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Q & A: REENA JANA TALKS TO GAYE CHAN

Q: Let's start with your piece, created in collaboration with the art historian Andrea Feeser, *Historic Waikiki* (2001), which was recently on view at the Asia Society in New York. (The Web site component, featuring anecdotes and personal histories from Hawaiians themselves juxtaposed with tourist postcards and other visual paraphernalia, is still accessible at www.downwindproductions.com.) **A:** Andrea and I co-founded DownWind Productions in 1999. Our work takes place on multiple fronts but all of it is located within the agitprop tradition. We started with tourist souvenirs and are currently working on a coffee table book. Our "travel website" www.downwindproductions.com, is a collaboration between the sociologist Nandita Sharma and me. All of our productions center on the histories and current realities of Waikiki. Waikiki is viewed as an actual specific site/sight and as a metaphor for countless other places where self-sustaining and self-determining people have been variously dislocated for profit. **Q:** *Historic Waikiki* reminds me of Jamaica Kincaid's rather bitter musings on tourism (to her native country of Antigua) in her book, *A Small Place*, which places the Caribbean tourist industry in the context of Western colonialism. Kincaid seemed to suggest that tourism maintains a colonial relationship between "the West" and indigenous peoples and cultures, i.e., the roles of "superior" and exploitative Westerners and exoticized natives who are taken advantage of. Yet, tourism is accepted as a very viable means of economic sustenance for an indigenous community. Can you discuss how you address these problems in *Historic Waikiki*? **A:** The anecdotes and personal histories included in our website are not only by Hawaiians, but by people of diverse backgrounds who variously live/d, work/ed and otherwise engage/d with the contested site of Waikiki. In this regard the website does not present a Hawaiian/Western binary based upon specific identities. Nandita and I are much more interested in two different politics in dealing with land and life—one based upon self-sustenance and the other on exploitation and destruction. Hawaii's current economy is almost entirely based on tourism and the U.S. military. Downwindproductions.com looks at how this "dependency" was orchestrated: through institutionalization by a colonial government, the imposition of a private/public property system, the creation of an indentured labor force for an export-based agricultural industry, and the forcible dislocation of small farmers. We also examine how this process of violence is framed as "progress" and "development" through hegemonic history and imagery. The website explores these issues in our tongue-in-cheek timeliness, quizzes and tours, focusing on specific topics like the semiotics of the public space, the politics of naming, etc. The main feature of the site is a collection of stories and images linked from dots on the map page, juxtaposed with a quote by Patrick Chamoiseau: "Our thousand stories replace their history." **Q:** How did you compile and edit the narratives featured in *Historic Waikiki*? Did the project take on a growing momentum? Are you receiving constant submissions from Hawaiians? (Note: the term Hawaiian or Native-Hawaiians is used to indicate only those people who are descendants of the first two waves of people who came to Hawaii prior to James Cook). **A:** We operate somewhere between being curators and editors. The intent of collecting and publishing "stories" is to problematize the notion of a space, any space, having only one history. We are, therefore, particularly interested in things that the tourist industry won't tell us. The stories and images primarily come from people we meet in every type of situation—through the presentations we do, from communications through the site, in bars and stores, on the streets and beaches of Waikiki, through personal introductions, etc. Surprisingly, while people are always willing to tell us stories, they generally don't think their stories matter unless they measure up to some mainstream "historical" value system. We have discovered through this project just how effective hegemony has been in colonizing our imaginations to the point that we believe abstractions are more real than our own lived experiences. We therefore spend a lot of time with the "story-tellers" to tease out those lived experiences—and together we figure out what their stories might tell us about larger social relationships. **Q:** The presentation of *Historic Waikiki* at the Asia Society included packets filled with concrete, marketed to the audience as "authentic" souvenirs of Honolulu hotels. Clearly, the piece is a commentary both on the "bogusness" of tourism and the destruction of the environment that accompanies hotel development. Having been to Waikiki several times, I always try to imagine what the area would have been like undeveloped/sublime. And, I wonder about the paradoxical experience that tourists have while there: the garish souvenir shops and cheaply fabricated motels that contrast with the natural gorgeousness of the ocean and beaches. Can you discuss the impetus for the project? **A:** The

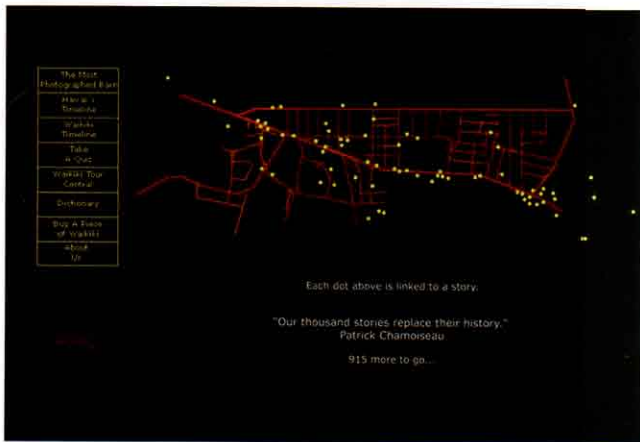
■ CHIMAERA [CHIMAERA 20 OF 43 (GARFIELD)], 2001, Pin-pricks on 43 framed chromogenic prints, Courtesy of the artist

paradox you experienced is very complicated and much more nuanced than it appears on the surface. Let's look at the binary of undeveloped/sublime on one end, and garish pre-fab high- AND low-end shops and hotels on the other. For thousands of years Waikiki has been a highly developed and thriving agri- and aqua-cultural system fed by streams running from the mountains. A canal was dredged in the 1920s under the pretext of mosquito eradication. It succeeded in destroying all the food farming and converted the fertile wetlands into prime tourist investment properties. Waikiki's natural shoreline was often narrow and rocky. In 1951 over 100,000 tons of sand was hauled in to create the "natural" beach most people have come to associate with Waikiki through promotional language and pictures. In subsequent years, the sand washed into the coral reef system and suffocated the reefs and the sea life that inhabited them. The current Waikiki Revitalization Plan includes discussion of hauling in more sand to "re-widen" the beach. In the last few years, several artificial streams have been built into the concrete sidewalk. (See <http://www.downwindproductions.com/beach.html>.) So in this light the concrete chunks we sell as souvenirs are not bogus at all. **Q: How do you hope tourist boards or community groups reacted to the piece? How do you hope they would react?** **A:** We're in communication with several community/environmental programs on a regular basis and are invited to do about ten presentations a year for different community groups and educational institutions. People seem to be very engaged by the content of our work and are particularly interested in the way we do our work. We were just invited to a meeting with the Dean of the School of Travel Industry Management at the University of Hawaii so we are anxious to see how that goes. We have never sought direct contact with Hawaii's Visitor Bureau, though, I am quite confident they would not like any of our ideas. **Q: Is the project a political one, and do you hope to be seen as an activist?** **A:** We work to create space for counter-hegemonic perspectives within the public arena. So, yes, DownWind Productions is a political entity, but I personally do not have any particular investment in how I am identified. My work takes many forms and I play many roles. I am much more interested in the flexibility and intersections among these activities. **Q: In regard to your 2003 piece *A Dot and a Line*, which deals with the drawing of boundaries and the photographic documentation of "reality," I was reminded of some of the ideas of the African novelist, Chinua Achebe, which are often taught in classes on colonialism and decolonization. He argues that formerly colonized peoples should write in the language of the colonized; like other thinkers representing indigenous groups who choose to communicate in forms imposed on them by Westerners. He believes that to do so is to create something new which reflects the experience of the colonized. In addition, other scholars believe that such action represents a "conquering" of the colonizer's culture, a reversing of the roles, if you will. Is this what you are attempting in *A Dot and a Line*, by using cartography and photography, tools used by imperialists, colonialists and capitalists, to oppress and exploit peoples?** **A:** In *A Dot and a Line's* exhibition catalogue, we included a quote by Martin Heidegger. He wrote, "The fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture." Both cartography and photography feed us the illusion of knowing. These pictorial abstractions naturalize territorial claims and boundaries where none exist. Most alarmingly, the "conquest" articulated by Heidegger is that we have come to see these representations as more real, more legitimate than our own lived experiences. This is the relationship I attempt to expose in *A Dot and a Line*. I do this by drawing the viewers' attention to the absurdity of border making through my own absurd methodology. Namely, by using the shapes created by pairing the shadows left accidentally by the amateur photographers as a cookie-cutter



■ **A DOT AND A LINE**, 2003, found photographs, photo corners on screen-printed atlas pages, 19.25" x 11", Courtesy of the artist

■ **CHIMAERA** [CHIMAERA 18 OF 43 (GRANT)], 2001, Pinpricks on 43 framed chromogenic prints, Courtesy of the artist



■ GAYE CHAN AND NANDITA SHARMA, WWW.DOWNWINDPRODUCTIONS.COM, 1999, web media, Courtesy of the artist

■ A DOT AND A LINE, 2003. Inkjet print on onion skin paper, 2 1/4" x 8.5", Courtesy of the artist



template to make bite-size pieces/ territories from world atlases. To refer back to your question, I am not attempting to “conquer” the colonizer’s culture by a reversal of roles. That culture is based on their use of illegitimate power through violence and through the manufacturing of consent. I am attempting to unsettle the consent given to top-down boundaries and identities that have been imposed, and to instead acknowledge the legitimacy of our actual lived experiences, and the alliances and adversaries based upon them. **Q:** Some of your other works, including *Chimaera* (2001) and *Departure* (1999), deal directly with the illusion of the American Dream as experienced specifically by Asian-American Hawaiians to Hawaii. The former consists of photographs of Asian-American Hawaiians superimposed with reproductions of official portraits of Western leaders such as George Washington, which you “drew” by pin-pricking outlines onto the photographs’ surfaces. The latter consists of a nonlinear meditation, in the form of an installation incorporating various objects (an American flag, personal mementoes on America. These works seem to express the (n)either/(n)or character of becoming an Asian American. Please talk about creating a palpable expression of this feeling of alienation, which to me seems like it could be understood by audiences of any national descent, even those descended from Mayflower passengers. The visual elements you choose are so visceral in impact. **A:** You are right that the “American Dream” functions importantly in both of these projects. The dream’s promise is what propels the movement of many into the First World. “Success” in the First World is defined within this system of oppression and exploitation of others. The feeling of alienation in *Departure* and *Chimaera* is the tragedy of what it means to dream in America. **Q:** As a photographer, can you discuss the challenges of working in installation versus photography? **A:** I am assuming you mean photography in terms of unique single images or multiple images that form one artwork. I work with found material (including photographic material) from a cultural studies perspective with two recurring methods. One, I seek out social patterns by pouring through tons and tons of similar things. Or I look at one thing very, very closely. Basically I love to see what can happen from the slow tedious process of close scrutiny. The installation format allows me to literally re-stage this process by the way the viewer’s body navigates through the exhibition space. I have not been successful achieving this through single artworks. I do think that book and web projects have this potential. **Q:** Now that the apotheosis of Internet art has been achieved, the hype surrounding “new media” art has died down. Do you believe the Web will remain viable as an effective art form? Why or why not? What are some of the challenges and advantages of using the Internet to address the themes that you have chosen to discuss in your work with DownWind Productions? **A:** [laughing] You New Yorkers are so funny. Most of the world is completely unaware of, or cares little about, these rises and falls. Actually I have never been interested in using cutting-edge technology and dislike brand new things in general. I initially resisted making the website until I came to the realization there was no less expensive or efficient way to get into so many peoples’ consciousness. www.downwindproductions.com is found by Googlers who do searches on everything from Waikiki tours, Waikiki maps, Waikiki webcams, and mantis shrimps, to Louis Vuitton, and on to police brutality. I have never had anyone accidentally walk into an exhibition of my work thinking it was a dentist office or a supermarket. For me, accidental encounters allow for this very special potential. One that is only possible when you are a bit confused. **END**

REENA JANA is a Contributing Editor at *Art Asia Pacific*. Her writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Artnews*, *ELLE*, *Wired*, and numerous other publications.