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Visual art

Yuki Kihara brings her acclaimed Paradise Camp to Sydney

The artist's hyperreal photographic series is a wry take on a giant of the past.

By Fiona Kelly McGregor

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Yuki Kihara's hyperreal photographic series is a wry take on Paul Gauguin. COURTESY OF YUKI KIHARA AND GUI TACCETTI

Yuki Kihara has chosen familiar wallpaper for our Zoom interview: a tropical beach, the curve of white sand fringed with palms, translucent shallows and a long blue horizon. One could easily assume it is a stock photograph from Silicon Valley, an idealised holiday setting from a tourist brochure.

“It’s nice and inviting,” says the Samoan fa’afafine artist. “But you would never know the ocean is rising.”

Born in Samoa in 1975, Kihara had a cosmopolitan childhood, attending primary school in Osaka, then boarding school in Wellington while living in Jakarta. Her father is Japanese, her maternal grandfather was German. Fa'afafine, loosely translating as “born a man, living in the manner of a woman”, and fa'atama, “born a woman, living in the manner of a man”, are gender identities particular to Samoa, with counterparts across the Pacific.

Paradise Camp first showed at the 59th Venice Biennale: The Milk of Dreams, Kihara the first Pasifika artist to represent New Zealand. Curator Cecilia Alemani's remarkable vision which centered women and non-binary artists in this time of ecological collapse pointed to humanity's need for holistic thinking, economic systems based on sustainment rather than growth and the importance of Indigenous knowledge.

Kihara's installation, which will be at the Powerhouse Museum from March 24, stood out for its saturated tropicity and the fa'afafine featured in photographs and videos. Attending the Biennale after six months in Italy, I was struck all the more by the contrast to European aesthetics, and the aching familiarity of Pasifika culture. The pavilion was close to the main exhibition in the event's notoriously huge sprawl of galleries.



Three Fa'afafine (After Gauguin), 2020.

YUKI KIHARA

“Being based in the Arsenale was a blessing in disguise because the group show helped form the context for my work, and my work extended some of the dialogue that Cecilia was curating: representation, the ecology, equality, human rights.”

Ancillary events such as a conference on climate change to which eight Pasifika scholars were invited, were bonuses. Flood-prone, vulnerable Venice was an ideal host for them. But there was a spanner in the works.

“The Commissioner (Caren Rangi) of the New Zealand Pavilion consulted with the La Biennale about housing a fa'afafine transgender artist, and the need for gender-neutral bathrooms, but they didn't install any. They want to appear liberal but when it comes to the pragmatic side, it's got a long way to go. I'm kinda used to it because that's what I have to face every day in my life.”

Like her compatriot Greg Semu, whose photographic re-enactments of old European paintings are also shot in and with communities, Kihara trained as a fashion designer. “Then I worked in wardrobe management, as a stylist, making costumes for performing arts productions, television and film. I learnt how everybody collaborated to realise the vision of the director. When I make photographs I use the methodology of film production.”

How did you feel about the representation of Oceania at the Biennale?

“Again, I wasn't surprised because we're always left out; although the Pacific Ocean covers one third of the

planet, we continue to be ignored. The region has 50 thousand islands, over 3200 Indigenous languages spoken actively every day.”

“A sea of islands,” as pioneering Tongan-Fijian scholar Epeli Hau’ofa called it.

Curated by Australian Natalie King, *Paradise Camp’s* foundation is a photographic series responding to paintings done by Parisian artist Paul Gauguin at the turn of last century. During her decades’ long international career, Kihara has accessed archives in New Zealand, Europe and the USA pertaining to this body of work.



Si’ou alofa Maria: Hail Mary (After Gauguin), 2020. YUKI KIHARA

“Yuki is indefatigable,” King tells me. “She has a strong research methodology, but the work has such tenderness and materiality.”

The paintings Gauguin produced fed Europe’s appetite for the exotic, gaining popularity throughout the 20th century. Born in that tumultuous year of Revolution, 1848, Gauguin left for Tahiti 50 years later, searching for the new. That his desire to escape the depredations of his own civilisation resulted in continued exploitation is tragically familiar. For all the years he spent there, Gauguin did not learn the language nor give economic remuneration to the Tahitians who enabled his bestsellers.

“I think that as a person Gauguin did a lot of dodgy things but as a painter he did a wonderful job. All the interesting work happens when he comes to Polynesia, inspired by the Other. Everything else is crap,” Yuki peals with laughter. “I’m very drawn to his use of colour and departure from Impressionism to post-Impressionism.”

Supposedly inspired by the landscapes of Tahiti and the Marquesas, many of Gauguin’s paintings were fictitious. What Kihara presented in Venice was very influenced by Pakeha photographer Thomas Andrew, whose Samoan photographs she unearthed in Gauguin’s journal *Noa noa*.



Genesis 9:16 (After Gauguin), 2020. YUKI KIHARA

Andrew took portraits in studio and landscape settings, mostly of young women. Sold in the name of science, such photos were common sources of erotic pleasure for white men from body-phobic cultures who used them to legitimise the display of bare breasts. Kihara guesses Gauguin came across Andrew’s photos during a visit to Auckland. Comparing them with Gauguin’s paintings, she found repetitions of compositions, poses, even sitters’ features. Her collages are astonishing illustrations not just of source material but also the interplay between photography and painting characteristic of this time. Andrew’s photographs often depicted Samoa, which with Tahiti and the Marquesas is part of the Austronesian language group spanning from Madagascar, Taiwan, Indonesia, then across the Pacific, following the pattern of migration millennia ago.

Kihara's 2018/2020 collage *Three Tahiti(Sāmo)ans* combines Andrew's photograph *Tattooed Samoan* with Gauguin's painting *Three Tahitians* (1899). The former shows a man seated from behind, the distinctive Samoan pe'a tattoo across his lower back. The latter shows two women flanking a man with his back to the camera, his shape and pose an exact replica of Andrew's Samoan model. However, Gauguin painted a twist of cloth across the man's back, perhaps anticipating correction from a perspicacious ethnologist. Yet the pe'a peeps through if you know what you're looking for.

The other twist is that many of the women in Gauguin's paintings are now recognised as muhu, the Tahitian equivalent of fa'afafine. Gauguin made no reference to alternative genders, perhaps too wary of upsetting the market. Māori scholar Dr Ngahuia Te Awekotuku wryly noted in her 1992 critique of him, "The male-female opposition is reconfigured and reinforced in the 19th century by missionaries, gentlemen scholars and Christian Māori scribes as the accepted norm, though the natives persist in its subversion."



2Two Fa'afafine on the beach (After Gauguin), 2020. YUKI KIHARA

Pasifika readings of Gauguin consider his attraction to mähū as complicated. His hair had grown long by the time he disembarked in Papeete. They laughed and called him tata-vahine, Tahitian for man-woman. I ask Kihara if she thinks he identified with mähū.

"I don't think he knew what it was like to have a mistaken identity. I think they were laughing at him because he was a white guy, and an ugly white guy. And he just hopped off the ship looking *terrible*."

In the wittiest of *Paradise Camp's* so-called "In-drag-enous" theatrical mise-en-scene, Kihara spent hours getting made up as Gauguin. As Yuki, she converses with Gauguin in a surreal spar

between artist and model, subject and object, past and present, cis man and fa'afafine, Europe and Oceania. No prizes for guessing who wins.

Paradise Camp at MAAS will be reinvigorated by the Powerhouse's huge collection pertaining to Samoa's colonial history, most notably 2900 glass plates by photographer Charles Carey who visited the Pacific around the same time as Andrew. Archival interplay has been the backbone of other Powerhouse exhibitions by Indigenous artists such as Brook Garru Andrew.

"I haven't found any link between Gauguin and Charles Carey. But I can make out an uncanny connection in the visual composition of the landscape," Kihara sends me a collage of a Carey riverbank superimposed over a Gauguin painting. The landforms are the same.

"I think Gauguin took artistic licence. He could brand the works as from a particular place then sell through his Parisian dealer because nobody there knew. Like he used Tahitian titles for paintings of Samoans."

Carey's photos also provide a visual record. Natural disasters are on the increase. The average sea level rise around the world is 2.28 to 3.5 mm per year but in Samoa and other parts of the western Pacific, the movement of currents puts it up to around 4.

Kihara brings my attention back to her Zoom wallpaper. In fact, it is a photo of a beach called Saleapaga on Upolu Island, badly hit by the 2009 tsunami.

"The district suffered greatly. 189 people died. And their recovery has been impacted by climate change."

Kihara's models are all from the Islander Fa'afafine Association. In the panorama *Fonofono o le nuanua: Patches of the Rainbow (after Gauguin) (2020)*, they pose at water's edge in colourful cloths, behind them thick jungle. The stilted nineteenth-century poses are offset with knowing, self-possessed expressions. These people were among the first responders to the tsunami, care-giving and guardianship being primary roles of fa'afafine.

"They were pulling bodies out of the debris, supporting young children, helping people to higher ground, yet there is nothing for them on the frontline. Whether climate change or natural disaster, we continue to face discrimination."

Although culturally recognised, the lack of legal recognition in most Oceanic nations is alarming. Kihara describes Samoa as very patriarchal, but it's the Westminster system that adheres to the gender binary. "Due to this colonial hangover, we aren't represented in statistics or climate change policies and rescue measures."



Nafea e te fa'aipoipo? When will you marry? (After Gauguin), 2020. YUKI KIHARA

As the gender binary here fractures and evolves, ancient Pasifika sophistications still barely feature. Just after interviewing Kihara, I watched the telecast of Sydney WorldPride’s opening concert. Courtney Act, Australia’s most famous drag queen, sang *We’ve Been Here All Along*. Ancient Egypt and Greece featured, along with familiars Alexander the Great and Socrates, but Oceania was absent.

New Zealand took over colonial administration of Samoa from Germany in 1914. “It’s interesting that it’s looked at as a queer friendly, liberal country. Same-sex marriage, trans people recognised on passports. Yet their old laws still bind us in Samoa. New Zealand should be helping with this conversation.”

Kihara cites Tahiti as an example not to follow. “When Paris legalised same-sex marriage, all the French speaking territories had to go with it. Nobody asked the natives of Tahiti what they wanted, so the māhū became scapegoats for colonial imposition. LGBTIQ kids are being bullied; coming out is really difficult, there is pressure from the church.”

On the eve of Samoa’s independence in 1961, the administration passed the Crimes Ordinance Act, banning female impersonation by any male in public, and homosexuality. Fa’afafine lawyers and the Samoa Fa’afafine Association worked for years with the Samoan law Commission to abolish the first clause in 2013, but homosexuality remains illegal.



Yuki Kihara’s Paradise Camp at New Zealand’s pavilion during the 59th Biennale of Arts exhibition in Venice. AP



Paradise Camp in Venice. AP

“The law is not imposed but the government can easily decide to. A lot of western people are agitating but they need to ask *us*, not the government, what we need.”

Kihara moved back to Samoa in 2009 because “I’m a landowner and have responsibilities to my land. My studio is in the family home. I live with my mother and aunty.”

“I have a whole community here; everybody in *Paradise Camp* knows each other. It was important for me to make sure whoever participated benefited from the funds. It’s not just conceptual, it’s about job training and upskilling.

“I made *Paradise Camp* with fa’afafine as my main audience. I’m using Gauguin’s paintings to tell my own story, not attribute to his brilliance but to question the system of power. Most Samoans don’t know who he is and don’t care. The series works on its own terms. For fa’afafine, the entry point is to see themselves reflected in an artwork because that so rarely happens.”

Paradise Camp will return to its origins next year in June, debuting at Saletoga Sands Resort where it was shot.

“It’s really important for me to take it to the actual district where the photographs were taken. The Islanders can’t wait.”

***Paradise Camp* will be the Powerhouse Ultimo from March 24 until December.**

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