

LEIKO

a cultural keepsake

by Amber Nightingale

Photos by Dibble Photography

Brilliant colors and memory-rich vintage fabrics reveal timeless stories found within locally crafted Leiko clutches. True to her appreciation of Hawai'i culture, designer Julie Lopez creates memorable handbags that are reminiscent of her native west side Kaua'i origins. Enlivening the island's sense of place, Leiko clutches are far more than chic, functional bags.

Lopez describes, "Every piece is original. I put a lot of love into my clutches – they aren't mass produced. My hope is that it reminds people of a happy place, their childhood, good memories, the old Hawai'i...the simple life. There's meaning to the culture." With modern, Asian and vintage styles to choose from, Leiko clutches are attuned to all tastes and ages. Even though Lopez gravitates towards bold, bright colors (like her personality), the handbags also come in more subtle tones and classy, clean designs. Available in two sizes, the clutches are framed in tortoise shell, antique brass or wood to complete the unique look.

"There's a story to the inside and the outside of Leiko. I put a lot of time into considering how they're put together. Every little piece is hand-touched. It makes them priceless," Lopez states genuinely.

Growing up with a mother who sewed all the family clothing, Lopez's creative sensibility was ignited at a young age. Since her grandmother and grandfather were from Japan, this ancestry colored her Hanapēpē childhood and determined her given middle name – Leiko. Translating as 'calm child,' the traditional Japanese name is a significant cultural memento (obviously Lopez's symbolic brand name) that also interweaves with Hawaiian language as 'beautiful flower.' Laughing, Lopez jokes that she is definitely not a "calm child," but the iconic flower emblem paints her personal clutch and surfboard.

Immersed in the 'simple life,' Lopez's west side Kaua'i youth was filled with tomboy adventures, where she ran with her two brothers Jason and Kevin

alongside her older sister Karen. Lopez thrived as an active girl in volleyball, basketball, swimming, hiking and surfing. Her mother, Gladys Wandasana, made all her dresses for elementary school (to accommodate the family budget) and prepared all their meals from fresh, organic ingredients. Her father, of Filipino descent, was a "quiet, yet effective" hard-worker who clung to traditional values as a provider for the family.

It was this pure, rural foundation that propelled Lopez forward as an artistic child, making jewelry from shells and experimenting with photography as a student at Waimea High School. Her teenage 'punk rock' originality was expressed in brightly painted jeans and white Converse shoes. Graduating in 1985, Lopez soon met her husband Jeff and made a big move from her cozy Hanapēpē neighborhood to the rainy north shore in Ha'ena. It wasn't long before the north shore's enchanting beauty drew her in, and the beginnings of Leiko ensued.

In 2010, Lopez was inspired by some locally crafted vintage bags made by her friend Denise, which encouraged the first ever Leiko creation. With a modern-retro feel, the black, white and red flower-covered clutch was made with fabric from Singer's. Most of Lopez's initial designs were made from this regular cut fabric, until Denise shared a 'loud' vintage



print for her to sample. Vintage quickly became the fabric of choice – synonymous with the Leiko name.

Now with more than 1,000 hand-made clutches behind her, Lopez has fine-tuned her creations and made a universal presence with clients ranging from North Carolina to Japan. Sourcing her distinctive prints (in vintage, Asian and modern styles) from local Kaua'i thrift stores and the internet, Lopez explains that she is sensitive to using traditional mu'umu'u in order to uphold the integrity of its heritage. "I'm very aware of that...it could hurt people's feelings," she explains sweetly.

After selecting her fabric, Lopez goes through an extensive process to prepare it for use. Washing, unraveling, ironing and finally cutting the fabric makes it ready for a Leiko creation. Once the fabric has been cut, it takes an

average of about one and a half hours using her two sewing machines.

Contemplating the story of each individual clutch, Lopez intentionally chooses the inner and outer fabrics to complement one another. Opening a Leiko clutch for the first time can reveal a chromatic surprise. The definitive inside label, displaying the exclusive Leiko name, is the marker of its high quality, artisanship and homage to Kaua'i.

The Leiko legacy continues to expand, with future design schemes that will incorporate native Hawaiian woods like koa, milo and mango to create a locally crafted clutch frame. Lopez also specializes in custom orders for those with special requests, like utilizing forgotten family fabrics to create sentimental keepsakes. On the side, she also makes belt buckles sealed with

surfboard lacquer. Leiko clutches may be found in boutiques island wide, notably Halele'a, Oskars, The Collection at Kalaheo Coffee and Pualani.

Appreciating life's simplicity, Lopez is contented every day when she paddles out to surf in Hanalei. When she isn't crafting Leiko clutches, her free time is spent in the water, picking shells at Lumaha'i or hanging with her husband and best friend Jeff. Together they love dining out, surfing and savoring fine wines.

Honoring her humble heritage, Lopez expresses, "You may travel the world, but you always gravitate back to Kaua'i. The beauty is inspiring. I love the simple things, the lifestyle and the people. There is plenty of love here in Hawai'i." ■