

# SHIGEYUKI KIHARA: SUBVERTING DUSKY MAIDENS AND EXOTIC TROPES OF PACIFIC PARADISE

PROFILE

by Pamela Rosi



■ Shigeyuki Kihara — *Taaluga: The Last Dance* (2002) Performance at the 2002 Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. Photo by Lukas Davidson.

RECLAIMING THEIR HISTORIES AND identities, contemporary Pacific artists are subverting tropes of “enchanted islands” and “dusky maidens” fabricated by European explorers’ myths of the South Seas idyllic “paradise.” In the 1990s, resistance to stereotypes of native cultures and bodies was re-energized in New Zealand by Islander artists who labeled themselves “Pacific.” Employing imagery mixing features of urban life with ethnic heritage, this new art became accepted New Zealand art practice, recently shared with Western audiences in two blockbuster exhibitions—“Paradise Now?” (SEE AAP 41) at New York’s Asia Society Museum in 2004 and “Pasifika Styles” at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in 2006.

In the kaleidoscope of talents exhibited, the cutting-edge work of Samoan artist Shigeyuki Kihara—the 2003 recipient of Creative New Zealand’s Emergent Young Artist Award—stands out for its brilliant use of photography and multimedia technology to reframe spirituality and comedic traditions in postcolonial discourse about identity. Kihara’s work challenges binary norms of heterosexuality and gender theory from her unique space (*va*) as a *fa’afafine*—a man who identifies as a woman in a traditional transgender role, considered anomalous in New Zealand, where she now resides.

Kihara’s interest in border crossings and liminal spaces stems from mixed parentage—her father is Japanese and her mother Samoan—and childhood residence in Indonesia, Japan and Samoa. In 1989, after her family migrated to New Zealand, she studied fashion design at Massey University, where her flare for styling engaged the funkiness of Islander street culture and melded boundaries between art and fashion. In 1995, New Zealand’s National Museum Te Papa Tongārewa bought her prize-winning student project “graffiti dress,” which encoded “off the boat” immigrants’ wearing of recycled clothing. In 2000, Te Papa recognized her innovative talents again when it acquired her entire first solo exhibition “*Teuanoa’i: Adorn to Access*”—28 T-shirts that bastardized corporate logos, three of which were withdrawn from display due to litigation concerns.

Her second exhibition, “Black Sunday” in 2001, played with the semiotics of the clothed/unclad body by collaging colored T-shirts, bright lipstick and snazzy sunglasses over 19th-century ethnographic photographs of Polynesians. These eye-catching collages intersected images from the past with contemporary experience, indexing change and reconstituting historical processes long denied Pacific Islanders by persisting notions of a timeless South Seas “paradise.”

In her next exhibitions, “*Fale aitu: House of Spirits*” in 2003 and “*Vavau: Tales from Ancient Samoa*” in 2004, Kihara posed in dramatic photographic self-portraits of gods and goddesses from Samoan mythology. These images reclaim the erotic gaze of the voluptuous “Dusky Maiden” genre of velvet paintings, made famous in New Zealand by Charles McPhee and other painters in the 1950s and 1960s, while honoring concepts of ancient cosmologies in contemporary media. “*Fale aitu*” is inspired by Samoan comedic skits where men, possessed by spirits, performed gendered roles of men and women. This “gender-bending” is hinted at in *Sina and her Eel* (2003), in which the goddess holds her eel lover’s severed head before planting it to become the first coconut—a transformation mediating life and death, male and female, as the (phallus) head is self-propagating. In “*Vavau*,” inspired by Samoan folktales, Kihara wears elaborate costumes and morphs into male and female deities. Although these self-portraits have been compared to Cindy Sherman’s reinterpretations of classic cinema and Yasumasa Morimura’s appropriations of art-historical icons (SEE AAP 47), Kihara



differentiates her work by honoring her own heritage.

Kihara's latest series, "*Fa'afafine: In the Manner of a Woman*" (2005), presents haunting sepia-toned prints that challenge heterosexuality and the colonial voyeurism of Polynesian female bodies popularized when semi-nude "scientific" photos were turned into soft-porn postcards and titillating peep shows for Western consumption. Kihara poses as both native men and women: in one image as a "Samoan Couple," and in another triptych as a reclining "South Seas Belle" with her grass skirt removed, revealing her penis. Subtexts mix: one plays on the surprise and shock mariners received upon discovering dusky maidens were in fact lovely lads; another references the Samoan *fa'afafine* role, subverting binary models of sex and gender and critiquing feminist philosopher Judith Butler, who theorized that gender is fluid performance, not inborn essence, but did not acknowledge that homophobia and racism constrain gender-bending.

Kihara's performances complement her visual art. As a member of the cooperative Pasifika Divas, whose program opened the 2002 Asia-Pacific Triennial in Brisbane, she collaboratively showcases *fa'afafine* styles from flamboyant drag to measured expressive choreography. One theme elaborated in her group and solo work is *taualuga* (last dance), inspired by the stately solo performance of the *taupou* (ceremonial village maiden). Positioned center stage wearing period costume, Kihara's graceful performance redresses colonial history while reclaiming, in her own person, the respected role of a *fa'afafine* as a mediator of oppositional forces in Samoan society.

Now 31 years old, Kihara is internationally recognized, her art increasingly the focus of scholarly discourse. The race, gender and ethnicity that are part of her world are a stimulating source for keeping her vibrant art true to her own *va*-space—the space-in-between.



Shigeyuki Kihara is a listed artist with Sherman Galleries, Sydney. Her work is currently on view in "Pasifika Styles," through August 2008, at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Future exhibitions in 2007 include "Island Affinities: Contemporary Art from Oceania" at California State University Northridge Art Galleries, Northridge, from January 29 to March 7, and "Who's afraid of the big bad wolf?" at *Te Tuhi—The Mark*, Auckland, New Zealand from March to April 26; in May, she will be artist-in-residence at The Physics Room, Christchurch, New Zealand.

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