

Manga explore island history and tradition

"Crossing Cultures" celebrates the role of comics artists in documenting, analyzing and cataloging our past

By David A.M. Goldberg / Special to the Star-Advertiser

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Sep 08, 2013

LAST UPDATED: 02:25 a.m. HST, Sep 08, 2013

In the early 21st century there are still people who do not consider "comics" to be an art. Read no further if you count yourself among this group.

For the rest of us, the comic book is a rich medium for storytelling, design and aesthetic exploration that is as diverse as Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning Holocaust memoir "Maus," the punk Chicano sci-fi of the Hernandez Brothers' "Love and Rockets," the ultra-violent noir of Frank Miller's "Sin City" and the innovative fusion of narrative and pedagogy in Lynda Barry's "What It Is."

For true believers, "Crossing Cultures" celebrates the work of Hawaii's multigenerational manga and manga-influenced artists, and invites those still on the fence about comics-as-art to understand the work outside of its broader context of Japanese animation and cryptic bookstore aisles haunted by teenagers.

The formal setting of the gallery has allowed curator Brady Evans to develop a context for manga that is different from the conventions, websites and magazines that typically represent, communicate and sustain the culture.

The show provides a historical overview, didactics that contextualize the artists and focused presentations of original artwork. Like most comics art, these panels are much larger than their final print dimensions, offering a unique opportunity to study the artists' various approaches to line, action, emotion and composition.

Manga is first and foremost a visual communications medium (like hieroglyphics and computer icons), in which ubiquity, formal constraints and at-first-glance uniformity camouflage a vast array of genres and stylistic conventions that address an equally wide-ranging audience. Where most Americans consider comics to be "for kids" or casual Sunday amusement, the Japanese consume manga for every subject and lifestyle, targeting various demographics with distinct styles of pacing, design and drawing.

Comparing page layouts by Roy Chang, Avery Berido and Tara Tamayori demonstrates a range of possibilities. Chang's panels are the most traditional, breaking the narrative down into clear steps so as to direct attention to the dramatic moments of the characters' encounter with the volcano goddess Pele. Berido approaches the problem of a rider being pulled from a horse in a collage-like style that unifies various moments in time through a diagonal vector drawn from the top right corner to the bottom left. Tamayori is perhaps the most experimental of the three, eschewing traditional panel boundaries to combine several cinematic moments that convey speed, awareness,

attitude and raw martial arts power to great effect.

Hawaii has no schools for drawing manga. Though a local art teacher might accept, refer to, or use manga aesthetics to engage students in traditional Western art methods, this is no different from using rap as a "stepping stone" to the "real" art of Shakespeare. Many of the artists in "Crossing Cultures" are traditionally trained, but all of them studied and taught themselves the specifics of manga through self-organized local and Internet-based communities.

Due to obvious cultural connections with Japan, Hawaii has always enjoyed a close relationship with manga. These local artists' unique position between the Western styles of DC and Marvel, and the trans-Pacific shadows cast by legends like Osamu Tezuka ("Astro Boy") and Hayao Miyazaki ("Spirited Away") affords them a unique take.

This is what radicalizes projects like Patsy Iwasaki and Berido's "Hamakua Hero: A True Plantation Story."

Manga speak the visual language of a young local audience that might not otherwise come to know this story of immigration, entrepreneurship and anti-Japanese racism. Similarly, Chang, who is of Native Hawaiian ancestry, translates traditional stories into a medium that is not only contemporary, but possesses unique strategies for storytelling that prefigure both animation and live-action film. Both projects fall into the type of production normally found in "Peoples' History" academic texts pioneered by scholars like Howard Zinn.

"Crossing Cultures" does not feature mere stylistic emulation. The show smartly recognizes that Hawaii artists are doing more than emulating conventions; they are actively adapting them to the requirements of local tastes, aesthetics and interests.

Evans has successfully laid the groundwork for developing an understanding of manga on its own terms, with a Hawaii-specific twist that becomes yet another turn in the multicultural braid that characterizes life and popular culture in this archipelago of crossroads.



"Hamakua Hero: A True Plantation Story," written by Patsy Iwasaki and illustrated by Avery Berido, casts an account of immigration, entrepreneurship and anti-Japanese sentiment in a visual language suited to young audiences.



A page from "Cacy & Kiara and the Curse of the Ki'i" by Roy Chang.

'CROSSING CULTURES: THE ART OF MANGA IN HAWAI'I'

» **Where:** Gallery 'Iolani, Windward Community College

» **On exhibit:** Through Oct. 2; 1 to 8 p.m. Mondays and Tuesdays, 1 to 5 p.m. Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Sundays (closed Saturdays)

» **Phone:** 236-9155

» **On the Net:** visit www.gallery.wcc.hawaii.edu or <http://hawaiiimanga.com/>