New mural speaks volumes on water rights

By Kekoa Enomoto

A new mural in the heart of Honolulu carries ancient messages being transmitted in modern art and communication forms of graffiti and Twitter.

Enter: the 22-by-193-foot "Kalihi Water Writes" mural designed by artists Estria Miyashiro of the Estria Foundation and John Prime Hina of the nonprofit 808 Urban organization.

The Oakland, Calif.-based Estria nonprofit spearheaded the project, which was unveiled July 7 in a Honolulu Community College parking lot.

The artwork — executed in aerosol art, or graffiti, and spanning more than 4,200 square feet — highlights environmental themes of public access to water and the sustainability of the traditional Hawaiian ahupua'a system.

Miyashiro said planning for the project started last November, and painting got underway June 6 by a cadre of local artists. The Kalihi artwork is the third of 10 murals planned for global sites, including cities in Colombia, El Salvador, Palestine and the Philippines. The # sign in the title is a social-media tag that can help each mural become a trending topic and vault it to the front page of the Twitter web site, Miyashiro added.

The centerpiece of the O'ahu mural is a stately image of Queen Lili'uokalani, Hawai'i's last reigning monarch and benefactress of the Queen Lili'uokalani Children's Center.

"Pu'uwaia means 'heart' or 'hill of water.' In the mural, we made her sash like a waterfall or river. Literally, her heart is still pouring out water," Miyashiro said, referring to Lili'uokalani. "We made her throne the crown lands. It blends in with the mountain range behind her. In her hands is the deed when she gave her money to take care of orphans. There's a lot of symbolism in that portrait.

"The first thing we drew on the wall was the queen. Because she's in the middle, everything lines up from her. ... She came over us, there was an energy shift. ... The whole process was chicken skin," he recalled.

Of Japanese, Okinawan, Hawaiian and Caucasian descent, Miyashiro said he's been a graffiti artist since age 16. The 'Iolani School graduate, now 43, co-founded the Estria Foundation with Twitter co-founder Jeremy LaTrasse. Estria — aka John "TJ" Miyashiro — is a graffiti pen name. He holds a BFA degree in art and illustration from the University of San Francisco.

"I am just a gateway, a channel; the message came from the farmers and lawyers," Miyashiro said. "It was a duty and honor to do the mural.

Likewise, creating the mural was a profound experience for Hina, 41, who lives in 'Ewa, O'ahu. He said he started in aerosol art as a teenager nearly three decades ago, when there was "no training available for this medium; so the streets became our canvas and the ditches our refuge."

"This mural has become a spiritual journey for me," said Hina, who was born in American Samoa and raised on O'ahu, where he serves as Founding Director of 808 Urban. The mural "forced me to dig deep and give it all I had to offer as an artist, a person and a student."

The "Kalihi Water Writes" mural flows with the values of water rights and water rites — water as a pono public trust, and water as the basis of a sustainable ahupua'a system.

"By taking care of water, we can set up a long-term, sustainable lifestyle," Miyashiro said in discussing the mural's ancient, yet still cogent messages. "It's the kuleana of all of us. So we need big companies to return the water for public use, and construction trades to build green structures with solar energy, wind turbines, water catchment systems on roofs, where we can grow plants down the sides of buildings. And glass skylights to reduce electricity for lighting. The plants and soil actually can cool the buildings, so we reduce air-conditioning costs.

"We need to be going back to a green way of living and using water efficiently, where the water in the rivers can run down to the ocean how it should flow," he said.

Kekoa Enomoto is a retired copy editor and Staff Writer with The Maui News and the former Honolulu Star-Bulletin.