

Sweet and sour history

Artist Lynne Yamamoto uses the symbol of Hawaii, the pineapple, to reflect on culture and colonization

In one room at the Mattress Factory, Lynne Yamamoto has arranged small, stooped figures cut from Dole boxes depicting how strongly identified the workers are with their company.

BY MARY THOMAS
POST-GAZETTE ART CRITIC

Picture a company town, where immigrant workers and their families live in small, look-alike company-owned houses and shop for necessities at a company-run store. The one you have in mind probably isn't in Hawaii.

As artist Lynne Yamamoto talks about members of her family, and other Japanese immigrants, who labored on the Dole-owned plantation island of Lanai, it becomes apparent that there are parallels to the experience of Europeans who immigrated to Western Pennsylvania to work in the mines and mills.

The Honolulu-born artist, who is assistant professor of art at Smith College in Northampton, Mass., was in Pittsburgh two weeks ago to put the finishing touches on her installation at the Mattress Factory. It's part of the exhibition "New Installations: Artists in Residence," that opens Sunday.

Yamamoto, who grew up on the island of Oahu and is 42 years old, has consistently drawn upon her heritage for inspira-

tion for her sculpture, installation, video and photographic work.

Within the stories of family and ethnic history, she's found a rich repository that invites exploration of the intersections of memory and history, of places where the personal and the wider culture come together or separate.

The personal component, however, is just the starting point for a lengthy process that involves research across increasingly diverse disciplines.

In this installation, the central figure is the pineapple.

Yamamoto's research invariably uncovers interesting isolated facts, such as the pineapple is the third largest global crop, after bananas and citrus.

But more weighty observations also begin to reveal themselves over time.

As she researched the agricultural history of pineapple, for example, she became "interested in the way pineapple connected to colonization." Within this context, the pineapple's economic status takes on more sinister meaning. She realized it could be a "really potent symbol for all of the ideas I was investigating."

Christopher Columbus is credited, Yamamoto says, with the "so-called discovery of the pineapple," after which the exotic yellow fruit became a trendy food in Europe. A pineapple could be rented to serve as a centerpiece for dinner parties to impress guests. One fruit might make the rounds of several homes, serving as a decorative element. The wealthiest hostesses would actually purchase it to serve to her eager diners.

The 1893 Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago, marked the 400th anniversary



of Christopher Columbus' discovery of the New World. (The plants from the exposition agriculture building, including a pineapple, were purchased after the fair closed for the new Phipps Conservatory.)

That was also the year that Queen Lydia Kamekeha Liliuokalani, the last of the Hawaiian monarchs, was overthrown by a "group of American businessmen," Yamamoto says. Hawaii was an important acquisition for strategic military purposes and also as a potential plantation for sugar cane and pineapple crops. Sanford Dole, cousin to pineapple king James Dole, became the first territorial governor. And with marketing savvy, "fresh" and "pineapple" became connected with Hawaii — as in "fresh Hawaiian pineapple"; the fruit became associated with ham and upside-down cake; and recruiters began looking for workers to harvest and process the expanding crop, the largest numbers coming from Japan.

The workers were so important to the economy that after Pearl Harbor they remained free while prominent figures in the Japanese-American community, Japanese language school teachers, Buddhist priests and some fishermen were sent to internment camps.

SMOOTH CAYENNE

As her research evolved, these seemingly disparate elements gained cohesiveness in Yamamoto's vision. The accumulation of history, culture, memory and personal experience was "distilled into this installation, which invites the visitor to reflect upon the choices that I made," she says.

"Smooth Cayenne" — the name of a preferred species of pineapple — occupies two rooms on the second floor of the museum's 1414 Monterey St. satellite.

In the first, a wallpaper the deep golden yellow of the sweetest pineapple serves as a "touchstone that relates to botanical bounty and colonization."

Imprinted upon it are two images that repeat. One is of a water tower, painted and altered to look like a huge pineapple, that once rose over the Dole pineapple packing plant in Honolulu, both gone now.

The other is the: "Dunmore Pineapple," an architectural folly built in Scotland in 1761.

"The pineapple was a really hot fruit in Europe," Yamamoto says. "Gardeners were trained to grow



Lynne Yamamoto stands next to a glowing bust that holds the pieces of a pineapple at The Mattress Factory, North Side. Right and below: Details from Yamamoto's pineapple wallpaper.



pineapples in glass houses. [The folly] comes out of that fascination with the pineapple. The idea of crowning a building with a pineapple is connected with that impulse to know and catalog and map the world, connected to the impulse to conquer and own, which are hallmarks of 18th-century Enlightenment attitudes."

In the center of the room is a glaringly white, headless bust on a pedestal covered with irregular black forms. The gloved arms hold the oval, patterned edible body of a pineapple in one hand and the spiky clump of its green leaves in the other, having just "broken the crown," as detaching the leaves is called. Within the context of the in-

stallation the figure may be read as allegorical for the Caucasian entrepreneurs who overthrew the last monarch and took control of the islands.

The dark forms on the pedestal are silhouettes of the world's top 26 pineapple producing countries, almost all of which were once colonies of the West. Their blackness indicates "unknown territory," Yamamoto says. "Joseph Conrad's heart of darkness."

Looking into the adjoining room seemingly provides a bird's-eye view of a number of workers harvesting pineapples. The small, stooped figures are cut from Dole boxes and the strong logo practically obscures the outlines of the people, referring to the way workers became "so strongly identified with being employees of that company." Behind them, their shadows populate the wall, but have the same opacity of identity and information as the silhouettes on the pedestal.

"The graphics are so strong, they almost keep you from seeing the figures," Yamamoto says. "But the image is strongest as shadow."

She is a presence in both rooms, having posed for both the bust and the laborers' pattern, which become in a sense self-portraits that simultaneously illustrate the concept of one as a part of the whole and the whole comprising its

parts. As such, this work is part of a series that fits well under the umbrella issue of identity.

Yamamoto grew up in a family that retained interest in its cultural roots, and she took classes in Japanese classical dance and attended Japanese language school. Her father was too young to serve in the military during World War II, but two uncles were part of the all Japanese-American 442nd Infantry and 100th Battalion, both distinguished for their valor.

After generations of assimilation, stereotypes of Japanese-Americans persist, Yamamoto says. Some that she's encountered include a presumed "excellence in math, science and computer science; quiet; studious; meek; humble; deceitful; a treacherousness masked by a quiet, reliable demeanor."

On the other side of the coin, it clearly distresses the artist that a few Japanese Americans who have risen to positions of political power have been responsible for legislation that's been harmful to native Hawaiians. "Greed is a universal human characteristic," she muses.

Other Japanese-Americans have become activists and are partnering with the Hawaiians to "ameliorate the detrimental effect three centuries of colonization have had on them."



PREVIEW

'NEW INSTALLATIONS'

WHERE: Mattress Factory, 500 Sampsonia Way, North Side.

WHEN: Opening reception 1-5 p.m. Sunday with free exhibition tours at 1 and 3 p.m. Continues through June 27, 2004.

WORKSHOP: 1-4 p.m. Nov. 15, "Narrative: Women and Memory," led by Lynne Yamamoto and writer Judith Gold Stizel, will investigate the intersection of narrative, memory, history and cultural identity. \$10, \$8 students and members. Registration required.

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Saturday and 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday.

ADMISSION: \$8, \$5, students and seniors; free, children, members and Thursdays.

INFORMATION: 412-231-3169 or www.mattress.org.

It's evidence of social progress, albeit slow, that Yamamoto has felt the freedom to change her process, going "beyond the genre of artist of color" to "more complicated models, thinking about the impact of immigration and assimilation."

And it is such laudable and intensely conceived exhibitions as this one that will move the necessary dialogue along.

Other exhibiting artists are Jeremy Boyle, of Pittsburgh; Rebecca Holland, Santa Fe, N.M.; Liza McConnell, Brooklyn, N.Y.; Curtis Mitchell, New York City; Ara Peterson, Jim Drain and Eamon Brown, Providence, R.I.; Ann Reichlin, Ithaca, N.Y.; Margo Sawyer, Austin, Texas.

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Artist reflects on a sweet and sour history