

Digital and physical mesh in the mystical Nakamura-Campbell exhibit “Kukai” at Kittredge Gallery, University of Puget Sound

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Inside Kittredge Gallery it's very, very dark. Eerie blips and taps punctuate the stillness. And in the center of the room is a kind of temple created by light, inhabited by seven inscrutable ceramic priests. It's "Kukai," a brand new collaborative installation by Tacoma ceramic artist Yuki Nakamura and Vashon digital media artist Robert Campbell that redefines each art form into something both ancient and futuristic.

The set-up's cleverly simple. Seven foot-high clay towers – beautifully made, like unusual chess pieces – stand on a dark, mirrored surface, which reflects their length down into eternity, and also reflects back the light flashes, shimmers and lines projected onto them by two opposing side projectors. The projected images flicker over the towers with piercing exactitude, but the pale shadows thrown up by the mirror onto the walls to either side are giant, hovering, and above all, precisely in sync with what you can't always see on the clay forms.

Behind this is another mirrored floor, with a video projected onto it that crystallizes and rotates endlessly like a cluster of stalactites, or an insect hive. As you move around the installation this crystal shimmers in and out of focus, points becoming lines, lines swaying in either direction like a crowd in a trance.

The loop lasts about five minutes, fizzling like TV white noise or blipping like a cardio monitor, with squeaks, trumpet notes and faint taps giving a subtle horror-flick feel. But you'll probably find it hard to sit there that long. The artists say they're inspired by sea imagery and the recent Japanese tsunami, but in practice this brilliant combination of old-world and new-world art forms creates a totally alien landscape, a kind of cross between an arcane cave temple and a futuristic hospital room, where a mortal heartbeat might eventually be quashed by an arrhythmic, relentless pulse of light.

A collection of contemporary drawings from the TAM collection fills the small gallery, from the iconographic Thomas Schlotterbach and Gerald Purdy to the simplicity of George Tsutakawa.

Opening reception 5-7 p.m. Jan. 30, then 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday and noon-5 p.m. Saturday through February. Free. Kittredge Gallery, University of Puget Sound, North 15th and North Lawrence Streets, Tacoma.

