

# HAWAI'I

## - THE NATIVES ARE NOT HAPPY

How should we react to two centuries of oppression and humiliation? Sculptor William Hanson's answer is with sorrow and anger, feelings that also describe his *mission*.

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We learned to know William Hanson when we designed a new website for him about a year ago. This assignment gave us a good opportunity to gain insight into his work as an artist. We must confess that we had quite a prejudiced view of his sculptures to start with - the painted wooden shapes seemed to indicate that he was trying to ride a fashionable ethnic wave without, as we saw it, belonging to the ethnic group whose style he was imitating.

On closer acquaintance with William and his art, we became more and more positive. His chosen forms of expression are deliberate to the nth degree of accuracy, as we experienced several times. He never attempts to ingratiate himself with the onlooker by adopting a bland and folkloric style. The more closely we looked, the more we realised that his works reflect his intensely critical view of the way in which Hawai'i and its indigenous population have been treated, and are still being treated, by the USA among others.

One of the items displayed on the website shows William's exhibition in Berlin in 2013: "HAWAI'I – THE NATIVES ARE NOT HAPPY". One of the walls in the exhibition gallery displays a time line recording events from the history of Hawai'i. The time line, which stretches from 1778 to 2009, does not make particularly happy reading. The classical, blood-soaked colonial history that is told contains the familiar elements, where a well organised society is discovered, taken over and destroyed in the worst imaginable way by a greedy Western power. We Europeans see Hawai'i as synonymous with a holiday paradise, so things cannot be that bad surely? But bad they are - at least for those who belong to the original culture. As in so many other places, such as Australia, North America and Taiwan, the original inhabitants are prone to unemployment and alcohol problems and are roughly shouldered away from the resources that in truth belong to them. Sometimes they are favoured with a tiny reservation, but even there they are seldom left in peace. Some years ago, Facebook boss Mark Zuckerberg bought a beach site in Hawai'i. He wanted the 740-acre site (nine times as large as Oslo's Frogner Park) for himself, so he erected a fence around the whole perimeter. The Kaula'i people, who had hunting and gathering rights in the area, protested. Zuckerberg's response was to sue them. Amazingly, given his millions of dollars and fat cat lawyers, he lost the case. In the end he had no choice but to drop the matter.

But let us return to William and his art. We take the liberty of quoting from one of his exhibition catalogues:

"William Hanson was born and grew up in Honolulu on Hawai'i. His parents, who were of Scandinavian origin, had moved from the USA in order to settle there. In his own words, Hanson is therefore a *Europeanised islander* and simultaneously an American citizen. He left Hawai'i as a young man, went to sea, studied German language and literature in Hawai'i, sculpture in England and the USA, and has lived in Norway since 1992.

How should we react to two centuries of oppression and humiliation? Hanson's answer is with sorrow and anger, feelings that also describe his *mission*. His approach to his art is different from other contemporary Hawaiian artists, who under the banner of resistance mainly support the islanders' efforts "to define themselves as indigenous Hawaiians with an independent cultural tradition within Hawai'i's multicultural society". As a descendant of people who set out in search of new horizons, Hanson has a different viewpoint. He is far removed from existential questions and national affiliations; his standpoint is rather that of a man of the present day, who demands that if we are to thrive and survive, humanity must be the underlying principle in our society. Hanson's critical treatment of Hawai'i's colonial inheritance refers to an older art form, often described as ritual art, where the use of the material (primarily Norwegian pine) represents in contemporaneous form the close relationship between man and nature that is the core characteristic of traditional Hawaiian culture.