

A family weaving tradition resurrected

Dream weaver

MITCHELL KUGA

As a young boy growing up in Kane'ohe, Marques Hanalei Marzan would sift through his mother's closet and spend hours examining her grandmother's collection of woven hats.

"I've always felt close to her my whole life, even though I never met her," Marzan says, referring to his great-grandmother, a weaver who died long before he was born. "It was just being around those hats."

After trying to decipher how the intricately woven patterns crafted from lauhala leaves were accomplished, Marzan asked his family for assistance. No one knew how. Although his great-grandmother tried to pass down the skill to her children and grandchildren, none showed any interest in the traditional craft of plaiting or ulana—once used in ancient Hawai'i for producing necessities like pillows, mattresses and fishing traps. Determined to learn, Marzan enrolled in an eight-week plaiting workshop at Bishop Museum during his junior year of high school. He completed it in four weeks.

"Maybe it was genetic memory that stayed inside of my blood and it just came out in my hands," Marzan, whose work has been displayed in traveling exhibitions throughout the mainland and in Hastings, New Zealand, says. "It just came so naturally to me. The instructor would say, 'Do this, this, this and this' and I wouldn't have to ask any questions. I just look and then do it, and it would be done."

Today, Marzan, 30, is the cultural resource specialist at Bishop Museum and the curator of *Ka Le Pāpale: Hats of Hawai'i* (which runs until April 11), a collection of more than 100 Polynesian-style hats flaunting an assortment of detailed weaving patterns, funky shapes and unorthodox materials. Some, like those from the Bernice Pauahi Bishop collection, date as far back as the 19th century. On a Wednesday afternoon in December, Marzan walked me through the gallery—located in Bishop Museum's Castle Building, above the bellowing roar of the *Dinosaurs Unearthed* exhibit—and stopped to point out his favorite hat.

"This was made from koa haole, the rubbish plant you see all over Wai'anae and Sandy Beach and Makapu'u," he explains, referring to a plantation-style hat titled "pāpale 'ie," a gift to the museum from Dorothea Woodrum. The shiny, brownish-green koa haole seedpods looked like wet seaweed and were woven in loose,

seemingly pliable layers. "Looking at this, you'd never think that a rubbish plant could transform into something so beautiful," he said. "It's really, really eye-opening when you see something made from it and you know it's all over the place."

Marzan feels he has a responsibility to preserve what he calls a diminishing skill, and he is one of the weaving community's leading practitioners not eligible for a senior citizens discount. Though he has the ability to weave just about anything, with just about any given materials, Marzan favors crafting more esoteric objects, like old Hawaiian-style fans with triangular-shaped handles (what he calls his signature) or dog's-tooth anklets traditionally made for male hula dancers.

"I think it's that rarity," says Marzan, who graduated from UH-Mānoa in 2002 with a bachelor of fine arts degree in fiber arts. "Knowing that I'm trying to reawaken this lost skill in today's society is kind of the thing that drives and pushes me."

Although much of Marzan's work gets imbued with a contemporary slant—it's constructed more for artistic display than actual use—and he's practicing what was customarily a craft designated to women, the process he goes through to create each piece stays true to Native Hawaiian tradition. Before gathering materials (pandanus, makaloa and loulou are most common), Marzan asks for permission, typically in the form of an oli or chant.

"For me, it's opening my eyes to let nature tell me what's OK," he says. "It's this understanding that everything has a life, its own spirit. You don't just go out and take everything away to use it for yourself. Basically, being polite."

After gathering enough material, Marzan prepares each strip individually, a laborious process involving cleaning and splitting each leaf to its appropriate size. He learned the skill the way most things in the weaving community are learned: through word of mouth and informal gatherings, particularly with master weavers like Gladys Grace and Elizabeth Maluhi Lee. From there, the rest comes naturally to Marzan, who insists that the seemingly labyrinthine pieces he creates aren't as difficult as they appear.

"It relaxes me," he says. "The act of moving my hands and creating this piece, it clears my mind. I know a lot of people have the thought of stress when they see all of these crazy things going in all these different directions. What I

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like to tell people is you don't focus on everything all at once. All you focus on are those two little strips right in front of you... So to me, my perspective on the way I do things is very simple. It's simply over one, under one."

Aside from his job at Bishop Museum, Marzan looks for opportunities to educate and share his preternatural skill with anyone willing to learn. This includes



Marques Hanalei Marzan feels a responsibility to preserve the traditional craft of Polynesian weaving.

presentations at weaving conferences both in Hawai'i and abroad, as well as casual gatherings under a kukui tree in Bishop Museum's courtyard, where Marzan and other practitioners of Native Hawaiian crafts—feather work and shark-tooth knives, among them—meet every Wednesday afternoon to talk story, eat lunch and educate.

"I think I've always felt like I had a responsibility, even at first when I was learning lauhala during that eight-week course," Marzan says. "There was five students in this class and I was going through it like nothing. So I would actually help the other students... even though I was just learning at that point, too. I just think that something I've always wanted to do is teach." ■

Visual Art Picks

RAY YOSHIDA AT THE CONTEMPORARY MUSEUM

If Chicago Imagism means anything to you, you already know about Ray Yoshida. The influential artist spent nearly half a century contributing surreal, quirky, semi-abstract works to Chicago's art scene—and teaching at the Art Institute of Chicago—before returning to Hawai'i, where he died in 2009. Whether or not you already know the Kauai-born artist's work, the opportunity to take in an exhibit devoted to Yoshida is not to be missed.

Ray Yoshida, 3/12–6/18, The Contemporary Museum, 2411 Makiki Heights Drive, Tue–Sun, 11:30AM–2:30PM, \$8 adults; \$6 students/seniors, tcmhi.org, 536-1322

ETERNAL BLINKING: CONTEMPORARY ART OF KOREA AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII AT MĀNOA ART GALLERY

An exhibit featuring the works of 20 contemporary artists from Korea, handpicked to highlight the "historical dynamism of their modern country."

University of Hawai'i Art Gallery, 2/21–4/9, Mon–Fri 10:30AM–5PM, Sun Noon–5PM, free, www.hawaii.edu/artgallery, gallery@hawaii.edu, 956-6888

ARTISTS IN RESIDENCE AT THE ACADEMY OF ARTS

One of the most exciting local developments in visual arts is the reimagined Artist in Residence program at the Academy of Arts. Each semester gives two master of fine arts candidates (or recent graduates) from the University of Hawai'i the space and audience to present their work. Museum-goers can sit for a portrait by photography resident Elizabeth Curtis, who is exploring how portraiture relates to the formation of identity. Return later this spring to see an interactive installation by resident Steve Coy that the program's director says is almost indescribable.

Artists in Residence, Elizabeth Curtis: 1/23–2/28, Steve Coy: 3/20–4/25, Honolulu Academy of Arts, 900 S. Beretania St., www.honoluluacademy.org, 532-8700. The Artist in Residence Gallery will be open on the weekends during museum hours.

STELLA LAI AT THIRTYNINEHOTEL

After a longish period of minimalism and realism, the gallery space at thirty-ninehotel is going pop fantastic when Stella Lai takes over this spring. The Hong Kong native has a penchant for creating vivid dreamscapes rife with fuel for your imagi-

nation. She also likes to play with language, especially in the space between English and Chinese, so keep a close eye on the intentional grammatical freedom in the titles and descriptions of her work. While you're there, you might as well head across the street and check out the revolving gallery at The Manifest. It seems like those guys are always putting up new exhibits, and they're huge champions of local artistic efforts.

Thirty-ninehotel, 39 N. Hotel St., 2/5–5/1, 4PM–2AM, 21+ after 8PM, thirty-ninehotel.com, 599-2552

The Manifest, 32 N. Hotel St., 7AM–2AM, manifesthawaii.com, brandon@manifesthawaii.com

COMMAND-OPTION-ESCAPE AT THE ARTS AT MARKS GARAGE

We're always impressed by the diversity of incredible art that pops up in this Chinatown gallery, and we can't wait to see what comes from the call-to-artists for March's *Command-Option-Escape*. The exhibit aims to explore flights of fancy, life vessels and other innovative strategies for coping.

Command-Option-Escape, The ARTS at Marks Garage, 1159 Nu'uuanu Ave., 3/2–3/27, Slow Art Friday Artist Reception on 3/19, Tuesdays through Saturdays 11AM–6PM, 521-2903