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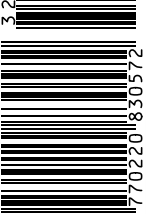
WAVULT
Sistas

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The Future is Female: Cigdem Aydemir, Yevgeniya Baras, Bonita Ely, Emma Freeman, Michelle Hamer, Yuki Kihara, Wangechi Mutu, Glenda Nicholls, Rose Nolan, Izabela Pluta, Bhenji Ra, Marikit Santiago, Collier Schorr, Kaylene Whiskey, Anne Zahalka & more

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Conversing with curator Natalie King, artist Yuki Kihara discusses her Japanese Sāmoan ancestry, Fa'afafine pageantry and colonial photography while reflecting on her solo acquisitive exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and her selection to represent Aotearoa New Zealand at the 59th Venice Biennale, rescheduled to 2022.

FEATURE *by* NATALIE KING

IN CONVERSATION

YUKI KIHARA & NATALIE KING

Yuki Kihara is exceptionally creative, habitually outspoken and unassailable in addressing some of the most urgent issues of our times. In September 2019, we were appointed as the artist-curator duo for Aotearoa New Zealand at the 59th Venice Biennale, which has been delayed until 2022. Yuki is the first Sāmoan and Pasifika artist selected to represent Aotearoa New Zealand. Fortunately, I was able to visit Yuki's studio in Upolu, Sāmoa in March 2020, prior to the COVID-19 lockdown. Since then, we have been working across time zones and waterways: Zooming, reading, exchanging, discussing and conversing. We paused to conduct this interview via email while Yuki was in an apartment in Auckland waiting to be repatriated back to Sāmoa, and I was at home in Melbourne.

You were born in Sāmoa, went to primary school in Ōsaka (and can speak Ōsaka-ben dialect) and St Patrick's College Silverstream in Wellington before studying fashion at Wellington Polytechnic. Can you discuss your ancestry and how you became an interdisciplinary artist?

The steady arrival of Japanese people to Sāmoa first came about as a result of Japanese foreign diplomacy. Sāmoa was the first country in Oceania to dispatch a JICA volunteer (Japan International Cooperation Agency) from Japan in December 1972, which subsequently generated a new cross-cultural relationship between Sāmoa and Japan.

My Sāmoan mother met my Japanese father, who was one of the first wave of JICA volunteers, in Upolu Island. Shortly after I was born in

Sāmoa in 1975, my parents moved to Jakarta, Indonesia due to my dad's JICA posting and we subsequently moved to Ōsaka, Japan around 1980. There I attended kindergarten and primary school until my parents decided to move back to Upolu, to open the first Japanese restaurant on the island, around 1989. The 'Lesina's Lounge' ran for almost 11 years and served fusion Sāmoan-Japanese cuisine catered for the locals. Moving around a lot as a child, I was exposed to diverse cultures and people. My first real job was in hospitality because I was made to work by my parents at the restaurant.

My parents wouldn't let me go to art school, so I ended up training as a fashion designer instead. I remember struggling as a fashion student because the training was geared towards



graduates being 'industry ready' to enter a very conservative fashion industry, while I was more interested in using fabric as a sculptural material with fashion shows a form of performance art. Students in my class were busy looking at *Vogue* and bias-cut dresses by Christian Dior and Balenciaga, whereas I was looking at anthropology books, production techniques of Sāmoan siapo and how Sāmoan migrants were adapting to their new environment in Aotearoa through various forms of dress. I could have easily bailed out of fashion school for being overwhelmingly white, but I stayed and

persevered. I told myself that if I can survive this, then I can survive out in the real world by creating my own space on my own terms.

How has your training in fashion informed your constructed, theatrical and composed mise-en-scènes?

After graduating in 1996, I worked mostly as a freelance costume designer and wardrobe manager for choreographers, theatre directors, television and film directors. I also staged fashion shows in raves and worked as a fashion editor for various magazines and newspapers right

up until early 2000. It was during this period that I was exposed to the creative processes of mise-en-scène, and ways I could use it to tell my own narratives. This was also a tough period in my life because I transitioned into living as a 'trans woman' and yet I didn't necessarily 'pass' as a woman in public due to my androgynous appearance. This became a barrier to getting jobs outside of the creative industry so I was periodically on unemployment benefits, sometimes with just \$5 to my name.

The theatricality in my work partly came from growing up watching Fa'afafine beauty pageants in Sāmoa, which featured elaborate sets, drag shows, glamorous gowns and costumes. The Fa'afafine pageants created a fantasy world literally from the ground up. There were several Fa'afafine beauty pageants during the 1980s and '90s run by various charity organisations, but the pageant that stood out for me was the *My Girls* production of the 1990s led by the late Moefa'auō Tanya Toomalātai, a Fa'afafine pioneer who produced, directed, choreographed and MC'd the pageant. She was a multitasker who did everything! She was even able to have local politicians and archbishops as judges. I saw Fa'afafine pageantry not just as entertainment, but also as providing visibility for Fa'afafine at a time when they were used as scapegoats, accused by religious leaders and the media of causing AIDS and natural disasters.

In 2008, you held an acquisitive exhibition, *Living Photographs*, at the prestigious Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, presenting a series of sepia toned self-portraits titled *Fa'afafine: In the Manner of a Woman* (2005) that re-enact late 19th century postcards of Sāmoan people taken by Western photographers. Can you discuss gender classifications in this series where you masquerade and perform a variety of genders, and your identification as Fa'afafine?

In Sāmoa we have four genders: Fa'afafine ('in the manner of a woman'), used to describe those who are assigned male at birth who assume their gender in a feminine way; Fa'atama ('in the manner of a man'), used to describe those who are assigned female at birth who assume their gender in a masculine way; Fafine, used to describe cisgender women; and Tane, used to describe cisgender men. Today, the term 'Fa'afafine' loosely describes the Fa'afafine, Fa'atama and LGBTIQ+ community.

When I look at early studio photography of Sāmoan people, the Western photographers played multiple roles ranging from writing, producing, casting and set design – similar to how a theatre or film production is made. Informed by colonial stereotypes of gender, race and sexuality, they imposed their own biased view that would result in the development of the 'dusky maiden' and 'noble savage' stereotypes, created for commercial consumption by

Western audiences to propagate colonial domination in the Pacific.

You have participated in the Auckland Triennial (2009), Asia Pacific Triennial (2002 and 2015), Sakahaan Quinquennial (2013), Daegu Photo Biennale (2014), Honolulu Biennial (2017) and Bangkok Art Biennale (2018). I saw your work *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* (2013) in APT8 in 2015. In this series, you adopt the persona of a fictional 19th century Sāmoan woman posed at historic sites. Seen from

behind, your silhouette is carefully choreographed before landscapes, seashores, colonial buildings, an orchard and cultural locations. Can you elaborate on the genesis of the character and your interest in colonial photography?

The works I presented at ATP8 are part of a broader body of work that feature myself in the guise of 'Salome' a Sāmoan woman in Victorian mourning dress. Salome was inspired by a similar photograph entitled *Samoan Half Caste* taken by New Zealand photographer Thomas Andrew in the late 1800s.





YUKI KIHARA
Ulugali'i Samoa - Samoan Couple (From series *Fa'afafine - In the Manner of a Woman*), 2005
 c-print

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 YUKI KIHARA
サ-モアのうた (Sāmoa no uta)
A song about Sāmoa, 2019
 Samoan siapo, textiles,
 beads, shells, plastic
 5 piece installation

YUKI KIHARA
After Tsunami Galu Afi, Lalomanu (From series *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?*), 2013
 c-print

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Mau Headquarters, Vaimoso (From series *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?*), 2013
 c-print

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 YUKI KIHARA
My Samoan Girl (From series *Fa'afafine - In the Manner of a Woman*), 2005
 c-print

Courtesy the artist and
 Milford Galleries, Dunedin

Salome first appeared as part of a dance performance during the opening ceremony of ATP4 in 2002. Since then, I have been developing a body of work featuring Salome across video, performance and photographic mediums.

The photographs presented in APT8 were six of the original 20 images from the series *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?*. These images were taken in the aftermath of Cyclone Evan in December 2012 – production began two days after the cyclone had passed. This series sees Salome behold scenes in Sāmoa that relate to recent natural disaster as well as locations that are associated with Sāmoa's colonial history and 1962 independence.

The series is named after the famous painting by Paul Gauguin, which posed symbolic questions of existence. In this series, 'we' becomes a question posed by and to Sāmoan people as a collective. These questions create a narrative around Sāmoan historical, cultural and social identity across time.

Your evolving series *A song about Sāmoa* – derived from a popular Japanese childhood song with the lyrics

describing the Sāmoan archipelago – are freestanding kimonos heavily beaded and stitched with oceanic designs and siapo patterning as well as nihonga motifs. Can you discuss your preoccupation with garments, textiles and performance, and the linking of your Japanese and Sāmoan ancestry?

サ-モアのうた (Sāmoa no uta) A song about Sāmoa (2019–23) is a title adapted from a popular Japanese song entitled 'サモア島の歌 (Samoatou no uta)', meaning 'A song from Samoa.' Music textbooks for elementary school students in Japan feature the song. The lyrics describe the Sāmoan archipelago as a paradise on Earth settled by 'noble savages' – a typically romantic, Orientalist imagining of neighboring Pacific Island nations held by Japan dating back to the 17th century.

The Sāmoan siapo and the Japanese kimono are customary regalia. Both function as repositories of the ancestral stories that shape our contemporary experience, and thus inform how we might engage with the future. The siapo kimono brings together these two distinctive cultural metaphors into a fusion that subverts the colonial gaze

by shedding light on lived experience in the Pacific while reframing the Vā or relationship between Japan and the Pacific, and specifically Sāmoa. Taking an Indigenous interpretation of trans-Pacific identity, gender and history, the siapo kimono references my own interracial Sāmoan and Japanese heritage as a point of conceptual departure.

How have you been affected by lockdown, isolation and prolonged uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

I've had several international exhibitions and projects that have been in the pipeline over the last couple of years postponed indefinitely, which has caused havoc and has been disappointing. However, the lockdown has given me the gift of time to reassess what I've been doing and to find new ways of engaging with audiences, my community and myself. **V**

The 59th Venice Biennale has been postponed to April 23 – November 27, 2022.

Yuki Kihara is represented by Milford Galleries, Dunedin.
 milfordgalleries.co.nz
 yukikihara.ws