

“A Saying Forth”: Rebecca Horne’s art *Pono; Final* and Susan Braley’s poem “Ho’oponopono”

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As a poet transfixed by art, I am often moved to write about art works, as if the process of composing might allow me to inhabit them. Of course, it is not possible to do so, but the act of reaching from one art form to another generates new and unexpected striations of meaning. As poet and fiction writer Aislinn Hunter observes, this act, when initiated by any maker, whether visual artist or poet, is “not a hung or typed thing, it is a gesture, a saying forth, a door swinging open between rooms.”¹

I wrote the poem “Ho’oponopono” after I discovered the art piece *Pono; Final* by Hawaiian artist Rebecca Horne.

When I first viewed this art piece, I was vacationing in Honolulu in January, 2018, a visit made particularly memorable because, on January 13, a false missile alert was issued, prompting panic and confusion for forty minutes.

During my stay, I visited the Hawaii State Art Museum, which houses a permanent collection of Hawaiian art. Over 130 pieces reflect Hawaii’s ethnic and cultural traditions. *Pono; Final* was featured in an exhibit called Hawaii: Change and Continuity; this exhibit examined Hawaii’s past, its natural bounty, and the damaging impact of humanity on its environment.

Rebecca Horne’s piece gives form to the reality of decline—in this case, the inevitable decline of the human. In the first stage of her creative process, she drew the face of an aging man, using a contour line technique. In the third and last stage, she created several charcoal drawings of the same man, who had become ill and was in hospice. She then superimposed one of these charcoal drawings on the line drawing, allowing viewers to discern, simultaneously, the vital and the dying faces—in effect, to experience the process of decline in real time.

However, *Pono; Final* is also about healing. In the second stage of her creative process, Horne inscribed a five-part “mantra” over the entire surface of the piece. This meditation, presented in handwriting, is part of the ho’oponopono forgiveness practice, a custom to bring about reconciliation in Old Hawaii. In ho’oponopono (to put to right, to amend, to make orderly), participants repeat the mantra “I am sorry, forgive me, thank you, I love you” to bring about healing in themselves and others. The phrases in the mantra, repeated several times, “clean” or correct errors and allow reconciliation. The final phrase, “I release this to Divinity,” describes letting go of the offences and beginning anew.

Horne included this mantra in *Pono; Final* to repair her relationship with the man whose face she had drawn. Love and reverence for the man endure, as does his likeness,

¹ Aislinn Hunter, “Introductory Notes.” *Arc Poetry Annual 2011: Poet as Art Thief*, 12.

even as he moves toward death.² The image of the ailing man might be seen as a representation of tradition or nature itself, at risk of disappearing without acknowledgement and reparation.

Ho'oponopono can be practised by anyone who wishes to resolve conflict in groups, such as families, or in society at large. Practitioners believe that, when conflict exists in the world, this strife is not only outside themselves but also within, since all beings are connected and all memory is collective. Everyone is responsible for transgressions and for reconciliation.

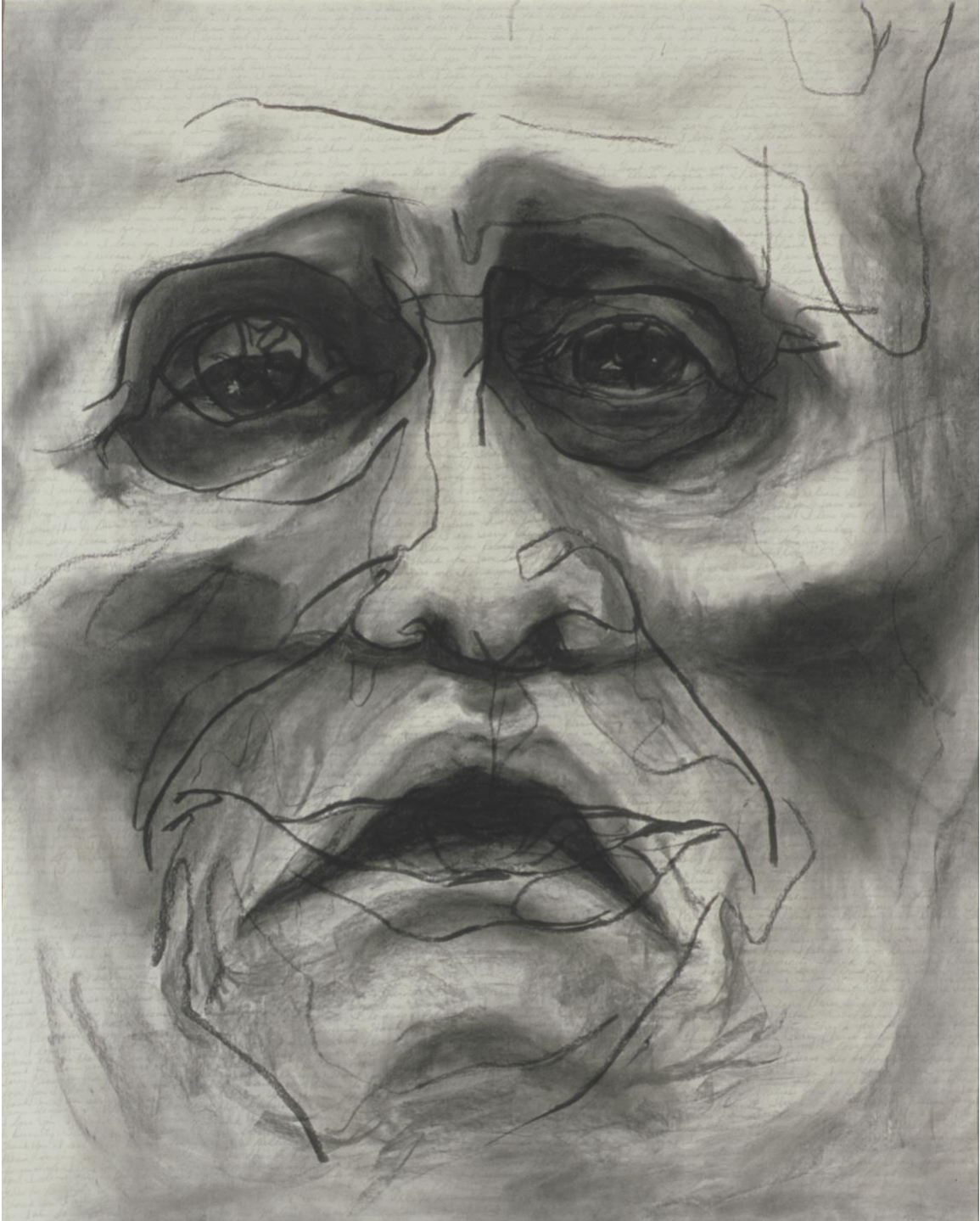
I was moved by the quiet power in Horne's piece: the startling simultaneity of life and death, present and past, love and injury; the deep devotion to the man who is her subject; and the sense of responsibility to him. As I continued my travels in Oahu, I began to see the connectedness—at the heart of Horne's piece and in the ho'oponopono practice—in the citizens, the history, the land, and the tourists, including myself.

Thus, the poem "Ho'oponopono" came into being. It is not a traditional ekphrastic poem, which would offer a description of Horne's piece, with the purpose of replicating, or at least illuminating it, with language.

Instead, the poem is aligned with contemporary ekphrasis, "a coming from and going to that holds one thing up against another."³ Inspired by the energy, dimension, and intention of *Pono; Final*, this poem extends Horne's image of the aging man to include humanity at large—familial, historical, cultural, political—and it imagines a collective and ongoing forgiveness practice that invites transformation in a turbulent world.

² Special thanks to Museum Educator Susan Hogan and her colleagues at Hawaii State Foundation on Culture and the Arts for providing information on Rebecca Horne's work and the image of *Pono; Final* which appears in this journal.

³ Aislinn Hunter, "Introductory Notes." *Arc Poetry Annual 2011: Poet as Art Thief*, 18.⁵



Horne, R. (2011). *Pono; Final*. Hawai'i State Foundation on Culture and the Arts, Honolulu, HI.

Ho'oponopono

THIS IS NOT A DRILL
BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII
SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER

I am sorry

The tourists in the van cried into their cell phones, our guide tells us the next day.
They wanted to climb the embankments at the freeway's edge.
It is not possible to dig a hole in lava rock.

Forgive me

He said to them, I need you to sit down, put your seatbelt back on. If I can't get you to the airport, I will take you to my house.
He told them, I watch for the owl, my family god. It has found our ancestors lost at sea and guided them home.
We leave no one behind.

Thank you

Mothers lift their children from the sewers where they hid them from the coming firestorm.

I love you

the tourists say to him at the airport. Were you really going to take us to your house?
Here, take this, and go out to dinner with your wife.

In a suburb, a family lies dead in their living room – they kept their vow to die together.
Not vaporized, without shadow or ash.

*

We are dying out as a people, the guide tells us.
I have only a daughter, no son.

I am sorry

We have no land for hunting.
My father is in love with muscle cars. My uncles, who live in the Maui mountains, taught me how to hunt with crossbow and knife.

See the dip between those hills. The Japanese warplanes found a gap in our radar. The bombs fell here before they fell on Pearl Harbor.

Forgive me

In 1893, the Americans imprisoned our queen in her own house. She refused to resign. The people sent her jasmine wrapped in newspaper so she could read about their suffering after the coup. She stepped down to relieve them.

Thank you

I work three jobs. Work is for putting food on the table for my family. Surfing is for the soul.

I love you

MISSILE THREAT IN ERROR. THERE IS NO THREAT.

* * *

On our phones, back at the hotel, news from Canada. A Vancouver teenager riding in his parents' car dies in a gang shoot-out. He was a gifted boy, his brother said.

I am sorry

One of the gunmen, 23, is shot in the head. He was kind, his mother said, he was so much more than his criminal record.

Forgive me

son, the victim's father said, we could not protect you.

Thank you

for being the pillar in our lives.

I love you

The ashes of two small girls, strangled by their father on Christmas Eve, lie together in an urn covered in yellow butterflies.