About the Cover Art

Located within the collections storage facility of the National Museum of Scotland is a box that contains a relic of Hawaiian antiquity—an akua kāʻai or ‘god stick’. The object is anthropomorphic in appearance, its facial characteristics comprising a furrowed brow, slanted hollowed-out eyes, and a mouth pulled back in a grimace of truculent defiance. In the ancestral past, this portable wood sculpture functioned as a physical manifestation of divine mana and potency—it was the dwelling place of a god. But an examination of the figure’s lower torso reveals a sight that mars its otherwise commanding presence. The phallus has been crudely cut away and reduced to a mess of chaotic striations. Its mutilation articulates with a broader historical context—which began around the early nineteenth century—wherein male and female genitalia on kiʻi kūpuna (carved images of Hawaiian gods and ancestors) were summarily excised by European missionaries, traders and, in some cases, Hawaiians themselves as Christian values and beliefs gradually seeped into the bedrock of indigenous society.

Carl Franklin Kaʻailāʻau Pao, the artist whose work, Kiʻi Kupuna: Maka, features on the cover of this publication, argues that the emasculation of kiʻi kūpuna, like the castrated akua kāʻai in the National Museum of Scotland, was not merely limited to the physical objects but it also had an adverse effect on the collective mana of the Hawaiian people. In response to what he believes has been a ‘symbolic-spiritual stripping’, Pao actively seeks to restore Hawaiian mana, in part by recuperating the iconography of the ule and kohe—male and female reproductive organs, respectively—through his art.

In Kiʻi Kupuna: Maka (2013), Pao invokes male and female streams of procreative power through his abstract profile portrait of an ancestral carved image. The face of the kiʻi is depicted in detail with flared nostrils and, more significantly, a gaping mouth that contains the
maka or centre of a flower. This is represented as a solid orange form comprising eight nodes, the largest symbolising the pistil or female sex organ of the plant and the smaller ones constituting the stamen or male sex organ. At the centre of the maka is a single sphere, the embryonic seed of the next generation (or perhaps, as Tengan writes in chapter two, ‘an eye peering out’). The mouth of the ki’i functions as a sacred, protective space, safeguarding the maka—a metaphor for the Hawaiian people—as it regenerates itself in a perpetual cycle of growth and renewal. In this work, Pao uses a visual language informed by the past and the present to envision and instantiate a new Hawaiian mana. One that is revitalised, re-sexed and restored to pono (balance).

A. Marata Tamaira