

This discussion reflects Brooks's contention that, in Gauguin's oeuvre, the female Tahitian body becomes 'naturalised'. The preference for a reading of sexual relations between young Polynesian women and white men as gift, as opposed to threat, mirrors writing by Gauguin, who mused on the viewing dynamics and intentions of his reclining female nudes.

In this rather daring position, what can a young Kanaka girl be doing completely nude on a bed? Preparing herself for love? All of this is in her character, but it's indecent and I don't want it. To sleep! The love-making, still indecent, will have been finished. I see only fear. What kind of fear? Certainly not the fear of a Susanna surprised by the elders. That doesn't exist in Oceania.⁴⁰

Childs also considers this relationship across time:

Although the account of *Noa Noa* may well represent aspects of Gauguin's intimate experience with an Indigenous woman for some months, the text (heavily edited in Paris by the symbolist poet Charles Morice for publication in a French journal) also echoes some of the more distressing presumptions Bougainville made 25 years earlier. Gauguin, speaking of Tahitian female desire, asserts with great hubris that the island's women generally prefer 'to be taken, literally, brutally taken (mau, to seize) without a single word. All have the secret desire for violence.' . . . [This] disturbingly echoes Bougainville, who noticed that 'even where the frankness of the golden age still reigns, [certain women and girls] appear not to want that which they desire most'.⁴¹

But who is the giver of the gift that Brooks refers to—the female, Polynesian body? Is it a gift that is both transactional and reciprocal, 'given' by her parents or guardians? This gift, Brooks insists, is freely given, for, as Gauguin states, the chaste and virtuous fear of Susanna is unknown in Oceania. A number of troubling tropes are here revisited across a broad temporal continuum. They echo Bougainville's origin narrative of Tahiti and, by implication, Polynesia as a sexualised, exoticised, feminised space. And they continue to resonate not only in the voice of Gauguin writing at the turn of the century, but also by Brooks, decades later, in the so-called 'postcolonial' age.

Eventually, all of Gauguin's 'vahine' left him, and he died alone in his House of Pleasures. Unlike Pierre Loti's fictional Rarahu,⁴² who is left forever weeping over her lover's departure, Tehamana moved on with her life. She married while Gauguin was in France and rejected him on his return. Pahura and Vaeoho, both pregnant to Gauguin, also left him and returned to their families. In all three cases, their 'exchange value' (to use the Marxist term) would seem to have been the prime motivating factor in the alliances. Selling brown girls to white men for sex dates back

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centuries, and, arguably, this prompted the arrival of Bougainville's 'Venus' on his deck back in 1768.

Shigeyuki Kihara draws on another of Gauguin's iconic works as a point of departure in her photographic series *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (2013). Her eighteen images take their title from Gauguin's monumental painting of 1897–8. The series comprises black-and-white images of Kihara dressed in a nineteenth-century black taffeta gown, imaged in sites around Samoa, her birthplace. Rather than adopting the stereotype of the dusky maiden, a trope she has reworked in previous series, Kihara takes the form of a matronly colonial figure, part-Victorian, part-phantasm. Her severe black gown starkly contrasts with the tropical background against which she is set. In all of the works,

Shigeyuki Kihara *After Tsunami Galu Afi, Lalomanu* 2013, black-and-white photograph, 59.5 x 84cm.
COURTESY MILFORD GALLERY, DUNEDIN

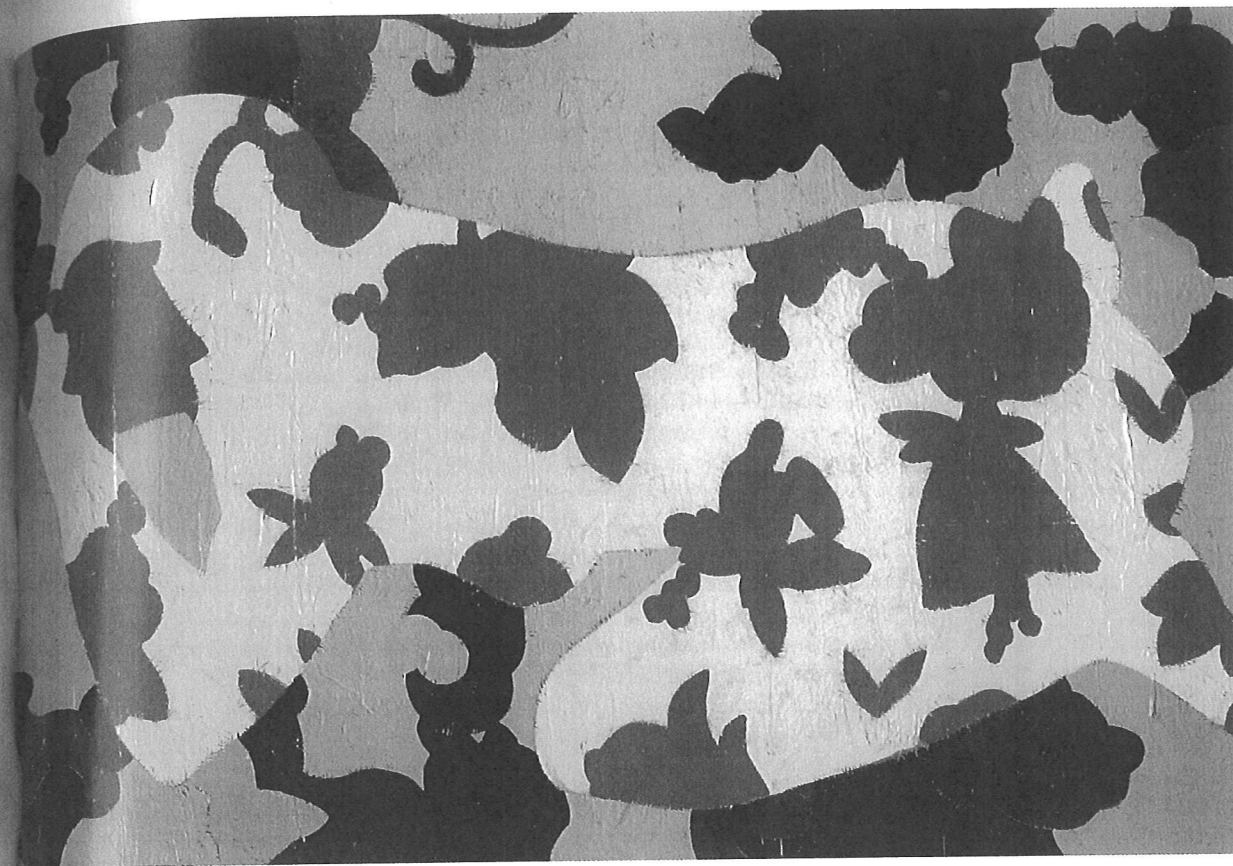
she looks away from the viewer, surveying her surroundings. Referencing postcard vistas of landmarks and natural beauty, Kihara invites her viewers to gaze with her at a range of contemporary Pacific sites not usually seen by tourists.

One image features a scene of natural destruction, disturbing popular notions of a Polynesian paradise (*After Cyclone Evan, Lelata*). In another, the artist is pictured in the centre of the image on a tranquil beach, looking out at the ocean; the title, *After Tsunami Galu Afi, Lalomanu*, along with the artist's stark black gown, reframe the timeless tropical scene by reminding us of the devastating earthquake and tsunami there in 2009. In other images, Kihara is set in her witnessing pose beside a range of deserted settings, including a monument to the raising of the German flag in 1900 (*German Monument, Mulinu'u*) and the former headquarters of the Mau movement, the indigenous-sovereignty movement critical to Samoa gaining independence in 1962 (*Mau Headquarters, Vaimoso*). In other works, the artist visits an aquatic centre funded by the Chinese Government in 2007 (*Aquatic Centre, Tuanaimato*) and Samoa's first casino (*Aggie Grey's Resort Casino, Mulifanua*).

The personal and axiomatic questions that Gauguin posed in his painting's title are reframed by Kihara. She seems to be pondering the layered colonial histories of Samoa and the future of her homeland in the face of globalisation and environmental change. Her dress though, inspired by the nineteenth-century Thomas Andrew photograph *Samoa Half Caste* (1886), creates a temporal disconnect. Her reference to Gauguin could also be an ironic play. Many have commented on Gauguin's disappointment when, on arriving in Papeete in 1891, he discovered it already inhabited by established colonial structures and missionaries. The Tahitians in Papeete would probably have been garbed in missionary-approved dress, perhaps not unlike Kihara's gown, another demonstration of the corruption of his longed-for exotic sanctuary.

Like *Manao Tupapao*, readings of Gauguin's *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* are usually prefaced with references to his life. The painting's significance and affect are often experienced with a knowledge of the artist's fraught emotional state at the time he painted it, and his threat to commit suicide on its completion. Its pathos, while not explicit, has become manifest in the mythology of the work. Having recently been informed in a blunt letter from Mette of the death of his favourite daughter Aline, the artist fell into a deep despair. His illness and pain, it would seem, had become too much to bear. His lack of resources, Tehamana's rejection of him, his cutting ties with Mette upon receiving her letter, his frustration with Tahiti's colonial administration, and his work's lack of recognition from France, contributed to him taking a large dose of arsenic and retiring to the mountains to meet his fate. He survived the episode, however, and would soon after make plans to leave for the Marquesas. The painting and its reception offer another example of the way that Gauguin's biography has become transposed onto readings of his work.

Graham Fletcher's paintings explore Pacific culture, colonial history, and heritage. Several of his series have focused on the deadly effects of European



diseases introduced into the Pacific during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This visual exploration into the dire consequences of disease introduction and the replacement of indigenous medical practices and knowledges with Western scientific ones culminated his series *Virgin* (2001), the last of his enamel-on-tapa works. Appropriating female forms from Gauguin's Tahitian paintings, Fletcher paints them into his bright textured environments and then covers them over with (his then-signature) patterns. *DPM 3* takes the figure from *Mahana No Atua* (*Day of the Gods*) and *DPM 4* from *Nafea Faa Ipoipo?* 'DPM' refers to 'disruptive patterned material', used in military camouflage uniforms. Fletcher extends this notion, literally covering his dusky maiden figures with brightly patterned cloth, and placing them against contrasting backgrounds. The use of glossy enamel on tapa cloth creates shiny, textured effects that blur or merge the background and female forms,⁴³ who are barely recognisable as figures. Describing his art practice at this time as a 'camouflage aesthetic', the artist attempts to 'cover up' the women,

to protect or hide them from the gaze. 'My painterly camouflage', he states, 'offers the women a degree of anonymity and dignity that has hitherto been denied them.'⁴⁴ Unlike the palimpsest, whose surface is erased and reinscribed, Fletcher's representations of the female body are layered, each layer building on the last to create a tactile, loaded site.

Fletcher's and George's layering of images and patterns over Gauguin's representations of women, Kihara's solemn witnessing, and Vaeau's imported faces offer counter narratives. In the final stages of his celebrated book *Gauguin's Skirt* (1997), Stephen Eisenman muses on Gauguin's legacy. In antiquated language, and displaying a colonial nostalgia similar to Brooks, he concludes, 'Like Gauguin however, the native peoples of the Pacific refused to become relics and pass into the tomb of history.'⁴⁵ As if this was even a possibility. Eisenman argues that while Gauguin brought racist assumptions with him, he was a kind of boundary rider, located in the interstice. In the final pages of his book, he writes, 'Gauguin remains today an ambiguous figure in the Pacific, insecurely wedged between the past and the present, and between colonial and Indigenous society.'⁴⁶

Eisenman recalls a telling conversation he had with a Pomare-family member at an anti-nuclear rally.⁴⁷ Eisenman asks, 'Do you think of him [Gauguin] as a French colonist or as a Tahitian?' The response: 'Gauguin was a rogue who liked to screw eight-year-old girls.'⁴⁸ The conversation continues and the Pomare-family member offers a more tactful response, in which he reworks the questions posed by Gauguin in *Where Do We Come From? Who Are We? Where Are We Going?* as:

Who are you? Where do you come from? Where is your family? Where is your land? What is your future? These are the questions we ask each other all the time here in Tahiti.⁴⁹

This response locates the work and its questions into a different cultural context. For 'Who are you?' is a very different question to 'Who are we?', and 'Where is your land?' is a more specific question than Gauguin's universalising 'Where do we come from?' Eisenman concludes that these questions illustrate 'an Indigenous concern with identity and tradition that is clearly pan-Pacific'. On the contrary, perhaps they do not speak to an Indigenous audience, but to a colonial settler. It seems clear in Eisenman's account, from the comments in French and Tahitian made at the author's expense during his conversation, and his pointed response, that Pomare's sentiments do not embrace Gauguin as a fellow brother or kindred soul. Eisenman concludes:

Oceanic peoples have always been vitally concerned with lineage and genealogy, yet Pomare's question would probably not have been asked by Tahitians of Gauguin's day. Where are you come from? Who are you? Where are you going? are *especially* European primitivist questions . . . Gauguin's achievement was thus to have taken primitivism—born in the

brains of Rousseau, Diderot and the rest—and transported it physically to the colonies where it might eventually do some good.⁵⁰

In almost patronising terms, and perhaps with a degree of missionary zeal, Eisenman suggests that Gauguin enabled a kind of awareness that was not present before he arrived. This is unlikely. For many in the West, Gauguin represents a brave rebel; but for many in the Pacific, he is a problematic figure, who misrepresented his subjects and 'liked to screw eight-year-old girls'.

Writing in the Marquesas in 1903, the year he died, Gauguin muses:

I believe that life has no meaning unless one lives it with a will, at least to the limit of one's will. Virtue, good, evil are nothing but words, unless one takes them apart in order to build something with them; they do not win their true meaning until one knows how to apply them. To surrender oneself to the hands of one's Creator is to annul oneself and to die.⁵¹

Gauguin did not need to go to the Pacific to engage in an exploration of Self and Other. Arguably, he always saw the Other in himself. His writing and art demonstrate an engagement with alterity that is personal, subjective, and contingent. 'I am Savage', he would state, though disappointingly for him, in a place where there weren't (or were no longer) any more savages.⁵² Indeed, perhaps there never were any 'savages' as he imagined them, for, like the dusky maiden, the savage is a trope of the Western imagination. Parallels have been drawn between Bougainville's and Gauguin's experiences and accounts in Tahiti. An arc has been drawn, which stretches from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, encompassing Tahiti and Polynesia. In imaginings of Tahiti and French Polynesia, be they touristic, literary, cinematic, or scholarly, the now quasi-mythical figures of Bougainville and Gauguin dominate as key points of reference and departure. They occupy similar but differentiated roles in canonising Tahiti as 'Aphrodite's Island'.⁵³ Gauguin has become a mythic figure, representing polarised and ambivalent positions in relation to artistic creativity, adventure, freedom, colonial fantasy, sexual exploitation, and disease. For, more than the Orientalist's and primitivist's dream of the Other, often distanced and constructed as a ballast or binary, Gauguin's life and death in Polynesia situate him in a different kind of critical discourse and artistic exchange.

Returning to Gauguin's letter to Redon, written as he took his leave from Paris for the first time, and transporting it to Papeete and Hiva Oa in his last years of life, it seems that the artist continued to keep his friends close. His painting *Sunflowers on an Armchair* (1901) highlights the intimate ties he still felt towards his friends in Europe, especially van Gogh. The vase of sunflowers is an obvious reference to his old friend. Behind it sits another flower, set against the darkened background, probably conjuring his friend Redon and his eye/flower motif that stares directly at the viewer.⁵⁴ They dominate the scene, making the face of a Tahitian woman seen passing by the window—reminding us of its Polynesian locale—seem secondary.

Belonging was not something Gauguin seemed to yearn for, but acclaim certainly was. His oft-quoted letter to Mette sent from Tahiti exclaims, 'I am a great artist and I know it. It is because I am such that I have endured such sufferings.'⁵⁵ Gauguin's 'suffering' and the body of art and writing that have emerged from his quest for artistic enlightenment have secured his place in art history's canon. It is a complex, polemical, and contested place, however. Ironically, he seems caught in the liminal space that the colonial subject is often fixed in: as a potentially threatening yet alluring figure, at once known, yet always unknowable.

1. Paul Gauguin writing to Odilon Redon, cited in Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 96.
2. See Miriam Kahn, 'Tahiti Intertwined: Ancestral Land, Tourist Postcard and Nuclear Test Site', *American Anthropologist* 102, no. 1 (2002): 7–26; Elizabeth C. Childs, *Vanishing Paradise: Art and Exoticism in Colonial Tahiti* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).
3. Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits 1888–1893: Gender and the Color of History* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 68. See also Lee Wallace, 'Gauguin's Manao Tupapau and Sodomitical Invitation', *Sexual Encounters: Pacific Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 109–37.
4. Elizabeth Childs, *Vanishing Paradise*, 91.
5. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Going Native: Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism', in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrad (New York: Icon Editions, 1992), 326.
6. *Ibid.*, 327.
7. Peter Brooks, 'Gauguin's Tahitian Body', in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, 332–45.
8. *Ibid.*, 343, my emphasis.
9. Naomi Maurer, *The Pursuit of Spiritual Wisdom: The Thought and Art of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998), 173.
10. Jane Duran, 'Education and Feminist Aesthetics: Gauguin and the Exotic', *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 43, no. 4, Winter 2009: 94, my emphasis.
11. Jehanne Teillet, 'The Influence of Polynesian Culture and Art on the Works of Paul Gauguin: 1891–1903' (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1975), 383.
12. *Ibid.*, 386.
13. Bengt Danielsson, *Gauguin in the South Seas*, trans. Reginald Spink (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1965), 121 and 283n92.
14. *Ibid.*, 182.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, 275.
17. *Ibid.*, 241.
18. *Ibid.*, 273.
19. *Ibid.*, 200.
20. *Ibid.*, 192.
21. Vincent van Gogh cited in Stephen Eisenman, *Gauguin's Skirt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 54.
22. Colta Feller Ives, *The Great Wave: The Influence of Japanese Woodcuts on French Prints* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1974), 96.
23. Paul Gauguin cited in Bengt Danielsson, 'The Exotic Sources of Gauguin's Art', *Expedition*, Summer 1969: 21.
24. www.dettloff.org/Gauguin/reservoir_eng.html
25. Tyla Vaeau, e-mail correspondence with the author, February 2011.
26. Tyla Vaeau, e-mail correspondence with the author, January 2011.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Kay George, e-mail correspondence with the author, April 2011.
29. Paul Gauguin cited in Françoise Cachin, *Gauguin: The Quest for Paradise* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 171.
30. Naomi Maurer, *The Pursuit of Spiritual Wisdom*, 173.
31. Bengt Danielsson, *Gauguin in the South Seas*, 241.
32. Nicholas Wadley, ed., *Noa Noa: Gauguin's Tahiti* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1985), 33.
33. Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits*, 17.
34. *Ibid.*, 26.
35. Nancy Mowill Mathews, *Paul Gauguin: An Erotic Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 182–3.
36. Lee Wallace, 'Tropical Rearwindow: Gauguin's Manao Tupapau and Primitivist Ambivalence', *Genders* 28 (1998), www.genders.org/g28/g28_gauguin.html.
37. Peter Brooks, 'Gauguin's Tahitian Body', 336–7, my emphasis.
38. *Ibid.*, 337, my emphasis.
39. *Ibid.*, 340.
40. Paul Gauguin, extract from *Cahier pour Aline* (1893), cited in *Artists by Themselves: Gauguin*, ed. Rachel Barnes (London: Bracken Books, 1992), 66.

41. Elizabeth Childs, *Vanishing Paradise*, 37.
42. Pierre Loti's *The Marriage of Loti* was originally published in 1880 as *Rarahu*. It tells the romanticised story of a relationship between a French naval officer and a young Tahitian woman, Rarahu. For Gauguin, the lure of Tahiti was partly informed by this novel.
43. Caroline Vercoe, 'The Many Faces of Paradise', *Paradise Now?: Contemporary Art from the Pacific* (New York: Asia Society Museum, 2004), 43.
44. Graham Fletcher, 'Artist's Statement', *Virgin* (Auckland: Anna Bibby Gallery, 2001).
45. Stephen Eisenman, *Gauguin's Skirt*, 195.
46. *Ibid.*, 204.
47. A prominent Tahitian family with royal lineage.
48. Stephen Eisenman, *Gauguin's Skirt*, 204.
49. *Ibid.*, 204–5.
50. *Ibid.*, 205, my emphasis.
51. Paul Gauguin, *Paul Gauguin's Intimate Journals*, trans. Van Wyck Brooks (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958), 241.
52. While Gauguin's lament for the lost savages of Tahiti displays a fraught, deluded colonial nostalgia, the death of Pomare V in 1891 had important historical, symbolic, and political significance. Childs writes that on his death, 'the French government announced that Tahiti was now fully a French colony and that 'by the terms of annexation, royalty ceases to exist . . . and no King can succeed him. Elizabeth Childs, *Vanishing Paradise*, 50.
53. Anne Salmond's book focusing on the history of Tahiti from the time of Cook's arrival takes this name as its title: *Aphrodite's Island* (Auckland: Penguin, 2010).
54. See Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images*, 96.
55. Rachel Barnes, *Artists by Themselves*, 6.