

RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC
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Niu Systems

June 25 – August 21, 2026

Opening reception: Thursday, June 25, 2026, 6:00-8:00 pm

Including work by Kaili Chun, Sean Connelly, Pier FichEFEUX, Kainoa Gruspe, Amber Khan, John Koga, Roland Longstreet, Nicole Parente-Lopez, Nanea Lum, Dane Nakama, EnoKa Phillips, Nalani Sato, and Lawrence Seward

RYAN LEE Gallery is pleased to present *Niu Systems*, a group exhibition of contemporary artists from Hawai'i.

Niu is not a coconut. This distinction is not merely linguistic. Where “coconut” names an object for consumption, *niu* holds layers of *'ike* (knowledge): husk, shell, water, flesh, each revealing itself only through time, care, and engagement. *Niu* is a relation, not a resource. It carries genealogy, voyaging histories, ancestral planting practices, and future sustenance. Every part has purpose; nothing is isolated; nothing is wasted. To encounter *niu* is to slow down, to work with one's hands, to engage in process rather than extraction. It becomes *kumu*, a teacher, reminding us that knowledge is not taken but revealed through relationships.

Niu Systems takes this framework as its ground. The exhibition does not treat *niu* as metaphor or decoration, but as a model for how the works here coexist: as distributed, interdependent parts of a larger structure, each distinct, each inseparable from the whole. On islands, time does not move forward. It gathers. Histories accumulate, materials circulate, and relationships to land deepen. In Hawai'i, ancestral knowledge, migration, and contemporary movement overlap within a compressed geography. Land is not distant. It is encountered through use, through memory, and through the conditions of daily life.

Amber Khan employs *niu* cordage alongside wood and metal, binding organic and constructed elements where every binding carries both physical and cultural tension. Sean Connelly's structures rely on lashing and compression, holding form through balance rather than fixed joinery, a logic the *niu* itself enacts. Kainoa Gruspe maps surface and accumulation, where fragments of environment, sand, line, debris, become quiet records of movement and contact. In Dane Nakama's panels, shells, pumice, and sand are embedded directly into the work, collapsing image and shoreline into the same plane.

Nanea Lum's use of kapa and video extends material into duration, making process and time visible within the work. John Koga and EnoKa Phillips both engage the inherited weight of objects, how things carry histories that exceed their surfaces. Nalani Sato positions *pōhaku* within domestic interiors, shifting land into spaces of habitation and memory. Nicole Parente-Lopez isolates the form of a single stone, rendering it as both object and field. Roland Longstreet and Pier FichEFEUX approach Hawai'i from positions shaped by movement and distance, engaging the islands as sites of encounter, observation, and projection, perspectives that do not resolve into a singular view but exist in active relation to the others.

Lawrence Seward's contribution brings the *niu* into direct sculptural presence. His works are not literal coconuts but representations: painted, assembled forms that invoke the *niu*'s physical layers

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while opening onto something stranger and more interior. Organic materials, found objects, and bold surface treatments accumulate on forms that read simultaneously as vessel, organism, and world. Where other works in the exhibition engage *niu* as structural logic, Seward's pieces make its body visible – the husk, the opening, the held interior – as sites of mystery and meaning rather than utility.

The conceptual grounding for the exhibition draws in part from the thinking of Kaili Chun, whose work is also included here. Chun's articulation of *niu* as a relational framework, one that holds layers of *'ike* rather than a single extractable use, shapes how the exhibition understands its own materials and positions. Her contribution to the show reflects this same integration of concept and form.

Together, the works in *Niu Systems* do not argue for a single relationship to land, material, or time. Some are grounded in genealogy. Others arrive through migration or temporary presence. What the exhibition holds is not a unified narrative but something closer to what the *niu* itself demonstrates: a system where each part participates in the whole, where use is inseparable from responsibility, and where meaning is not extracted but revealed slowly, through attention, care, and relationship.

Niu Systems is curated by Jon Santos within Ontopo, a platform spanning performance, installation, and exhibition formats across sites and disciplines. This presentation continues Ontopo's exhibition track centering Hawai'i-based artists.

Kaili Chun (b. 1962) is a sculptor and installation artist based in Hawai'i. Her works address ideas of containment and exposure, agency and restraint. Process and materials transform physical spaces into unique environments commenting on contemporary issues in her work.

Sean Connelly (b. 1984) is an artist and spatial practitioner working across contemporary art, spatial practice, and civic engagement. His practice integrates sculpture, moving image, cartography, and site-based intervention to examine relationships between land, water, architecture, and power. Connelly's work was included in the 2026 Whitney Biennial and the 2024 Cooper Hewitt Design Triennial.

John Koga (b. 1964) is a Honolulu-based sculptor and painter whose work ranges from small paintings to large sculptures and environmental installations. He's known for his abstract modernist aesthetic that conveys a sense of serenity, balance, and space inspired by the artists Isamu Noguchi, Satoru Abe, and Tadashi Sato.

Pier Fichfeux (b. 1976) is a French-American artist based on the Big Island of Hawai'i. His practice works at the boundary between geological and human time, using the forces of volcanic landscape — heat, weight, oxidation, duration — as collaborators in the making of sculpture and works on paper. The land is not a subject. It is a condition of the work.

Kainoa Gruspe (b. 1995) is a painter and sculptor based in Honolulu whose layered works investigate value, duration, and absurdity within contemporary painting. Gruspe engages in

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a critical and often humorous conversation with art history, pitting surface against symbol, innocence against labor. Gruspe's work was included in the 2026 Whitney Biennial.

Amber Khan (b. 1993) is an artist from Honolulu, Hawai'i. Her practice explores philosophies and materials around forms of life and living, spatiotemporal identities, nonlinear realities, cultural production, and the natural world. Khan is primarily a sculptor with a mixed-media approach.

Roland Longstreet (b. 1990) is a painter and sculptor based in Honolulu, Hawai'i. His work is focused on philosophy and esoteric thought, exploring the medium in search of connectivity and overlap with universal and basic truths.

Nicole Parente-Lopez (b. 1974) is a visual artist based in Honolulu whose art practice focuses on volcanic stone and natural materials as meditative studies in transformation. Working primarily from volcanic forms, her practice emphasizes attention, reverence, and perceptual intimacy.

Nanea Lum (b. 1991) is a Native Hawaiian artist born in Kahalu'u, O'ahu, Hawai'i, and based in Honolulu. Her art practice interrelates kapa (Hawaiian barkcloth) making with large-scale paintings, printmaking, drawing, and time-based media. Lum connects different traditions, materials, and perspectives through her interdisciplinary practice.

Dane Nakama (b. 1999) is a Japanese-Uchinanchu ceramicist, painter, and educator whose work bridges local aesthetics, folklore, and decolonial critique. Raised on O'ahu and currently based on Tongva land, Nakama's interdisciplinary practice is both highly referential and disarmingly tender.

Enoka Phillips (b. 2001) is a Native Hawaiian feather artist from Maui whose work bridges tradition and modernity through the discipline of hulu (featherwork). Rooted in centuries-old Hawaiian customs, his lei hulu honor the cultural, spiritual, and political significance of feathers.

Nalani Sato (b. 1977) is an oil painter based in Honolulu whose work explores animism, eroticism, ritual, and postcolonial symbolism through complex, narrative compositions. Trained in classical painting, Sato's figurative work is deeply shaped by personal mythology, spiritual inquiry, and her lived experience in an Americanized, Christian household in occupied Hawai'i.

Lawrence Seward (b. 1966), born and raised in Hawai'i, has been making and showing art professionally since 1990. Casual yet calculated, his understated work—whether it takes the form of drawings, paintings, publications, sculptures, videos, or installations—frequently deploys tropical kitsch aesthetics to interrogate notions of “paradise.”