

Brendan George Ko, Moemoeā, CONTACT Gallery, Toronto

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Brendan George Ko

← *Raising of the Sail on Hikianalia*, 2017.

Photo : courtesy of the artist

↑ *Hokule'a On Her Way*, 2017.

Photo : courtesy of the artist

Brendan George Ko

Moemoeā

In 1976 the Polynesian Voyaging Society sailed its first ancestral canoe from Hawai'i to Tahiti and back. The vessel—dubbed Hōkūleʻa, after the star Arcturus that rises and sets directly above the Hawaiian Islands—has since covered 140,000 sea miles, docking in bays and harbours across the Pacific, and inspiring over fifty other voyaging canoes and education programs. Hōkūleʻa has become a symbol of Hawaiian Renaissance, guided by revived ancient ancestral navigation methods like the star compass, flight paths of migratory land birds, and the pattern of the waves. In 2014 Toronto and Hawai'i-based Brendan George Ko began work on a project of research, training, and discovery, that would take him three years to complete. In September 2016, Ko was part of the welcoming committee for Hōkūleʻa's visit to Kahnawá:ke Mohawk Territory in Québec, and he crewed the fleet of voyaging canoes that gathered for Hōkūleʻa's homecoming to O'ahu in June of 2017. The resulting body of work contributed to his winning of the CONTACT 2017 Portfolio Reviews Award.

Moemoeā—Hawaiian for a collective dream or vision of healing that unites all people in a call to action—is an exhibition of video and photography that is alive with the spirits of community, history, and hope. The canoe itself supports a literal and metaphorical bridging of cultural worlds, shrinking gaps between generations, histories, natives, and non-natives. As a self-described “visual storyteller,” Ko approached his time aboard Hōkūleʻa with discipline and an unyielding openness to the power and beauty of the journey. His immersion in the voyage as a member of the crew, combined with a unique eye for isolating the agency of the everyday, has resulted in a body of work imbued with something akin to magic. Walking through the exhibition, I am struck by how *present* each subject appears. Nothing is frozen in time, or catalogued for consumption. Instead, each photograph has been created out of such love and respect for the

lasting energy of the moment that, standing in front of them now, I find myself drawing close to listen for the flapping of the ships' sails, or to breathe the fine mist of sun-warmed salt water. This feeling of “being there” is further enhanced by the soundtrack to a video projection of the ship and her crew: the quiet murmuring of voyager communications and the intermittent harmony of voices absorbed in Hawaiian prayer and song.

The passion and sensitivity required for such powerful representations is paired with Ko's technical skills and coherent creative choices. The images in *Moemoeā* possess a characteristic style that is inseparable from their content. It is not uncommon to encounter a stray hand, finger, or leg protruding from just outside of the image's frame. Occupying a space outside the central action of the image, they might read as mistakes, were they not so vital for communicating the true spirit of such a compelling atmosphere. Ko's keen eye is attuned to a poetic strangeness that often lends itself to humour. His work is intensely personal, exuding a reverence for the experience that is wholly romantic, but never romanticized.

Alex Bowron

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