

Artist's isle depictions draw on power of nature

By Steven Mark

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COURTESY PHOTO

"Wrath," a two-story spike of faux lava that hangs like a huge stalactite from the ceiling of a gallery at The Contemporary Museum. With tree limbs gnarled into the structure, it is a startlingly real portrayal of life consumed by lava.

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Darren Waterston had an atypical introduction to Hawaii. The artist, a Californian now based in New York, bypassed the usual tourist spots and plunged immediately into the harsh, foreboding terrain of Hawaii Volcanoes National Park on Hawaii island.

The result is a series of paintings and sculptures that depict the power and fury of nature, Hawaii style. His works are on display at the Honolulu Academy of Arts and The Contemporary Museum in an exhibit titled "Forest Eater." The museums brought Waterston to

Hawaii as part of their artist-in-residence program.

"There was no time for me to project any of my tropical fantasies onto the land," he said. "It was really a much more direct experience at feeling awestruck at just the kind of power of this landscape as a place not of just this lush paradise ... but a place of trepidation and danger and volatility."

'FOREST EATER'

Sculpture and painting by Darren Waterston

» **Where:** Honolulu Academy of Arts, 900 S. Beretania St.; The Contemporary Museum, 2411 Makiki Heights Drive

» **When:** At the Academy, 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Tuesdays to Saturdays, 1 to 5 p.m. Sundays, through Sept. 12. At The Contemporary Museum, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesdays to Saturdays, noon to 4 p.m. Sundays, through Oct. 2

» **Cost:** \$5 to \$10

» **Info:** www.tcmhi.org

During his visit to Hawaii last year, Waterston met with volcanologists and experts in Hawaiian folklore and culture. As a result he developed a particular interest in Pele, the Hawaiian goddess of fire and volcanoes. He said he learned that "Pele evokes and represents the nature of the landscape as a place that gives life, that takes life. There's a balance going on there that's not just the verdant landscape.

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"There's something about Hawaii that's just ... It's dangerous there! A rogue wave could just wash you away; a little slip on a trail that's been there hundreds of years could plunge you to your death."

His exhibit, which includes paintings in oil and water and sculpture, depicts that sense of peril. The most arresting piece is "Wrath," a two-story spike of faux lava that hangs like a huge stalactite from the ceiling of a gallery at The Contemporary Museum. With tree limbs gnarled into the structure, it is a startlingly real portrayal of life consumed by lava.

Despite its massive presence, Waterston said the piece weighs only 300 pounds. The main structure is made of foam, which had to be shaped and worked "in a hurry" before it hardened, Waterston said. Other pieces in his exhibit, such as watercolor paintings that show remarkable detail and oil paintings that show thick textures, also were created under a deadline imposed by the media he used.

Waterston said he also saw the process of creating his works as being similar to the lava that created the landscape of Hawaii island.

"There's a kind of alchemic nature of painting that in many ways kind of mimics the volcanic activity," he said. "There's so many variables that can actually determine how (paint) ends up solidifying."

Waterston has a history of doing works related to a single abstract theme, such as a series of pieces depicting animal forms in various states of existence.

"I like to think in terms of symphonics, almost, where ideas and images coalesce and come together," he said, "particularly in a place like a Hawaii, where I didn't want to be ... just another artist who comes and shows their work. I felt like I wanted to do a piece that actually responded to a sense of place, a sense of history, and that would be meaningful to the community."

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