

Genteel

Lawrence Chua

The house on Kamaile Street is still there. A squat two story concrete block, it sits perpendicular to the street. Apartments radiate off its vertical axis like orderly cells. Banal in its execution, it is unrecognizable from the other buildings on this quiet street in downtown Honolulu. My father lived in this building towards the end of his short, violent life. He shared two rooms and a bathroom with his third wife, various cockroaches, and the detritus of a life lived fleeing some invisible threat. His apartment was bursting with things. Most of these things seemed inappropriate to the new life he had found in Honolulu. He had laid a plush carpet down on the linoleum floor that he had taken from one of his homes on the mainland. Two large couches took up most of the floor space in one of the two rooms. His kitchen cabinets were bursting with provisions that he could not possibly consume in a single lifetime. I would like to say that he valued objects more than he valued life, but I think that is not true. I think it is closer to the truth to observe that he knew how to relate to objects better than to his own children.

A model of a shack. Tinned goods. Insects embroidered on lace doilies. There is much about Lynne Yamamoto's "Genteel" that reminds me of my father and the house on Kamaile Street. The work that she has put in the gallery looks comfortably familiar, but on closer inspection there is something awry about it. The canned foods are actually cast out of delicate china. They are purged of their corporate branding and of their link to the world, like the survivors of some impartial apocalypse. They assume the uncanny characteristic of objects in limbo, things whose value is now unknown. These new, impenetrable surfaces remind us of Georg Simmel's observation that value is not a property inherent to an object, but is a judgement made about them by subjects.¹ Their fragile but heavy nature reminds us that these judgments are at once precarious and profound.

When I first visited my father in his new home, I was surprised to find that the house was built of concrete cinderblock, of the kind that the Brooklyn housing projects I grew up in were made. Reflecting back on this now, I don't know what I had expected. Teak wood? Palm fronds? Marble? No. Concrete. Tin. Glass. This was the vernacular material of which my father's reality in America was constructed. Yamamoto's model of a shed is sculpted out of marble, blanching the same spectral white as the canned goods and the doilies that complement it. Perhaps the dreams of all migrants are this color. Yet, in spite of its lofty materials, there is no mistaking the poverty of the structure, and perhaps the poverty of the dream itself.

Since the Enlightenment, architects have sought to rationalize the chaos of the world, to dominate nature to further the needs of production, and to organize great cities to better serve the purposes of order and beauty. But this utopic goal was bound up with the realities of capitalism.² Modernity sought to alleviate the symptoms of poverty but not the conditions that gave rise to it. The great

¹ Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* (Routledge and Kegan: London, Boston, 1978), p. 73.

² Le Corbusier famously poses the question "architecture or revolution?" in *Towards a New Architecture* (Dover: New York, 1986, originally published as *Vers Une Architecture* in 1923). For a more nuanced observation of the inherent contradictions of modern architecture, see Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia* (MIT Press: Cambridge, 1976).

capitalist organizations of the 20th century adopted the utopic ideas of the European modernists and there is something of this tragedy inherent in Yamamoto's work.

The sorrow of this failed dream of salvation pre-dates the 20th century. Mid-nineteenth century missionary housing in Hawai'i established and maintained separate spheres between missionaries and the different classes of Hawaiians whom they sought to "save." House forms were imported from New England and adapted to facilitate friendships with chiefs while at the same time restricting access of commoners to the core of the house. Lucy Thurston, whose family built a house in Kailua, Kona, stated that "no intercourse whatever should exist between children and heathen," and planned a compound with separate yards, divided by six-foot-high stone walls with "(a)s few doors as possible, as the natives are like children, ready to press through every gap."³

The walls of the house on Kamaile street were made of concrete but they could not protect its inhabitants from the native outside. At night, insects ran riot over the house. Large cockroaches, in particular, seemed to come and go with particular fearlessness. I have always associated these large beasts with my father's origins, a past that seemed to extend before the beginnings of recorded time. They were a migrant Asian species, like my father. As a child, I was terrified of them. Their bodies were like dark, shiny eyes that seemed to follow me around the room. When they moved towards me, disproving my father's wisdom that I was bigger and therefore far more scarier to them, my heart froze. They would crawl up the walls of the apartment on Kamaile street and then leap in seeming desperation. Their lack of resolve disgusted me, as did their unruliness and their selfish industry. How unlike ants they were! But what really revolted me was how much they reminded me of a past that my father had tried, and failed, to protect me from. All the goods that my father had accumulated could not keep this past from asserting itself in our lives. I would try to stay awake and fend them off, but inevitably my body would surrender and I would fall asleep on the couch, dreaming of millions of dark limbs crawling over me, claiming me as one of their own, reminding me of the desperate kingdom my ancestors had tried to leave behind.

In "Insect Immigrants, after Zimmerman (1948)," Yamamoto has embroidered found doilies with images reminiscent of the drawings that are a part of the work of Elwood Zimmerman, an American entomologist best known for his cataloging of the insect life of Hawai'i. Crowded within spots of light on the gallery wall, they appear as ghostly memorials to creatures that are at once revolting and familiar. By using refined materials to recreate common objects, structures, and memories, Yamamoto reveals the promise of salvation that draws us to them. She looks at these objects with the compassionate but unflinching gaze with which a good scholar observes her subjects. In doing so, she is able to remind us of the shifting value of objects and lives in different regimes of time and space, and the profound sadness of sunshine on remote islands.

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³ Laurel Spencer Forsythe, "Anglo-Hawaiian Building in Early-Nineteenth Century Hawai'i," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, Vol. 6, Shaping Communities*. (1997), p. 168.