showcased in the ten-minute looping video *last\_resort*. Set against a soundtrack of constant running water, windows pop up and fade on top of one another, displaying multiple images of waterfalls, swimming pools, liquids being pushed through a syringe and other water-related vignettes. Source images and gifs include Sonic the Hedgehog, Disney’s animated *Pocahontas* movie, TLC’s music video for their 1994 hit song “Waterfalls,” aquatic military training videos and those backlit moving water pictures found at the New Age Creations boutique in the mall.

While the artist does thread colonial critique through the work by showcasing loaded images like that of *Pocahontas*, the video complicates the expected dualism referenced by other artworks in the exhibition that pits white against dark, good against bad. Whereas the history of the Aloha shirt is steeped in binary stereotypes and complicated by outsider perspectives, the *last\_resort* video speaks to an identity characterized by multiplicity, one that emerges through the repetition of water-based worlds both real and imaginary.

Constant exposure to idealized viewpoints of island culture renders the associated visual and mental images so opaque that the original reference point becomes difficult to suss out. That is to say, the repeating water images in the video proffer a glimpse of the tropics that is located in the predominately white, cis-gendered, hetero-normative perspective taken up by popular culture. While this perspective is inherently exclusive, it is so ubiquitous that contemporary island identity accounts for its seen-through-the-eyes-of-a-white-dude-ness in a manner that simultaneously celebrates the mesmerizing aura of the tropics and eschews its racist colonial past.

The pieces showcased in *last\_resort* speak to these kinds of contradictions colonized bodies encounter when defining who they are and where they belong. Rather than positioning themselves to the left or right, these artworks lean to the white: they cleanse; they bleach; they are tinted a lighter shade. They make assumptions about whiteness through acts of erasure and make visible a tacit racial bias. It is here, in this plural identity, that Lemafa's work finds anchor.

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