



Pacific New England: Reuben Tam's Archipelagic Landscapes

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IN February 1939, while visiting the Hawaiʻian island of Kauai on commission to make advertising images for the Hawaiian Pineapple Company, the painter Georgia O’Keeffe stopped by the studio of the twenty-three-year-old Kapa’a-born artist Reuben Tam. “She stayed more than an hour; talked about herself,” Tam recounted in a diary entry. “She bothered me with her inconsistencies, her airy egotism, her belittling of my efforts. . . I need no longer stand in childish awe before such as she is.” Despite Tam’s apparent discomfort with the visit, O’Keeffe ultimately encouraged him in his work. In a paragraph bracketed for emphasis, Tam recalled: “Her message, and I thank her for it: an artist must see the place as no one else in the world has seen it. . . . No one has yet seen the American landscape; nor Hawaii. ‘Perhaps you’ll do it.’”¹

When Tam was elected an Associate Member of New York’s National Academy of Design over three decades later in 1974, the election committee asked him to contribute a portrait of himself to the Academy’s collection, a tradition for new Academicians. Eschewing conventions of genre, Tam submitted not a likeness but a New England landscape. This was *Monhegan Landform*, its title indicating Monhegan Island, a storied artist colony where Tam had maintained a summer home and studio with his wife and fellow artist, Geraldine King Tam,

¹Reuben Tam, diary entry, February 24, 1939. Reuben Tam Papers (1931–2006), Box 5, Folder 1. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter “Tam Papers”).



FIG. 1.—Reuben Tam, *Monhegan Landform*, 1974. Oil on canvas, 36 × 30 in. National Academy of Design, New York, 1986.214. Credit: National Academy of Design, New York, USA National Academy of Design, New York/Bridgeman Images.

since 1948 (Fig. 1).² Although Tam names Monhegan in the painting's title, the terrain that fills its foreground bears few recognizable signs of habitation or locality. Instead, gestural zags and slashes of black paint, overlaid with dusky purples, deep blues and teals, pinks, whites, and zips of brighter green, render the landscape alive with a sense of tectonic action, like an X-Ray or photographic negative that inverts the expected relations between dark and light. It is as if the artist has not so much represented Monhegan as delved into its stratigraphy, unearthing the molten magma that erupted from the earth's

²See Kimia Shahi, "Place and Painting on Monhegan Island: George Bellows, Robert Henri, Reuben Tam" in *For America: Paintings from the National Academy of Design*, eds. Jeremiah McCarthy and Diana Thompson (New York: American Federation of Arts, National Academy of Design; and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 122–135.

crust some four hundred million years ago before cooling into gabbro, the coarse igneous rock that textures its surface.³ The landform's outer edge cuts a jagged arc across the middle of the canvas, projecting into a glacier-white sea that nearly merges with the pale greenish sky above it. To the upper left, a scrape of black paint might suggest Manana Island, Smutty Nose, or the Duck Rocks, Monhegan's smaller, westerly neighbors. A thicker smudge of black, its lower edge rimmed with bits of lighter grey, blots the sky near the painting's upper edge. Perhaps it is so placed to suggest a dark cloud. Or perhaps that patch of black simply draws the composition closer to abstraction, reminding us that this is a Monhegan primarily made of paint and canvas, a place defined through the deep time of experience, close looking, and patient brushwork.

The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has observed: "Place is whatever stable object catches our attention. As we look at a panoramic scene our eyes pause at points of interest. Each pause is time enough to create an image of place that looms large momentarily in our view." By defining place as an image, Tuan aligns it with stasis, in contrast to the movement that denotes its dialectical opposite, *space*. He argues: "If we see the world as process, constantly changing, we should not be able to develop any sense of place."⁴ Yet process is precisely what *Monhegan Landform* depicts. In its vivid abstraction, it becomes not only a painting of an island but also a picture concerned with probing the elemental relations between islands and their oceanic environs: the very processes that, in Tam's view, rendered an image of place. For example, although land and water might first appear distinct and separate, a closer look renders their divisions less certain. The molten quality of Tam's brushwork imbues the island's rocky landform with a certain liquidity, suggesting the semi-transparent swell of a cresting wave or the slick surface of a rocky shore. In the sea beyond the island's edge, subtle

³R. G. Marvinney, "A Brief Review of the Geology of Monhegan Island, Maine," April 2010. Maine Geological Survey, Department of Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry. Accessed September 15, 2023. https://digitalmaine.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1446&context=mgs_publications.

⁴Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 161, 179.

passages of grey, green, and blue suggest the water's gently heaving surface, but they may also signal the imminent emergence of many more new landforms that push upwards from the deep. To push our close looking even a step further, if we resist our initial impression that we look towards a conventional horizon line, the relative positions of water and land shift again: could it be possible that Tam has depicted Monhegan as a submerged landform, as if recalling its distant past or projecting its possible future? Might Tam's picture even show us Monhegan from multiple perspectives, or at multiple times? If we notice the similarities between the fields of pale pigment that first appear as sea and sky, that pair of black blots near the upper left starts to resemble two islands, or perhaps the same island twice-over, viewed from different vantage-points: across the water and from above. From this a-perspectival vantage point, the pale seam running along the upper portion of the composition starts looking like other things, too: a swell stretching across the ocean, a mapped line of longitude or latitude, or even a seam dividing different images collaged together. It becomes plausible that we are looking at a shifting assemblage of many different islands, or different places, as they loom large and small within our view. Given these possibilities, what are we to make of the fact that Tam presented this fluid island-escape as a self-portrait?

This essay will examine how Tam's painterly excavations of the elemental processes that shaped Monhegan articulate an idea of place that can be considered archipelagic, that is, oriented by the dynamic relations among different islands. As archipelagic landscapes, Tam's paintings materialize new interconnections between their New England setting and a vaster ocean world, drawing Maine's archipelago, some two thousand islands in the North Atlantic, into dynamic relation with the 137 islands of Hawai'i, nearly six thousand miles away in the Central Pacific.⁵ This transoceanic reach, which Tam once summarized

⁵Maine Coastal Island registry: https://www.maine.gov/dacf/parks/about/coastal_island_registry.shtml. "Hawai'i Facts and Figures," State of Hawaii Dept. of Business, Economic Development & Tourism, January 2023. Accessed December 15, 2023. https://files.hawaii.gov/dbedt/economic/library/facts/Facts_Figures_browsable.pdf.

as “Hawaii to Monhegan – birthplace + home,” shaped the artist’s life story and is commonly taken as the premise for his career as a painter of island landscapes.⁶ But no scholar has yet offered a sustained examination of how Tam’s works mediated this trajectory, let alone considered the possibility that his practice enabled him to redefine, rather than merely reflect, the intersecting relations between Pacific and Atlantic, Kauai and Monhegan, and self and place, that patterned his life and work. In what follows, I will argue that Tam’s permutations of color, shape, and contour rendered his personal and familial geographies inextricable from the oceanic forces and timescales that shaped and reshaped them. By orienting Tam’s landscape paintings within this oceanic frame, I aim to look beyond the mere fact of their island-themed subject matter and instead explore how archipelagic relations became inherent to his processes of picture- and place-making.

By basic definition, an archipelago is a group of islands, but the term has also come to describe both geopoetic and geopolitical, as well as geophysical, states of relation. Following foundational work by scholars like Édouard Glissant and Epeli Hau’ofa, the archipelago has become a figure for anti-colonial thinking that challenges fixed demarcations of geography and identity and the imperial and territorial histories that subtend them, including within a growing body of scholarship oriented towards recharting the contours of American history and culture along similarly insular and oceanic axes.⁷ Putting

⁶Tam, diary entry, April 3, 1948, Tam Papers, Box 5, Folder 7. See for example Erin Kinhart, “From Kauai to Monhegan Island and Back Again,” *Archives of American Art Blog*, May 23, 2012. Accessed December 15, 2023. <https://www.aaa.si.edu/blog/2012/05/from-kauai-to-monhegan-island-and-back-again>. In one of the few other scholarly mentions of Tam’s work, Margo Machida includes Tam among those whose work “makes the case for encouraging multiple art-historical frameworks.” Machida, “New Critical Directions: Transnationalism and Diaspora in Asian American Art,” *Notes in the History of Art* 31, no. 3 (2012): 27.

⁷“Archipelago” is a word with an amphibious history. Deriving from the Italian *arcipelago*, meaning “chief” or “principal” pool or gulf, originally in reference to the Aegean Sea, the term’s meaning shifted over time from water to land, eventually coming to describe the Aegean’s islands. See Brian Russell Roberts Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens, “Archipelagic American Studies: Decontinentalizing the Study of American Culture,” in Roberts and Stephens, eds. *Archipelagic American Studies*

Tam's paintings in dialogue with these interventions opens up additional pathways for tracing them within art history. As the son of Chinese immigrants born in Hawai'i, a U.S. Territory since its forcible annexation in 1898, Tam's personal and familial geographies charted the hybridizing routes of transpacific migration and took shape within what Lanny Thompson has called America's "imperial archipelago," so named to describe the far-flung assemblage of Pacific and Atlantic island territories brought under U.S. control in the wake of nineteenth-century expansionism.⁸ Tam's engagements with forms and formations of islands and archipelagos arguably offered a means of navigating his complex transoceanic roots and routes as a twentieth-century Chinese-American and Hawai'ian artist. But I will also go further and posit that Tam's archipelagic modes of thinking, making, and seeing ultimately worked by submerging more expected markers of geography, place, and identity within less familiar oceanic surrounds. Structured by the logic of the archipelago, Tam's landscapes not only draw Monhegan into relation with Kauai, but also bring what the geographer Philip E. Steinberg calls "the sea's complex, four-dimensional materiality" to bear on the relational terms of modernist abstraction and seriality.⁹ Through their ocean-oriented lexica of place, time, and subjectivity, paintings like *Monhegan Landform* thus offer an oceanic vision of New England that strengthens

(Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 7, 15; Stratford, et al., "Envisioning the Archipelago," *Island Studies Journal* 6, no. 2 (2011): 113–130. See also "Archipelago, n.," *Oxford English Dictionary*. Foundational examples of archipelagic thought as anti-colonial praxis include Édouard Glissant, *Treatise on the Whole-World*, trans. Celia Britton (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020); Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 148–161. For a recent example of this thinking brought to bear on art and art history, see Tatiana Flores and Michelle A. Stephens, eds., *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago* (Long Beach, CA: Museum of Latin American Art; Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017).

⁸Lanny Thompson, *Imperial Archipelago: Representation and Rule in the Insular Territories Under U.S. Dominion After 1898* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010).

⁹Philip E. Steinberg, "Of Other Seas: Metaphors and Materialities in Maritime Regions," *Atlantic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2013): 156. See also Hester Blum, "The Prospect of Oceanic Studies," *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 125 (2010): 670–677.

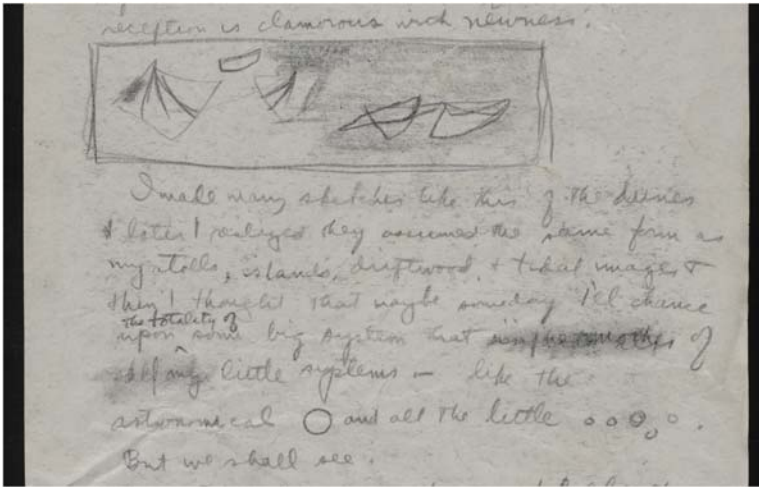


FIG. 2.—Reuben Tam, diary entry from June 6, 1942. Tam Papers, Box 5 Folder 5. Reuben Tam Papers (1931–2006), Box 5, Folder 5. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution Washington D.C., Collection: <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/reuben-tam-papers-8481>.

“connections *between* Atlantic and Pacific worlds,” to quote the historian Kariann Akemi Yokota.¹⁰ However, Tam’s archipelagic landscapes also, and perhaps more radically, succeed at challenging the very demarcations that encourage us to perceive these ocean worlds, and the islands within them, as bounded or distant in the first place.¹¹

An odd pair of sketches accompanies a diary entry from one of Tam’s first visits to Maine in 1942, a summertime retreat from New York City, where he had moved to study art in 1941 (Fig. 2). Boxed in a rectangular frame is a group of geometric forms: the largest, at left, is diamond-shaped, and to the

¹⁰Kariann Akemi Yokota, “Transatlantic and Transpacific Connections in Early American History,” in *Pacific America: Histories of Transoceanic Crossings*, edited by Lou Kurashige (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2017), 29. Margaretta Lovell has recently undertaken a similarly globalized rereading of New England marine and landscape paintings by the well-known nineteenth century artist Fitz Henry Lane. See Lovell, *Painting the Inhabited Landscape: Fitz H. Lane and the Global Reach of Antebellum America* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2023).

¹¹This observation is inspired by similar points made in Steinberg’s article as well as in Martin W. Lewis, “Dividing the Ocean Sea,” *Geographical Review* 89, no. 2 (1999): 188–214.

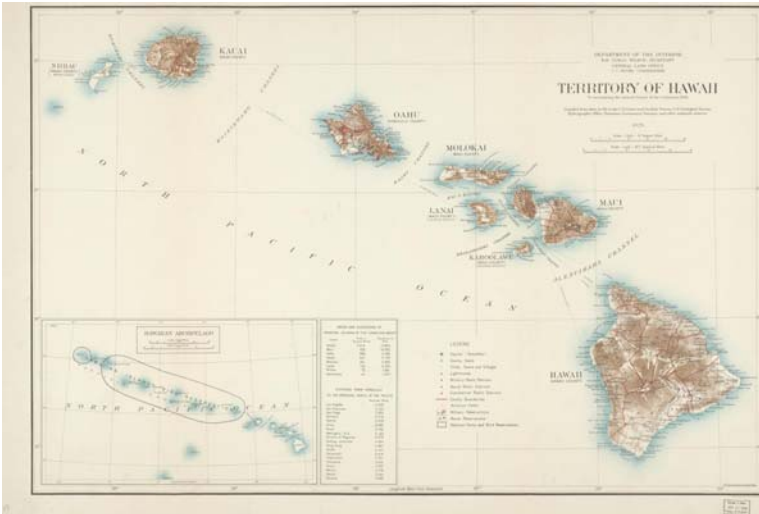


FIG. 3.—United States Department of the Interior, *Territory of Hawaii*, 1938. Geography & Maps Division, Library of Congress.

right of its slightly upturned wing appear smaller rectangles, prismatic triangles, and star-shapes that trace a gentle horizontal arc across the page. Though abstract, the shapes loosely resemble the biggest islands of the Hawai’ian archipelago, but their orientation appears to reverse that which is most typically seen on printed maps (Fig. 3). Tam captions this sketch with a smaller diagram, embedded in an account of his work while in New England:

I made many sketches like this of the dunes + later I realized they assumed the same form as my atolls, islands, driftwood, & tidal magic, + then I thought that maybe someday I’ll chance upon the totality of some big system that may be the mother of all of my little systems—like the astronomical O and all the little o o o o o. But we shall see.¹²

As Tam considers his studies of sand dunes, they start to evoke a set of vastly different oceanic objects and topographies: “atolls, islands, driftwood, & tidal magic.” Remarkable in this passage is his observation that, despite superficial variances in

¹²Tam, diary entry, June 6, 1942, Box 5 Folder 5, Tam Papers.

size and substance, these features all come to assume the “same form” in his work. He recognizes, in other words, an underlying structure or pattern that repeats across disparate scales, united by the ocean’s cyclical movements and geologic force. The atoll-like rings that follow suggest Tam’s attempt to translate this recognition into a single “big system,” one capable of capturing the interconnections and interactions among celestial bodies, gravitational pulls, eroding shorelines, drifting flotsam, dunes, and drawings. This diary entry brings into full view Tam’s realization, through his sketches of the Maine coast, of a new sense of the interrelations animating his practice as a whole. Across text, image, and diagram, the artist not only encounters his work anew but begins to derive a new language of systems and forms to describe these revelatory connections. “It was Maine that shook the city out of me,” he would proclaim in his diary the following year. “It was Maine that saved me.”¹³

The Monhegan Island Tam encountered in the 1940s was a place long shaped by both art and ocean histories (Fig. 4). Named from the Algonquian word for “out-to-sea island,” its earliest known uses were as a fishing and trading outpost among Indigenous communities, and eventually also for European voyagers and colonizers. By the mid-nineteenth century, the barely mile-sized island had begun attracting the interest of landscape painters like Aaron Draper Shattuck and William Trost Richards who, like growing numbers of summertime tourists, were inspired by its remoteness and rugged scenery (Fig. 5).¹⁴ Monhegan soon became one of seaside New England’s best-known artists’ retreats; alongside destinations like Gloucester and Mount Desert Island, it embodied

¹³Tam, diary entry, September 30, 1943, Tam Papers, Box 5, Folder 5.

¹⁴Michael Komanecky, *Jamie Wyeth, Rockwell Kent and Monhegan* (Rockland, Maine: Farnsworth Art Museum, 2012), 13; Emily Grey, *A Sense of Place: Representational Painting on Monhegan 1950–2000* (Monhegan Island: Monhegan Museum, 2012); Grey, *A Century of Women Artists on Monhegan Island* (Monhegan Island: Monhegan Museum, 2005); Carl Little, *The Art of Monhegan Island* (Camden, Maine: Downeast Books, 2004). For more on nineteenth-century artists’ fascination with geology see Rebecca Bedell, *The Anatomy of Nature: Geology & American Landscape Painting, 1825–1875* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

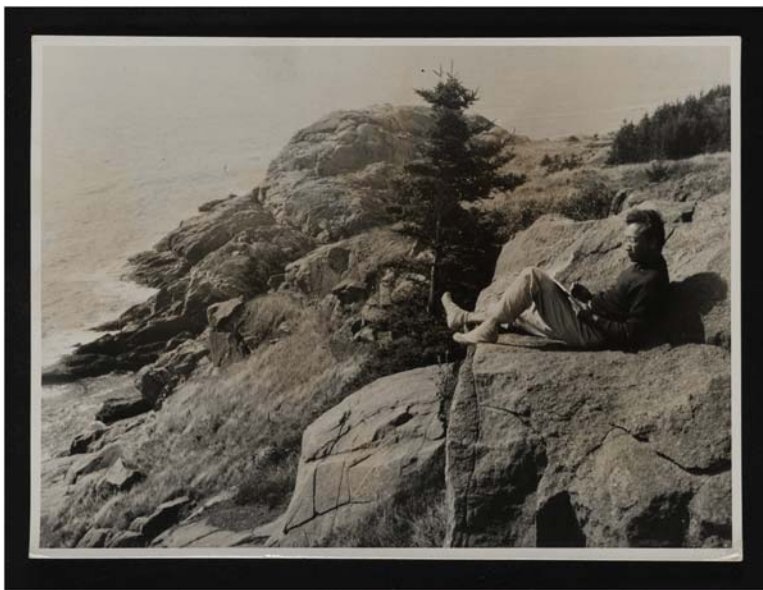


FIG. 4.—Reuben Tam sketching on Monhegan Island, undated photograph (circa 1940s). Reuben Tam Papers (1931–2006), Box 6, Folder 19. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution Washington D.C., Collection: <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/reuben-tam-papers-8481>.

for many the nostalgic trope of “Old New England,” which scholars like William Truettner, Roger Stein, and Bruce Robertson have defined as an imaginative vision of regional places like Maine’s rural coast as bastions of authentic nature and “timeless values” amid the tumult of urban and industrial modernity.¹⁵ The painter and teacher Robert Henri was among Monhegan’s most ardent proponents in this vein during the early decades of the twentieth century. With vigorous, wet-on-wet brushstrokes that capture the surf’s churning rhythm against the island’s rocky shore, paintings like *Monhegan Island* (Fig. 6) embody Henri’s vision of artmaking as a muscular confrontation with both “nature” and authentic experience. “Grasp

¹⁵Bruce Robertson “Perils of the Sea,” in William H. Truettner and Roger Stein, eds., *Picturing Old New England: Image and Memory* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 143.



FIG. 5.—Aaron Draper Shattuck, *Whitehead Cliffs, Monhegan Island, Maine*, 1857. Graphite and Chinese white on paper laid down on linen paper, 12 5/8 × 19 in. The Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens. Purchased with funds from the Virginia Steele Scott Foundation, 91.24. © Courtesy of the Huntington Art Museum, San Marino, California.

the big things outdoors,” he urged students like George Bellows and Edward Hopper, who followed their mentor to the island. “The big strong thing can only be the result of big strong seeing.”¹⁶

Among Henri’s students who visited Monhegan, Rockwell Kent is perhaps the artist most closely associated with the island’s art historical mythos. After first visiting in 1905 on Henri’s recommendation, Kent famously lived and worked on the island for years, taking on work as a carpenter and lobsterman to support himself as a year-round resident. Of Monhegan, Kent rhapsodized:

Monhegan: its rock-bound shores, its towering headlands, the thundering surf with gleaming crests and emerald eddies, its forest and

¹⁶Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1923), 268. See also David Peters Corbett, “The World is Terrible and It is Not There at All: George Bellows on Monhegan Island,” in Alexander Nemerov ed., *Experience* (Chicago: Terra Foundation for American Art, 2017), 136–154; Shahi, “Place and Painting.”



FIG. 6.—Robert Henri, *Monhegan Island*, 1903. Oil on oak panel, 8 × 10 in. Farnsworth Art Museum. Museum Purchase, 1991.9.

its flowering meadowlands; the village, quaint and picturesque; the fish-houses, evoking in their dilapidation those sad thoughts on the passage of time and the transitoriness of all things human so dear to the artistic soul; and the people, those hardy fisherfolk, those man garbed in their sea boots and their black of yellow oil skins, those horny-handed sons of toil—shall I go on? No, that's enough. It was enough for me, enough for all my fellow artists, and for all of us who sought 'material' for art.¹⁷

In Kent's *Afternoon on the Sea, Monhegan*, sea and land meet less violently than in Henri's studies of surf and rock, but the island is somehow more precisely rendered and yet also more dreamlike. Backlit by a setting sun, its snow-blanketed form projects upward from the water. Seen from the lowered vantage point of the small boats that surround it, our view of the

¹⁷Rockwell Kent, *It's Me O Lord: The Autobiography of Rockwell Kent* (New York: Dodd, Meade and Company, 1955), 120.

island captures a perspective that Kent, a practiced sailor, might have known from experience. Lobstering is not Kent's primary subject in this painting though. The toil lies instead in his transmutation of Monhegan's "material" into a poetic meditation on the transitory, the eternal, and the passage of time; a working landscape of "Old New England" rendered a gorgeous figure of the sublime in nature.

Tam's first glimpses of Monhegan actually came in the form of Kent's paintings, which the younger artist saw and admired in reproduction as an art student in Hawai'i.¹⁸ Yet though Tam shared in the romance of earlier artists' encounters with Monhegan, his visions of the island would depart from more established modes of regional, topographical, and temporal specificity, opening onto primordial relations that extended far beyond its shores in time and space. Consider *Moon and Shoals* of 1949 (Fig. 7), a semi-abstract work made up of sharp angles and semi-solid shapes that oscillates between transparency and opacity, perhaps mirroring the play of shallow waters over an uneven seabed under moonlight. Thematically and even coloristically, *Moon and Shoals* has something in common with Henri and Kent's earlier Monhegan pictures. Mostly or entirely devoid of human figures, all three examples focus primarily on the converging forms of ocean, sky, and land, and in this, *Moon and Shoals* might even be said to echo the hard-edged geological studies of Monhegan by their nineteenth-century predecessors. Yet while Henri and Kent's Monhegan pictures represent the island head-on, Tam's looks underneath and away from shore. His emphasis on the shoal, a submerged landform or rocky seabed, subverts the distinctions between land and sea that figure in Kent and Henri's compositions, even if as sites of productive tension or ambiguity. If Monhegan can be said to figure in Tam's picture at all, it is not as an island surrounded by water but rather as a terrain contiguous with its subaquatic

¹⁸"I knew I had to come here," Tam recalled, "and as soon as I could, I did." See Martica Sawin, "Reuben Tam: Island Paintings," *Arts Magazine*, December 1975, 93. As quoted in Little, *The Art of Monhegan Island*, 76. One of the reproduced paintings was possibly *Blackhead, Monhegan* (1909), Colby College Museum of Art.



FIG. 7.—Reuben Tam, *Moon and Shoals*, 1949. Oil on canvas, 30 × 34 7/8 in. The Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Sam Lewisohn, 289.1949. © Reuben Tam. Digital image: © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

ground, in which the viewer's perception of perspective and depth continually snags, dives, and resurfaces as the eye tracks across the composition's wrinkled topography. Do we gaze onto partly visible ocean depths through the water's faceted scrim, or look up from underneath it? Time works peculiarly in *Moon and Shoals*, too. The urgent pounding of breakers against rock drive Henri's energetic brushwork and frothy impasto, while Kent lends his waves a measured regularity and juxtaposes their even tempo with the surrounding signs of diurnal and seasonal change. By contrast, although Tam's titular moon signifies a nocturnal setting, it also harkens back to the "astronomical O" he inscribed in his diary. If meant to capture some similar interplay between "big" and "little systems," the moon's presence may then also allude to the "tidal magic" of its cyclical gravitational pull, establishing through the painting's plasticity a

physical link from the celestial body to the undulating forms of water and shallow sands beneath them.¹⁹ Tam had captured just such a perspective in a draft poem in 1941:

And he who stands before three islands
 Remembers ~~peaks of long ago~~ more, [illeg] sees
 in mid-channel whirls the thunderous
 peaks of long ago, now no more
 than level shoals inglorious on the tranquil scene.
 Remembering these, the Coast, the lands submerged.²⁰

A view of islands here recalls a deeper past, their forms merely stages in an ongoing cycle of erosion and sedimentation. The “peaks” of waves and ancient landforms become synonymous in channels carved by “whirls” of moving water.

Tam’s interests in what he called “the origin of land, the revisions of the earth’s crust, the imminent changes of the coastline,” had underpinned his practice since Hawai’i.²¹ Once he arrived in New York, he applied for a Guggenheim fellowship to support his plans return to home and produce a series of paintings that explored these themes. When the outbreak of the Second World War prevented him from doing so, however, he reapplied the following year with a modified plan to pursue “creative work in oil painting,” noting that “the paintings I have executed during the past year here demonstrate the fact that I am able to produce work regardless of where I am located.”²² Matching these statements against Tam’s burgeoning enthusiasm for Maine at the time, one might infer that he saw Monhegan as a substitute for Kauai. Yet a fuller picture of Monhegan’s role in Tam’s practice emerges if we connect the artist’s changing conception of location to the archipelagic relations he first began exploring on Kauai. Doing so situates his

¹⁹The title of another painting, *The Moon-Driven Sea* (private collection, 1954) further supports this interpretation.

²⁰Tam, diary entry, 1941, Box 5, Folder 3, Tam Papers 1941. Tam Papers, Box 5, Folder 3.

²¹Tam, diary entry, September 30, 1943.

²²Tam, application materials for Guggenheim fellowships, 1941 and 1942, Box 1, Folder 42, Tam Papers.



FIG. 8.—Section of map showing eastern Kauai [coastline annotated in red]. Reuben Tam, *Diary* (loose pages), 1940–41. Tam Papers, Box 5, Folder 2. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution Washington D.C., Collection: <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/reuben-tam-papers-8481>.

encounter with Monhegan as both a continuation and evolution of the “abiding sense of place” that animated his practice.²³

As Tam termed it, the “Spirit of Place” he derived from Kauai’s landscape was as an island among islands, whose deep histories of formation and subsidence were most acutely sensed in littoral spaces like shoals and shorelines (Fig. 8). “On the dry leeward side of the island one could see from the dunes of Mana the oldest of the archipelago—Kaula, Niihau, and Lehua,

²³Tam, *Autobiographical Essay*, 1975, Box 5, Folder 10, Tam Papers.

rising dimly from the long horizon, hinting at still earlier islands, now only submerged shoals and atolls,” Tam recalled. On shifting sands and basalt rock, “one acquired a sense of geologic time—an awareness of land as dynamic presence” that rendered “instant” and immediate the dry “textbook eons” Tam and his classmates learned about in school. From atop a nearby hill, neighboring Oahu appeared across the water, and frequent trips on inter-island steamers contributed to a “conscious of the changing face and color of land in relation to the distance covered by the boat”; “I grew into an awareness of the vastness of oceanic space, distances that harbored other islands and other coastlines.”²⁴ An early notebook sketch (Fig. 9) captures such a perspective in a composition whose bare elements—rocky landforms below a flat horizon—would recur in later works like *Monhegan Landform* and *Moon and Shoals*. In the sketch, the recognizable forms of island and sea meet with another image of a craggy landform framed lightly in pencil above a rule-straight horizon, suggesting a play with perspective like the later works. Does Tam look across water at a neighboring island, perhaps recreating the familiar hilltop view of Oahu? Does he imagine distant islands or the same island at different points in its geological life? We might explain the extra island as the byproduct of Tam’s sketching process or his economical use of paper. However, its format, as a framed inset image, also recalls the mediated nature of Tam’s first encounter with Monhegan as a faraway island rendered proximate through pictures; a place made by artists’ hands. Envisioning the interconnectedness of distant islands, Tam’s sketch implies, may not only be a matter of looking towards distant horizons, but also something achievable—and scalable—through the making and viewing of pictures.

Tam’s early paintings of Hawai’i challenged established ways of seeing and depicting the archipelago. In *Koko Crater* (Fig. 10), for example, an imposing landform emerges from a

²⁴Tam, Autobiographical Essay. Maude Riley, “Tam of Hawaii,” *The Art Digest*, February 1, 1945, Box 7, Folder 18, Tam Papers 1945. Tam Papers, Box 7, Folder 14.



FIG. 9.—Reuben Tam, early drawing, undated. Pencil on paper. Reuben Tam Papers (1931–2006), Box 7, Folder 10. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution Washington D.C., https://edan.si.edu/slideshow/viewer/?damspath=/Collections/Online/tamreub/Box_0007/Folder_010.

roil of dense brushwork, as if the application of paint to canvas mirrors the accretions of the long-dormant volcano. This vision of Hawai'i's volcanic landscape was a far cry from works painted



FIG. 10.—Reuben Tam, *Koko Crater*, c. 1940, exhibited at the Golden Gate International Exposition, San Francisco, 1940. Black and white photograph printed in "Art Throughout America," *Art News*, August 17, 1940. Scrapbook 1 (1 of 2), 1938–1944. Reuben Tam Papers (1931–2006), Box 7, Folder 15. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution Washington D.C., Collection: <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/reuben-tam-papers-8481>.

in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century "Volcano School" tradition, whose perspectival realism and compositional balance both romanticized and domesticated the "exotic" nature of Hawai'ian geology by bringing it into alignment with



FIG. 11.—Jules Tavernier, *Volcano at Night*, c. 1885–89. Oil on canvas, 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 36 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. The Honolulu Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. E. Faxon Bishop, 1959.

picturesque aesthetics (Fig. 11).²⁵ Remarking on Tam's departure from more established modes of landscape representation, a critic characterized his approach as a reversal of the expected maneuvers through which landscape scenery was conventionally transferred and translated into pictorial form, noting that "rather than transfer the values of a landscape to traditionally prescribed forms, he transfers the form to meet the heavy demand of new experience. And so with each new picture, Reuben Tam contributes to the establishment of a new perspective."²⁶ This approach yielded pictures that also defied more contemporary stereotypes of Hawai'i as a lush and inviting tourist destination. When he first began exhibiting his works in the continental U.S. in the late 1930s, one San Francisco critic described Tam's "unusual canvases" as follows:

²⁵See David W. Forbes, *Encounters with Paradise: Views of Hawaii and its People, 1777–1941* (Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts, 1992); Scott A. Shields et al., *Jules Tavernier: Artist & Adventurer* (Portland: Crocker Art Museum, 2013); Joseph R. Hartman, ed., *Imperial Islands Art, Architecture, and Visual Experience in the US Insular Empire After 1898* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2022). Thanks to Olivia Armandroff.

²⁶Edward Deverill, "Reuben Tam's One Man Show: 20 Oil Paintings on Exhibit at the Art Academy for Two weeks from March 18th," *The Hawaii Sentinel*, March 20, 1941, Box 7, Folder 15, Tam Papers.

The atmosphere in which these strange pictures were conceived is liable to be a bit of a shock to the average American. Instead of the well-worn scene of hula-dancers and guitar-twangers and lei-throwers, we are presented with starker and more unfamiliar aspects of Hawaii as a rocky island set in the midst of thundering seas. Which, of course, it is. Only it takes an artist to discover and to publish such an obvious fact.²⁷

Here, it is Tam's perspective on Hawai'i's islands *as* islands that defamiliarizes them, and productively so; of a painting of a night-time beach scene he completed in 1938, Tam proudly wrote: "I knew I had discovered a strangeness never before seen and recorded."²⁸

Tam's search for Hawai'i's "strangeness" indicates an appreciation for its islands and waters from a distanced rather than an enclosed or hyper-localized perspective. This is an aesthetics of place fundamentally—and indeed geomorphologically—linked with the past and present of places beyond; resonant with what the geographer Doreen Massey described in 1991 as "the accumulated history of a place, with that history itself imagined as the product of layer upon layer of different sets of linkages, both local and to the wider world." Yet if Massey aimed to redefine place in response to globalization and its impacts on social relations, in Tam's view, one need look no further than the shoreline to see such linkages and accumulations taking form, a littoral-material rejoinder to Massey's assertion: "places are processes, too."²⁹ Consider once more the exchange with O'Keeffe that opened this essay. By Tam's account, he worried that the elder artist failed to grasp his and other islanders' relationships to their home. Drawing a contrast between the "quick impression (of a tourist) [and] the long study (of a native)," he told her: "when we young island artists read in the papers that so + so has arrived in

²⁷R.D. Turnbull, "The Art World," *The Argonaut*, November 8, 1940. Tam Papers, Box 7, Folder 15.

²⁸Tam, diary entry, June 4, 1938. Tam Papers, Box 4, Folder 42. I have been unable to locate this work. Somewhat confusingly, Tam says he'll title the painting "May 3, 1939." A pencil inscription below the entry suggests the title might instead be "Evening at a Headland."

²⁹Doreen Massey, "A Global Sense of Place," *Marxism Today* (June 1991), 29.

Honolulu + will paint Hawaii's beauty, we feel he has come to take something away from us."³⁰ To some degree, Tam and his fellow islanders' concerns were warranted. As Sascha Scott has shown, O'Keeffe's lush Hawai'ian landscapes and bright botanicals used to sell industrial agricultural products, can be seen as enacting a similarly colonial and exploitative logic by extracting and re-packaging Hawai'ian scenery in commodity form. As Scott points out, O'Keeffe's unquestioning acceptance of this logic was perhaps further reflected in her tendency to refer to places using the possessive "my."³¹ Addressing O'Keeffe, Tam used similarly possessive terms but to different ends:

She said after seeing my landsc. from a shore: You'll change. I replied – or tried to say: the sand beaches are my own. The lands of the world meet the sea, and there are shores of sand or rock. I was born on this island. I have known the shores all my years. The shores are universal and they are of my life, mine. I thought she understood. But no, she makes some remark about her self – about something far removed. I smile, and try not to seem hurt.³²

By calling Kauai's shores equally "universal" and "of my life, mine," Tam asserts a claim to the island that simultaneously rejects conceptions of ownership as a form of individual possession, containment or enclosure. In contrast to O'Keeffe, his assertion that "the sand beaches are my own" aligns his position with that of the shoreline, a terrain perpetually open to the "lands of the world."³³

In their openness to "distances that harbored other islands, other coastlines," Tam's claims to Hawai'i's shores coincided with his question, "where is home for me?"³⁴ We might read this query, scrawled in Tam's diary in 1938, as both a reflection

³⁰Tam, diary entry, February 24, 1939.

³¹Sascha T. Scott, "Georgia O'Keeffe's Hawai'i? Decolonizing the History of American Modernism," *American Art* 34, no. 2 (2020): 46–47.

³²Tam, diary entry, February 24, 1939.

³³In this way, Tam's sense of Kauai's landscape exceeds the fragmenting and miniaturizing logic of the postcard or advertisement. See Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 138. Thanks to Yifan Song and Amy Ogata.

³⁴Tam, Autobiographical Essay, Tam Papers, Box 7, Folder 18. Tam, Diary Entry, 1938. Tam Papers, Box 4, Folder 42.

of his artistic restlessness and his awareness of his own diasporic position as the descendent of Chinese migrants to the archipelago. Indeed, Tam's defiant assertion of his claims to sand and shore the following year ("If Georgia O'Keeffe [sic] can paint bones all her life I can paint sand all my life too!") may also have served to counter O'Keeffe and others' tendency to look at his landscapes and see China rather than Hawai'i. "She sees my etchings; sand + lava, and Pali Hills. She sees the Oriental influence," he noted, perhaps alluding to the frequent reception of his work as "Oriental" among critics who persisted in relating his landscapes to his "Chinese extraction."³⁵ Although Tam was Hawai'ian born, his invocation of "native-ness" in the context of his visit with O'Keeffe should not be confused for a claim to Indigenous descent, nor do I wish to suggest that Tam's vision of Hawai'i offers a straightforwardly "decolonial" counterpart to the "colonial" gaze attributable to O'Keeffe. While fragments of Tam's writings and artwork suggest some knowledge of Hawai'i's colonial history and its impacts on Indigenous sovereignty and culture, the Kauai where Tam fostered his early artistic ambitions was not only the place of volcanic rocks and tide-swept shores that he would recall later in life but also an Americanized world of tennis, church, and trips to the movies.³⁶ I do not think that acknowledging their settler-colonial context delegitimizes Tam's feelings of place and rootedness in Kauai. In reading the artist's notebooks and looking closely at his pictures, I have instead come away with a sense that Tam's transpacific heritage sharpened the artist's sense of the littoral and oceanic as grounds for his connection to Hawai'i.³⁷ "The Visitor," a typescript poem or

³⁵Christopher Stull, "This World," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 27, 1940, 28. Undated clipping titled "Oils Displayed in Art Show." Tam Papers, Box 7, Folder 15. By all accounts, Tam was proud of his U.S. citizenship and was apparently "elated when a friend in Maine put a lei, made of sea shells, around his neck when the news came over the air that Hawaii had become the 50th state of the Union." S. Neill Fujita, "Reuben Tam of Hawaii Winning Mainland Fame," n.d. Tam Papers, Box 8, Folder 4.

³⁶See Tam, *Diary*, 1932. Tam Papers, Box 4, Folder 41. See also "Converted Native," 1939. Tam Papers, Box 5, Folder 1.

³⁷I have not investigated Tam's family specifically, but they may have belonged to a swell of Chinese immigrants to Hawai'i over the latter half of the nineteenth century,

dialogue in one of Tam's notebooks, reveals how his attention to the materiality of oceans and islands was inseparable from his understanding of what it meant to grow up in a U.S.-occupied territory as the child of Chinese immigrants. "The Visitor" speaks first:

I have heard your names: Jack Yamashiro and Larry Wong and Peter Kim and Nancy Shizuko Yamagata and Clifton Kaneshiro; Soo Nam Lee and Makoto Ono; Chew Fung Chong; Adeline Rodrigues and Marie Torres and Evangeline Kamaka. Young people of Keokea: What of the centuries behind you? What of the lands? When you sit in the Rialto and see the latest Deanna Durbin smash hit, Are the Hollywood tears your tears? Are the Nevada plains of a Gene Autry show the plains of your past?

Some of the young people respond, asserting their belonging within this transcultural milieu:

Marie: [. . .] Chee, we know all about Nevada and California.
 We know all about Mexico too and Dolores Del Rio.
 We see the pictures in Life magazines, eh?
 We know all about Alaska too
 We know all about the world. Chee, what you
 Think. Us dumb because we stay live on one island?
 Chew Fung: Funny thing I just feel now. We stay live in
 The middle of the Pacific. Maybe
 of the world. I bet we know more about the

many of whom found work on sugar plantations and in entrepreneurial ventures. For an overview of the history of Chinese immigration in Hawai'i, see Clarence E. Glick, *Sojourners and Settlers: Chinese Migrants in Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017). My tentative perspectives on Tam's intersecting Chinese, American and Hawai'ian identities rely on a rich body of scholarship about such questions in the fields of Asia-Pacific and Asian-American studies. See for example Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996); David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995); Rob Wilson and Arif Dirlik, eds., *Asia/Pacific as Space of Cultural Production* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995). Bianca Isaki has rightly argued that: "An Asian settler history cannot create a claim to an indigenous relationship with Hawai'i. History must instead be another political space for archiving existences with uncertain, but material, positions in a colonial landscape." Bianca Isaki, "Re-archiving Asian Settler Colonialism in a Time of Hawaiian Decolonization, or, Two Walks along Kamehameha Highway," in *Transnational Crossroads: Remapping the Americas and the Pacific*, eds. Camilla Fojas and Rudy P. Guevarra Jr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 275.

World than any other races.know about us.
 Or maybe we can know all about the world if
 We only remember we get the whole Pacific and the
 Whole ocean all around us. I wonder if our parents
 Stay remember anything about the sea.
 Voice: Busy islanders: leave your shops and canneries and cane
 And behold, from this windy lava mountain,
 The two-thousand miles of dazzling sea around us [. . .]³⁸

As the text unfolds, the young islanders become more assertive in their claims to both know and possess the island, the sea, and the world at large (“we own this land. We own the sea”). The text ends on a note of ambiguity, however, as the islanders’ voices give way to the crying of plovers and the reader confronts the question: “where is the edge of the island?”³⁹ With these evocative lines, Tam probes—though does not discount—the islanders’ “Americanness” while also asserting their belonging in both the Pacific and the wider world.

As if elaborating his assertion that “the shores are universal and they are of my life, mine,” Tam’s insistence on his and his fellow islanders’ connectedness to both the North American continent and to the diasporic trajectories of their families hinges on the shore’s fluid qualities as both territorial boundary and porous oceanic threshold; conjuring, like *Moon and Shoals*, the image of an island with no, or perhaps infinitely extending, edges. “The Visitor” thus inscribes Hawai’i within a geopoetics of insular connectedness, not isolation, and offers a theory of identity and place not grounded in the separation of continents and seas but rather mobilized through the archipelago’s proliferating, oceanic form.⁴⁰ Captured in Tam’s assertion that “we get the whole Pacific and the Whole ocean all around us,” the artist’s understanding of the islanders’

³⁸Tam Papers, Box 5, Folder 12.

³⁹Tam Papers, Box 5, Folder 12.

⁴⁰Tam’s geopoetics of the archipelago also resonate with Epeli Hau’ofa’s conception of the Pacific as a “sea of islands,” a space its Indigenous inhabitants have long known and navigated in ways that exceed the bounds of nations and empires. See Hau’ofa, “Our Sea of Islands.”

diasporic and transoceanic relations echoes Glissant's concept of "rhizome-identity," through which he theorizes the identities of those, like Afro-Caribbeans, whose cultural origins are not rooted in a single place or time but rather formed in and through histories of displacement or migration. Glissant took the archipelago (particularly the Antillean archipelago) as a model for understanding the non-homogenizing relations between particular and universal, part and whole, that he saw as arising from *within* the creolized spaces and communities of colonial and post-colonial modernity, countering those imposed upon them from without. Resonant with Tam's vision of islanders in the Pacific, Glissant conceived of "the world as it is diffracted in archipelagos, precisely, these sorts of diversities in spatial expanses, which nevertheless rally coastlines and marry horizons."⁴¹

These biographical and theoretical connections lend depth to *Monhegan Landform's* status as a self-portrait by helping us see how firmly Tam aligned his senses of place and of self with Kauai's shorelines and their expansive geographic surrounds. If, by the 1940s, Monhegan had begun to answer Tam's question, "where is home for me?" it did so not by taking the place of Kauai but by becoming grounds from which artists expanded upon his vision of his place within an archipelagic world, a "big system" of relations that did not obliterate but rather enfolded all the little ones. We might call these relations "tidalectic," a term that the scholar Elizabeth DeLoughrey, citing the Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite, uses the name "the complex and shifting entanglement between sea and land, diaspora and indigeneity, and routes and roots" that resist neat synthesis in the Caribbean and Pacific Island literatures she studies.⁴² Rather than tidalectic, though, I find it more productive to think of Tam's landscapes as "islanded" or "islanding," a verb the artist used to specify not only the topography but also the temporality with which he aligned his perspective and practice. In

⁴¹Édouard Glissant, *Treatise on the Whole-World*, 11–12, 18.

⁴²Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 2.

Tam's poem "Monhegan, October," islanding derives from a prolonged duration of observation:

What are those rafts
that ferry cargoes of light
from the island to the open sea,
breaking our shorewater, pirating our silver,
leaving us this wake of black water?

We watch from a torn coast.
Some days at sunset our drowned shoals
emerge along the horizon, doubling
and arching like gleaming porpoises
released in a new sky.

Some days gulls ride the tide
past Nigh Duck into the calling straits
never to return. The cove also goes,
slipping from contours pebble by pebble,
leaving our maps.

Down in the emptying pools
colonies of mussels weave their threads
into layers of stone.
We wait between the slanting foreland
and the scoured headland.

Look down from Burnt Head.
The bottom of the sea might be stirring
from its dark sleep of kelp.
Wait. Stay. In the white upwelling
we might yet be offered
a storm of flowers, garlands
to shore us, to island our time.⁴³

As the sky darkens, Tam imagines the receding tides as "rafts" that carry light away from shore. The sunset implies that we—notice his use of the first-person plural—gaze west, towards Nigh Duck Island. Yet the poem's final stanza asks us to "look down from Burnt Head," a peak nearer to Monhegan's eastern

⁴³Reuben Tam, "Monhegan, October," in Tam, *The Wind-Honed Islands Rise* (Honolulu: Mānoa Books, University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), 29.

side, scrambling our coordinates as the island's contours appear to "leave our maps" as night descends. As visible landmarks fade or fall from view, Tam urges us to "stay" and "look down" under the water's surface, to see where "our drowned shoals / emerge along the horizon" and upwellings from the depths promise to "shore us" anew from below, proffering bright garlands that call to mind a ghostly image of Hawai'ian leis.

In Tam's paintings, the verb "to island" similarly becomes an invitation to bring the ephemeral, human-scale temporalities of months and times of day into relation with the deep time of ocean and earth. In paint, though, "islanding" also acquires additional significance as a descriptor that captures both the geologic texture of Tam's facture and the relations among and across different pictures. Indeed, Tam's islanded vision of place arguably reached its fullest expression in the geometric, iterative, serial possibilities of painterly abstraction. As an astute observer of art and art history, the artist responded to a range of influences and ideas in his work, but his engagement with Mondrian is especially interesting in this regard. "As in Mondrian – an art of relationships, + not of images," he wrote of his ambitions in 1946. "But instead of his severe, rigidly controlled art of contrasts between the vertical & horizontal, perhaps now I seek a dialectic between the straight line (the timeless) and the focus forms (the ephemeral) – To recall the known image + contrast it with the non-figurative forms."⁴⁴ For Mondrian, the purpose of painting was to reveal what he called "the plastic expression of relationships," an aim he believed was only achievable through strict abstractions of color and line: "the more the natural is abstracted, the more pronounced is the expression of relationship." At stake in Mondrian's concept of *relationship* was the promise of a more essential or universal understanding of reality, an objective achieved only by transcending the limitations of particularity.⁴⁵ He argued:

⁴⁴Tam, diary entry, April 12, 1946. Tam Papers, Box 5, Folder 6.

⁴⁵Piet Mondrian, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality: An Essay in Triologue Form* (1920, repr., New York: George Braziller, 1995), 21. See also Piet Mondrian, "Dialogue on the New Plastic," (1919), in Harry Holzman and Martin S. James (eds. and trans.),



FIG. 12.—Reuben Tam, *Edge of Place*, 1948. Oil on canvas, 26 × 40 in. Collection Buffalo AKG Art Museum, Room of Contemporary Art Fund, 1950, RCA1950:2. Image credit: Buffalo AKG Art Museum/Art Resource, NY. © Estate of Reuben Tam.

Each thing contains the whole in miniature. As the ages say, the microcosm is also the macrocosm. So we need only to view each separate thing, the one, as a duality or multiplicity—as a complex. And, conversely, to see each thing as part of that complex: a whole. Then we will always see relationship, then we will always know one through the other.

Mondrian used the example of a landscape composed of a horizon and moon to elaborate these ideas, arguing that though these elements might appear separate, translating them into abstract axes of horizontal and vertical revealed their “primordial relationship” as component parts of a greater whole.⁴⁶

Compare a work like *Edge of Place* (Fig. 12) to one of Mondrian’s prototypical grids (Fig. 13) and Tam’s realignment of the latter’s ideas becomes apparent. In Tam’s painting, the crags and furrows of Monhegan’s headlands become slabs of interlocking blacks, whites, and primary colors that translate Mondrian’s “controlled art of contrasts” into shifting substrata of molten earth. As if excavating beneath the clean lines of one

The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian (Boston: 1986). As excerpted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford, UK and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1992), 282–284. Dunes, beaches, and oceans were also recurring subjects in Mondrian’s early works.

⁴⁶Piet Mondrian, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*, 22, 25–27.

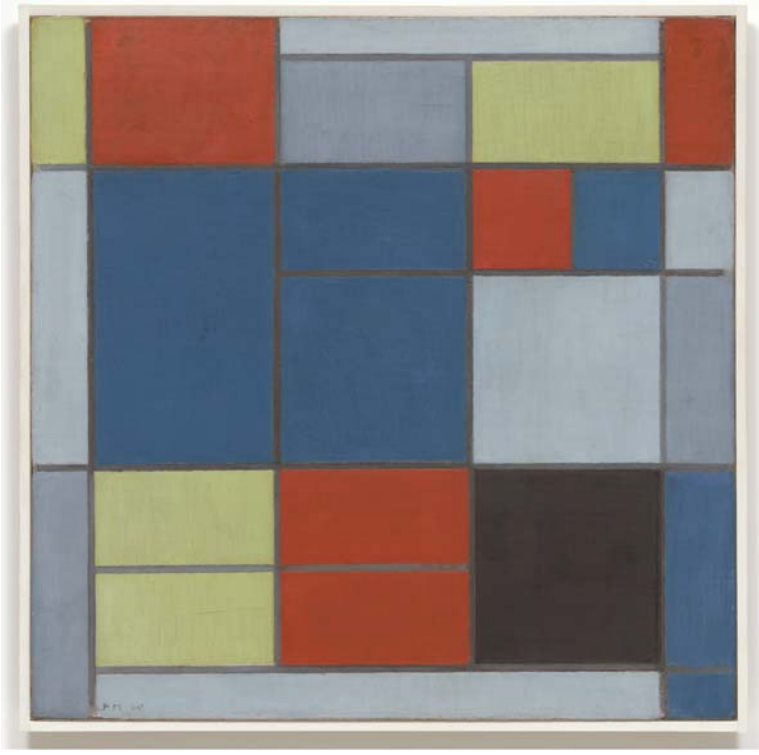


FIG. 13.—Piet Mondrian, *Composition C*, 1920. Oil on canvas, 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ \times 24 in. The Museum of Modern Art. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (by exchange) 257.1948. © 2024 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

of Mondrian's "rigid" abstractions, Tam's picture exploits the grid's capacity to suggest an infinitely extending space beyond the canvas. Yet in Tam's hands, the composition's primary mass (whether island, shoal, or molten rock) suggests an equivalent projection underneath it, into the depths of water or land.⁴⁷ The essential plastic relationships Mondrian sought to articulate with his reduced palette of black, white, red, yellow, and blue, come to suggest a layering of different geographies, potentially Hawai'i's "warm red and burnt sienna basalt" and Monhegan's "cold grey gneiss and granite," as Tam described

⁴⁷Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9 (1979): 50–64.

them.⁴⁸ If *Edge of Place* reprises “The Visitor’s” concluding query, “where is the edge of the island?” it looks to abstraction as grounds for a potential answer: a means of unearthing the “primordial relations” between places whose particularities might otherwise make them appear separate. In Tam’s hands, abstraction thus becomes a tool for re-materializing Mondrian’s “plastic relationships” in the forms and formations of island geology: “Our islands are the summits of ocean peaks,” he told O’Keeffe. “I look upon these landscapes as variations of the earth’s crust,” he would later elaborate, “with the Hawaiian Islands providing the basic vocabulary of landforms through which other earth structures can be perceived and understood.”⁴⁹

Like islands, Tam’s paintings both enclose and open outward, bringing interior terrain and exterior world, part and whole, into continually charged interrelation. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the artist’s final series, known as *Archipelago*. Made after the Tams’ eventual return to Kauai in 1981, it charts the life cycle of a group of volcanic islands, from their creation and emergence to their weathering, subsidence, submersion, and reemergence as new land.⁵⁰ An example from the series, *Islanding: Blue Channel* (Fig. 14) captures the dynamics at play across the larger group. In a vertical composition recalling Tam’s earlier sketch of two islands, a pair of forms face or orbit each other, their delicate edges fuzzing into the currents of blue, white, and grey that both connect and render them discrete. Pale yellow forms—perhaps atolls or shoals—dot the channel running horizontally between them, suggesting that we look from above at an archipelago in formation. Or, to reprise one of the questions I posed at the outset, could this be but one island, shown in different states and at different times? In looking from above, we may also see beneath: note the areas of pale green and dusky pink that shade the uppermost island,

⁴⁸Tam, Autobiographical Essay, 1975. Tam Papers, Box 5, Folder 10.

⁴⁹Tam, diary entry, February 24, 1939. Tam, Autobiographical Essay, 1975.

⁵⁰See Reuben Tam, *Archipelago: Life Cycle of the Hawaiian Islands* (Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts, 1998).



FIG. 14.—Reuben Tam, *Islanding: Blue Channel*, from *Archipelago* series, 1988–1990. Acrylic on paper. Collection of the Honolulu Museum of Art. Gift of the artist, 1990 (21017).

as if offering a glimpse of its submerged form. The green is bolder, but this time bounded, in roughly the same area of the lower form, while the curve of a delicate white line mirrors the shape of the upper form as if rendering its wake offshore. The lava-like reds, yellows, and pinks that fill the upper island have, in the lower, passed from view, as if cooling and contracting into rocky topography.

Archipelago's seriality emblemizes the relations plotted microcosmically in works like *Monhegan Landform* and *Edge of Place*, as well as macrocosmically, in the oceans and that recur

and recur across his practice as a whole; an entire *oeuvre* archipelagized. As dunes transformed into islands, atolls, driftwood, and tides through endless permutations of color, shape, horizontal and vertical, Tam came to see paintings and islands in analogous terms: “I can mark the nebulous passage of days + nights only by the completion of a new picture,” he wrote from Monhegan in 1948. “It is like arriving on an island; I feel firm earth beneath me; the achievement is positive, and I am then able to look back and survey the vague stretch of waters I have traversed.”⁵¹ Resembling the relations Tam attempted to chart, in the summer of 1942, between the “Astronomical O” and “little o’s,” *Archipelago’s* seriality aligns with Tam’s broader conception of his work as a search for “some big system that is the mother of all my little ones,” wherein “system” might be akin to the open and iterative structures of both archipelagic forms and astronomical cycles, as well as Mondrian’s painterly “complex” of micro- and macrocosmic parts and wholes. Citing John Coplans’s classic essay: “seriality is identified by a particular interrelationship, rigorously consistent, of structure and syntax: serial structures are produced by a single indivisible process that links the internal structure of a work to that of other works within a differentiated whole.” Unlike the abstract permutations explored in the serial work of contemporaries like Frank Stella or Kenneth Noland, however, Tam’s combinations of color and shape iterate and constellate within a decidedly more earthly “macro-structure” of the archipelago.⁵² If landscape’s traditionally place-based and perspectival modes of specificity have here “disappeared into painting,” to quote Hilton Kramer’s take on a group show featuring Tam’s work in 1968, the serial character of Tam’s pictures render this disappearance grounds for landscape’s re-emergence in islanded form, rendered part of a serial and relational theory of place.⁵³

⁵¹Tam, diary entry, March 11, 1948, Box 5, Folder 7, Tam Papers.

⁵²John Coplans, “Serial Imagery,” *Artforum* 7, no. 2 (1968), accessed May 19, 2024, <https://www.artforum.com/features/with-serial-imagery-the-idea-of-the-masterpiece-is-abandoned-211011/>.

⁵³Hilton Kramer, “Where Landscape Painting Has Gone” *New York Times*, February 4, 1968, Box 8 Folder 4, Tam Papers 1968. Tam Papers, Box 8, Folder 4.

Like *Archipelago*, Tam's self-portrait in *Monhegan Landform* thus asserts the special capacity of painting to island the geographies of the artist's own history: "one is doomed by time," he wrote in a diary entry in 1942, "and yet to paint is to project time beyond the limits of the temporal."⁵⁴ As with Kauai so with Monhegan: the relations among islands that had structured Tam's life and practice could best be captured along-shore, where the land passed under the water only to rise from it again, and islands themselves were not cut off by the ocean but part of a unified terrain stretching across and underneath it; small parts of a contiguous whole. By environing a New England landscape within this wider system of oceanic relations, Tam's Monhegan pictures respond to the provocation that "no one has yet seen the American landscape," by showing us how it might only become visible from an islanded point of view.

⁵⁴Tam, diary entry, October 2, 1942. Tam Papers, Box 5, Folder 5.

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