

Paradise Revisited

Trailblazing artist Yuki Kihara explores the diasporic experience of fa'afafine in her latest work.

WORDS ASHLEY NOLAN



OVER THE RAINBOW

'Fonofono o le nuanua: Patches of the rainbow (After Gauguin)' (2020) by Yuki Kihara. Photograph by Zan Wimberley.

Yuki Kihara's much-praised presentation for the 59th Venice Biennale – *Paradise Camp*, curated by Natalie King – entered a dynamic new phase when it opened at Sydney's Powerhouse Museum in March.

With the artist having undertaken a creative residency at the Powerhouse, new works have been unveiled throughout her time there. The new pieces include the collage 'Gauguin Landscapes', through which Kihara expands her exploration of the legacy of post-impressionist French artist Paul Gauguin.

Drawing upon the Powerhouse's extensive collection of glass-plate negatives by 19th-century Australian photographer Charles Kerry, Kihara melds photographs of the Samoan archipelago with landscape paintings by Gauguin.

These works join Kihara's original *Paradise Camp* photographs which restage Gauguin paintings created during his time in Tahiti and the Marquesas between 1891 and 1903. By re-enacting his paintings back in the Pacific, and using sitters from the fa'afafine and fa'afatama communities, Kihara (herself fa'afafine) pushes back against a Western, heteronormative notion of modernism, challenges Western misconceptions of the Pacific, and reflects upon the impact of colonialism and climate change on the communities depicted. Utopian scenes celebrating the third and fourth gender communities of Samoa are juxtaposed against backdrops drawing attention to a slow-motion climate catastrophe.

Now Kihara's presentation at Powerhouse has evolved yet again, with the launch of a second activation in August of a new series of works commissioned by the museum and also curated by King. Titled 'BERTHA', the series features racialised, vintage Pacific dolls that have been repurposed to tell the story of the eponymous drag performer, otherwise known as Harold Samu, who played an active role in gay nightlife and HIV/AIDS activism in Aotearoa in the 1990s.

Paradise Camp is strongly focused on the fa'afafine experience in Samoa. Translating to 'in the manner of a woman', fa'afafine traditionally refers to Samoa's third gender community; however Kihara says today the term is also used to describe Samoa's LGBTQ+ community more broadly. Through presenting *Paradise Camp*, it dawned on Kihara that there has been little artistic exploration of the lived experience for fa'afafine who reside outside of Samoa, despite there being an estimated half a million Samoans based overseas, compared to just 200,000 in Samoa itself. "I was looking for a way that I could actually capture the dynamic life of the fa'afafine community, and that is really part of why I made 'BERTHA'," Kihara says.



YUKI'S WORLD
 Clockwise from far left: 'Three Marys 2010' (2023), 'Law Reform Girl 1986' (2023), both by Yuki Kihara, photographs courtesy of Gui Taccetti; Yuki Kihara portrait by Luke Walker; 'Nafea e te fa'aipoipo? When will you marry? (After Gauguin)' (2020) by Yuki Kihara, photograph by Zan Wimberley; Bertha and friends as the Three Marys, 2010, photograph courtesy of Edward Cowley; 'Eaten Alive 1998' (2023) by Yuki Kihara, photograph courtesy of Gui Taccetti; Harold Samu, sketch for 'Eaten Alive 1998' (2023).



supposed to be about Pacific people, that are made in Hong Kong and are sold in the Pacific and are sold to people as kind of a racial stereotype. So I'd been collecting them thinking that I was going to do something with them and then maybe address this racist mass production of Pacific people," Kihara says.

'BERTHA' is not Kihara's first series of works created using these dolls. In 2022, she presented 'A Night to Remember', inspired by a black-and-white photograph taken by an unknown New Zealand photographer capturing Samoa's first fa'afafine beauty pageant in 1983. She managed to track down one of the contestants, fa'afafine elder Galumalemana Alfred 'Freda' Waterhouse, who fondly recalled the pageant being "a night to remember". Kihara worked closely with Freda to recreate each of the dresses worn by seven out of 19 contestants featured in the photograph. "And then I came to realise, wow, maybe I can actually repurpose these dolls to tell a more positive story," says Kihara.

Kihara explains that in Samoa and elsewhere in the Pacific, the act of wrapping is undertaken to imbue mana, or supernatural force, into an object. Through re-dressing these dolls, both in the context of 'A Night to Remember' and 'BERTHA', Kihara breathes new meaning and mana into them.

"By stripping these dolls from their racial garb, and then dressing them in what the fa'afafines were wearing, in a way, for me, it's a process of imbuing mana back to an object that was made to basically denigrate us, and then to tell our own history through these dolls."

For 'BERTHA', Kihara dresses the dolls in outfits worn by the drag superstar throughout her career. Together Kihara and Samu went through photographs and selected 11 looks that they could reproduce for the dolls.

"Each doll comes with a biographical story about what Bertha was doing at that particular time when she was wearing this outfit," Kihara explains. Examples of the occasions include Bertha performing at LGBTQIA+ events, attending marches for AIDS awareness and homosexual law reform, and hosting the TV game show *Eaten Alive*. "The stories are very gutsy, very interesting, and it provides an insight into the kinds of things that Harold was doing with his life."

Kihara met Samu in the '90s when she was making costumes for the Devotion gay dance party, for which Samu was performing. "For me, Harold is a very important person in terms of talking about fa'afafine diasporic experience," Kihara says. "Because not only is Harold a son of Samoan migrants, who migrated to

In thinking about what aspect of the fa'afafine diasporic experience she could explore, Kihara says she "didn't want to be too poetic or theoretical about it", but wanted to ensure she explored real-life issues with transparency.

"The thing is that there's a lot of amazing 'their'-story - 'his'-tory, 'her'-story, 'their'-story - in the fa'afafine community that if nobody makes an effort to highlight, members of the community will just take it to their grave," Kihara says. "And then these important stories of individuals whose shoulders I stand on will be gone forever. So I felt like as an artist, I wanted to use my platform to try and highlight those stories."

While Kihara was undertaking her residency at the Powerhouse, she got in touch with Samu, who, as Bertha, had been a star of the Auckland club scene in the 1990s before moving to Sydney in 2000. Kihara proposed that she would like to create a retrospective on Bertha by upcycling vintage Pacific dolls that Kihara had been collecting from eBay and op-shops around Tāmaki Makaurau. These dolls were made in Hong Kong and then sold in countries across the Pacific dressed in Polynesian-inspired costumes.

"I find it really ironic that you have these dolls that are



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Aotearoa New Zealand from Samoa, but [he] also grew up in a very religious family, [and] Harold felt very challenged by it, with his sexuality. So in a way, drag was an outlet for Harold, Bertha was a outlet for Harold, in order to make sense of the world.

"Not just fighting against something or opposing something or challenging something, but I think that the creativity behind it all helped to provide some resolution about what is taking place in the world. I'm a true believer that when you make work about something very specific, there's always something very universal about it."

Beyond its showing at the Powerhouse, Kihara is working towards taking *Paradise Camp* to Samoa, where it's set to open in June 2024. Kihara says the fact the work has a life beyond the Biennale is bittersweet. "I'm very grateful that *Paradise Camp*

continues to be perceived as being relevant. But I wish, at the same time, it was irrelevant. Because if it was irrelevant, then I don't need to be talking to you about the fa'afafine experience, and the compounding experience of racism, homophobia, transphobia, that is part and parcel of our fa'afafine existence. So I'm grateful for the media attention and all the praise, but I wish it wasn't so relevant."

In Samoa, *Paradise Camp* will be presented as an outdoor exhibition at the Saletoga Sands Resort. "There's lots of enthusiasm behind it," Kihara says. "The photo shoot in Samoa involved over a hundred people, half of which were members of the fa'afafine community. So being able to actually take it back home, and to be able to share it with the people who were involved in the production, for me, it's kind of like *Paradise Camp* coming full circle. But at the same time, I'm hoping that the exhibition also helps to spark conversations about our contributions in the wider Samoan society that are often going unnoticed."

**Paradise Camp
 Until 31 December
 Powerhouse Museum, Sydney**