

Freediver Kimi Werner talks
about fish, fun and fate

July 11-17, 2012
HONOLULU
WEEKLY

The Hunger Games

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If Kimi Werner were a fish, she'd be an 'uku (jobfish, a.k.a. grey snapper). The 'uku doesn't live in a hole like many goatfish—it travels, moves, explores and hunts. An artist and champion freediver, Werner is known for her strength and fight, and like the 'uku, she doesn't give up or go down easily. "I get tunnel vision and I go for it," says the 32-year-old Hā'iku, Maui, native who now lives on O'ahu. "I put myself out there, and I put my whole heart into it."

This attitude is how she became an accomplished chef, painter, and most notably, an infamous fish hunter who is paid to travel the world seeking unique catches while modeling the lifestyle she represents for photographers and publications. Although she's an award-winning hunter, she doesn't compete much anymore; it doesn't thrill her quite the way it used to.

However, much of Werner's fame isn't that she's almost always the sole female competing in tournaments, but that she often wins, and now holds the record for spearing the world's biggest 'ono (wahoo) at 84 pounds.

The first time she dove outside of Hawai'i in 2008, she won the national championship of spearfishing in Newport, Rhode Island, and that same year, ended up winning every title possible, from Rookie Of The Year to the International Pacific Cup—which she's since won twice.



Skindiver, artist and chef—Kimi Werner's connection to what she eats is a full-circle experience

"It's a really nice vacation the minute I stick my head in the ocean."

—Kimi Werner

Mark Brown and apprenticed under him. Now her paintings and sea creature-inspired trucker hats and apparel are so popular that their sales actually pay the bills, lending the artist the freedom to return to spearfishing. Freediving masters Kalehi Fernandez and Wayde Hayashi soon became her mentors. "I'm a great stalker," she laughs. "I saw them on TV and was so mesmerized by the way they dove. I'd never seen it on that level before."

Trusting her gut

Werner says that, gender aside, she's known as someone who loves to eat her catch. She's in it for the food. Everything else that goes along with freediving—the beauty, adrenaline, exercise, travel, friends met along the way—all of that could be taken away and the self-professed “foodie” would still go diving for the pure satisfaction of being able to feed herself what she wants to eat.

“The meal is much more meaningful when you prepare it yourself and especially when you harvest it yourself,” she explains. “Whether it's a plant or an animal, harvesting gives you respect and appreciation for the growth and the life of whatever it is you're eating. You had to work hard to put that on your plate. That makes me feel so much more connected to the world around me.”

A connection to the ocean and the creatures living in it is what has taught Werner to trust her gut. “You're constantly relying on your instincts underwater,” she says. “I run into

sharks all the time, and my fear might tell me to get out of the water, but my hunter's instinct tells me to defend my catch. ‘That's my food, I got that, go get your own.’ Reacting in that way is what communicates to the shark that I'm not prey. I'm another predator. So we're not going to eat each other, now we're more bumping elbows than anything.”

While she can dive up to 159 feet and hold her breath for nearly five minutes, Werner remains a conservative diver. “If I can't get the fish to come in within two minutes, I'm either doing something wrong or that fish is just too smart for me,” she laughs.

On art and opportunity

By seeking out mentors, Werner has fast-tracked her proficiency in her various passions. While attending KCC for a culinary arts degree, Werner apprenticed at Halekulani's La Mer. After that, she spent time as a line cook at a Mexican restaurant, then competed in a culinary competition in China and later became a personal chef.

“I've been cooking since I was 7,” she says.

After college Werner became inspired to paint, and she sought out landscape painter

Cool sounds, no words

Werner's story is one of constantly striving to be a higher version of self, seeking mentorships, trusting one's instinct, perseverance, connecting to what is sacred, and knowing when to surrender.

“Your senses are so stimulated underwater,” she says. “It's a place where there's really cool sounds but there's no words—and thank god for that because our brains can be so noisy.”

Werner says that's what she loves most about diving, “my brain mellows out. It remains present for the only time ever, in the moment, focused on what's right there and not beating itself up about all the stuff we can't control. It's a really nice vacation the minute I stick my head in the ocean.”

While Werner continues to accrue exciting travel opportunities and invitations to dive for the spearfishing industry, the artist dreams of having her own travel show. She says that highlighting remote places throughout the world, where people live and thrive sustainably off diving, would illustrate the infinitely simple goal of a diver—to always be able to catch and cook great fish. ■