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*Radiant South:  
Ari Southiphong Comes Into Her Own  
The Aloha Zen of Lynne Hanzawa O'Neill  
Alobawear, Then and Now*

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# ALOHA ZEN

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## LYNNE HANZAWA O'NEILL ON BEING AT THE HELM OF FASHION SHOWS AND EVENTS FOR MORE THAN 30 YEARS.

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TEXT BY LISA YAMADA  
IMAGES COURTESY OF GERARDO SOMOZA

*Lynne Hanzawa O'Neill is in the middle of a story about working at King's Bakery in the '70s, selling dozens and dozens of its now-famous sweet rolls, when her mother Florence stops by our table to drop off a plate of six perfectly round Portuguese sausages. "Go eat," says Florence, her eyes crinkling warmly above a deep smile before she flits off to check on another table. We're at the breakfast buffet at Marriott's Kuhio Beach Grill, where Florence has been working diligently for the past 29 years. Despite the shuttered windows and cave-like feel due to a recent hotel renovation, the restaurant is buzzing with guests.*

"My mother is 78," explains Hanzawa O'Neill, "and she's still working five days a week, still wants the best schedules, the best tables, wants to turn the most tables. She's always kind of pushing herself." Recently returned from New York City, where she produces fashion shows and events for eight months out of the year, Hanzawa O'Neill has agreed to let me interview her at the restaurant her mother has become practically legend at. Appropriately so, since the story of Lynne Hanzawa O'Neill and her "aloha zen" starts with mom.

Hanzawa O'Neill was born in Hawai'i in 1953, the eldest daughter of Roy and Florence Hanzawa. They moved to Los Angeles when she was 3 years old but came back every year to the islands to spend time with grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. She remembers going to bon dances, the warm summertime months spent listening to her father sing and play taiko drums at the Soto Mission Temple in Nu'uuanu. "I had the best of

both worlds because I was exposed to other things living in California," she says. "But I always felt really misplaced because I felt a real connection to Hawai'i, like this is really my home."

Hanzawa O'Neill went on to graduate with an art history degree from University of California, Los Angeles, and as timing or initiative would have it, a volunteer position opened up at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Hanzawa O'Neill jumped at the chance to man one of the information hotlines, providing inquiring callers details on the blockbuster exhibitions showing at the time. She soon worked her way up to managing the phone bank and then to a paid position as assistant volunteer coordinator. "I really thought I had this dream job, working in a museum after everyone told me all I could do with an art history degree was teach," she says. Then her boss told her about a job opening at Macy's in Union Square in the public relations and special events department. "The only hitch was that it was a six-month, temporary job. But I didn't have the five-year plan, and so I was just really open to opportunities.

... Growing up, my mother never told me what to do. She always just said to me, 'You can do it.' She didn't ask me if I thought I could do it. So I think that's why I didn't know about planning ahead, because she always gave me the freedom to find and figure it out myself, as well as instilled the confidence in me to think that I could do whatever I wanted to do in my life. ... So I went, interviewed for four hours, got the job, and this six-month job ended up being

five years before I left."

Macy's ended up as a training ground for Hanzawa O'Neill, what she calls the Harvard of retail. Her first day on the job, she was thrown into the fire – or rather, the flowers. She was assigned to coordinate Macy's Easter Flower Show, a lavish display of plumbing flowers, topiaries and other verdant plant life, an overwhelming task for a young art history major. "I was given so much responsibility my first day, I just felt like I was drowning," she recalls. "This was the first time in my whole life that I thought, I don't know if I can do this." But harkening back to those words from her mother, she did. From the ground up, Hanzawa O'Neill successfully took on all of the position's challenges: working with Macy's in-house PR and advertising departments, aligning window displays with print ads and visual merchandising; hosting VIPs; dealing with security, guest lists, ticket sales. Together with what she calls "creative geniuses," Hanzawa O'Neill would help to redefine Macy's San Francisco as a purveyor of designer goods and set the department store to become a leader in the fashion world. They achieved this through coming up with innovative special events like a tapestries exhibition in Berkeley held in conjunction with a fashion show for Missoni's new line and a complete overhaul from top to bottom (including plumbing) of an abandoned warehouse to host the elegant collection of Japanese designer Matsuda.

After five years, tired of what she describes as a politically motivated atmosphere and in need of a change of pace, Hanzawa



O'Neill up and left everything at Macy's and made a break for Japan. And though enthralled by the fashions there, after five months, she came to the realization that she was "Japanese from Hawai'i" and "not Japanese from Japan," and that "there was a really big difference." So she returned to San Francisco thinking she was going to be a housewife and take cooking classes and such. But "I was not very successful at that," she says, "and fortunately my friends started calling and that's how it all snowballed."

One of those friends happened to be an old colleague from Macy's who went to work with United Colors of Benetton, a company known then for its controversial, multi-ethnic ads. Hanzawa O'Neill was invited to produce a yearlong fashion tour for Benetton's 25th anniversary, which took her to five different cities, including New York City, where she remains to this day. Working on fashion shows and events for independent designers and large companies alike, Hanzawa O'Neill has made name for herself solely through word of mouth. A big part of her business is taking part in New York Fashion Week.

Hanzawa O'Neill has worked every NY Fashion Week since its inception in 1994, when it hadn't even gained the name it's known by now. Initially called Market Week, it originated when designers opened up their showrooms to display their current collections for buyers and press. Back then,

Hanzawa O'Neill coordinated fashion shows within the individual show rooms. According to her, and as documented in *The Tents*, which chronicled the beginnings of NY Fashion Week and how it positioned the city to become one of the leading fashion capitals in the world, NY Fashion Week grew out of the desire to have one central location for press and buyers to converge. That location eventually became Bryant hanger.

This past fall, Hanzawa O'Neill produced 17 shows, from womenswear designers like BCBG, Hervé Léger and Vivienne Tam to menswear shows for Perry Ellis, Todd Snyder and Duckie Brown. "You only have this short window of time to produce the show," she says. "We have just three hours to get the show up and running, and sometimes it's a huge, 360-degree turnover from the show before." And setup is just the beginning. "We have to move the collection in, bring in models, usually over 20 of them, hair and makeup teams, nails – and I mean that could be like 35 people right there – and then we have the dressers, backstage PR, VIPs, photographers. It's kind of all just organized chaos." For her part, Hanzawa O'Neill oversees everything and is responsible for getting the show going. This is when her "aloha zen" kicks in, a term her husband Bobby coined to describe the way she works. "When there's so much chaos, I get really calm, sort of into this meditative

state, because if I react, then everybody else is going to react. I cannot be hysterical." Hanzawa O'Neill and her team have been working on this for months, the designers even longer, so it's a satisfying moment to build to. Everyone works to that point, to be ready for that moment. And then the show starts.

"I've been doing this for so long, but it's still really exciting," she says. "It is formulaic, but what makes it different is the people." Though she's worked in the tents, some of her most memorable shows have been with young, up-and-coming designers, like Miguel Andover, who quickly catapulted to fame to become the fashion darling of the likes of Vogue editor-in-chief Anna Wintour for transforming items into wearable pieces of art (a Louis Vuitton handbag into a skirt; a frock from Quentin Crisp's discarded mattress ticking). Hanzawa O'Neill produced his first show, which was held in a little theater in a Hispanic part of town. "Then all his clothes were brought in on broken broomsticks by his friends, and his father, his sweet father, was sweeping up all the dried grasses, which was what the set was made from, that had fallen around the runway," she says. "I remember Alexander McQueen was there with his little disposable Instamatic camera, but that first show was not completely full, not even all the editors were there. ... Then the collection was brought out, and oh

*I remember Alexander McQueen was there with his little disposable Instamatic camera, but that first show, not even all the editors were there. Then the collection was brought out, and it was just unbelievable. It was couture. And then of course his second show, Anna Wintour came with her fur coat on.*

my god, it was just unbelievable. I said to myself, I get it now – it's couture. And then, of course his second show," she continues, "Anna Wintour came with her fur coat on."

Producing fashion shows for real has also spun off to consulting on producing staged fashion shows for TV. Probably the most beloved by fans, and most infamous, is her work for *Sex and the City*. Diehard *Sex and the City* fans, you know the one: Margaret Cho plays Lynne Cameron, "a much sought-after fashion show producer as valuable to a show's success as Valium or Velcro;" Carrie models a set of sheer rhinestone underwear alongside Heidi Klum, trips and falls ("She's fashion road kill!"). The character played by Cho was modeled after Hanzawa O'Neill, who *Sex and the City* writer and producer Michael Patrick King shadowed during fashion week. For the record, Hanzawa O'Neill says, "Margaret Cho is not aloha zen at all. That was Margaret Cho channeling me. She's the potty mouth version of me." That year, 2001, *Sex and the City* received its first Emmy award for outstanding comedy series.

Hanzawa O'Neill attributes much of her success to spending time in Hawai'i growing up. "I think what I've been able to get from Hawai'i is the aloha spirit, and I think that carries over every day to whoever I meet. It's so easy to get wrapped up in the fashion and glamour of it all, but I can always tell people from Hawai'i right away. It's just that

aloha spirit." I ask her to explain, and she says: "It's the warmth, the friendliness, not the attitude. It's wanting to help people, to connect with people. You feel that as soon as you meet them. I just feel when I see people from Hawai'i, I'm back home again, back home in Hawai'i."

It is that permeating sense of aloha spirit that prompts Hanzawa O'Neill to help out wherever she can. On her recent trip home, she was immediately corralled onto the steering committee for Hawai'i Fashion Month, which is being organized in collaboration with the state Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism and Hawaii Fashion Incubator, on which she serves on the advisory board. To be held this October, Hawai'i Fashion Month's goal will be to stimulate creative sectors in fashion garment and jewelry design industries and encourage local merchants to celebrate made-in-Hawai'i fashions.

She also serves as the at-large director for the Japanese Cultural Center of Hawaii. It's her way of honoring the heritage of her grandparents, who left Japan to make Hawai'i their home. "I feel that it's important to preserve the history and culture of the first generation of Japanese, who were the seminal generation of the ever-evolving and unique Japanese-American history in Hawai'i. My Hanzawa grandparents came from Fukushima and my Nekomoto grandparents came

from Hiroshima. I admire and appreciate their bravery and pioneering spirit, and I am proud to be part of their legacy."

As a way to honor her father, she is on the board for the Honolulu Fukushima Kenjin Kai. "My father was a big influence on me because he taught me a lot of discipline. He taught me how to throw the football, play baseball, basketball, to swim perfectly. ... I used to call him 'Coach.' But it wasn't about finding the perfect stroke or throwing the ball, it was about the discipline of doing it, giving it your all and trying to find perfection in whatever you do." Like her mother, her father worked until late in his life, until he was 75 years old, as a groundskeeper for the aquarium. He only retired when he broke his femur after a fall from a ladder while trying to trim the aquarium's hau tree. "You know, before, when I was young, it was always, 'What's your five year plan?' Now, it's, 'When are you going to retire?'" she muses. "But I don't even think about retirement, because of how my parents are. They just enjoy their life."

She continues: "My parents are both such great role models for me. They're both full of the aloha spirit, so yes, I guess I get it from them too." Lucky for us, and Hawai'i's future in fashion, Hanzawa O'Neill's career is just getting started.