

## Shigeyuki Kihara's *Fa'a fafine; In a Manner of a Woman*: The Photographic Theater of Cross-Cultural Encounter

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On 19 October 2008 a performance of *Taualuga: The Last Dance* took place at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in conjunction with the exhibition "Shigeyuki Kihara: Living Photographs."<sup>1</sup> This performance, like much of Kihara's work, employs photography to interrogate both colonial history and genre. The first half of the 12-minute performance consists of the projection of a series of historical photographs of Samoa, beginning with a sequence of highly masculine photographs, featuring naval vessels, ordered groups of police and military men, and all-male delegations. Images of women finally appear, initially group photographs and then more intimate images of individuals, many of them commercial "ethnographic" photographs. At first, the women appear in a mixture of European and Samoan costume, but their bodies are then severely contained within voluminous cotton garments, the "Mother Hubbard" dresses introduced by Victorian missionaries to hide the nakedness of their Polynesian converts. The subjects' hair becomes similarly constrained, bound into tight coiffures that proscribe sensuality and force conformity to European constructions of gender. A pivotal photograph in this series documents a group of bare-chested men in traditional costume, with no traces of European clothing. In the very center of this group appears a young bare-chested woman with an elaborate head-dress. She is a *tāupōu*, the ceremonial titled village virgin of high rank (Shore 1981, 196-197).

After the conclusion of this extended photographic sequence, the artist appears, garbed in an elaborate dark Victorian dress with bodice and full skirt, hair tightly bound, and spot lit with a raking light projecting an enormous shadow of her elegant figure on the screen. Kihara begins to dance the *taualuga*, which is usually performed by a *tāupōu* or another high rank person as the last in a series of dances (Moyle 1988, 233; Mageo 2001, 63-64; Mageo 1998, 193-202; Radakovich 2004, 59-60). While this improvisational dance displays the grace of the solo dancer, the *taualuga* is usually a rather lively performance as other dancers participate in an explicitly raucous manner, even mischievously interacting with the lead dancer. Indeed, the *tāupōu*'s ability to maintain her poise and continue the elegant execution of her dance adds to her charm. In contrast, Kihara dances alone, clad in Victorian mourning garb. In place of the lively group performance, Kihara appears as a tem-

porally displaced figure, mediating between past (both pre-contact and colonial), present, and future.

This performance of *Taualuga: The Last Dance* provides a frame for considering Kihara's *Fa'a fafine; In a Manner of a Woman* (2004-2005), a series of photographs that is the primary subject of this essay. This performance took place at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a leading institution of Western art that has played a significant role in defining canons of representation, while the photographic series self-consciously critiques the legacy of such Western high art institutions and representations. Kihara articulates a number of distinctive themes in both the performance and the photographs: the critical and creative interrogation of historical photographs; the use of costume, including dress and undress; the central role of performance in Samoan culture, including the visual arts; and the European misreading of Samoan customs and the resultant imposition of Western norms upon colonial subjects. Dance also provides a link between the performance and Kihara's visual artworks, the photographs taking the form of carefully choreographed performances of identity, as well as theatrical arenas for cross-cultural encounter.<sup>2</sup>

In *Taualuga: The Last Dance*, Kihara appears as a *tāupōu* in the wake of colonization and missionization, when Western conceptions of gender and sexuality entangled with traditional Samoan culture. Colonial powers and missionaries, misunderstanding such customary roles as the *tāupōu* and interpreting traditional culture in terms of European mores, worked to alter cultural practices in Samoa, clothing the women and proscribing dance performances that were seen solely in terms of sexual provocation. These issues are heightened by Kihara's status as a *fa'a fafine*, a term which may be literally translated "in a manner of a woman" and may refer to a Samoan of male sex who adopts female social roles but also more broadly to non-heterosexual or queer members of the Samoan community (Kihara 2010). The artist herself uses the term "third sex" to refer to *fa'a fafine*, while Niko Besnier has proposed "gender-liminal person" as a more neutral label that resists easy assimilation into such Western stereotypes as the drag queen (Besnier 1994, 287). The artist explains her identity and its relation to her art as follows:

As an artist and a *fa'a fafine* (in this case as a “Pacific island woman of transgender experience”), the idea of beauty and harmony across the Pacific and specifically to Samoa is possessed through a dual combination of both male and female energy. Hence, the reason why people like myself are allowed to exist within the context of my Samoan culture is for living in the *va* or space between men and women... Through Samoa’s encounter with introduced religion, colonialism and globalization, the dual energy has been challenged by the western binary opposition of gender and sexuality. My *Fa’a fafine* series exposes and shatters these colonial constructions imposed upon many Indigenous cultures in the Pacific (Kihara, pers.comm.).

Kihara instrumentalizes her status as a *fa'a fafine*, as a being occupying the space between male and female, to critique the imposition of European concepts of gender and sexuality upon colonial peoples. While European explorers and missionaries noted the presence of gender-liminal persons in other Polynesian cultures during early contact and colonization, the emergence of *fa'a fafine* in Samoan society is a comparatively recent phenomenon. As the anthropologist Jeannette Mageo has argued in her extensive scholarship on gender, transvestism and performance in Samoa, the prominent emergence of *fa'a fafine* in Samoan society is in part a reaction to the social changes brought about by colonialism (Mageo 1992). Accordingly, this essay will examine how Kihara’s photographic series *Fa’a fafine; In a Manner of a Woman* challenges the persistence of Western colonialist classification schemes from the eighteenth century and their internalization by many Pacific Islanders to the present day.

### *Fa’a fafine; In a Manner of a Woman*

Kihara was born in Samoa in 1975 to a Japanese father and Samoan Mother. She lived in Samoa, Japan, and Indonesia before moving to Aotearoa/New Zealand in 1989. She studied Fashion Design and Technology at Massey University and worked as a fashion stylist after the completion of her studies. Kihara first came to prominence in the New Zealand art world in 2001, when Te Papa Tongarewa/The Museum of New Zealand acquired and exhibited *Teuanoa’i - Adorn to Excess* (1999), a set of 28 t-shirts that played with corporate branding and the stereotyping of Pacific peoples. After concerns arose about possible legal action for copyright infringement by some of the corporations parodied in this series, Te Papa temporarily removed three t-shirts from exhibition, an event that was extensively covered in both the art and popular press in New Zealand (Matthews 2001, 22; Potter 2001). Following this controversy, Kihara’s reputation continued to grow with her execution of a number of photographic series. In *Black Sunday* (2001), Kihara appropriated historical tourist and ethnographic

photographs of Samoan people and “dressed” them with contemporary fashion items, such as t-shirts and sunglasses. The name of this series deliberately evokes both White Sunday (the annual Samoan holiday in celebration of childhood) and Black Saturday (the shooting of Mau protestors by the New Zealand Police in 1929). For *Fale Aitu: House of the Spirits* (2003) Kihara staged photographs of herself in the guise of archetypes of Polynesian women, rendered in a manner evocative of the kitsch black velvet paintings of “dusky maidens” of the mid-20th century (Vercoe 2004, 45-46).<sup>3</sup> Both of these series inform the photographs of *Fa’a fafine; In a Manner of a Woman*, in which Kihara uses her own image to interrogate historical photographs of Samoans.

The series *Fa’a fafine; In a Manner of a Woman* consists of seven highly staged images that evoke 19th and 20th century ethnographic photography.<sup>4</sup> In *Ulugali’i Samoa (Samoan Couple)*, we are confronted by a man and woman attired in distinctive ethnic costume and holding ethnographic “artifacts” (Fig. 1). The man wears an *ulafala* (a seed necklace worn only by people of high rank) and holds a fly whisk; both elements of costume connote his status. The woman is adorned with more delicate, feminine neckwear (the work of another contemporary Samoan artist, Ela To’omaga Kaikilekole) and holds a fan in her hands. The staging of this photograph reenacts some central tropes of early ethnographic photography in the Pacific. First, the presentation of a high rank couple (often



Fig. 1: Shigeyuki Kihara, *Ulugali’i Samoa (Samoan Couple)*, 2004-2005

From the series “Fa’a Fafine; In a Manner of a Woman”  
C-print, 80 x 60 cm

Courtesy of artist Shigeyuki Kihara and photographer Sean Coyle



Fig. 2: Alfred James Tattersall, *The Present Faumuina Mata'afa*, between 1900 and 1930  
Gelatin silver print, 24 x 18.9 cm  
Tattersall Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand

an identified male chief and “his wife”) is common in this type of photography, as in Alfred Tattersall’s early 20th century photograph of *The Present Faumuina Mata'afa* (c. 1900-1930, Fig. 2). Despite the claims of ethnographic photography to provide scientific data about its subjects, this image provokes many questions of a basic factual nature. Who was “The Present Faumuina Mata'afa”? Who is the other person? Can it be more precisely dated? Indeed, such images usually present their indigenous subjects as timeless semi-clad innocents, as if before the fall from grace and expulsion from the Garden of Eden, a primary colonial fantasy concerning Pacific peoples.

Kihara’s work also incorporates several common working practices of ethnographic photographers from the 19th and early 20th centuries: the head-on shooting of subjects at close range, and the incorporation of “ethnographic” artifacts. Writing in *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* in 1896, M. V. Portman provided advice on photographing ethnographic subjects, whom he referred to as “savages.” A photographer for the Ethnographic Department of the British Museum, Portman instructed his readers that “the body must be upright and the face so held that the eyes looking straight before the subject are fixed on an object on a level with them” (Portman 1896, 76). He also gave hints on how to incorporate weapons and other ethnographic objects to achieve succinct renderings of “racial types.” While such photographic advice for anthropologists is clearly dated

and was long ago replaced by more nuanced methods of visual anthropology, the type of gaze Portman advocated persisted in popular culture representations of Pacific peoples (Banks and Morphy 1997; Edwards 2001).

Kihara’s photograph is clearly staged in a studio, yet uses background props to create an illusion of being set in the natural world – just as was the case in earlier anthropological studies. In his influential writings on photography, the theorist Roland Barthes coined the term “punctum” to describe an at first inconsequential detail that pricks at you as it does not seem quite right. This element ultimately functions as a fulcrum that transforms the interpretation of a photograph (Barthes 1981, 51-59). For me, the “punctum” of this photograph is the wainscoting that cuts behind the couple. Evident even in the small gap between the pair, this fragmentary architectural detail ruptures the continuity of the photograph, destroying the fantasy of an exotic other world. It makes clear that this is a staged studio portrait, a highly artificial genre that was also a commonplace of ethnographic photographs. An example is Dunedin photographer Alfred Burton’s image of *Samoan Princesses* (1884; Fig. 3), who appear against a painted backdrop that has been supplemented with some living plants and ethnographic props.<sup>5</sup> Kihara’s couple is presented in



Fig. 3: Alfred Burton, *Samoan Princesses*, July 1884  
Albumen print, 19.8 x 13.7 cm  
Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand

a similar manner, with a profusion of plants deployed to simultaneously mask the artifice of the studio and to create a suitable environment for the presentation of these “natural” beings. As such, Kihara’s photograph calls attention to the fictive nature of the 19th and early 20th century originals upon which it is modeled.

With its pastiche referencing of ethnographic photography, Kihara’s work functions as a post-colonial critique of a specific type of European vision of Pacific peoples. However, Kihara also utilizes this problematic ethnographic imagery to explore issues related to the artist’s own identity as *fa’a fafine*. Discussing this series, Kihara notes that “my existence as a *fa’afafine* person goes against every thread which makes up the social fabric that is essentially Western based” (Kihara, pers.comm.). In particular, this work provides a critique of the imposition of western binary norms of sexuality and gender onto indigenous Pacific peoples. Just as ethnographic photography provided a limited and distorted stereotypical representation of non-western peoples, the imposition of western concepts of sexuality onto Pacific cultures functioned to impoverish and repress rich, multivalent traditions. As noted earlier, Kihara draws upon her status as a being located “in the *va* or space between men and women” in exploring these issues. In this she builds upon the concept of *va* as articulated by Albert Wendt: “*Va* is the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving meaning to things” (Wendt 1996, 18-19). Using photography and contemporary digital media, Kihara reclaims that space in between, the *va*, by imaging herself as both sexes. For the male subject, she made her face up as a man and then attached her head to a man’s body with Photoshop. The artist has perceptively commented upon her working method: “The most ironic thing about this whole process is that I was born male to begin with and yet I had to utilize make up to appear ‘masculine,’ adding beards and all via make up because I already appeared feminine to begin with” (Kihara 2008).

In addition to the double portrait *Ulugali’i Samoa*, the series includes separate images of the man and woman entitled *Tama Samoa; Samoan Man* and *Teine Samoa; Samoan Woman*. The artist refers to this pair of photographs as a “dip tick” – a pun that plays off the conventional art historical term for a two-paneled painting (diptych) and evokes bawdy word play and double entendre (i.e., “dick tip”). Clearly, things are not quite what they seem to be. Meaning is unstable, slippages occur, but all in the production of an evocative, positive eruption of Duchampian *jouissance*. Such slippages and shifts are also evident in *Fa’a fafine; In a Manner of a Woman* (Fig. 4), a distinct work within the larger series bearing the same title.<sup>6</sup>



Fig: 4: Shigeyuki Kihara, *Fa’a Fafine; In a Manner of a Woman*, 2005

From the series “Fa’a Fafine; In a Manner of a Woman”  
C-prints, each image 60 x 80 cm

Courtesy of artist Shigeyuki Kihara and photographer Sean Coyle

This work consists of three almost-identical photographs of the artist in the same interior and pose. Only minute details change in the photographs: the presence of a grass skirt, the absence of a grass skirt and penis, the presence of a penis.

Kihara refers to this pairing as a “trip tick,” another term that oscillates in meaning and generates numerous possible associations and word plays (dick tuck, trip ticket, dick trick and so on). According to the artist, this work references an early European account of an encounter with a *māhū* (a Tahitian gender-liminal person) that was recorded by George Mortimer, a marine officer on John Henry Cox’s ship *Mercury*, which visited Tahiti in 1789. Attending a nighttime dance performance, a sailor was smitten by one of the dancers and presented her with trinkets, “but what was his surprize when the performance was ended, and after he had been endeavouring to persuade her to go to with him on board our ship, which she assented to, to find this supposed damsel, when stripped of her theatrical paraphanelia, a smart dapper lad” (Mortimer 1791, 47).<sup>7</sup> Hence, the images provide a narrative reenactment of this originary moment in western perceptions of gender in the Pacific.

Like *Ulugali’i Samoa*, this “trip tick” refers to the legacy of colonialist images of Pacific Islanders, while simultaneously deploying Kihara’s indigenous Samoan identity as a *fa’a fafine* to interrogate and deconstruct the formulation of gender in European visual culture. Just as the performance *Taualuga: The Last Dance* entailed research into the photographic archive, this work draws upon Kihara’s research on historical representations of Samoan and European traditions in the representation of women, both literary and visual (Kihara 2008).<sup>8</sup> European cultural precedents shaped the explorers’ perceptions of Pacific women from the very outset. This is evident in such narratives as Louis-Antoine de Bougainville’s much remarked upon account of a woman who boarded his ship during the initial French landing in Tahiti in April 1768: “The girl carelessly dropt a cloth, which covered her, and appeared to the eyes of all beholders, such as Venus shewed herself to the Phrygian shepherd, having, indeed, the celestial form of that goddess” (Bougainville 1772, 218-219). In this instance, Bougainville likened what was probably a ritual offering of sacred cloth to the European iconography of the Judgment of Paris, a comparison that fired the imaginations of the European readers of his account of Tahiti as a present-day Cythera.<sup>9</sup>

Kihara’s initial engagement with interrogating representations of Pacific women through the European art historical tradition was first stimulated by research completed during her fashion studies. While working on an assignment about European historical costume of the Baroque and Renaissance eras, she came across Christraud M. Geary and Virginia-Lee Webb’s *Delivering Views: Distant Cultures in Early Postcards* (1998), a book about early 20th century postcards that included exten-

sive material about the Pacific (Tonga 2008).<sup>10</sup> This book prompted her to consider Pacific imagery in terms of European traditions of representation.

Approaching *Fa’a fafine; In a Manner of a Woman* from the viewpoint of European art history, a rich series of associations quickly spring to mind. Firstly, a beautiful woman elegantly perched on a divan, elbow resting on a pillow evokes a long tradition of representations of women in European painting, such as Jacques Louis David’s *Madame Récamier* (1800, Fig. 5), a portrait of a celebrated French beauty of the Napoleonic era. In contrast to Kihara, Madame Récamier seems much daintier, more restrained and unavailable. This is due to her chaste clothing and the positioning of her body, which turns away from the viewer, making her less exposed, more unobtainable. A better comparison might be to a European painting of an exotic other, such as J.A.D. Ingres’s *Grand Odalisque* (1814), a fantasy image of a Turkish harem woman. Indeed, the uncomfortable artificiality of Kihara’s pose and odd combination of familiar European furnishings with objects from an exotic culture emulates Ingres’s evocation of another world, as well as the furniture and props of the early photographic studio. This places Kihara’s work into a longer tradition of Orientalist imagery, where the normative Western heterosexual male viewer can partake of a fantasy of unbridled sexuality set in an imaginary Orient, including the Pacific. The exotic props, feathered fan and grass skirt, serve similar functions in creating this fantasy; they are the fetishistic objects of displaced desire. While Ingres’s images of harems circulated in the realm of high art, the invention of photography in 1839 would soon lead to a booming pornographic trade that trafficked in similar imagery.<sup>11</sup> One such image is an anonymous



Fig. 5: Jacques Louis David, *Madame Récamier*, 1800  
Oil on canvas, 174 x 244 cm  
Musée du Louvre, Paris  
© RMN/Gérard Blot

early French daguerreotype of a nude woman preserved in the collection of the George Eastman House (Fig. 6). Although the photographer and subject are unknown, the official title identifies the subject as an *Odalisque*. While this daguerreotype clearly emulates Ingres's *Odalisque*, it is only the pose and minimal garments that enable this identification. The "punctum" that transforms our reading of this photograph and facilitates the Orientalist fantasy of the harem girl is the exotic headwear; without the cap, she is just a naked woman provocatively displaying her posterior. The key role of this garment in facilitating the Orientalist fantasy points to the importance of the grass skirt in Kihara's photographs. Present in one photograph and absent in the other two, the skirt becomes a fulcrum for interpretation. The skirt draws attention to the "ethnic" nature of the subject and brings to mind related photographic images of "dusky maidens," such as A.M. Brodziak and Co.'s photographic postcard of a "Fijian Girl" from the early 20th century (Fig. 7). The skirt, tapa cloth and fan are typical of ethnographic images of the Pacific, but the porcelain cup and Japanese screen make clear that this is a European fantasy. In contrast to the odalisques, this "girl" seems more innocent, like a naïf Madame Récamier. This postcard makes evident the more confrontational nature of Kihara's photographs. The *fa'a fafine* brazenly turns toward the viewer, arm extended and hips turned up to fully display her body (and her sex).



Fig. 6: Unidentified photographer, *Odalisque*, ca. 1840s  
Daguerreotype, 1/6 plate, 7.4 x 6.1 cm (visible)  
Courtesy of George Eastman House, International Museum  
of Photography and Film, Rochester, New York



Fig. 7: A.M Brodziak & Co., *Fijian Girl*, c. 1905  
Photographic postcard, 8.5 x 14 cm  
Private collection, New Zealand

This confrontational pose recalls Eduoard Manet's infamous painting *Olympia* (1863), which created a major scandal at the time of its first exhibition in 1863. It unmasked the tradition of the reclining female nude as deeply sexual, its lascivious nature obscured by costuming its subjects as Orientalist harem girls or Greco-Roman goddesses. Manet's *Olympia* presents a woman, who could clearly be nothing other than a contemporary French prostitute, plying her trade under a quaint classicizing alias. *Olympia* created unease due to the brazen gaze of the subject back at the viewer, a look that made clear both her professional activity and her secure possession of her sexuality (Clark 1984, 80-146). Instead of a dainty hand resting on her knee or fondling her *lei*, *Olympia*'s spread out fingers draw attention to her pudenda and, hence, her sexuality. It is this same part of the body that Kihara draws attention to through the three almost identical photographs of the same subject; however, it is not her hand that attracts attention. It is the disappearance of the skirt, much in the manner of Francisco de Goya's paired paintings of a *maja*: *The Clothed Maja* and *The Nude Maja* (c. 1800, Figs. 8-9). Like Goya, Kihara renders identical poses of the same body both clothed and nude. Yet Kihara takes this further by providing two variants of the exposed, naked body: one in which the penis is "tucked" to make the body appear female, the other in which it is exposed to reveal the penis of the *fa'a fafine*.

While Goya's paintings present us with "the clothed" and "the nude," Kihara extends this by also offering for contemplation both "the female" and "the male." This in turn, problematizes various theoretical models for the critical analysis of representations of women that are reliant upon gender-specific constructions of vision. For instance, one strand of feminist psychoanalytic criticism has analyzed patriarchal representations of women in terms of the lack of the phallus and the concomitant substitution of a fetish object to make up for

this lack (an approach that could be applied to *Olympia* and the Odalisques discussed earlier).<sup>12</sup> Kihara's photographs turn such analysis on its head by presenting an actual penis in place of the symbolic phallus. Her lack is not at all lacking, making her a type of complete being.<sup>13</sup>

**Performance and the Theater of Cross-Cultural Encounter**

In both Samoa itself and in the broader Samoan diaspora, *fa'a fafine* are particularly visible in cultural performance, a realm in which they have received broad acceptance and achieved much acclaim. Nico Besnier has observed in regard to the actual terms applied to gender-liminal persons in various Polynesian languages that they “can function as nouns to refer to a person, as verbs to refer to demeanor or action and often also as adverbs to specify the manner in which an action is being performed; such patterns of linguistic multifunctionality are not specific to these terms” (Besnier 1994, 286, 311-312, 317). Words like *fa'a fafine* may refer to a noun, verb or adverb points to the performative nature of Samoan culture and, more broadly, to gender itself. Judith Butler has similarly noted that “*gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence...gender proves to be performative – that is, always constituting the identity it is purported to be” (Butler 1990, 24-25). Gender is produced through its repetitive performance, with each reiteration allegedly referring to a prior act of performance right back to an allegedly originary one that guarantees its meaning.

Gendered performances were central to the initial encounters of European and Pacific peoples. As discussed above, one of the earliest European accounts of a Polynesian gender-liminal person describes an encounter framed by performance, namely the dance in Tahiti in 1789 related by George Mortimer. As in the final image of Kihara's triptych, this account

included a removal of costume that revealed the biological sex of the *māhū*, allegedly much to the astonishment of the Europeans and to the merriment of the Tahitians: “The Otaheiteans on their part enjoyed this mistake so much; that they followed us to the beach with shouts and repeated peals of laughter; and I dare say this event has served a fine subject for one of their comedies” (Mortimer 1791, 47). Teasing out the intended meaning of such an act is fraught with uncertainty. As Serge Tcherkézoff has argued in his scholarship on early cross-cultural encounters in Tahiti and Samoa, Europeans interpreted the removal of clothing with nudity, sexuality and the anticipation of sex. Yet the symbolic content of such acts, which often occurred at the end of a dance, was likely related to the acknowledgement of respect to a superior or the ritual giving of sacred cloth (Tcherkézoff 2004).<sup>14</sup> Hence, the removal of the *māhū*'s costume could have been an act of offering. On the other hand, this action revealed the performer's biological sex, so it may also have resonated with provocation, especially if it entailed exposure of the lower body. That this act may have signified both respect and provocation may have provoked laughter, as it both displayed and subverted gendered codes of behavior. It revealed, potentially, the instability of all constructions of gender as performative (Butler 1990, 141).

Extrapolating these ruminations to Kihara's *Fa'a fafine* series, the photographs make clear reference to various moments of cross-cultural encounter and spoof early imagery intended for the European gaze. In *My Samoan Girl* (Fig. 10), a photograph that emulates 19th century cabinet card studio photographs of ethnic types, Kihara appears seated languorously on a European chair, waist wrapped in a fabric garment, holding a branch over her head. The raised branch recalls the presentation of green branches recorded by early European travelers in the Pacific, but her stance also emulates a classic pose of European painting, the Venus with her arms raised above her head, a pose that lifts the breasts, providing maximal



Fig. 8: Francisco de Goya, *La Maja vestida* (*The Clothed Maja*), 1807-1808  
Oil on canvas, 95 x 190 cm  
Prado Museum, Madrid,  
© 2010 Photo Scala, Florence



Fig. 9: Francisco de Goya (Spain), *La Maja desnuda* (*The Naked Maja*), 1797-1800  
Oil on canvas, 98 x 191 cm  
Prado Museum, Madrid  
© 2010 Photo Scala, Florence

display of the torso and simultaneously rendering the woman's body fully available. While such a pose typically presents the woman passive and ready for consumption, the effect of Kihara's photograph is much more aggressive. The manner in which she holds the branch evokes sadomasochism, with the branch morphing into a phallic whip brandished overhead by a mistress—a commonplace of pornography. The imagined European observer is thereby challenged, his sexual status problematised, and the typical power relations made manifest in Orientalist imagery are placed in jeopardy.

The triptych also plays upon these early cross-cultural encounters, and interpretation of the performance that unfolds across it is similarly fraught with ambiguity. Kihara appears as the dusky maiden of European fantasies. Removing the skirt, she appears simultaneously as "Venus shewed herself to the Phrygian shepherd" and as a chaste *tāupōu* performing a ceremonial function. In the final act, with her penis unfurled, Kihara's performance borders on provocation. Divesting one's garments as a sign of respect is quite different than exposing one's genitals. As Tcherkézoff notes in regard to contemporary Samoa, "Gestures of exposure are recognized, they have a specific name, and, whether a man or a woman is involved, they are regarded as provocative. If somebody exposes him- or herself in a non-ceremonial context it will cause a row" (Tcherkézoff 2004, 63-64). Hence, the cumulative meaning of Kihara's performance is highly ambiguous. Here we have an instance of what Jeannette Mageo has described as a zone of ambiguity (a reworking of Homi Bhabha's "zones of ambivalence"): "Through zones of ambiguity...producers and artists, along with their audiences, cast cultural meanings back into a conceptual play in which the fictive and constructed nature of gendered and raced identities becomes visible and hence subject to revision" (Mageo 2008, 62).

In conclusion, I will return to the performance discussed at the start of this essay. Presented in conjunction with an exhibition of Kihara's work entitled "Living Photographs," *Tauuluga: The Last Dance* asserted the sustained interrogation of historical photographs as a sort of moral, political and aesthetic bedrock for the exhibited works. While this performance has been described and interpreted largely in terms of the post-colonial interrogation of gender (Taouma 2005), the version of the performance given at the Metropolitan Museum of Art contained explicit references to significant historical events, thus charting a movement from political history back into an earlier history of representation.<sup>15</sup> At the juncture between the projected photographs and Kihara's dance, the voice of New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark intones: "On behalf of the New Zealand Government, I wish to offer today a formal apology to the people of Samoa for the injustices arising from New Zealand's administration of Samoa in its earlier years, and to express sorrow and regret for those injustices." In this historic



Fig. 10: Shigeyuki Kihara, *My Samoan Girl*, 2004–05  
From the series "Fa'a Fafine; In a Manner of a Woman"  
C-print, 80 x 60 cm  
Courtesy of artist Shigeyuki Kihara and photographer Sean Coyle

speech delivered in Apia on 4 June 2002, Clark singled out a number of events for which New Zealand was culpable during its tenure as the colonial power in Samoa: giving permission for a ship carrying influenza to land in 1918 (which resulted in the death of more than 20 percent of the population) and the shootings of Black Saturday in December 1929, when New Zealand police opened fire on non-violent protestors and killed eleven people.<sup>16</sup> In addition to ethnographic studio portraits and postcard images of "dusky maidens," the projected photographs in *Tauuluga* include images documenting New Zealand's establishment of colonial rule in German Samoa in August 1914. There are also numerous photographs related to the Mau, the non-violent Samoan independence movement that was initially organized in response to the influenza episode and that was brutally suppressed in 1929.<sup>17</sup> Following the projected images, Kihara appears contained within European mourning costume, in sharp contrast to the acts of exposure and playful concealment in the photographic series *Fa'a fafine; In a Manner of a Woman*.



While viewers unfamiliar with Samoan or Pacific history might not comprehend the historical references, they are as important to Kihara's art as the exploration of gender. Kihara is engaged with a broad critique of the legacy of colonialism in Samoa, with gender and sexuality being just one facet of her work. As Tamasailau Sua'ali'i has argued, for Samoan individuals familial ties and identities "would inform understandings of self, before classifications of gender." She encapsulates this as "Aiga [extended family] First, Gender Second: On Being Samoan, then Male, Female, Fa'afafine" (Sua'ali'i 2001, 171). By extrapolation, the interpretation of Kihara's work requires an attempt to provide readings that resist its easy transcription into (and containment within) contemporary Western discourse about gender and sexuality. The interpretation of Kihara's work requires caution in order to avoid a traumatic post-colonial repetition of the initial misunderstandings that occurred in the theater of cross-cultural encounter.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> "Shigeyuki Kihara: Living Photographs" (7 October 2008–1 February 2009) was curated by Virginia-Lee Webb.
- <sup>2</sup> While these early encounters between Pacific and European peoples were cross-cultural, Kihara astutely notes that it is perhaps more correct to view her work as intercultural: "I see it as intercultural, because I see myself meeting these issues face to face, interacting and engaging with it in the artwork and life. Therefore, I am interracial, intercultural, and intergendered. I am not a clashing point but a meeting point where all these factors meet and have a dialogue, and the artwork is an outcome of it" (Kihara 2010).
- <sup>3</sup> Both series were included in the exhibition "Paradise Now? Contemporary Art from the Pacific" at the Asia Society, New York, 2004.
- <sup>4</sup> The series was first exhibited at the Sherman Galleries, Sydney. The entire series may be viewed at the archived website [www.shermangalleries.com.au](http://www.shermangalleries.com.au). For an overview of recent scholarship on early photographs of Samoan subjects, see Blanton (1995). For the popular dispersal of such imagery in the illustrated press, see Quanchi (2006).
- <sup>5</sup> This image was one of the photographs projected during the performance *Tausaluga: The Last Dance* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Alfred Burton took part in a two-stage cruise to Fiji, Samoa and Tonga in 1884. For the published diary of this trip, see Burton Brothers (1884).
- <sup>6</sup> The triptych was exhibited both in the exhibition at the Metropolitan and in "Pasifika Styles" at the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 5 May 2006 to 23 February 2008. For more on this exhibition, see Raymond and Salmond (2008).
- <sup>7</sup> For discussion of this and other early accounts, see Besnier (1994, 288-295), Balme (2005, 201-202) and Wallace (2003).
- <sup>8</sup> The artist has confirmed the author's identification of the European sources that inform this series. Her earlier professional work as a fashion stylist is clearly evident in the exquisite attention to detail in forging a persuasive synthesis of ethnographic and art historical sources.
- <sup>9</sup> For a discussion of such European misinterpretations of Polynesian ritual, see Tcherkézoff (2003).
- <sup>10</sup> Webb subsequently curated Kihara's exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- <sup>11</sup> Art historical scholarship has largely failed to interrogate this aspect of early photography, preferring to deal with such imagery in terms of "artistic nudes." For commentary on this state of affairs, see Batchen (2004, 773).

<sup>12</sup> For an example of a Lacanian analysis in relation to the work of Ingres, see Leeks (1986).

<sup>13</sup> The Metropolitan Museum of Art only acquired the first of the three images that comprise *Fa'a fafine; In a Manner of a Woman*. The failure to acquire the complete set of images suggests the unease that this work creates within the established visual order of high art.

<sup>14</sup> For discussions of the theatrical nature of early cross-cultural encounters in the Pacific and contemporary *Fa'a fafine* performance, see Balme (2005, 19-46, 200-210).

<sup>15</sup> Kihara first performed *Taualuga: The Last Dance* at the opening of the Asia Pacific Triennial (2002). Kihara has since presented this work Der Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (2003), the Musee du Quai Branly, Paris (2007), the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand (2008), and October Gallery, London (2009).

<sup>16</sup> The full text of this speech is available at [www.beehive.govt.nz](http://www.beehive.govt.nz). For a history of the Mau movement, see Field (1984).

<sup>17</sup> The photographs include group portraits of both the male and female leadership of the Mau, New Zealand marines transporting Mau prisoners, New Zealand sailors removing Mau insignia from lavalavas, a Mau parade in Apia that preceded the shooting, and the funeral and cortege of Tupua Tamasese Lealofi III, a high ranking Mau leader who was mortally wounded in the shooting. Most of these photographs are from an album of photographs of the Mau uprising taken by Francis Joseph Gleason, now in the collection of the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. This album may be viewed at <http://timeframes.natlib.govt.nz>.