



HOME TOUR: A hideaway in Hawai'i.

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T

o get to Ren MacDonald-Balasia's family home, you need to know how Hawai'i works—to know that the roads will zigzag sharply across the mountains, for example, or that you'll ultimately only get to where you're going by following your intuition, rather than looking at Google Maps. Even when you're outside the house, it's still not clear that this sloping lot in O'ahu's lush Mānoa Valley, a 15-minute drive from central Honolulu, is the right place. A cement staircase inlaid with small stones curves through eucalyptus and ironwood trees that hide the house from view; it's only as you climb that the house reveals itself, modest and minimalist, the exterior wood painted a brown that emulates the color of the island's dark earth.

MacDonald-Balasia grew up in the house and lived there until she was eight. Now 36, the celebrated artist behind floral design studio Renko splits her time between Los Angeles and Hawai'i, where she always stays with her grandmother, Tomi Kaizawa Knaefler, who has lived in the house for 65 years. Kaizawa Knaefler remembers first happening upon the lot with her then-husband, "whoever he was." ("She's had three husbands," MacDonald-Balasia explains, "and a lot of boyfriends.") The couple had made a wrong turn, and when they saw the wooded site on the then-sparsely populated street, Kaizawa Knaefler knew that it was "exactly what I wanted."

When, in 1960, it came time to build the house, they chose local architect Stephen Oyakawa, who been working under the master of American architecture Frank Lloyd Wright, and had just returned home to Hawai'i following Wright's death. Kaizawa Knaefler, then a journalist for the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, had previously contacted Oyakawa while working on an article about the city's architecture and he had driven with Kaizawa Knaefler through Honolulu, criticizing the city's white prefabricated houses—"so many pieces of rubbish littering the landscape"—and buildings in the neighborhood of Waikiki as "lack[ing] a feeling of rhythmic space and movement...and beauty." The Knaeflers would not make that mistake:

Their instructions to Oyakawa were to make their house open and in harmony with its natural surroundings—an idea that the architect could be said to have taken to extremes as there are nearly no exterior walls, only sliding screens. Crossing the home's threshold and ascending the orange-carpeted floating staircase to the living room, it feels as if you haven't left the surrounding forest, but are instead suspended in it. Everywhere is the sound of birdsong and the wind rustling through leaves.

Oyakawa built the house in three phases. The original structure took the form of a simple rectangle with cork floors, a pitched roof and exposed beam ceilings. The house had been built on stilts and in 1967, a ground floor was added by filling in the space beneath it in much the same style as the floor above.

The original entrance led directly into the living room, which opened onto the kitchen on one side and the primary bedroom on the other, a transition marked only by a slight change in floor height. Shoji screen doors that slide into the walls were installed to provide privacy, but they were rarely used, and the furnishings, at least initially, were sparse. Ren's mother, Pamela MacDonald, remembers that when she was growing up in the house, aside from all the built-in pieces—such as the platform bed, myriad bookshelves and desks for the children—the only additional furniture was a low table and zabuton cushions.

Today the original furnishings are very much intact, save for a few holes in the shoji doors, but while the home was once more austere, it has softened over the years as generations grew up and moved out and moved back in: Carpet now covers the redwood floor downstairs and rattan sofas and chairs provide additional seating.

Japanese influences are clear throughout the house, but these are less a nod to Kaizawa Knaefler's own heritage (her parents moved from Hiroshima to Hawai'i before she was born) than a reflection of Hawai'i's strong Asian community. And unlike much of the postwar construction that



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Oyakawa had criticized, the design preserves a sense of place through the elimination of barriers between the interior and exterior, a feature that borrows from Wright as well as from Hawai’i modernist principles.

That’s not to say that its openness was not radical for its time. “People didn’t like the idea that there were no walls,” says MacDonald, who moved back from LA to take care of her mother in 2018. “Most people still don’t.” Kaizawa Knaefer’s third husband disliked it so much that in 1977, the couple asked Oyakawa to build an extension jutting out from the original, a more enclosed space for another bedroom and study. Still, even here, the bathroom lacks an exterior wall—a Zen rock garden serves as a transition between the orange-tiled ofuro (a Japanese soaking tub) and the outdoors.

The house has been formative for MacDonald-Balasia, and she has designed her LA showroom and store in homage to it. There is the same dark wood and orange tiles, and for her opening party, the food included an edible Zen garden with a “sand” of sesame and nori powder that guests rolled mugwort mochi in.

“I loved growing up here because you’re just so exposed to the elements, it felt like camping,” MacDonald-Balasia says. She remembers falling asleep to the sound of the rain, and having to dry water that blew into

the house during storms with a towel. She spent much of her time outside.

“Being in communication with nature and being alone a lot, I took time to look at what was happening, and it made me very observant of the way things grow and change,” she says. “I wasn’t gardening. I was pulling leaves and ripping them apart and pelting them with rocks. I was really trying to interact: ‘What is this like? What does it smell like? Can I mush it up and make a potion?’”

It’s an approach that is evident in her dramatic and sculptural floral arrangements today, which typically highlight the wildness, the weirdness and the diversity of the natural world. For the recent wedding of Alexa Dell—daughter of Dell Technologies’ founder, Michael Dell—on Hawai’i Island, MacDonald-Balasia designed a ceremonial

arch of white ginger flower leis draped over mossy Pele’s hair interspersed with thousands of variegated hala leaves stripped into thin ribbons. Tufts of wild grass extended down the aisle. Though nearly all the materials were grown in Hawai’i, the effect was more gothic and ethereal than tropical.

“I can work with material anywhere,” MacDonald-Balasia says. “But what I’m drawn to is the materiality here in Hawai’i. I love the stuff that grows in LA too, it’s cool, but it’s not *juicy*. It feels like everything I see here, I’m just like, What the fuck!”

As if to demonstrate, she unpacks her haul from an early morning trip to Chinatown. There’s frilly dried snow fungus; prickly soursop; a round brown fruit she’s unsure of but likes for its mottled exterior; red mountain apples; Vietnamese sweets bundled in banana leaves and tied with green or blue string. While most people go to Chinatown looking for things to eat, MacDonald-Balasia seeks textures. She’s imagining a fence made with sticks of hairy gobo, bound with ginseng roots and decorated with dainty flowers—perhaps the tangerine or lavender blooms that she picked up that morning at an orchid nursery in the back of Pāolo Valley, or strands of feathery ohai ali’i, purchased at the lei stands in Chinatown. She will seek coral vines from abandoned lots and, from the side of the road, fallen dried

(opposite)
Tomi Kaizawa Knaefer, Pamela MacDonald and
Ren MacDonald-Balasia.







kiawe pods, creamy white monstera flowers and scaly snake fruit (“so creepy”). Her past arrangements, scattered throughout the house, include sticks covered with lichen, scattered with mgambo seed pods, their interiors burgundy and seeds blue and velvety.

Whenever she is home in Honolulu, she likes to create arrangements simply for the joy of it, something she says she doesn’t do in LA. “It feels like a rebellion,” she says, to create with materials that aren’t available in the continental US, to make an arrangement that could only exist here in Hawai’i, or more accurately, in this house. She is constantly finding backdrops, like an old easel that stands in a corner; one of her favorite settings is a gold sliding door—she remembers being young and watching her mother cover it with origami paper and painting gold on one side, silver on the other.

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Her grandmother’s ceramics also make appearances in the arrangements. While some of her pottery is displayed throughout the house, like the platters and large bowls arranged on a shelf in the living room, or the smaller figurines and vases alongside the stairs, many are scattered and hidden. In one bathroom, “It’s like a museum in every drawer,” MacDonald-Balasia says, as she rummages through one, finding bronze bells and a dish that Kaizawa Knaefer has titled “Rivers, Mountains and Stars.”

MacDonald-Balasia ultimately plans to move back to Hawai’i and the house full-time. She talks about some of the things she would want to do, like rip out the downstairs carpet and expose the original redwood floors underneath. But for now, as Kaizawa Knaefer’s dementia takes hold, everything needs to be kept in their exact places, otherwise it causes confusion. The house and its contents are anchors for her mind, just as they are for MacDonald-Balasia: “Ever since I left, I am always thinking of this place.”

(opposite)

Orchids thrive in Hawai’i’s tropical climate and appear throughout the home, including a *Grammatophyllum scriptum* in the living room.





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