

The first big retrospective of Hawai'i artist John Kelly reveals his complex style and charmed life

A portrait of the artist

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The life of John Melville Kelly was charmed and luminous, matching the idyllic quality of the prints he created for more than three decades. That is one of several fresh insights offered by *Hawaiian Idyll: The Prints of John Kelly*, the first major retrospective of his work at the Honolulu Academy of Arts, organized by Curator Jennifer Saville.

Born in 1878, from the beginning, Kelly's life possessed a quality of adventure—from a youth spent as a cowhand, professional cyclist and prize-fighter, to the more contemplative but no less bold experimentation that marked his approach to intaglio printmaking.

Kelly studied at what is now the San Francisco Art Institute, and worked for a number of years in the art department of the *San Francisco Examiner*. In 1908, he married Katherine Harland, also an art student. Kate, as she would come to be known, played a pivotal role in the unfolding of Kelly's life as an artist. In 1923, the Kellys and their young son, John, came to the islands with

In 1932, after working for six years as an art director at the *Honolulu Star Bulletin*, Kelly made the bold move to devote himself to his work as a printmaker. He had the support of Kate, who by all accounts was tireless and resourceful in promoting Kelly's work, cultivating collectors, engaging models and taking many of the photographs that Kelly used as reference. Their home and studio at Black Point—then a native Hawaiian neighborhood beyond the end of the streetcar line—was a comfortable gathering place, a cradle of island ambience within which they could work.

Island life embodied

Drawn from the academy's own extensive holdings (amplified in recent years by gifts from the Kelly family) and supplemented by more prints and corollary materials still in the family collection, the exhibition is organized along chronological and thematic lines, revealing important aspects of Kelly's development as an artist-printmaker. Working, via Kate's tutorial, with the expertise of Luquiens, some of Kelly's early prints dealt with island landscape (as did Luquiens'). One can only spec-



Kelly by Kelly

ation of color aquatints requiring close registration of multiple plates. The style shift was paralleled in some ways by a shift from the specific to the generic—where early works might be titled with the names of individual models, later works might be referred to only with such titles as *Hawaii* or *Hawaiian Decoration*. This process of stylistic evolution came to be anchored in the emergence of female subjects which, though they might have been based on particular individuals (including Kelly's daughter-in-law, Marion), are presented in more archetypal form—elegant distillations of the merger of the exotic and the erotic.

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Examiner. In 1908, he married Katherine Harland, also an art student. Kate, as she would come to be known, played a pivotal role in the unfolding of Kelly's life as an artist. In 1923, the Kellys and their young son, John, came to the islands with an assignment to work on advertising for the development of the then new area of Lanikai. What was to have been a year's stay became a lifetime, as Kelly and the island community embraced each other.

Soon after their arrival, when it became evident that Hawai'i was to be their new home, Kate, a talented sculptor in her own right, began to study photography and took a course in printmaking with University of Hawai'i faculty member Huc Luquiens. It was Kate who introduced Kelly to the art of etching—and the rest is quite literally the history of the artist-printmaker celebrated in this exhibition.

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The exhibition reveals the gradual transformation of Kelly's style, based in a consummate sense of draftsmanship, from faithful representation using a complex vocabulary of etched and drypoint line, to increasingly stylized work anchored in elegant though simplified contour lines that were important in the cre-

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The exhibition's strongest sections are in a small alcove that includes works by Kate and John Kelly, emphasizing the extent to which they sometimes worked from the same models. It also includes a short video produced by the Kelly family that reveals the human side of an artist who has attained mythic stature in the local community. Another section, appealing in particular to those interested in the technical aspects of Kelly's art, includes preparatory drawings, progressive state proofs (showing the modifications the artist made in arriving at a final statement) and the actual copper plates from which some of the prints were pulled. Even for those not informed about the nuances of intaglio printmaking, this section



Lush life: "Breadfruit Boy" ca. 1930s

more than any other reveals the sense of visual quest that informed much of Kelly's work.

A final section of late work is focused on Kelly's interest in imagery inspired by Asian traditions, particularly those of India and China. Kelly, who died in 1962, was admittedly an armchair traveler, and these images, based on reproductions of paintings and statuary, have a studied quality, though they also exhibit a virtuosic handling of aquatint and

color printing, validating in their own way the sense of exploration inherent in Kelly's work. Fittingly, the exhibition concludes with a self-portrait drawing of the artist. Casually confident, attentive to the world reflected in his sight, it conveys the presence of an artist, a person we would want to know. Through this exhibition, we do. ■

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