

ART

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Thurs., May 20, 1971

by Jean Charlot



Robert Wenkam has given us some of the most beautiful books ever related to our Hawaii, including his large polychrome albums on Kauai and Maui. And now, no less impressive for being a modest black-and-white paperback and costing only \$2, "Hawaii's Treasures," just published by the State Department of Planning and Economic Development.

State money could not be put to a wiser use. The scenes pictured renew our pride in Hawaii's unique beauty. For the many, mostly acquainted with high-rise Hawaii, it will come as a surprise how much of untampered nature remains.

Underlining the ever-changing facets of the panoramic display, one feels Wenkam's well-known passion for the wilderness. Not only through the eyes does he contact our earth but, indefatigable roamer that he is, equally lovingly with his feet.

AS AN artist, Wenkam should feel handicapped by the times he lives in. Not wholly because he is a photographer. Pretty much everyone at this date agrees that photography is an art. To reassure themselves as to the truth of the matter, present-day photographers industriously modify the photographic image, through double exposures, negatives superposed to positives, chemical contact prints and distortions galore.

Indeed, as is true of other art media, photography may be enrolled in a search for an artist's elusive self, may be made to probe the twilight recesses of one's inner world.

Contrariwise, Wenkam aims at an untampered objectivity. So straightforward is his style that a species of timelessness clings to his photographs, as it did in pioneer days to Calotypes and Daguerreotypes.

Paradoxically, this search for impersonality is actuated by passion—a passion turned away from self, beamed at the grandeur of the forest, of the shoreland, and of the ocean. Truthfully, man is not an essential ingredient of this art.

Had he had a choice, Wenkam would have preferred to photograph a thoroughly prehistoric, Hawaii, one peopled at most by bats and birds, caught thus before even the first pioneer had beached on its uninhabited shores. *his work*

Undoubtedly an artist of stature, Wenkam is a hard one to fit in the complex graph of present-day esthetics. Art and nature are for him as one. As the Bard said, "Ay, there's the rub!"

"ART HOLDS a mirror to nature". The saying was taken for granted in the days when a painting was expected to be a landscape, a portrait or a still life. True, the mirror, not always was faithful. In the days of Impressionism it became intentionally fogged, so that the image appeared as a mosaic of many colors, all the more esthetic for their unsubstantiality.

The saying still held good when a youthful Picasso grafted both eyeballs on the profile of a nose. The mirror was still at work. True, it was concave or convex or a combination of both, and reflected Nature with a twist all its own.

Soon after, abstractions spread their thin film over esthetics like an all-permeating oil spot, and the link between art and objective nature weakened drastically. Closing his eyes to hills and forests, seas and sunsets, the painter embarked on a fantastic voyage inside self—and, in most cases, he is still in there, yearning for an exit.

The Old Masters had a heady respect for nature. Their technical manipulations and mental computations were designed, unlike our own, so as to bring more of nature into art: to reassure the spectator that what he saw was not mere paint spread on canvas but indeed what it purported to be, a cow grazing, or a moonlight scene, or the benign countenance of one's favorite aunt.

ONE MAY map the progression of pride that, along two centuries, loosened the link between the artist and nature. Early in the 19th century, the French Romantic, Eugene Delacroix, marked the cleavage of paths with this haughty saying, "To the artist, nature is little more than a dictionary." It implied a lack of interest in the way nature orders things, with man as the godling called upon to extract sense out of such nonsense.

A century and a half having elapsed, Georges Mathieu, the French lyrical abstractionist, arrived on Oahu, en route from Tokyo to Paris. In Japan he had

just completed, in the flamboyant theatrical manner that is peculiarly his own, a large abstract panel, to the accompaniment of flashbulbs exploding, of television and movie cameras grinding.

He indeed was a tired man. As a soothing interlude I suggested the beach. With tremulous pride, he refused the invitation: "I am not interested in nature."

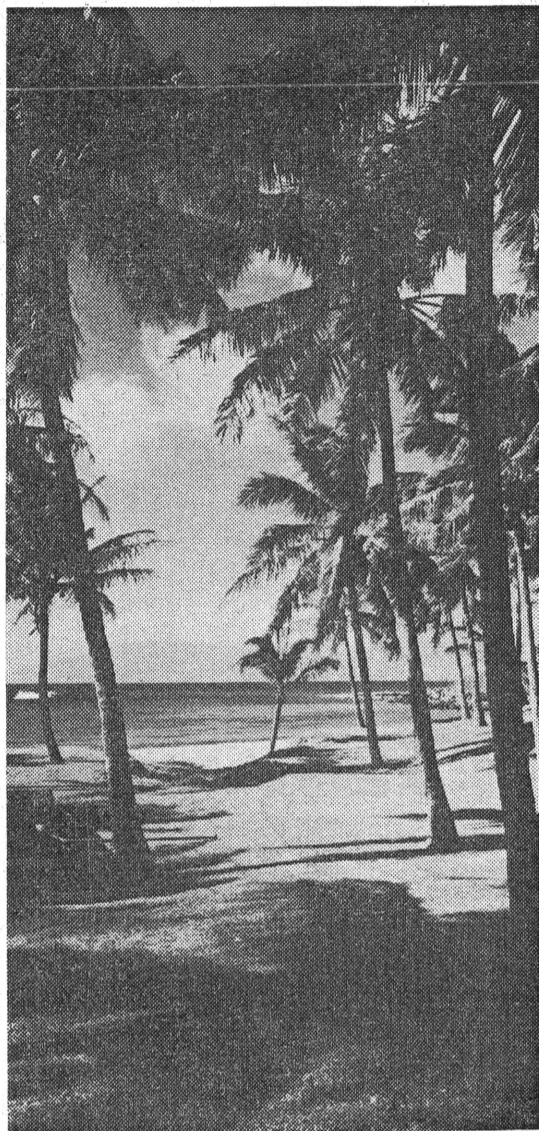
There is, of course, bound to be a reaction. I do not mean an orderly retreat into the "good old days," when a

picture was either a still life, landscape or portrait. What form a return to nature will take, I know not. The Chinese masters looked long at sheer cliffs and thundering waterfalls before dipping their brush in ink. Their formula: "A mountain a foot high; man the size of a chick-pea."

In the West, our present-day brand of art casts man as a giant and the mountain as less than a chick-pea. Wenkam's cult of the wilderness proposes the much-needed antidote.



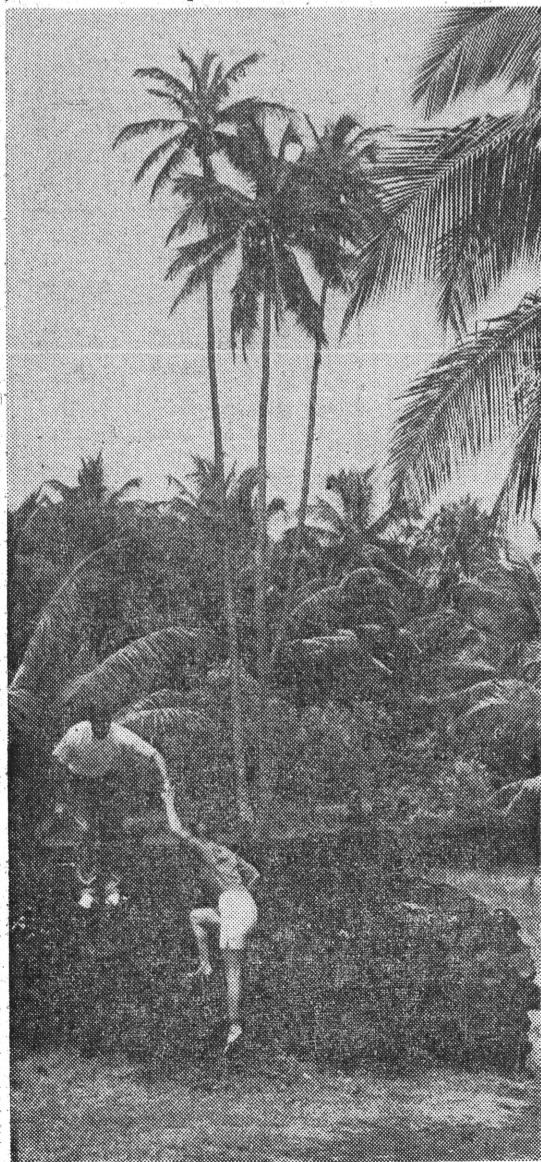
KAUAI — Kalahele Beach.



MAUI — Kapalua Beach.



KAUAI AGAIN — Waialeale Valley.



HAWAII — Heiau, Issac Hale County Park.

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~~Out of self and into the wilderness is also Wenkham's way. Only he goes still a little further. Though I looked hard, man was nowhere to be seen in his work, not even a man the size of a chick-pea.~~

Jean Charlot

The End

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