

NEW ZEALAND PAVILION
ENGLISH

La Biennale di Venezia

59. Esposizione
Internazionale
d'Arte

Partecipazioni Nazionali

Paradise Camp

by **YUKI KIHARA**

CURATED BY

NATALIE KING

CAMPING PARADISE: NATALIE KING

‘WHO AM I, WHAT AM I, AND WHAT ARE YOU?’¹

Jim Vivieaere

An ensemble exhibition, Yuki Kihara’s *Paradise Camp* for the New Zealand Pavilion at the 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia unravels colonial histories intersecting with gender politics and environmental concerns. Conceived eight years ago, *Paradise Camp* comprises a suite of twelve tableau photographs in saturated colour; a five-part episodic ‘talk show’ series whereby a group of Fa’afafine (Sāmoa’s ‘third gender’) comment wittily on select Paul Gauguin paintings in *First Impressions: Paul Gauguin* interspersed with footage from Fa’afafine beauty pageants. The exhibition also includes a “Vārchive” – a term coined by Kihara that uses the Sāmoan concept of Vā to describe the space that unites separate entities. The Vārchive features posters, rare books by 19th century explorers, colonial replica portraits, pamphlets, news items, a geological sculpture and activist material.

Depicted from the unique perspective of Fa’afafine, Kihara’s performative photography upcycles select paintings by French Post-Impressionist Paul Gauguin. Kihara’s audacious re-enactments deftly instil a Polynesian inflection to each photograph highlighted within scenography of dazzling costumes, a vibrant palette and richly tropical landscapes. Kihara’s photo portraits, eloquently and provocatively investigate a range of critical issues including the intertwinements of colonisation, intersectionality and climate catastrophe. An interdisciplinary artist of Sāmoan and Japanese

FRONT AND INSIDE REVERSE *Two Fa’afafine (After Gauguin)* (detail), 2020

heritage, Kihara initially trained in fashion, editorial and theatre in New Zealand. Working across performance, photography, video, collage, curation and dance, Kihara's early work as a fashion stylist was a precursor to her creative dexterity.

In 2008, Kihara presented a solo, acquisitive exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York where she saw, for the first time, Gauguin paintings. Recognising aspects of herself and her Fa'afafine community, Kihara formulated the concept of *Paradise Camp* further inspired by an essay entitled '*He Tangi Mo Ha'apuani: Gauguin's Models - A Māori Perspective*' by Māori scholar Dr Ngahuia Te Awekotuku MNZM presented at the Gauguin Symposium in 1992, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.² In her paper, Te Awekotuku discusses how Gauguin deliberately painted his models to appear androgynous and exotic as a reflection of his personal and sexual fascination with the 'Māhū' - the equivalent of Fa'afafine within the Indigenous culture of Tahiti as described in his journal *Noa Noa*.³


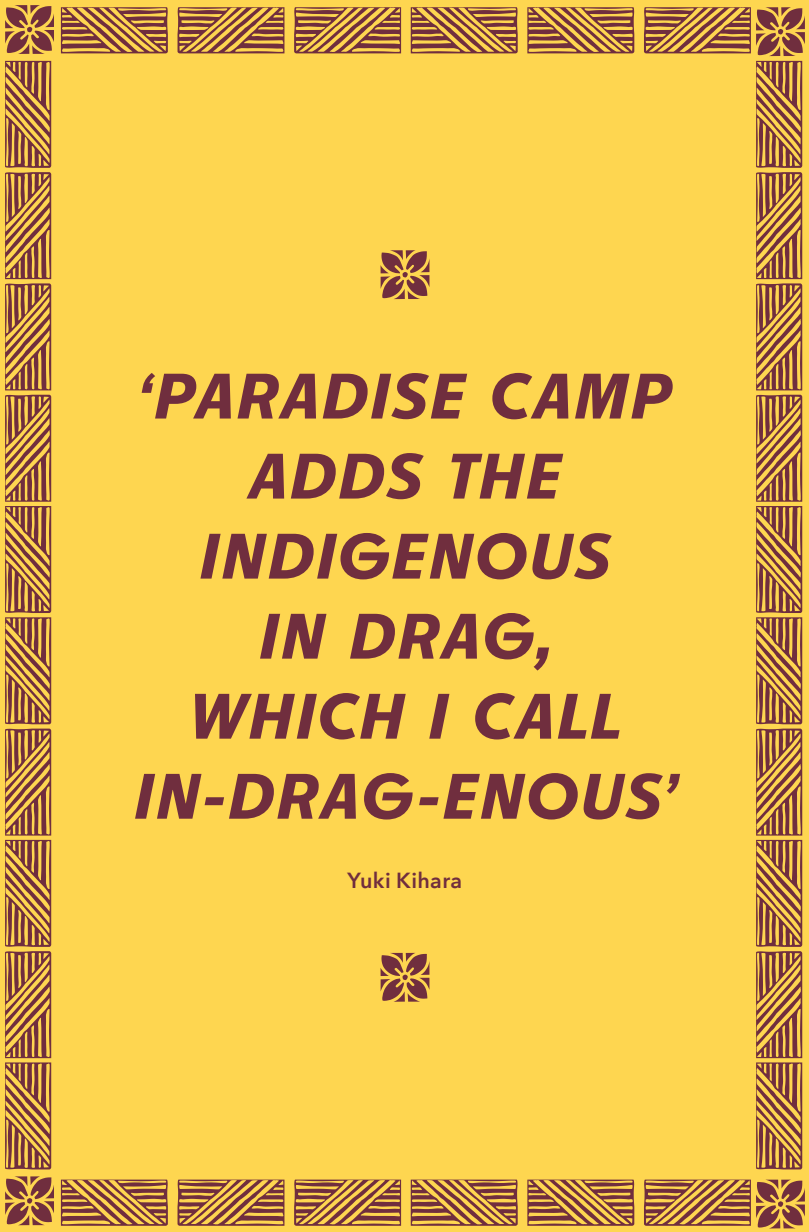
In *Two Fa'afafine (After Gauguin)* (2020), Rubenita Pau cradles a shallow bowl laden with rambutans, wearing a fuchsia pink 'ie lavalava while Mandy Lynn Joyce holds a white flower and glances sideways as part of a taut composition of grace and dignity.

Set against luscious foliage on Upolu Island Sāmoa, Kihara's *Paradise Camp* deploys socially engaged methods featuring a local cast and crew of over eighty people.

Inspired by the faleaitu (house of spirits) skits performed in Sāmoan culture, Kihara returns indoors to a studio casting herself as Gauguin in *Paul Gauguin with a hat (After Gauguin)*. In this ingenious role reversal,



ABOVE *Paul Gauguin with a hat (After Gauguin)*, 2020



***'PARADISE CAMP
ADDS THE
INDIGENOUS
IN DRAG,
WHICH I CALL
IN-DRAG-ENOUS'***

Yuki Kihara



Kihara is transformed via prosthetics, costume, moustache and wig, commanding her own space within the traditions of art history while upending the conventions of portraiture itself.

The more I disguised myself, the further it revealed my thoughts about colonially constructed boundaries of race, gender, sexuality and geography. RuPaul once said that drag doesn't hide but rather reveals who you are.

Kihara's vārchive provides a backstory to how *Paradise Camp* compounds her photographs with early accounts and representations of Fa'afafine displayed against a siapo patterned backdrop inspired by her siapo teacher, the late Sylvia Hanipale. Sāmoan siapo is the fine cloth made from the bark of the Paper Mulberry tree with a distinctive pattern and used in ceremonial occasions. Kihara integrates archives and memories, posters and performances, thus allowing her to retrieve and retell her own story, whilst queering the archive.

In *First Impressions: Paul Gauguin*, a five-part episodic talk show, a group of Fa'afafine critique select works by Paul Gauguin, who is both essentially unknown and irrelevant to them. With remarkable candour and humour, the five guests comment on the appearance of Gauguin's paintings with hilarity and insight. Hosted by Anastasia Fantasia Vancouver Stanley (Queen Hera) and commissioned by the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco and The Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen, *First Impressions* draws us into the *Paradise Camp* universe.

In *Paradise Camp*, Kihara traverses scholarship, contemporary art, history, popular culture and politics within a practice that binds communities without mandating hierarchy. Kihara steers us towards a geo-poetics of place, eliciting our capacity to imagine relationships anew while forging radical forms of togetherness and solidarity.

¹ Jim Vivieaere, 'Fa'a Fafine - In The Manner Of A Woman: The self-effacement of Shigeoyuki Kihara', catalogue essay, Sherman Galleries, Sydney, 2005.

² Reprinted in *Paradise Camp* by Yuki Kihara, edited by Natalie King, Thames & Hudson Australia, 2022, pp. 43-47.

³ Paul Gauguin, *Noa Noa: The Tahitian Journal*, Dover Publications, USA, 1985.



YUKI KIHARA is an interdisciplinary artist living and working on Upolu Island, Sāmoa. Since her solo acquisitive exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2008, Kihara has exhibited extensively. Her work has been presented at the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, Taiwan; BOZAR Centre for Fine Arts, Brussels; and the Royal Academy of Arts, London, and included in the Asia Pacific Triennial, Daegu Photo Biennale, Sakahàn quinquennial, Honolulu Biennial, Bangkok Art Biennale and Venice Biennale. Her work is held in major collections, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, British Museum, Queensland Art Gallery & Gallery of Modern Art and Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Kihara is a research fellow at the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands. In addition, Kihara is a member of the Global Asia/Pacific Art Exchange (GAX) and the Pacific Arts Association (PAA). Kihara is the co-editor of *Samoan Queer Lives* (2018) with Dan Taulapapa McMullin.

yukikihara.ws



Photo: Evotia Tamua

NATALIE KING OAM is an Australian curator, editor and arts leader. She is an Enterprise Professor of Visual Arts at the University of Melbourne. In 2017, she was Curator of *Tracey Moffatt: My Horizon*, Australian Pavilion at 57th Venice Biennale, accompanied by a publication that she edited with Thames & Hudson. She has curated exhibitions for the Singapore Art Museum; the National Museum of Art, Osaka; Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography; National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, amongst others. She is widely published in arts media including *Flash Art International*, *Art and Australia*, *Ocula*, *e-flux* and Phaidon publications. She is Series Editor with Thames & Hudson for Mini Monographs. She is President of the Australian chapter of the International Association of Art Critics, Paris.

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Photo: Alli Oughtred

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