

BEN KIKUYAMA

*Born in 1962 in Wailuku, Maui
Lives in Makawao on Maui*

Ben Kikuyama has a capacity for seeing the potential for art in any thing, and has used many things in the creation of a complex and eclectic body of work. His interest in juxtaposing diverse elements, materials, emotions and ideas is visible in both mixed-media painting and sculpture, and in more extended performance/installation events.

Kikuyama has strong roots in the Maui art community. Raised in Lahaina, his talent was recognized early with an art scholarship from the Lahaina Art Society, and he spent a year at Chapman College in California. Involvement in a serious car accident after his freshman year led to a major refocusing of his life and a decision to fulfill a commitment to art work. He began to tap into a newly found emotional space and to express it in his work. Kikuyama also decided to stay closer to home and returned for another year of study at Maui Community College. As an early influence in guiding his commitment as an artist, Kikuyama also acknowledges the quiet presence of Tadashi Sato, father of one of his friends, who by example validated the creative life.

Though Kikuyama initially thought he would have to leave Maui in order to pursue a career as an artist, the growth of the gallery scene—a complicated mix of

tourist-oriented work and more personal and innovative visions—presented the artist with unexpected possibilities. Kikuyama has experienced considerable success as an artist, but is aware that his more personal and complex work is better situated in non-commercial venues. Yet the artist does sense a continuity between the various projects in which he is engaged, and the spirit of putting together a world from various fascinating fragments, whether in collage, sculptural assemblage, or orchestrated performance, provides strong connective linkages.

Working with found materials means being constantly attuned to the process of finding in the first place, and Kikuyama often alternates periods of fabrication with phases of collecting—ideas and feelings as well as things, creating and replenishing a stockpile of raw materials. His passion for collecting is sufficiently well-known in the community that a number of friends keep “Ben Boxes”—things put aside for him to use. Kikuyama has a particularly keen eye for leather, metals, old tools, but no plastics; he appreciates signs of wear, and thinks of former owners of things as friendly co-conspirators in his work.

One form which recurs in the artist’s sculptural work is the horse, which he considers the most beautiful creature

and, after human beings, a most interesting subject. Kikuyama’s approach to this strong and elegant form, as evident in the life-size *Resurrection Stallion*, for example, combines an ironic playfulness with an astute sense of combining and counterbalancing materials, including a black leather briefcase, carpenter’s level, electronic equipment, and portions of signage. Such work also points to the artist’s ongoing interest in technology—not as a resource per se, but as a source of raw materials, and as a counterbalance to the organic world. In other works, Kikuyama’s signature yellow cat may also appear, perhaps as a surrogate for the artist himself.

Another strong and ongoing series focuses on large blue heads which provide the focal point in a series of mixed-media collaged works on canvas. Figurative art was Kikuyama’s first interest, and such works as *Blue Artist Dreaming* or *Imago Gemynd (Images of the Mind)* take advantage of his skill in classical drawing. The collage format, a counterpart to sculptural assemblage, is ideal for creating a kind of surreal juxtaposition, and the artist takes full advantage of the way in which the profiles and physical qualities of individual components resonate with each other to create multiple layers of mystery and

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meaning. A black-and-white checkerboard motif, for example, both echoes the floor in the artist's own studio and alludes to a kind of mind-game in which the artist wants to engage his viewers.

That motif is also to be found in a series of works which create a kind of transitional zone between two and three dimensions, and between inanimate works of art and animate performance. In *Three Nudes Contemplating Marilyn*, a mixed-media work on paper, the artist has created an interior tableau in which the nudes are painted blue, red and green. Those figures have also come to life, as models in full body paint in tableaux vivants or performances which Kikuyama has staged, creating an important transition between these very different bodies of work. These collaborative works, engaging what the artist calls "living mannequins," have, on occasion, literally come off the wall at the NaPua Gallery which represents the artist. Here the artist also worked with a choreographer as part of the collaborative effort.

Kikuyama has continued to explore the realm of performance and installation in various configurations. In a work created for the Maui Arts and Cultural Center, he created a bedroom being taken over by a

forest, inhabited by a girl, covered with moss and lying on the bed. The ambiguity of her presence—was she a living mannequin, or a sculpture?—reinforced the commingling of domestic and natural spaces. This work also signaled an increasing concern for the fuller articulation of space, now not simply an extension of perspectival illusion working off a two-dimensional surface, but space in which performers and viewers would both be contained. Such conceptual extensions have also led Kikuyama to consider other aspects of installation, including lighting, sound, and video documentation and projections.

Kikuyama's current installation *Evidence of a Metamorphosis* provides an opportunity for the artist to orchestrate in a fuller and more complex way the various themes and strategies which have informed his earlier work. He has again chosen as a focal point a figure on a bed, taking advantage of the intimate, private nature of personal space to complicate the position of viewers who enter the space. Who or what was contained within the human-sized cocoon? How did it come to be here, and why?

As the title suggests, there are forensic implications at work here, and viewers are asked to participate in considering possible solutions to the mystery, aided perhaps by various forms of evidence within the room which, though simply furnished, has the look of a crime scene. The artist hopes to create a time-warp with retro styles of furniture, a kind of alternate universe which positions both event and observers in a different time and space. Stages of a life cycle—caterpillar, cocoon, butterfly—are also evident, in refrigerated specimens, sculpted fragments, and in various forms of imagery.

An important and distinctive component of this installation, the core of evidence, is the *Obsession Wall*, which the artist has covered with various forms of artwork, from charcoal drawings and photographs to mixed-media paintings, exploring the hybrid creature, the human/butterfly.

Though the artist offers some suggestions as to narrative, he considers its denouement or solution open-ended, and perhaps more inflected by each viewer's reflections on mortality and identity, rebirth and transformation. Yet the butterfly metaphor is also significant for the artist himself, as he contemplates some major shifts and new growth in his own life and work.