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Contact:

Heshan Berents-Weeramuni

heshan@bostonarts.org

617-417-5574

Chloe Conceicao

chloe@bostonarts.org

Image: Lani Asunción, *Big Luau Give Back Aloha*,

Photo by Sasha Pedro



***Lani Asunción: Duty-Free Paradise* is a Critique on the Interplay
Between Tourism, Culture, and the Exploitation of Hawai'i**

Curated by J.R. Uretsky, this multimedia exhibition opens to the public on January 20th at the Mills Gallery.

Location

Mills Gallery, 539 Tremont St. Boston, MA 02116

On View

January 20 — April 13, 2024 | 1-6pm, Wednesday — Saturday

Opening Reception

January 26, 2024 | 6–9pm

Public Performance

March 16, 2024 | 4–7pm | Performers: Shey 'Rí Acu' Rivera Ríos & Anabel Vázquez Rodríguez



539 Tremont Street, Boston MA 02116

bostonarts.org

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BOSTON, MA — Boston Center for the Arts (BCA) is excited to announce the opening of *Lani Asunción: Duty-Free Paradise* curated by J.R. Uretsky, presented at the BCA Mills Gallery through April 13, 2024. *Duty-Free Paradise (DFP)* (2020–23) plays on the tensions between lived and imagined Hawai‘i. Through the lens of tourism, around which the Islands’ economy heavily circulates, this work explores the contradictions between perceptions and realities of island life as a paradise constructed through American pop culture, underwritten by militarism and biopolitics.

As a Filipinx-American who grew up in Hawai‘i, now living in Boston, Asunción offers an exposition of Boston’s complicated history with Hawai‘i. Through honoring Kānaka Maoli culture and the Filipinx diaspora, they embody characters that critique colonialism and imperialism with a compelling sense of ritualistic care.

In the 1920s, Asunción’s grandparents immigrated from the Philippines to the island of O‘ahu to work at the Kahuku Sugar Plantation, where Asunción’s father was born. Decades later, Asunción found themselves creating in their studio in Jamaica Plain, a few blocks away from the historic Dole House home of James Drummond Dole — founder of The Hawaiian Pineapple Company, now known as the Dole Food Company. Dole’s legacy is intricately rooted in the dispossession of indigenous Kānaka Maoli lands orchestrated by his cousin, Governor Stanford Dole, a key figure in the 1893 coup against the Hawaiian Monarchy. In 1898, the once-free sovereign state was illegally annexed by the United States. Mirroring the same year Spain formally ceded the Philippine Islands to the U.S. This convergence of events set the stage for the migration of Filipinos to Hawai‘i, where they labored on plantations such as Dole’s.

As an interactive element of the exhibition, Lani Asunción is delighted to install the *Duty-Free Paradise Store* at the entrance of the Mills Gallery. “This store, which started online in 2020 now has a physical space to exhibit and sell performance wear, printed items, zines, music, and other items that take a critical perspective on the greenwashing of ecotourism and socio-political complexities associated with Hawai‘i and the Dole Company,” shares Asunción.

Asunción’s videos, sculptures, and performances honor Kānaka Maoli culture and the Filipinx diaspora, while exposing the roles imperialism and U.S. militarization played in shaping Hawai‘i from a once-free sovereign state to a tourist paradise. They embody characters that critique colonialism and imperialism with a compelling sense of ritualistic care.

Lani Asunción’s *Duty-Free Paradise* is the caution before the Aloha — a play on the tensions between lived and imagined Hawai‘i. Modern translations simplify the Hawaiian word Aloha to feelings and salutations like love and kindness, hello and goodbye. However, English cannot contain Aloha, it is the unseen, connective tissue between people, ‘āina (land), life, everything. Aloha is a cultural understanding of care and a reverent force.

Asunción’s unique ability to expose exploitative systems while maintaining the spirit of Aloha illustrates the “what is not said;” the space in between that connects American histories, and offers counter narratives encouraging collective empowerment in the face of cultural violence, oppression, and ancestral intergenerational trauma.

In this immersive world crafted by Lani Asunción, there's a profound exploration of what it means to exist in an ambiguous space of cross-cultural interactions. In curator J.R. Uretsky’s



words, “Lani is making work that embodies what it feels like to be caught between cultures. I appreciate and share Lani's impatience with compliance and admire how that manifests in their work. It's a sort of aggressive care that challenges viewers, myself included, to look at uncomfortable things.”

“Aloha is to learn what is not said, to see what cannot be seen, and to know the unknowable.”
— Queen Lili‘uokalani

This project is supported, in part, by a Foundation for Contemporary Arts Emergency Grant.

About Lani Asunción

Lani Asunción is an interdisciplinary multimedia artist who makes socially engaged work that uses transmedia storytelling through new media technologies and immersive digital environments. Asunción creates a visual language guided by historical research, community engagement, and experimental ritualized performance connected to their identity as a queer multiracial Filipinx-American. They use new media to encourage conversations that magnify connections to facilitate healing in the face of cultural violence, oppression, and ancestral intergenerational trauma narratives. Asunción has been awarded the Kala Fellowship, Future Frequencies Fellowship at MassMoCA Studios, and NEFA Public Art for Spatial Justice Grant. They are the founder and Creative Director of Digital Soup, a Boston-based queer BIPOC multimedia arts collective.

Website: <https://laniasuncion.com/>

Instagram: [@lani.asuncion](https://www.instagram.com/lani.asuncion)

About J.R. Uretsky

J.R. Uretsky is an artist, performer, musician, and art curator living in Providence, Rhode Island. Uretsky has over fifteen years of experience organizing, designing, and installing exhibitions. Uretsky worked as the curator at the New Bedford Art Museum, where they exhibited Pete Souza (Chief Official White House Photographer for President Barack Obama) and Academy Award-winning (*Black Panther, 2019*) costume designer Ruth E. Carter. Their artwork and writing have been published in print, online, and video journals such as *Headmaster Magazine*, *Sculpture Magazine*, *Gaga Stigmata*, *Big Red & Shiny*, and *ASPECT: The Chronicle of New Media Art*. Uretsky earned degrees from Biola University, the University of Connecticut, and Harvard University.

Website: <https://jruretsky.com/>

Instagram: [@jr_uretsky](https://www.instagram.com/jr_uretsky) | [@jr_worshipband](https://www.instagram.com/jr_worshipband) | [@comoquewao](https://www.instagram.com/comoquewao)

About Boston Center for the Arts

Boston Center for the Arts (BCA) supports working artists to create, perform, and exhibit new works; develops new audiences; and connects the arts to community, and has for over five decades engaged the creative community for public good. While the organization's physical



residence is in the historic South End, BCA touches every part of Boston’s cultural ecosystem. A leading force in the city’s cultural community, BCA has supported thousands of individual artists, small organizations, and performing arts companies, who add depth and dimension to the Boston arts ethos. Through residencies and programming, BCA serves as an epicenter for an expanding cohort of artists working across all disciplines, and has catalyzed careers by providing fertile ground for experimentation and artistic risk-taking. To learn more about Boston Center for the Arts, visit bostonarts.org.

About Mills Gallery

The Mills Gallery has been showing contemporary artists and curators from Boston and beyond since the mid-1970s. The Mills Gallery supports innovative exhibitions that connect artists with the community, peers, and resources providing a vibrant platform for new art in Boston. The Mills also presents signature exhibitions such as the Drawing Show and the Project Room Exhibition Series which features work by BCA Studio Residents who are part of a three-year residency in the BCA Artist Studios Building.

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