



Stepping into the In-Between

In his latest show, *MĀHŪ*, San Francisco hula master Patrick Makuakāne explores the Hawaiian concept of a fluid gender and an openness to the third self.

When ancient Hawaiian carvers would take material from the natural environment—whether a tree or a bone or a piece of stone—and then begin to shape it into a figure destined for a temple or other sacred place, they had a word for the unfinished work, the in-between entity: *māhū*. Outside of that ritual process, the word was also used in a different sense, to refer to people whose gender identity was fluid, neither *kane* (male) nor *wahine* (female).

But once missionaries arrived in Hawai‘i in 1820 with their Calvinistic properties, and once American culture overwhelmed Hawai‘i, the noun *māhū* lost its expansiveness. Today the wehewehe.org dictionary defines it as “homosexual” or “hermaphrodite.” And, unfortunately, it can be used in a downright pejorative sense.

That’s the *māhū* San Francisco Kumu Hula Patrick Makuakāne remembers from his teenage years in Hawai‘i, when he started to realize that he was gay. But attitudes are changing in the islands, much as they are nationally, and the groundbreaking choreographer aims to encourage us all to reimagine the term. To do so, he has invited outstanding *māhū* entertainers from Hawai‘i to collaborate with his company, [Nā Lei Hulu i ka Wēkiu](http://NaLeiHuluikaWekiu.com). And he will use his latest show, *MĀHŪ*, which premieres on October 22, to spotlight the unique Hawaiian concept of a fluid gender.

“Transgender issues are in the zeitgeist, and I was thinking of the many talented *māhū* people in Hawai‘i,” says Makuakāne, who wrote a grant proposal for the show in 2019 and has had to wait two years to be able to perform it. “I thought, What if I did a show with

BY CONSTANCE HALE

PHOTO BY PATRICK MAKUAKĀNE

transgendered artists who sang for us while we danced? I didn't want to take a political stance, per se. I just wanted to let people hear them sing and watch them dance, because their artistry is so powerful."

Yet Makuakāne acknowledges that celebrating such artists, and thereby celebrating the respect given to māhū people in ancient Hawaiian society, is inherently political. (There has never been a dance production or any kind of artistic showcase that has ever used that term in its name.) The show intends to move past the shame and ridicule that LGBTQ Hawaiians have endured by being labeled māhū. Instead it invites them to feel pride. Most important to him, though, is to "reclaim the idea of their authenticity and their humanity."

The concept of a third gender, where individuals can express both their masculinity and femininity freely, is not unique to Hawai'i. Parallels include *hijra* in Hindu society, two-spirit Native Americans, the *fakaleiti* or *fakafefine* of Tonga, and the *fa'afafine* of Samoa.

The show highlights three artists from Hawai'i who all fall under the hard-to-translate term māhū. Part One begins with Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu, a hula master and leader in the field of indigenous Hawaiian language and cultural preservation. (She is also the subject of *Kumu Hina*, a 2014 documentary, and she co-directed *Kapaemahu*, an animated 2020 film based on the long-hidden history of four stones on Waikiki Beach honoring legendary māhū who brought the healing arts to Hawai'i.)

"Kumu Hina is a beautiful dancer and chanter with a resonant voice," Makuakāne notes. The segment in which she is featured will focus on *kahiko*, or the ancient style of hula, with Nā Lei Hulu dancers interpreting, for example, the story of Kapaemahu, the four māhū prophets/healers who traveled from Tahiti to Hawai'i around 400 A.D. Newly composed chants will tell the story, and the dancers will perform in the *kahiko* style, while dramatic costumes, lighting, and video projections will complete the kind of stunning visual display Makuakāne has become known for.

Following her is Kuini, a musical trio composed of Ho'omanawanui Apo, Kēhaulani Tamure, and Keli Māhealani Viernes. The three singers specialize in *leo kiekie*, or Hawaiian falsetto. "They will knock you off your feet with their vocals and hairdos," says Makuakāne. "They're just incredibly witty and colorful, with vocal audacity and some of the most glorious harmonies you have ever heard in Hawaiian music."

This will be the *'auana* portion, showcasing the style of dance that may be most familiar to general audiences, in which light-hearted dances are choreographed to music featuring Western instruments, melodies, and vocal harmonies. Many popular *'auana* describe a 20th century life of firemen, streetcars, public parks, and even *pipi* (beef) stew. Part

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One of MĀHŪ closes with one such hula, "Hawai'i Isles Medley / E Ku'u Hawai'i"—or what Makuakāne refers to as the "bowling alley hula." The dancers appear in bowling ensembles, and they mime walking, talking, putting on shoes, and sending balls down onstage lanes. The dance is fun, mirthful, and a little madcap.

"My inspiration for this number was the bowling league I used to go to with my parents," he explains as I watch a rehearsal in a high school gym on Potrero Hill. Above the basketball court with its glistening polyurethane floors, high windows let in the bright August sunlight. "They bowled at Waialae Bowl," Makuakāne continues. "The league was called 'Hukilau,' and each team had the name of a different fish." (A *hukilau* is a Hawaiian tradition in which family and friends work together in casting a large fishing net from shore, scaring fish into it, and then pulling the bounty back for a communal feast. It is also the name of a popular hula.)

Part Two of the show features Kaumakaiwa Kanaka'ole, a scholar, activist, and performer born into a powerful matrilineal line of cultural experts and hula people on Hawai'i Island. "Her work is rooted in ancestral foundation, but the places that she goes—the voice, the melodies, the chord changes—she doesn't sound like anything else or anyone else," says Makuakāne. "She soars with contemporary ease."

That she doesn't sound like anyone else is hardly hyperbole. *The New York Times* described a performance of hers as a "traditionalist tour de force" in which Kaumakaiwa "vaulted through various registers and timbres, from bass to witchy contralto rasp to sweet soprano"—or what the singer called "skinny girl" voice.

For her part, Kaumakaiwa, who has transitioned from male to female, describes her power this way: "My body was genetically built to survive 9-12 months out on the open ocean, with a limited amount of resources and food, in order to maybe make it to arrive at some place called home, some place called Hawai'i, to a tiny little rock." She credits her grandmother with instilling in her a fearlessness about being who she is, and says that fearlessness allowed her "to say Yes to this show and to redefine status-quo hula."



PHOTO BY JOSIE ZAVALLA

Kaumakaiwa's off-the-charts music, which synthesizes the esoteric spirit of chanting with the beats of Michael Jackson and the vocals of Adele, is the perfect complement to *hula mua*, Makuakāne's signature dance invention. The verb *mua* means "to progress," and Makuakāne defines *hula mua* as dance that "takes from the past and brings to the future." Its movements rely on the vocabulary of *'auana* and *kahiko*, but the music is all over the map (including techno and pop and opera and everything in between). And many of the "traditional" movements are stylized—"tweaked and exaggerated," with other movements occasionally mixed in—a little modern dance, maybe, a little Broadway, a little hip hop.

"We are taking hula to new places—not just physical places, but also artistic and emotional places," he explains. "I'm broadening my context of hula, reminding us that tradition and innovation can coexist in meaningful and surprising ways."

One example of *hula mua* in the show is the number "Lovely Hinahina," which I watched at rehearsal in the gym, when rows of "rubber slippahs"—zoris and flip flops—marked out a stage on the basketball floor. The lyrical love song, written by Kaumakaiwa's mother Kekuhi, describes the breeze "bearing witness" as the singer catches a glimpse of her dear lovely hinahina. The memory of her is "presented on wings feathered by the breeze," a breeze that whispers and stirs my affections. The melody is hardly lyrical, though: the beat of the guitar, drums, and synthesizer—as well as the rapid fire chanting—it is made urgent and visceral.

For thirty minutes, 23 dancers, in two flocks, practiced entering and going through several formations in which they are birds, lifting their long arms in gentle waves, fluttering their fingers, moving their feet in a *hula bourée*, letting their bodies lower in lunges and pliés and then rise on tiptoes again.

The choreographer calls out makeshift names for the moves—"bird wave," "*kai*," "whisper." (*Kai* is the Hawaiian word for water, and in hula it is usually expressed with a precise wave movement of the arms at the hips.)

"I just want you to moooove," he says, "but not too move-y." He demonstrates with his own body. "Make your *kai*'s as smooth as possible, sweep and roll with your body: whisper into bird wave into *kai*."

As I watch them work over and over on a very small segment, with lots of impromptu changes, Makuakāne choreographing on the bodies before him, proposing something, looking at it, changing it, I am reminded that a critic from the *Los Angeles Times* once compared the "ineffably smooth unison" of the Nā Lei Hulu dancers with "the best corps de ballet" and described a "lasting aftereffect something like having seen flowers that breathe and butterflies that think."

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akuakāne has met with all three of his guest artists separately to conceptualize original pieces that celebrate the traditional status of *māhū* as cultural standard bearers, artisans, and healers. In Kaumakaiwa, in particular, he found an ambassador of *māhū*, someone who has thought deeply about the meaning of the word not just culturally but artistically. "In Hawai'i, we don't have gendered pronouns," she told a hula class in a Zoom lecture. "There is no such thing as 'she' or 'he.' It's just 'o ia.'" The term *māhū* literally translates to a state of being and doesn't refer to a specific gender. It encompasses everything, the entire breadth of gender expression."

With a collaborator like Kaumakaiwa (he calls her his "linchpin"), something new began to happen that took even Makuakāne by surprise. Call it collaboration, alchemy, or just the magic of finding a new muse. "I'm directing her, but I'm stimulated by her, and she by me," he says.

"I've never hid the fact that I am gay, but in this show I can internalize that. I can ask myself, 'What does it mean for me to do a show called *MĀHŪ*?' I can step into a self that is always there, though perhaps hidden a bit, or protected. It allows me to inhabit that self fully."

He clearly enjoys the flamboyance of these guest artists. "Every song is a parade, and who doesn't love a parade?" he says. "The combination of guest artists is allowing me to go *all out*. Every choreographer wants that!"

"For this show, everything is being reexamined," Makuakāne told Hawaii Public Radio. "People are going to see a combination of different musical styles, of costumes, of traditional, modern and contemporary dancing, chanting.

I mean, I don't like linear. I don't like to start with tradition and then move through time to end up in contemporary times. I love to mix them all up. Because I feel that's what my life is. I'm one big wheel collecting everything as I move throughout the day."

Nā Lei Hulu presents *MĀHŪ*

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naleihulu.org

CONSTANCE HALE is a California journalist who has been writing about Hawaiian culture for three decades. Her award-winning features on hula, slack-key guitar, the sovereignty movement, the Hawaiian language, Big Island cowboys, and Spam musubi have appeared in the *Atlantic*, *National Geographic Adventure*, *Afar*, *Smithsonian*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Miami Herald*, and *Honolulu*. She has written five books on language and literary style, including the best-selling *Sin and Syntax*. She has also written a book for children, *Iwalani's Tree*. Hale, who was born in Hawai'i, started dancing the hula at seven and has studied with Kumu Hula Patrick Makuakāne for twenty-five years. Her biography of him, *The Natives Are Restless*, was published in 2016.