

ART

by Jean Charlot



One of Hawaii's finest artists

Juanita Vitousek is a kama'aina, equally at ease at her social rounds in citified Honolulu as she is at work on her farm on Hawaii.

There she harvests crops of avocado pears and macadamia nuts. She is unafraid of hot treks through rough a'a lava trails in a hunt for ancient petroglyphs. And she is adept at gathering opihi.

Juanita Vitousek is also one of our finest artists.

A show of her recent works opened this Monday at the Ewing Krainin Gallery in Waikiki. The show lasts until November 25.

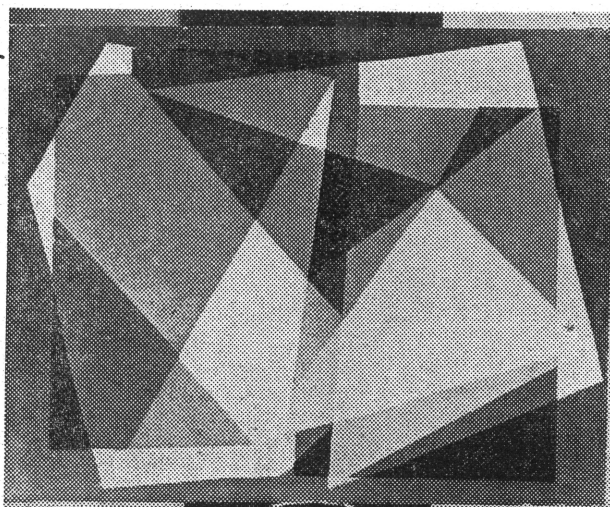
To mention that the bulk of her works are watercolor landscapes may be misleading. It could suggest a ready-made and not unpleasant formula: tropical palms nodding towards a blue ocean.

One contacts this specialized brand of art when on a cruise, on the cover of menus. Or polychromed on airline calendars.

The washes of color should be bold enough to imply a mastery of the watery medium. Yet not so bold as to jog the tourist out of his Pacific euphoria.

Her mastery is undeniable

Vitousek's mastery of the watercolor medium is undeniable. One finds in her land-



"Asteroids"

scapes enough nodding palms and spreads of blue ocean.

Yet it can be said that her own brand of art begins where tourist art ends.

Hawaii puzzles a sensitive landscape artist, not because of a dearth of motives but because of their plenty. Sights range from the untampered grandiose found in a Waimea Canyon to the fake picturesque of a single grass hut, erected for the pleasure of camera fans.

In her early works, Vitousek commented, often astringently, on the sights of the Kona Coast she knows so well.

She loves dilapidated architectures, general stores long bankrupt, their posters

in shreds, their corrugated iron roofs glowing jewel-like from red patches of rust and the gray growth of moss.

Or wooden chapels with a wobbly steeple, humble ones, poor ones, of the type Father Damien enjoyed building with his own hands.

Doors unhinged and congregation dispersed, only black pigs wander through the sanctuary.

Her thoughts run deeper

Most of the works seen at the Krainin Gallery are of a later date. They reflect a change in depth in Vitousek's thoughts, both as regards Hawaii and as regards art.

A roomful of abstract

paintings underlines the change. They are straight-line abstractions, shunning free-hand effects and relying exclusively on the use of a ruler.

The titles tell us that these geometries are based on natural sights. "Searchlights" probes the night skies. There is a Rembrandt-like darkness in "Up the Down Staircase," and the mystery of soft-edge perception is observed in "Twilight."

These abstractions are not meant as an escape from nature. Rather as a visualization of its laws instead of its sights.

For Vitousek, abstraction proved to be an important phase of her art. When the time came for her to return to straight landscape painting, she did so knowing the worth of a strict discipline.

The Hawaiian sights that Vitousek favors at present are chosen with a graver concern than that of their colorfulness.

As did the Chinese masters, to better paint a mountain she turns her back on it.

More than a pretty picture

"Mountain Rhythms," a green monochrome, proposes a law more geological than pictorial. The swellings and hollowings of its serried folds recall the dynamics that forced our Islands out of the ocean, roped and

dragged out, in Polynesian lore, by the divine fisherman, Maui.

"Molokai Coast" is among the finest of these semi-abstractions. There is no sky and no horizon. The dark curtain of cliffs cuts vertically into the dark horizontal of the sea. And, at the meeting line, the contrasting whiteness of a narrow ribbon of

foam delineates the coast and a jutting rock.

One comes close here to a knowledge of a darker Hawaii, one that lurks under the surface of lush palms and hula rhythms. Not anymore the skin of nature, as it were, but its bones.

Pele personifies this subterranean Hawaii. Juanita Vitousek is not unacquainted

with her, either in her mighty works, or with Pele as a person, said to appear as an ancient hag, dressed in mu'umu'u, wrapped in a red scarf, shaded by a wide-brimmed straw hat.

A godling in the shape of a poi dog always frolics about as she slowly walks along, a heavy cane in her gnarled hand.

Could it be that Pele is not dissatisfied with the artist, and in turn inspires her in all that concerns her kingdom?

Inspiration in the rocks

Volcanic rocks are at present the best source of Vitousek's inspiration. In her recent watercolors, lava, cooled off through centuries, seems to flow again, threateningly.

Among her best seascapes are those that pit against each other the realm of fire and the realm of water: The cool blue of the sea washes against the burnt black of jagged reefs in "Hana, Maui."

In "Napo'opo'o, Hawaii," the ocean has carved an arch into the rock, the better to spout.

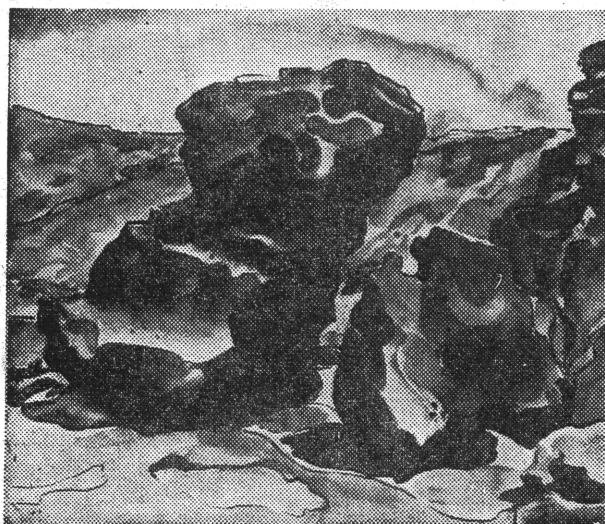
In "Ulula'au, Oahu," the pounding of the deep blue sea undercuts the jutting black rocks.

Looking at these scenes, one remembers how ancient Hawaiians had a flair to sense the spiritual hid in its mineral abode. A fisherman's akua did not need the touch of the sculptor to become a sculpture. The god already had provided.

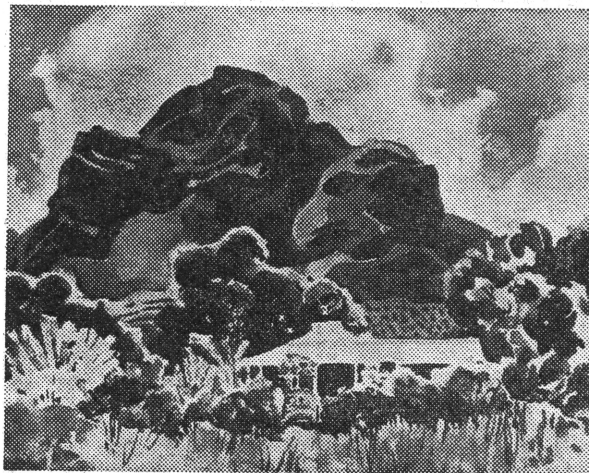
Most of us have lost this antique sense of awe before nature. Juanita Vitousek retains it.



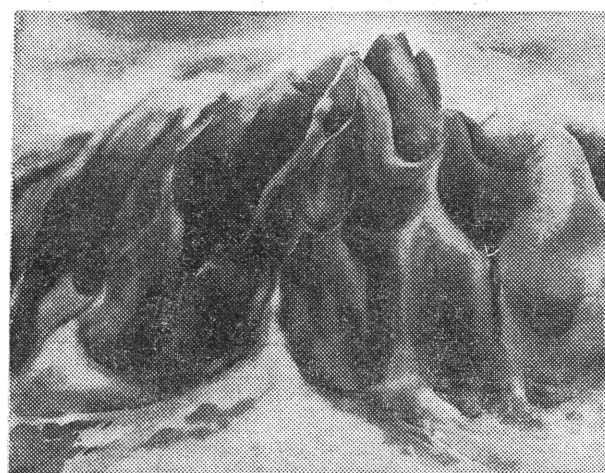
"Waikane Church" by Juanita Vitousek



"Hanauma Bay"



"High Noon, Oahu"



"Mountain Rhythms"