

The Natives Are Not Happy

Hawai'i in the Work of William Hanson

The sculptures of William Hanson occupy a special position in contemporary art. They care very little for the ongoing dissolution of boundaries between art forms, which often allow three-dimensional objects to be presented within a space as the smallest common denominator of sculpture; instead his works assert themselves as freestanding sculptures in the classic tradition which, in some cases, take on a statuesque, almost sacred form. The sculptures are in wood, and they are often polychromed, something which, like their references to ancient myths, makes them striking in appearance. The striking world of imagery that has evolved is closely tied to the artist's biography. He transports his personal experiences into the universal, bringing them together with a resolute political attitude, something that also affords the works of William Hanson a special position among sculptures that rest upon a figurative tradition.

William Hanson was born in Honolulu in 1952 and spent his childhood and early years in Hawai'i. His parents, who were of Scandinavian ancestry, had moved from the USA to settle there. Hanson is, therefore, a »Europeanised islander« as he refers to himself and an American national at the same time. He left Hawai'i as a young man, sailed to sea, studied German language and literature in Hawai'i, sculpture in London and the USA, and has lived in Norway since 1992. Hawai'i's importance for him as home, by virtue of birth and socialisation, grew gradually through conscious retrospection from afar. In 1995, he wrote the following for a group exhibition: »My ancestors were very devout Christians from Norway. This inheritance stood in stark contrast to the tropical surroundings of my island home. The constant tension between the belief in an emotionally cold god and the experience of a sensual island environment formed me and finally led to an identity crisis.«¹

Hawai'i (formerly the Sandwich Islands) is a group of islands in the Pacific Ocean. In the wake of Western colonisation it has been associated with a great many unfortunate clichés, which have portrayed it as an exotic paradise ever since it was catapulted onto the world map by the English navigator James Cook in 1778 during his third Pacific voyage. Established in 1810, the independence of the Hawaiian Kingdom was often threatened by external forces during its existence. Following an American-supported putsch of the monarchy, a short-lived republic emerged in 1894, before the islands were annexed in 1898 by the USA, which eventually declared them to be its 50th state in 1959. Hawai'i thus became part of America (the continent, that is, and not the unfortunately still commonly used terminological usurpation by the USA), despite the fact that the archipelago belongs culturally to Polynesia.²

The complicated process of Hawai'i's absorption into the Western capitalist sphere was one marked by suffering and violence. It went hand in hand with the decimation of the native population, caused by the fatal introduction of foreign diseases, the suppression of native culture, considered inferior or primitive, and the profit-orientated industrial exploitation of the natural environment. This finds its continued expression today in a Hawai'i that is plagued by military training exercises and mass tourism. However, the 1970s saw the emergence of the (second) »Hawaiian Renaissance«³ – a broad-based civil rights and resistance movement that recalls its lost traditions and revives them. Their political demands range from partial autonomy to national independence.⁴

»Hawaiians, both the living and their ancestors, embody for me the soul of the islands«⁵, William Hanson wrote. Expressive of this soul are above all the wooden sculptures in the form of temple figures that Hanson encountered as a schoolboy at the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum⁶ in Honolulu. They gave rise to his passion for the visual arts.⁷ His reflections upon ancient cultures are based on his own experiences, unlike the ways in which so-called »primitive cultures« have been treated by artists representing Western Modernism since the early 20th century – an often superficial, formal approach that they also apply to the cultures of the South Seas. »The objects of Oceanic art have become dead objects, empty symbols into which everyone tries to interpret his or her own emotions and values. They have become the object of intellectual speculation to the same extent to which their real value has been misjudged. The first wave of fashionableness was triggered by Surrealism, which believed it had rediscovered its phantasmagoria there«⁸ – is how famous ethnologist and oceanographer Jean Guiart put it half a century ago.

The limited number of preserved artefacts is spread throughout the museums of the world and it is no coincidence that the American painter Barnett Newman, a major figure in Abstract Expressionism, exclaimed in a tone of surprise in 1946 (long before Hawai'i was incorporated into the USA) on the occasion of the »Art of the South Seas« exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (!) in New York, that most of the exhibits originated from »American science museums«. »It has taken a war to make the American people tragically aware of this region as a cultural realm, until now known as some exotic paradise mortgaged to the travel agencies.«⁹ Newman emphasises the central importance of art from the South Seas for the Surrealists. While he also considers their treatment of it to be superficial, he maintains that, on the contrary, the new abstract artists of his generation better understood the typical »sense of

magic« of South Seas art. Incidentally, Hawai'i's only general art museum, the Honolulu Academy of Arts, which opened in 1927, exhibits mainly Asian, European and American art, obviously regarding art from Hawai'i as a mere accoutrement.¹⁰

»How does one address two centuries of decimation and humiliation? With grief and with anger«¹¹ are Hanson's closing words describing his »mission.« His approach to art differs from that of contemporary Hawaiian artists who, under the motto of resistance, mainly support the efforts of the island inhabitants »in defining themselves as indigenous Hawaiians with an independent cultural tradition within Hawai'i's multicultural society.«¹² As a descendent of the »explorers,« Hanson sees things differently, far removed from existential questions and national belonging, instead as a historically thinking and critical contemporary who demands humaneness in society as a fundamental principle of life and survival. Hanson's critical treatment of Hawai'i's colonial inheritance draws reference to ancient art, often defined as ritual art, whereby his use of the material wood (mostly Nordic pine) at the same time represents the close bond between man and nature, something that is absolutely essential to the character of Hawaiian culture. His path as an artist has taken him via German Expressionist sculpture in which medieval wood carving and so-called tribal art of indigenous peoples go hand in hand, and the tradition of Norwegian sculpture right back to Viking times, which can also be found thematically in his sculptures before 2000. Reflecting upon the ancient Hawaiian view of the world enjoys a reciprocal relationship here with the Germanic and Nordic myths which, because they have often been distorted through political-ideological misuse by both the academic and artistic communities, can still be regarded today as a mine field.

In the works FOREST GODS and HEIMSKRINGLA¹³ from 1992, their intimate connection to the forest and to nature, something that was also sacred to our European ancestors, comes to bear. HELHESTEN (1998), the three-legged horse of the underworld Hel, stands for the popular belief that is nourished by the opulent world of Nordic mythology. A further parallel can be seen in the figure of THE GODDESS NERTHUS who, as a voluptuous Germanic goddess appears to be closely related to the figure of PAPA HANAUMOKU (2002)¹⁴, the Hawaiian Mother Earth. She is embodied in the exhibition by the sculpture KU KOHANA (2009), a title that means »to be naked« and »to stand alone«. The struggle with one's inner »trolls«¹⁵, the search for the ultimate truth in life is a theme often found in the works of Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen (1828 – 1906). This is emphasized in Hanson's work HENRIK IBSEN'S BRAND¹⁶; together with MISSIONARY SPIRIT, A MIGHTY FORTRESS (all 1996) and other works that belong to the AT THE COURT OF THE TRYANT complex. All of these works refer to the rigid claim to truth of the monotheistic religions that is derived from divine authority, by which the human being is degraded to a sinful creature who must struggle for his own salvation. The link between missionaries and hornets in MISSIONARY SPIRIT stands for the intolerant and forceful claims of the Christian religion, a theme that again emerges in the cross of MISSIONARIES (2006). Covered with white cockroaches, in Hawai'i a derogative term for ethnic Europeans, it thus brands the (demonic) spirit of missionary work, which began historically in 1820 with the American Congregationalists. This symbolism corresponds with that of ANNO 1898 (2013), in which the annexation by the American occupying power is expressed through cockroaches surrounding Old Hawai'i in a death-bringing circle.

The works from the years following 2000, including the one last mentioned, can be read as a systematic critical examination of the imperialist monopolisation of the islands by the superpower USA. FIRST CONTACT (2008) with the death-bringing ship and the English flag (Saint George's cross) still belongs to the preceding historical phase. MEETING OF THE GODS (2008) symbolises the encounter between an established nature religion based on ancestor worship and a doctrinaire, monotheistic religion based on divine revelation.

The sculpture BATTLE OF KUAMO'O (2005), which has the aura of a memorial, refers to the warlike conflict of 1819, in which the indigenous supporters of the old religion, the so-called kapu system (kapu = taboo), lost against the royalist renegades before shortly thereafter the first Christian missionaries put a complete end to polytheism. ANNO 1893 (2008), a coffin draped with the flag of the kingdom, marks the still birth of the Republic of Hawai'i (the putsch against the monarchy was declared unlawful by United States President Bill Clinton in 1993). As a vassal, the Republic was finally incorporated by the USA half a century later.¹⁷

In ISLAND REALITIES (2006) the indigenous population is characterized above all by death, illness and suppression. After ORDER OF THE PENTAGON (2009) with the downwardpointing star as the symbol of Christianity's Satan, Hanson's unsparing criticism culminates in CIVILIZATION'S FINAL VICTORY (2011), which strips naked the true hierarchy of power. The Hawaiian flag (the only flag of an American state that contains the British Union Jack, the flag of the United Kingdom) is at the very bottom with the American flag above it, crowned by the largest, the flag of capitalism in the form of a well-fortified dollar sign. The sculpture NOT HAPPY NATIVES (2012), is a quintessential piece that alludes to the exhibition's title THE NATIVES ARE NOT HAPPY¹⁸, which in turn was influenced by the title of a recently circulated CDROM by a Hawaiian activist, who counters the stereotypes of the »happy native« that have been passed down in Europe since being coined by Rousseau. The recurring physiognomic cipher of the eyes in this

work acts as a pars pro toto that resembles ancient Hawaiian feather headdresses. The eyes are contained within a honeycomb-like structure which lends the entire work a sinister, threatening character and yet at the same time points towards a predicament in which the »natives« are branded as misunderstood outsiders. In his most recent work ANGEL OF DEATH (2013), the sense of danger is intensified by the blind face with the wide open mouth - it is not perchance that it reminds us of the mask-like countenance in the painting »The Scream« by his fellow countryman Edvard Munch. The angel's wings are formed out of coffins whose feathers spread forcefully outwards as if alarmed by a powerful but silent cry of pain.

William Hanson's works are not the embodiment of personal imagery; on the contrary, he uses the expressive power of sculptural figuration to reveal to us overpowering, magical or spiritual forces which were also certainly widespread in the pre-Christian art of Europe, but are all too often dismissed in the history of European art. However, at the same time, Hanson makes use of satire, sometimes even sarcasm, in order to raise his voice in accusation against oppressive social circumstances. Symbols and metaphors have central significance here, as does the artist's perfect execution which one can almost refer to as artisan in its skill. The clear delineation of colour replaces the artist's personal signature with clarity of expression. William Hanson's exhibition is of special significance in Berlin, as the Ethnological Museum in Berlin-Dahlem, one of the Berlin State Museums under the jurisdiction of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, is home to one of the most important collections of Hawaiian art worldwide¹⁹. There are plans for it to be presented in the historical and cultural setting of the future Humboldt Forum, part of the reconstructed Berlin City Palace.

It was not until quite recently – in 2010 / 2011 – that Dutch artist Willem de Rooij, who was born in Beverwijk in 1969, brought animal paintings by the Dutch painter Melchior de Hondecoeter (1636 –1695) together with Hawaiian feather work from museums in Berlin and elsewhere. Entitled »Intolerance,« this three-dimensional collage was exhibited in Berlin's New National Gallery and was intended as a critical reflection on exhibition practices, intercultural conflicts, power structures and the meaning of exoticism. Within the framework of our global village, William Hanson's exhibition at Meinblau draws our attention once again, and with increased vigour, to Hawai'i in order to shed light behind the façade of the Aloha State, pointing to the problems rooted in its cultural history.

Michael Nungesser, art historian
Berlin, Germany, June 2013

Translated to English by Lindsay Jane Munro

1 Quoted from the exhibition catalogue. Künstler (Artists), Lauenburgischer Kunstverein, Lauenburg 1995, without pagination.

2 In those times, a very kitschy image of Hawai'i became widespread throughout the world, promoted in particular by the mass media film and pop music hits. See Maren Kroymann: Itsy-bitsy-teenie-weenie-Honolulu-Strand-Bikini. Die Sehnsucht des Oberförsters nach der Yucca-Palme, in the exhibition catalogue Exotische Welten Europäische Phantasien, Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen und Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart: Edition Cantz 1987, pp. 132 –135.

3 The first Hawaiian Renaissance is seen as the period when Hawai'i was an independent kingdom in the 19th century, when attempts were made to suppress English and American influences. You can gain a lively insight into the Second Renaissance, which is based on meetings and interviews with activists from this movement in the following book by M. J. Harden: Die Stimmen der Weisen. Mythos, Kunst und Kulte auf Hawai'i, Munich: SIERRA from Frederking & Thaler Verlag 2002.

4 Ursula Daus reports about this new self-confidence, which can be understood as »the Polynesians embarking on a journey to themselves« (p. 15): Die Völker Polynesiens im 21. Jahrhundert. Hawai'i, Tahiti, Marquesas, Osterinsel, Berlin: Ursula Opitz publishing house 2010 (Babylon Metropolis Studies).

5 <http://www.hanson-art.com/mission.html>

6 The State Museum of Natural and Cultural History in Hawai'i was founded in the capital city Honolulu in 1889. It is Hawai'i's largest museum and contains the world's most extensive collection of Polynesian artefacts.

7 In addition to works made of bark cloth (kapa), feathers and petroglyphs, wooden sculptures form the most important artistic genre (other materials played an ancillary role), although the few examples handed down from the period at the end of the 18th century only represent the final products of a long (for ever lost) chain of tradition. They are compiled comprehensively in J. Halley Cox and William H. Davenport, Hawaiian Sculpture, Honolulu: The University of Hawai'i Press 1974.

8 Jean Guiart: Ozeanien. Die Kunst der Südsee und Australiens (from the series: Universum der Kunst), Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck 1963, p. 3

9 Barnett Newman, Art of the South Seas 1946, in: Jack Flam / Miriam Deutch (ed.): Primitivism and Twentieth Century Art. A Documentary History, Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press 2003, pp. 277–282, here: 278.

10 See Honolulu Academy of Arts. Selected Works, Honolulu, Hawai'i 1990. Hawai'i is mentioned in the last, brief chapter »Art of the Pacific, the Americas [as the rest of the continent is referred to from the perspective of the USA] and Africa«. It can be found alongside New Zealand, the Philippines, Canada, Mexico, Zaire and Nigeria, among others.

11 <http://www.hanson-art.com/mission.html>

12 Introductory text in the exhibition catalogue Ho'oku'e, resistance. Widerstand – Moderne Kunst aus Hawai'i, Linden-Museum, Stuttgart 1998, without pagination.

13 The title – Old Nordic for »Orb of the World« – refers to a medieval work (c. 1230) about Norway's kings without details of the author.

14 This monumental sculpture was exhibited in 2003 for a period of time in the entrance hall of Kassel's Main Station (»Kulturbahnhof«) as »Frauenakt in Eiche« (Female Nude in Oak).

15 Trolls refer to pre-Christian malevolent (male) supernatural beings, but the term can also refer to the inner demons with which a person is in conflict. Hanson entitled earlier exhibitions of his sculptures »Trolldom«.

16 Refers to Ibsen's 1866 drama »Brand« and its main figure, an obsessed priest.

17 A Jewish joke is doing the rounds on the internet, which alludes to Obama's (disputed) birth in Hawai'i: »While visiting the USA this month, Netanyahu asked President Obama to give Hawai'i back its independence.« (<http://www.kybeline.com/2011/05/30/warum-gibt-obama-den-hawaii-inseln-nichtihre>)

unabhängigkeit-zurück-judischer-witz/)

18 I am referring here to the CD-Rom issued by Jon Kikuo Shishido »We Are Not Happy Natives. Education and Decolonization in Hawai'i« (2002), which contains a speech by Haunani-Kay Trask, a Hawaiian feminist, author and professor of Hawaiian studies at the University of Hawai'i in Honolulu. Hanson heard a lecture by her in 1980 which had a lasting influence on him.

19 At the heart of their holdings is the collection of Eduard Arning (1855 –1936) acquired in Hawai'i. See Adrienne L. Kaepler / Markus Schindlbeck / Gisela E. Speidel (ed.): Old Hawai'i. An Ethnography of Hawai'i in the 1880s. Based on the Research and Collections of Eduard Arning in the Ethnological Museum, Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 2007.