

# KEITH TALLETT

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## PRESS

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### Star Advertiser

Moke Avant-garde, June 23, 2013

by David A.M. Goldberg

I've seen monster trucks with lava-grinding treads flying upside down royal flags, and ornate old English lettering in cut vinyl cursing me from rear windows. Kids rock T-shirts with King Kamehameha masked like a Mexican bandit, his image surrounded by a bristling ring of shark's teeth. Threatening-looking dudes wear gear that reads "aloha" and "hi" in friendly noodle script. In his first solo show, the inaugural exhibit at the newly opened SPF Projects, Hawaii island artist Keith Tallett's "Militia" mixes this language of raw, often stereotyped, popular visual culture with his personal practices of surfboard design, tattooing and critical reflection on contemporary Hawaii.

He doesn't paint portraits of Diamond Head, utopian scenes of underwater life or waves breaking perfectly under a full moon. Tallett borrows from modernist art strategies such as minimalism and abstract expressionism to boil down his Hawaii to a vocabulary of camouflage and tire treads, silhouettes of 40-ounce beer bottles, freight palettes, floral portraiture, calligraphy and color schemes rooted in surfing and auto culture.

"Militia" is an effort in consciousness-raising that begins with the viewer recognizing his transformations of local visual expressions. Many people will immediately recognize the macho codes of hunting, beach life, cruising, drinking and vehicle worship. They will also appreciate his take on photographing fruit and flowers that have come to represent Hawaii. Tallett leaves none of these objects or themes to themselves, instead cross-pollinating them through processes of addition, removal and juxtaposition.

His "Flying Hawaiian" series of plywood paintings coated in epoxy resin feature island essences of camouflage, tire treads, bullet holes and airbrushed color gradients, packaged in the thick gloss of high-end surfboards a la 1960s Los Angeles modernism. The treads clearly riff on flower lei, Polynesian tattoo patterns, the edges of traditional weaponry and tiki carvings. The vertical color fields behind them evoke the saturation of sunsets and the gloom of jungle twilight.

By simply raising them on wood blocks and leaning them against the wall, the artist warns the viewer not to treat these richly informative surfaces as paintings with a capital "P." Tallett sees them as entities, spirits with personality and also, simply, as mirrors.

Or consider a pair of bird of paradise blooms, slightly battered as if pulled from the wild instead of a nursery. With their beaks aggressively facing each other, the backs of their heads split with chaotic clusters of white blooms, the two flowers look ready to fight, or like they just finished a round. Tallett has tattooed "vanilla" onto the cheek of the left flower, and "moke" onto the other — "vanilla moke" refers to a Caucasian moke — using real ink and an electric needle. Clearly, these "white boys" are ready to scrap. This photographic series also includes ginger buds, antherium blossoms and other popular flowers tattooed with local concepts-in-one-word like "puinsai," "ainoskedu," and "tita." Taking the flesh of these flowers as seriously as any of his human clients, he inscribes each with a personality derived from pidgin English. Bunches of bananas, similarly tattooed with local slang, also hang from the gallery ceiling as "live" versions of the photographs. This kind of "code-switching" and "remixing" is a popular strategy in contemporary commercial design and art, but it can fail if there is nothing of significance behind the effort or in the material itself. The second amendment of the U.S. Constitution reads: "A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not

be infringed.” By definition, a militia is not “regular army,” but a defense force raised from the civilian population.

Tallett reminds us that only the acts of surfing, hunting and tattooing are indigenous to Hawaii; everything else — from the flowers to resin to malt liquor to the English language — is invasive. Though “Militia” is not a literal call to arms, it could be a first strike in an insurgency. From the perspective of this attentive outsider, there is no more volatile conceptual mixture produced when these words are spread like butter over a crust of Hawaiian self-determination issues that still glows red-hot.



*Tropical Expressionism*, March/April 2013 (vo.23)

By Sonny Ganagan

When Hawai'i island artist Keith Tallett was notified that he was to be awarded a national grant to support his work, it could not have come at a better time. “I was in shock actually”, the multimedia artist says of receiving a Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant, and annual award named in honor of the influential New York Abstract Expressionist. “I’m surprised by how many people know about it too. I’ve been working as a skills trainer for kids with autism, and when I was in the school cafeteria last week, a guy said, ‘that’s you ah, in da pepah. Nice ah your art”.

From Hilo public schools to national contemporary art circles, Tallett’s art has been getting attention everywhere. Like many Hawai'i artists, Tallett has made personal sacrifices for his calling. He spent years as an instructor at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo, and, along with his wife and fellow contemporary artist Sally Lundburg, organizes and works with a cooperative of artists called AggroCulture.

“I’m a maker,” Tallett says of his process. “That’s my roots, growing up outside of Hilo. My mother’s side was plantation workers. They made all sorts of crazy items like quilts – anything they couldn’t buy, they made. My dad makes surfboards. That’s how I got into painting. I picked up creativity through osmosis.” For a series titled “Tattooed Williams” (named after a type of banana that is ubiquitous in the islands), Tallett took organic items that would ordinarily start rotting in the tropical understory of his Pa’auilo home, spent hours tattooing them with local phrases, and then photographed the work at their moment of decay. The resulting images are works of staggering beauty. “It’s about assimilating into a culture with tattoos you see everywhere now,” he says of the series. “But it’s also about the ephemeral nature of everything. We put all this baggage on ourselves and on others. In the end, it goes away, but it was still worth it.”

With the Joan Mitchell award, Tallett will be able to continue to interrogate the motifs of him- self and his community, underwritten for at least another year. “Right now I’m working on a series on camouflage,” he says. “I see it everywhere out here in the country. I go to the gas station, and there’s a guy wearing four types of camouflage, and his buddy has three types. I’m like, ‘Wow that’s a piece right there.’” He is also working on images of Hawaiian flags, both the present state flag, which has been in use since 1845, and the Kanaka Maoli flag, which has become a symbol of the Native Hawaiian sovereignty movement.

For Tallett and his family, getting national recognition validates a life of creativity. “The biggest struggle for Hawai'i artists is, ‘How do we get out of Hawai'i?’ For me, to get this national nod feels amazing. It confirmed my decision to make art in Hawai'i. It gave me the confidence to take a chance with my materials and ideas.”

# HANDEYE

*Provocative Hawai'ian*, May 3, 2012

By Leslie Mehren **(excerpt)**

Keith Tallett and Sally Lundburg are two vibrant Hawai'ian artists whose life and work gracefully intertwine. Partners in the truest sense of the word, they maintain individual styles and influences, yet create from a confluence of shared experiences and constant dialogue. Although both artists reference Hawai'ian culture in their art, they shun the notion of being relevant in a merely regional context. They prefer to see themselves as part of the larger conversation surrounding contemporary art while relating to issues that are particularly relevant to Hawai'i today.

Citing artists such as Georgia O'Keeffe and Donald Judd, who fled urban life for distant locales in the American west, the couple found the freedom to continue their art practice in the remote calm of a Big Island farmhouse. After years of living in San Francisco, earning degrees at the San Francisco Art Institute and participating in a lively arts community, they chose to return to Hawai'i before the birth of their daughter, Kia'i. It wasn't just the surfing that brought them home. They knew they were building a future and could strike the right balance for their careers.

Both artists agree that Keith's work is the more overtly Hawai'ian, with its inclusion of Polynesian tattoo patterns, tiki imagery and pidgin words emblazoned across tropical fruits and flowers. Keith blatantly challenges the notion of what it means to call something Hawai'ian, even something as seemingly innocuous as a guava fruit. The ubiquitous guava is not indigenous to Hawai'i, but was imported and allowed to become an invasive species on the islands. To Keith, it represents the kind of falsified culture imposed on Hawai'i by outside influences and assumed to be authentic.

The image of a guava inked with Gothic pidgin slang could easily be interpreted as a self-portrait, a reflection on the artist's own struggle with his identity and the terms that others try to pin on him. As both a practicing Polynesian tattoo artist and a second-generation surfboard shaper, Keith is reviving awareness of Hawai'i's diverse art traditions. He recently began handcarving traditional surfboards, called *papahe'enalu*, from native woods. Last year he was awarded a Cultural Apprenticeship Grant from the Folk Art Program of the Hawai'i State Foundation on Culture and the Arts. This grant will enable him to study with Tom Pohaku Keali'iahonui Stone in a project titled *Pae Ka Nalu – Traditional Wood Board Building*. "I'd been building boards from all kinds of materials," said Keith, "including stuff that was going to the dump and things from Home Depot." Some people questioned whether those boards could really be considered *papahe'enalu*, but for Keith it was all valid in the context of advancing the craft.

Defining Keith's artwork in formal terms is nearly as tricky as inking a ripe guava. His painting, sculpture and iconography have evolved over the last two decades into an amalgam of Hawai'ian culture packaged with razor-edged wit and conceptual art theory. Observing contemporary life and paying homage to his roots, Keith straddles two distinct worlds with complete ease. No matter if he is shaping a surfboard, executing an intricate tattoo design, or patterning a series of canvases with layered tire treads, his work is on-point, articulate and original.

Keith and Sally collaborate as half of an arts collective called AGGROculture. Together with artists Margo Ray and Scott Yoell, they are showcasing urgent issues like the recent conflict between APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) trade liberalization and local land use rights. AGGROculture embraces art's ability to provoke and inspire, which is not what people normally expect from the paradise of Hawai'i, but it is what you'd expect from two of Hawai'i's most provocative young artists.



## Homegrown Contemporary- Artist Keith Tallett

BY Jared Yamanuha

FLUX MAGAZINE – TABOO – Fall 2011

The Honolulu Academy of Arts is tranquil at eleven o'clock in the morning when I meet artist Keith Tallett. He is tall, sports a shaved head, and his attire – a black graphic T-shirt, colorful surf shorts and Reef slippers – throws me off for a second. We trade pleasantries and jet towards the gallery in the back of the museum, where three of his pieces are on display as part of Artists of Hawai'i 2011.

Inside, people weave through the pedestals and false walls, their eyes hopscotching from photograph to painting to sculpture. Tallett walks towards a glossy, monolithic slab and stands right in front of it. The fetishistic finish of the piece, comprised of layers of resin and fiberglass, glints under the spotlights.

"It's kind of counter-cultural and lowbrow," says Tallett, referring to his using the materials and procedures of surfboard shaping in his paintings. He is soft-spoken yet articulate, with a penchant for peppering serious art talk with local colloquialisms. The painting, I realize, is not hanging flat against the wall; it's propped up against it, like a surfboard.

"It's a three-dimensional form that you interact with," says Tallett, who didn't want his pieces to simply rest flush against the wall in the way that, say, traditional paintings do. He insists that his works proffer an experiential element, and it's true: stand close enough, and the patterns and surface envelop you. "That's the whole thing about surfing and the materials I use," Tallett adds. "You have to experience it, you have to feel it."

Growing up in Hilo, making art wasn't a part of Tallett's life. In fact, the idea of being an artist didn't occur to him until college, in Los Angeles, where he took his first painting classes. He realized his experiences in Hilo primed him for life as an artist. "Hawaiian or plantation culture did very resourceful things, but they never called it art," he says. "My dad made skateboards and surfboards, and it wasn't like painting them was hip or artistic, it was just out of necessity!" Tallett returned home, obtained his bachelor of fine arts degree in painting from University of Hawai'i, Hilo, then headed back to California, where he pursued his master's degree in painting at San Francisco Art Institute. There, he encountered harsh criticism. "I got whooped my first semester," he remembers.

He returned home, however, and had an epiphany. "When I came back to Hawai'i on a break, I ended up surfing and making boards, and, 'uh-oh,' a light bulb went off in my head." He soon began to import the procedures and ideas of surfboard construction into his paintings. He cleared out his studio, sold his oil paints, and started from scratch.

While Tallett explains the genesis of his pieces, a crowd of students quickly accumulates around us. It turns out they are a class from Punahou School. One student asks a question about the patterns Tallett uses, which I naively thought were derived from Polynesian tattoos.

"These prints are all tire marks," he explains. "They're actually tire treads."

"Ohhh," everyone says, in unison.

"I wanted to have a pattern that's universal," Tallett elaborates. "You're on these patterns that go around, that are used and discarded everyday, and we don't know anything about them."

His own artistic practices aside, Tallett and his wife, the artist Sally Lundburg, form one-half of Aggroculture – a Hamakua-based art collective – with another art couple, Scott Yoell and Margo Ray. Given the diminutive size and relative insularity of the Big Island's art scene, it provides them with a support system in a place with very little. "For me and the people in Aggroculture, we need to figure out how to do this and get it out, and just get the audience more aware," says Tallett.

We part ways. Tallett throws me an open-handed shaka before disappearing into the gallery. I go back, one last time, to look at his paintings. Gazing at the reflective surfaces of his large-scale, candy-colored paintings, I think to myself, this is not what 'local art' is supposed to look like. Or is it?

# Star Advertiser

No Rainbows, no problem, July 3, 2011

By David A.M. Goldberg (excerpt)

Juror Michael Rooks manages collections and exhibitions of post-1945 art for the High Museum in Atlanta, but he lived in Hawaii for six years, working as a curator at the Honolulu Academy of Arts and The Contemporary Museum. Using his insider-outsider status, Rooks has done a brilliant job of curating Hawaii's home-grown and indigenous talent without including a single work that panders to, exploits or distorts our image of ourselves. Though the show invites consideration of collective expression, it is by no means harmonious, for Rooks has not selected for an artificial unity that is neither plausible nor necessary.

Keith Tallet's "Flying Hawaiians" duet fuses the seductive aesthetics of the perfectly waxed surfboard with black tire tread patterns. Linking these repetitions to traditional Polynesian tattoos and gene sequences, Tallet has given us one of the exhibition's most successful evocations of and challenges to (post-) modern Hawaii. This hybridity that mixes media, subject matter and aesthetic conventions carries the viewer from high modernism to contemporary indigenous to the borders of "outsider art."

## Big Island Weekly

***A Crafting Papahe'enalu – From Tree to Sea: Wooden Surfboard Shapers***

Nov/Dec, 2011

By Hadley Catalano (excerpt)

*"When Bob Russell began as a child, he surfed on blue and yellow canvas rafts along the Kona Coast. When Keith Tallett grew up in Hilo, his father couldn't afford to buy him a board, so he shaped his son a foam one in the backyard. Carlos Kuhn had his first surfing adventure south of Moloka'i, on a racing canoe. The story behind the legendary water vehicle has evolved, reshaped its curve and lines with time. The history behind papahe'enalu, or surfboards, is as old as the sport itself, and as the saying goes, history does repeat itself. Riding on a wave of the emerging Hawaiian renaissance, the ancient practice of wooden surfboard shaping has been revived, led by the O'ahu surfer Tom "Pohaku" Stone." - Excerpt from the article by Hadley Catalano – Ke Ola Magazine.*

# Star Advertiser

***APECalypse Now?, November 20, 2011***

By David A.M. Goldberg (excerpt)

The AGGROculture Collective relates APEC's pursuit of trade liberalization to local struggles against the profit-driven and often foreign-based use of land and resources. "The Rat and the Octopus" is a triptych of photographs featuring two allegorical characters, the land speculator and the construction worker, and their magic economic ritual that turns land into a commodity. In the left panel, the phone-toting speculator wears a lime-green suit printed with a repeating pattern of handshakes and blooming dollar-flowers. The construction worker in the right panel exudes confidence in a stylized safety orange jumpsuit with reflective stripes. In between the two shake hands to seal the unspecified deal for the coastline behind them.

# Big Island Weekly

## ***Gallery exhibit proves what's old is new again, October 25, 2011***

By Hadley Catalano

As Keith Tallett and Scott Yoell worked to arrange the final pieces in their upcoming exhibition “Cur- rent ReVisions – Hawaiian Craft Today” at the Kahilu Theatre gallery in Waimea, running October 20- November 27, an elderly Hawaiian man circled around the open exhibition space. He carried on excitedly pointing out different woods he recognized in surfboards leaning in racks along the wall, and admired the handiwork of traditional canoe and sailing paddles. Whether he was aware or not that the wooden surfboards and paddles, among the many other artworks, were considered contemporary Hawaiian art is exactly the line that Tallett and Yoell hope to blur.

“The art is about looking back but using the present,” explained Tallett, who along with fellow curator Yoell, Sally Lundburg and Margo Ray, established AGGROculture Collective, a Hawai`i based art collective, has a means to create, showcase and promote cutting edge and challenging concepts in contemporary art.

The Current ReVisions exhibition, a free museum/salon style show, in collaboration with the Kahilu Theater Foundation, will feature local artists Tricia Allen (Polynesian tattoo), Dean Edwards, Carlos Kuhn and Bob Russell (wooden surfboards), Henani Enos and Olu Saguid (collaborative painting/wood carving), Gary Eoff (fishing lures), Scott Hendricks and Kaleo Pilago (wooden canoe paddles), Hualalai Keohulua (canoe restoration), Beau Jack Key (fish hook carving), Carl Pao (ceramics), Nita Pilago (fashion design) and Tallett (mixed media).

The vision of this exposition, according to the artist’s statement, is to investigate how Hawaiian craft lives, influences and has evolved in the twenty first century, calling into question the many contemporary art-making practices and asking, “How has the artist incorporated the skills and techniques of the past into contemporary practices, and what do current skills and techniques tell us about who we are as a society and culture?”

Each artist’s work helps to answer that question with personal creative identity through traditional Hawaiian craft, through the visual examples of tattooing, sailing, surfing, textile and jewelry design, painting, woodworks and basket weaving.

Exploring traditions, decoration, community, design, practices and functionality, Tallett and Yoell hope to open doors to all facets of the Big Island artistic community, providing examples of how traditional Hawaiian art has influenced and adapted in the modern day setting.

“This is not a gallery’s preoccupied notions of Hawaiiiana,” said Tallett, noting that too often Hawaiian art is catered towards tourists. “This is history, you can see the translation with the patterns, material, and use.” One common problem that many artists around the island experience is lack of available exhibition space.

There are pockets of artistic uprisings such as the Donkey Mill Art Center in Holualoa, the University of Hawai`i at Hilo and through individual efforts of people like Richard Smart and Stephen Freedman, but on the whole the island lacks contemporary art education and availability. This is where groups such as the AGGROculture and like mind individuals have helped lead by example. All artists themselves, the four-member collective (with Lundburg, Tallett and Ray all born and raised on the island) has reached out and drawn in a wide assortment of artists.

“We try to help people understand that there is value in art besides it’s monetary value,” said Tallett, who is a native Hawaiian artist showcasing his “Flying Hawaiian” mixed media series called Rainbow Apparitions. “We are trying to show that our Hawaiian culture, through art, needs to be valued.”

## ***Gallery exhibit proves what's old is new again, continued***

As with Hawaiian artists and craftsman before, AGGROculture is providing a visual log of Hawaii's cultural art scene. For future generations looking back, the exhibition provides a snapshot of a blossoming artist community, helping to grow the word slowly in the traditional word of mouth style, to local artists.

AGGROculture's mission explains that Hawai'i is a place rich in culture, diversity and is a microcosm of local and global issues. These statements will be reproduced and represented through artwork. AGGROculture also nurtures and encourages other Hawai'i based artists and their unique practices through collaborative themed exhibitions that will be available to the community.



### ***HI Art- Punch Flow, HI ART Magazine, Spring 2011***

By Scott Yoell

Echoing the vibrancy of Pop Art and Neo Expressionism's emotional use of vivid color harmonies, the paintings & drawings of Keith Tallett are a punchy flow full of lyrical quality.

At first glance Keith's glossy fetishized surfboard-like surfaces could be categorized as a manifestation of late Pop or Post Pop eye candy, like the highly polished works of such contemporaries as Jeff Koons, Pharrell Williams and Takashi Murakami. But after time spent and closer inspection the viewer realizes that the artist is present in both concept and gesture. Brush strokes, squeegee lines and minor cracks and bubbles in the resin reveal a 'trace' that is definitely 'hands on' and very far from a place of mass production.

Although strongly influenced by artists like John McCracken, Chris Ofili, Fred Tomaselli & Raymond Saunders; Tallett's artwork draws from a deep rooted connection to his native Hawaiian heritage and that of surfing culture. It was during graduate school at the San Francisco Art Institute, punctuated by bad critiques and visits home, that Keith began to look at the physical practices/activities & materials that resonated with him. As an accomplished surfer and 2nd generation surfboard shaper, a craft learned from his dad; he realized that his work needed a radical change and decided to clean out his studio and begin re-contextualizing the process and materials used in the surfboard industry. Keith began making his pieces through a patient process of woodworking, resin, paint, fabric application, and finishing. In end, a highly crafted creation with a hint of a 'do it yourself' cottage and garage aesthetic.

In viewing his work, it is easy to see the use of patterning in colors, materials, and surface treatments. For example, Quiver (hotcoat), series and Hyperfreak, fluorescent series, large 4'x6' door shaped slabs share similarities in all three of these areas. It is in the hue and presentation that the artist creates radically different effects. Playing with fixed and dependent variables helps Tallett to open the viewer up to the plurality of perception. Emphasizing the details of the surface, the interrelation of numerous colored parts, and the overall feeling of the work, is therefore key. In his painting series 'Fifty Greatest Surfers of All Time,' Keith presents a large number of works on paper hung in a grid ten high by five across. Together the works remind you of the power and impact of abstract values; swells of color united by repetition, color codes and symmetry. Yet the title of the work as in most of Keith's paintings and drawings alludes that the content is more than 'beauty as meaning'. That the issues surrounding Keith's work are found in the blurred lines that define authenticity as a cultural production and commodity; where the merging of space age surfboard material with that of the natural becomes a metaphor for native verse nonnative. As Keith Tallett has put it, "The process itself becomes a way of creating dialogue between an ingrained cultural knowledge, and my investigations as a contemporary artist."