



Svetlana Loboff's "Eau Qui Chante (Chanting Water)" is a photography and collage piece.

Creole hula

French artists find inspirational power in Hawaiian tradition

By Keiko Ohnuma
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"Crossings: France/Hawaii" is a fitting title for the project that put Sandra Kilohana Silve on Honolulu's art map: She crossed from her home in Paris to "home," Manoa, a half-dozen times last year — a cultural gap that most people hardly bridge.

But crossing worlds has turned out to be something of a life calling for the Manoa-born art critic and curator, one that she has brought home with the first of many boundary-crossing undertakings.

"Hawaii in Paris: The Art of Hula," which opened Thursday at the Honolulu Academy of Arts, is both a culmination and an initiation into navigating the terrain from local to global. About 50 works of art present an intriguing reaction by 10 Paris-based artists to watching Silve's hula halau rehearse.

The collaboration began as a fluke several years ago when an artist friend asked if she could sketch during a performance — hula being rare in France even today. The artist, Kathy Burke, asked to draw again at the dance studio. This time, a light bulb went on for Silve, a self-proclaimed "chop-suey" local girl who moved to Paris after going abroad as a University of Hawaii art history student in the early 1970s.

Rather than just invite her friend, Silve launched a venture, just as her daughter's interest in hula had motivated her to start Paris' only halau in the early 1990s. She invited a handful of artists she knew to undertake a serious, long-term initiation into the art of Hawaiian dance.

"From the very beginning, we knew that something very unique and magical was happening," Silve said of the artists'.



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"Closeup of Hula Dancer," above, is a photograph by T. Multz. At top, Sandra Kilohana Silve, right, practices a hula step with her Paris-based Halau Hula O Manoa.

'HAWAII IN PARIS: THE ART OF HULA'

Where: Honolulu Academy of Arts, 900 S. Beretania St.
When: On view from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Tuesdays to Saturdays and from 1 to 5 p.m. Sundays through July 31
Admission: \$7 general; \$4 for seniors, students and military; free for ages 12 and under
Call: 532-8700 or visit www.honolulu-academy.org
Also: Free performance by Sandra Silve's hula halau at 4 p.m. July 17 in the Doris Duke Theater



Hula: Silve feels spread of isle culture represents a positive step forward

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stunned initial encounter with the hula kahiko, so different from the coconut-bra Tahitian exotica commonly seen in France.

"I thought something very exciting would come out of it, but not immediately," she emphasizes. "I wanted to get past the first sensations and really go deep, and you can't do that in four or five sessions or even four or five months."

So Silve, whose commanding, almost unerring gaze speaks of a more primordial island inheritance than one would expect from gentle Manoa, required that the group commit to taking the experiment as far as it would go.

The artists and dancers practiced together for four years.

The paintings, drawings, photographs, collage and other work that evolved in those monthly sessions portray hula in a way American audiences are not accustomed to seeing, Silve says. The artists began with no knowledge of the tradition, and Silve didn't show them the hula-dancer schlock sold in Waikiki. Instead, she sent them off to research the history and culture of Hawaii, just as her dancers are required to do.

"I wanted to see what they would come up with from a European context ... and it's very different," she says with lingering wonder. "This is hula, but it's never been portrayed this way before."

SILVE IS WELL AWARE that transporting Hawaii's sacred dance to soil as foreign as France might raise eyebrows among those concerned about the commodification of Hawaiian culture. Trained by such eminent kumu hula as Emma Bishop, John Keola Lake and Ellen Castillo, she is quick to refuse the title of kumu for herself and says she consults regularly with her teachers on protocol.

It's just that when an interest in hula blossomed among her family and friends in her apartment on the Right Bank of the Seine, there was no one else around to feed it. She invited kumu to come teach workshops, but once they left, she decided it was worth continuing to share what she'd learned. That's because Silve strongly believes that the spread of hula and other things indigenous to Hawaii, like surfing, represent a positive step forward for the people of Hawaii.

"It's creating a much larger



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Members of Halau Hula O Manoa, from left, Malia Ukishima, Lynn Malama Lindstrom, Stephanie Kalei Rigg and Elizabeth Moana Zana work on the beginnings of their leaf skirts. At top, "Volcano" by the artist Sylve is in acrylic on wood.

audience, and hula as an expression of Hawaii is, of course, honored," Silve said. "People always look to Hawaii as the source."

Dancers who have passed through her halau — several hundred now, by her count, although only about 30 at a time — range from expatriates to native Parisians, including the occasional man. Some come out of curiosity, some for exercise, but they stay, she says, upon discovering that hula is about much more than dance.

"It's a culture but it's a way of being. They're surprised at how involved we all get with each other's lives, like family. And they love it because Paris can be an existential city where people feel very alone."

Even when autumn leaves fall along the Seine, the mana of hula makes itself available to the dancers, Silve says: "It's amazing how wherever you are, that energy is still there. I think when you're very sincere about it, it's real."

Of course, most hula dancers would not try such an experiment, and many devotees will stop short at the sight of the halau's sober-looking Europeans dancing in full regalia (as seen in a video at the Academy exhibit) or at the sometimes strange solutions the European artists came up with to represent Hawaii's colors, landscapes and myths.

But Silve reacts to such unexpected results with pure delight. The product of cultural mixing herself, she sees in

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Sandra Kilohana Silve
Leader of French hula halau

things Creole the seeds of something truly new.

"I just find, in my life, these experiences I've had organizing different kinds of events, it opens doors for many people."

IT WAS WHILE serving as a goodwill ambassador for the U.S. Information Agency in the 1980s that Silve began to see how art could help others make the sort of cultural crossings she had made all her life. Charged with showcasing contemporary American art in Africa and the Middle East, she felt she wanted to do something for her hosts in return.

So she organized exhibits of contemporary African art to show in Paris.

"That kind of opened my eyes. I just saw how getting some of the art out of these countries affected lives, opened doors for many people," she said. "It just got me thinking."

Now she hopes to do for

Hawaii what she was able to do in Africa, starting with the universal language of hula. The Academy exhibit is really a steppingstone, she says. Her eventual goal — one of many projects planned by her France-Hawaii Association — is to bring a major exhibit of Hawaii art to Paris in 2007 that will also showcase the islands' performers and products, from seashells to ukuleles.

Silve had always been struck by the artwork she saw on her visits home to Hawaii. No matter what the medium or style, something about the work spoke to her of the islands' colors, landscapes and energy.

"Something creeps in by osmosis," she theorized. "Something about the light here and the landscapes comes out in the work, whether it's abstract or figurative or functional. And when you see it all together, especially in a foreign place, you see it as an expression of a place."

Audiences in Paris were impressed by the technical expertise and meticulousness of the Hawaii art she showed in "Crossings '89, France/Hawaii," she says. Adding Hawaii cultural products to the mix could open doors for exporters, helping to build a home-grown industry outside of tourism.

Art is, after all, about communication. And Silve believes that art, beginning with the grace and power of hula, could prove to be the most eloquent way to communicate to the world what Hawaii has to offer.