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About the Art: Carl Franklin Kaʻailāʻau Pao's *Kiʻi Kupuna: ʻO ʻAilāʻau* (*Ancestral Images: Forest Eater*) Series

Abstract

In his most recent series of paintings titled Kiʻi Kupuna: ʻO ʻAilāʻau (Ancestral Images: Forest Eater)*, Native Hawaiian artist Carl Franklin Kaʻailāʻau Pao reflects on the volcano deity ʻAilāʻau, who predates the more popularly known goddess Pele in the Hawaiian pantheon. Over the last century, ʻAilāʻau's story has largely fallen into obscurity. However, the eruption of Kīlauea volcano on Hawaiʻi Island in 2018 heralded what many kūpuna (elders) and cultural practitioners believed to be the triumphant return of the god. Pao's new, experimental works seek to place ʻAilāʻau at the center of collective remembering once again—not as a challenger to the Pele narratives, but as a coequal in a more diverse, deeper, and complex storyline.*

Keywords*: ʻAhuʻailāʻau, ʻAilāʻau, kupuna (ancestor), Fissure 8, Hawaiʻi*

In his most recent series of experimental paintings titled *Kiʻi Kupuna: ʻO ʻAilāʻau* (*Ancestral Portraits: Forest Eater*), Carl Franklin Kaʻailāʻau Pao reflects on the return of the volcano deity ʻAilāʻau, who predates the more popularly known goddess Pele in the Hawaiian pantheon. Over the last century ʻAilāʻau's story has largely fallen into obscurity. He has been consigned to the margins of memory; forgotten by all but a few. But the 2018 eruptions of the great shield volcano Kīlauea on Hawaiʻi Island heralded what many believed to be his reawakening—one characterized by the convergence of the twin forces of destruction and creation. During the eruption, Fissure 8, the massive vent that opened up on the East Rift Zone of Kīlauea and which produced the most intense volcanic activity, gave rise to a river of lava that incinerated thousands of acres of farmland and old growth native forest, destroyed homes, and razed entire residential neighborhoods. The images of the eruptions broadcast by media outlets around the world were surreal: fountains of lava gushed several storeys high in residential backyards and concrete pavements and roadways cracked open with fumaroles releasing toxic gases into the air. Cars abandoned on the side of the road were set ablaze as lava

engulfed them. And countless sites of cultural significance were lost forever, entombed under a thick crust of black basalt. Hundreds of people were forced to evacuate their homes, some never to return again. So much was lost. Yet out of all of this brutal upheaval, out of all of the churning, fiery chaos, something new was being birthed: land. The island was growing.

During the crisis, many kūpuna (elders) and cultural experts within the Hawaiian community attested to having had dreams and visions that identified the volcanic activity at Fissure 8 as being the work of the older god ʻAilāʻau rather than the younger Pele. They said the eruptions felt more male, aggressive. Some believed that even the sulfurous gases that were being emitted smelled different. Scientific claims seemed to corroborate their speculations; geological surveys confirmed that the lava that flowed during the eruptions originated from older pockets of magma.[1] It was, many believed, the molten lifeblood of an old god. In May 2019, after intense public discussion, Fissure 8 was given a name that acknowledged the immortal force behind it: Ahuʻailāʻau (Altar of ʻAilāʻau).

Carl Franklin Kaʻailāʻau Pao's most recent works—exploratory pieces that will be used to inform a larger series for a future exhibition—seek to place ʻAilāʻau at the center of collective remembering once again; not as a challenger to the Pele narratives, but as a coequal in a more diverse, deeper, and complex storyline. Further, the works are personal and hold familial significance for Pao. He, himself, bears a variant of the deity's name, Kaʻailāʻau (the addition of "ka" means "the"), which derives from his tūtū's (paternal grandmother's) lineage. It is a name that he has also passed down to his daughter. For Pao, ʻAilāʻau is not simply a ravenous forest eater, as his name means when translated. Rather, he is—to Pao—a beloved tūtū kāne, a grandfather. Pao's paintings are, in fact, portraits of a deified family member as imagined by the artist. They are works that restore a once forgotten god to contemporary consciousness and, in so doing, reanimate the life affirming flow of ancestral connections.

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Notes

[1] Hawaiian Volcano Observatory, United States Geological Survey, "Volcano Watch–What We've Learned from Kīlauea's 2018 Lower Eat Rift Zone Eruption," April 25, 2019, https://www.usgs.gov/news/volcano-watch-what-weve-learned-kilaueas-2018-lower-east-rift-zone-eruption, accessed Jan. 18, 2022.

Figure 1. Carl Franklin Kaʻailāʻau Pao, *Kiʻi Kupuna: ʻO ʻAilāʻau–Maka*, 2020. Acrylic and shellac on canvas, 40 x 30 in., private collection. Photograph courtesy of the artist

Figure 2. Carl Franklin Ka‘ailā‘au Pao, *Ki‘i Kupuna: ‘O ‘Ailā‘au–Niho*, 2020. Acrylic and shellac on canvas, 40 x 30 in., private collection. Photograph courtesy of the artist

Figure 3. Carl Franklin Kaʻailāʻau Pao, *Kiʻi Kupuna: ʻO ʻAilāʻau–Makahā*, 2020. Acrylic and shellac on canvas, 40 x 30 in., private collection. Photograph courtesy of the artist

Figure 4. Carl Franklin Kaʻailāʻau Pao, *Ki‘i Kupuna: ‘O ‘Ailā‘au–Maka II*, 2021. Acrylic and shellac on canvas, 40 x 30 in., collection of the Hawai‘i State Foundation on Culture and the Arts. Photograph courtesy of the artist