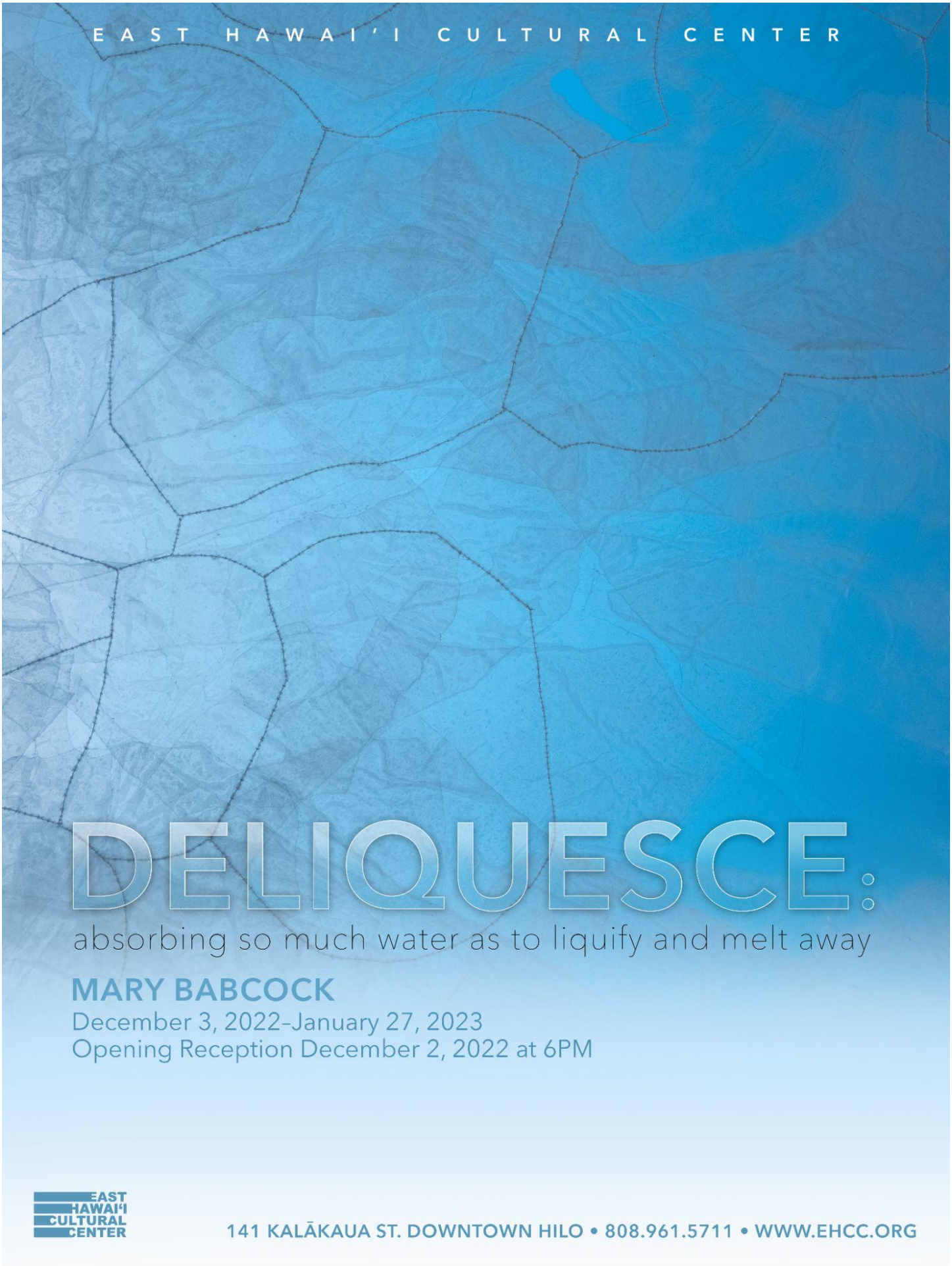
EAST HAWAI'I CULTURAL CENTER



DELIQUESCE:

absorbing so much water as to liquify and melt away

MARY BABCOCK

December 3, 2022–January 27, 2023
Opening Reception December 2, 2022 at 6PM

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“**Deliquesce**”

: *absorbing so much water as to liquify and melt away*

In this series of works, Babcock explores the deeper concepts of absorption and dissolution in the context of sea level rise and climate change. Based on studies of human interventions across the Pacific, the works address our often myopic attempts to harness nature’s power for self-interest and the reverberations of such arrogance. Household wax paper is the primary medium, chosen for its paradoxical and metaphorical nature - wax paper is meant to preserve and protect yet is itself fragile and impermanent. In these labour-intensive pieces, Babcock engages the act of mending as a personal and political gesture of restoration and repair.

Mary Babcock is a visual and performance artist deeply interested in the intersection of art and socio-ecological activism, holding mending as a central theme in her work, both as an actual reparative action and as a metaphor for personal and social change. Disparate in form, the unity in her work stems from her focus on process and materiality and her examination of the metaphorical significance of working with specific materials in selective ways. She is currently Professor in Sculpture and Expanded Practices in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. She has exhibited regionally, nationally and internationally, has work in significant public collections including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and multiple US embassies, and has lectured at numerous conferences linking artistic practice, inquiry, and socio-ecological sustainability.

Kajjitok in aō ñan kwe kiō
These are my questions for you still
hand laminated and stitched wax paper, 2022, $8,000.

March 1, 1954: The United States detonates “Castle Bravo”, the largest thermonuclear weapon in US history, on Bikini Atoll (Republic of the Marshall Islands) - an experimental “test” 100 times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Lijon MacDonald, 8 years old at the time, was at her home just 75 miles away. The radioactive mushroom cloud rose to 130,000 feet and spread in diameter over sixty-two square miles in under ten minutes, expanding to over 7,000 square miles. Children played in the fallout because they thought it was snow.

Cactus" bomb followed… small in comparison, but leaving a lasting legacy - the Runit or Cactus Dome, referred to locally as the “the Tomb” - a 377 ft dome of concrete entombing nearly 3.1 million cubic feet of radioactive debris, including plutonium-239, from nuclear tests in the Enewetak Atoll between 1946 and 1958. Rising seas now wash over its surface. The concrete is cracking and its porous bottom crater is absorbing sea water. It is reported that the soil and the lagoon water surrounding the structure measure higher levels of radioactivity than the debris of the dome itself. The United States continues to deflect any responsibility.

The title of this work is a line from a song by Lijon, now a prolific composer and anti-nuclear activist. Her voice, like many, has been injured by thyroid cancer surgery and cracks like the concrete surface of which she sings. Despite this she continues to sing. Singing is how stories are passed on from generation to generation.

Oh, Columbia
hand laminated and stitched wax paper, sea salt, 2019, $10,000.

REMEMBER.
DIKES ARE SAFE AT PRESENT.
YOU WILL BE WARNED IF NECESSARY.
YOU WILL HAVE TIME TO LEAVE.
DON'T GET EXCITED.[1]

On May 30, 1948, the dike separating Vanport, Oregon, the largest public housing project in the US, from the mighty Columbia River collapsed.
The city was inundated by nightfall, rendering it uninhabitable – leaving its nearly 18,000 inhabitants homeless. This catastrophic event lay a vivid, if misguided, justification for the further damming of the Columbia in the name of hydro-control and power. It later helped cement the imperfect marriage between Canada and the US – the Columbia River Treaty – delivering promised power, yet also decimating communities, cultures, and ecosystems and threatening food and water security as we face climate change.

Vanport was never intended to last. Brainchild of shipbuilding magnate Henry Kaiser, Vanport was a hastily built housing project constructed from expendable materials in the midst of a floodplain – a cheap real estate solution to satisfy housing needs of his rapidly expanded workforce of African-Americans, otherwise forbidden by discriminatory housing practices to live in all but a small overly saturated section of Portland.

Oh, Columbia. How do you understand liberty?

This installation is intended as a cautionary tale regarding the impacts of reckless greed, and our apparent acquiescence with climate apartheid.

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[1] *Flier distributed to residents of Vanport by the Housing Authority of Portland on the morning of May 30, 1948. No further notice was given.*

ʻŌlaʻla

hand laminated and stitched wax paper, 2022, $10,000.

As a child growing up in the continental northeast, I was repeatedly taught that trees draw up water from the earth through their roots. No one ever exposed me to *Papahulilani* – the Hawaiian study of the space from above the head to where the stars sit – and the observation that the mountain trees gather the mist, bringing us water from the skies through their leaves. In Hawaii, the ohia-lehua is a central pillar of the forest, responsible for our great watershed. This magnificent native plant gathers water from the clouds through its leaves, slowing the rains and directing fresh water to the aquifers. The ohia-lehua are the very first plants to grow on fresh lava flows and can grow in every ecosystem from mauka to makai. They are the keystone tree of our native forests and central to Hawaiian ecosystems and cultural traditions. Yet in many cases they are now dying of thirst.

ROD (Rapid Ohia Death) is caused by two fungal pathogens (*Ceratocystis lukuohia* and *Ceratocystis huliohia*). The fungus clogs the vascular system of the trees, our water catchers ironically dying as if from a drought.

The Ohia-lehua is historically an amazingly resilient plant, evolved over centuries to adjust to dynamic and harsh conditions. Much research is currently being done to better understand its vulnerability in the face of rapidly changing climatic conditions and human induced changes to its environment. Recent research using aerial photography and optical remote sensing suggests that a major vector in the spread of ROD is presence of ungulates – axis and Columbian black-tailed deer, European mouflon sheep, and feral pigs, goats, sheep and cattle – all foreigners to native forests. The work references such aerial maps and explores the dual edge of human intervention.

9.7808° N, 70.6871° W x 62.0360° N, 5.5310° E
hand laminated and stitched wax paper, sea salt, Norwegian mined olivine, glass, 2022, NFS.

I recently completed an artist residency at the Volcanoes National Park. As I was walking along the trails of the Kahuku unit, a friendly young trail-lover pointed out to me that we were walking on gems that had rained from the sky. As I looked more closely, the path that I was mindlessly stomping on was clearly bestrewn with sand-like particles of glistening peridot.

Others have noticed these gems as well. Some believe that these olivine sands are the key to solving our human generated climate crisis. In places like Hawaii Island's sacred Papakōlea Beach, the waves naturally weather olivine sands. In doing so, the olivine absorbs CO2, transforming to silicate + calcium carbonate + magnesium ions, the building blocks of coral reefs and reducers of ocean acidification.

One project wants to take this large scale, scattering sands across 2% of the world's "most energetic shelf seas" and accelerating olivine's chemical reactions that pull greenhouse gases and lock them up in the shells and skeletons of corals and mollusks. Yet what happens when we alters vast stretches of beach the Dominican Republic with minerals mined large scale in from mountain sides in Norway? Who is it that benefits?

Lotic Sea
hand laminated and stitched wax paper, sea salt, 2020, NFS.

"Lotic"*:*
a term referencing rapidly moving fresh water.

Reports of mass meltoffs in Greenland and predictions of disappearing island countries challenge our static understanding of terrestrially defined nation states. How do we understand borders in light of the rapidly changing topographies presented by sea level rise? In what ways do we import and impose our terra-centric and fixed understanding of boundaries on cultures and ecosystems more naturally accustomed to fluidity? What are the impacts, culturally, environmentally and spiritually, of attempts to halt this dissolution? What happens to our sense of collective responsibility when we define relevance via political boundaries instead of interdependence and compassion?

Lotic Sea examines our understanding of borders and challenges discourses that prioritize economies over communities and ecologies. On the fragile surface of the paper, hand-stitched lines represent the EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zones) borders of several Pacific Island nations, contested territories made more vulnerable to exploitation as climate change threatens their viability. The islands themselves, outlined with simple holes pricked in the surface of the wax paper, appear to have slipped away, flowing outside of conversations focused on resource extraction and geopolitical boundaries.

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