

# THE NATURE OF ART

Two island artists keep the ancient technique of block printing alive.

by LESLIE LANG  
Photographs by CHRIS McDONOUGH

Artists have long found their way to Hawai'i Island, a seemingly ever-erupting land of creation and inspiration, and printmakers Dietrich Varez and Andrea Pro are no exception.

You would be hard-pressed, so to speak, to not come across Dietrich Varez's bold, brown-inked block prints on a visit to the Big Island. Varez, whose iconic block prints seem to be everywhere, has been illustrating the traditional mythology and culture of Old Hawai'i for decades.

He says it's impossible to escape these subjects where he lives, deep in the forest near Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park.

"Every rock, every volcanic eruption, every plant," he says. "In Hawai'i, these things have all kinds of stories attached to them. And if you're dealing with an *'ohi'a* tree, you can hardly escape the whole Pele and Hi'iaka story. Everything in Hawai'i has a story. You have to fend off not becoming overwhelmed."

He is prolific, not overwhelmed. More than 225 of his different prints are available at the Big Island's Volcano Art Center Gallery, where he is a "signature artist." His work is also available at Honolulu Museum of Art, Bishop Museum, Maui's Haleakala National Park, Kaua'i's Koke'e Museum and elsewhere.

To create his monochrome prints, he carves a linoleum block and makes a silk screen from it. He hand-screens each print and then signs every one.

He also does oil paintings, "mostly of Pele," he says, which are available at Volcano Art Center. He's long designed Aloha shirts for Reyn Spooner. He recently combined some of his block prints with text and put out a book titled *Pele and Hi'iaka*. He also has work in The British Museum and the Berlin State Museums.



A detailed look at "I'iwi in Ohi'a" by Andrea Pro. The background texture in this print is from the wood grain of the block.

Opposite page: The wood block shown is one of five wood blocks used to make "I'iwi in Ohi'a." The artist used seven cutting tools of varying thickness to carve the wood.





Varez photos courtesy Dietrich Varez.

It's an impressive body of work, and an unexpected one if you consider where he started out. Varez, 74, says that his father, Friedrich Donat, was Hitler's chief underground architect. As WWII ended, his father left the family and went into hiding. Varez's mother divorced him and then met an American soldier from Hawai'i, Manuel Varez. They married.

**“I went from hell, from Berlin where the bombs were falling and the Russians were coming, to heaven. Hawai'i took me in and I'm repaying.” - Dietrich Varez**

“I was adopted by him and have his name now,” he says. “He taught me the local ways: fishing, local habits, Pidgin English. He was a very good guy. I couldn't ask for more.”

They moved to O'ahu where Varez went on to graduate from Roosevelt High School and then the University of Hawai'i.

“I went from hell, from Berlin where the bombs were falling and the Russians were coming, to heaven. Hawai'i took me in and I'm repaying,” he says.

He is repaying by making sure his art is affordable. “There are two ways of making money,” he says. “You can sell two paintings at a million dollars each, or a whole bunch of prints at a lower price. I make more contact with humans by keeping the price low and selling lots.”

Three things, he says, go into making art. “One is the material,” he says, “the second is time, and the third is vanity. If you're too arrogant and vain about how cool and smart you are, you're going to have a hard time selling. I keep that down. I just make the design.”

Andrea Pro is another printmaker inspired by her Hawai'i Island surroundings. She creates wood block prints on her coffee farm in Holualoa.

She says she “felt herself land” when she took her first printmaking workshop.

“I'd waited all my life to unlock the mysteries embedded in the grain of wood,” she said, “to make marks with chisels, and to grapple with the puzzle of the image reversing when transferred from wood



This page: (above) Pro making her initial wood carving for a new wood block design; one of Varez's finished linoleum blocks; Varez creates a print on paper; (right) Pro's “Uniting Heaven and Earth” comprises several wood blocks in puzzle pieces.

Opposite page: A close up of Pro's “puzzle pieces”



Clockwise from top left: A wood block print of a Sadleria fern endemic to Hawai'i, entitled "Ama'u," by Andrea Pro; "The Opihi Pickers" by Dietrich Varez; "Radiance" by Andrea Pro.

to paper. After many years of printmaking, all of this still satisfies my intellect, my hands and my soul in the deepest way."

She started out as an archaeologist, at one point living with Eskimos in a remote fish camp.

"They would see things I could never see happening, even when they were right in front of me," she says. "The grandmother in the family would always catch fish. I could never catch fish. I just couldn't figure out what she was doing that I wasn't doing. I never figured it out."

Those experiences, she says, eventually led to her learning to be still in nature, to "wake up," she says, which has shaped her art.

"It's part of how I work now, to be very still in nature," she says. "I guess I've spent so much time just watching and letting things unfold, that I tend to see things and have experiences I really enjoy. I couldn't have had that before."

Her work, which depicts Hawai'i, its flora, fauna and natural landscape, is evolving into art that is about more than just the subject, she says.

She talks about hiking with a friend up out of the crater Kilauea Iki a couple years back. At

the top, they sat for an hour, literally looking straight up the whole time, and noticed native birds in the 'ohi'a tree above them.

"They were communicating with the trees in a way," she says. "What does it feel like for that 'ohi'a to have a bird or a bee sticking its beak into its flower? The tree must be experiencing something, too. More and more I'm realizing there's lots more going on."

With her prints, she says, she tries to convey relationships.

"Between, say, the trees and the birds. The trees and the atmosphere," she says. "For instance, my print 'Sky, 'Ohi'a, Earth'—the title reflects that this 'ohi'a tree is not standing alone. It's in a relationship with the sky and the earth."

"It's all there, all the time," she says. "This is what fascinates me."

Pro's wood block prints are available at Cedar Street Galleries on O'ahu. On Hawai'i Island, they are available at the Volcano Art Center Gallery, at Niaulani Gallery in Volcano, at Elements in Hawi and Gallery of Great Things in Waimea. ✨



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