



Dance of history and loss

Shigeyuki Kihara's recent award-winning performance videos are lamentations for the victims of the recent tsunami – and the scars of Samoa's colonial past. She spoke to Virginia Were.

In Samoa there's a long tradition of storytelling and archiving social and political history through song and dance. When Samoan-Japanese artist Shigeyuki Kihara made her silent performance video, *Galu Afi; Waves of Fire*, 2012, she was following this tradition, performing her own haunting version of a classical Samoan dance, the tauluga, to lament the 189 victims of the 2009 tsunami which struck Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga.

Her eerily beautiful, sepia-toned video, which won the 2012 Wallace Arts Trust Paramount Award, is reminiscent of a Victorian photograph, though it's distinguished by its hypnotic sense of movement. The camera focusses on the graceful, sweeping movements of Kihara's hands during her performance, dressed incongruously – for a customary dance that is loud, rapid and celebratory – in a Victorian mourning dress. Her hands appear in silhouette, glowing in the velvety darkness like the flames evoked by the work's title, which came from a book by Lani Wendt Young commissioned by the Samoan Government to gather the recollections of tsunami survivors. Through the use of multi-tracking, Kihara's overlapping hand movements become a metaphor for fire – or water – as an overwhelming and unstoppable force that devours everything in its path.

In this work Kihara responds to a series of historical photographs taken by New Zealanders John Alfred Tattersall, Thomas Andrew and the Burton Brothers before and during the colonial administration of Samoa by New Zealand between 1914 and 1962, many of which are held in Te Papa's collection. She first came across these images while studying fashion design and technology at Wellington Polytechnic in 1996 when she was given an assignment to research adornment and costumes from world cultures. She also wanted to reference the velvet paintings of Australian-born artist Charles McPhee whose portrayals of Pacific peoples as 'dusky maidens' were big sellers from the 1950s to the 1970s and are now synonymous with kitsch tourist imagery and soft porn portrayals of Pacific women in popular culture.

Initially struck by the way the studio photographs of Samoans eroticised their subjects by presenting them naked or semi-clothed as 'noble savages', perpetuating the myth of the Pacific as an exotic paradise through the mass production and dissemination of these images as postcards, Kihara has subsequently found them fertile ground for her art practice. Yet her reconstructions and reclamations of these images – often in the form of self-portraits naked and clothed – have a contemporary frisson.

Opposite page: Shigeyuki Kihara, *Galu Afi: Waves of Fire*, 2012, performance video still. Winner, Wallace Arts Trust Paramount Award 2012. Courtesy of Shigeyuki Kihara Studio and Collection of the James Wallace Arts Trust, New Zealand

Right: *Samoan half caste*, photograph by Thomas Andrew, from the album *Views in the Pacific Islands*, 1886. Reproduction from a black and white photograph, albumen silver print. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

In them she exposes the colonial gaze and turns it back on itself so we become acutely aware of our own position as voyeurs – and of the way pictorial conventions of the past constructed and perpetuated racial, cultural and gender stereotypes, many of which still hold sway today.

Perhaps the best known of these works is her provocative series of photographic studio self-portraits, *Fa'afafine: In a Manner of a Woman*, in which she critiques western binary understandings of gender. This has been extensively shown and reproduced in international publications, and it's interesting to note that Kihara, who grew up in Samoa and arrived in New Zealand in 1989 when she was 16, seems to have achieved more critical acclaim and recognition overseas than she has in this country. That is sure to change with her Wallace Art Awards win and the recent announcement that she has received a New Generation Award from the Arts Foundation of New Zealand.



Shigeyuki Kihara. Photo: Greg Dvorak



Among the photographs Kihara was researching at Te Papa one stood out – *Samoan half caste*, an image of a Samoan woman dressed in a Victorian mourning dress, taken by New Zealand photographer Thomas Andrew, who moved to Apia in 1891 to create studio portraits and images for the booming postcard industry. “I looked at this picture and saw that she looks very comfortable in this dress, and her gesture just oozes confidence and mana. And I wanted to understand the context of what was happening at the time the photograph was taken. The more I got into it, the more ideas it sparked off.”

Kihara tried to imagine what it would be like for this woman to perform the energetic movements of the *taualuga* in such restrictive clothing – a style of dress first introduced to Samoa by the German colonial administration in the 1900s. And so the idea, which is a potent metaphor for loss, the impact of colonialism on Samoa, and the bizarre fusions of different cultural traditions that resulted from it, was born. Over the next decade it would manifest itself in a series of performances and videos.

Like the video *Siva in Motion*, 2012, commissioned by Auckland Art Gallery for its recent *Home AKL* exhibition, *Galu Afi* is an extension of *Taualuga: The Last Dance*, which Kihara first performed in 2002 at the Asia Pacific Triennial in Brisbane. Since then she has performed it in the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, Musée du quai Branly in Paris and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, during her solo exhibition *Living*

Photographs, 2008 – 2009 (she's the first New Zealander to show there). Earlier this year she performed it in New Zealand for the first time – at the opening reception of Te Papa's exhibition, *Collecting Contemporary*, dancing alongside the video of the performance, which she gifted to Te Papa in 2011.

Siva in Motion and *Galu Afi* were both filmed during a day-long session at Mangere Arts Centre, in collaboration with Rebecca Swan on camera and Kirsty MacDonald as creative producer and editor. The team spent most of the day filming *Siva in Motion*, a silent performance of the tauluga filmed in a vertical format, and found they had a couple of hours to spare in their schedule. Kihara asked her crew to turn the camera onto a horizontal axis and focus on her hands, and that footage became *Galu Afi*. The decision to take her face out of the work and focus the viewer's attention solely on her hands distinguishes *Galu Afi* from earlier portraits in which Kihara's eyes meet the viewer's in a steady gaze. It marks an interesting new direction in her practice – a movement toward the universal and away from the exploration of identity in which the body is portrayed as a fluid map inscribed by race, gender, history and culture.

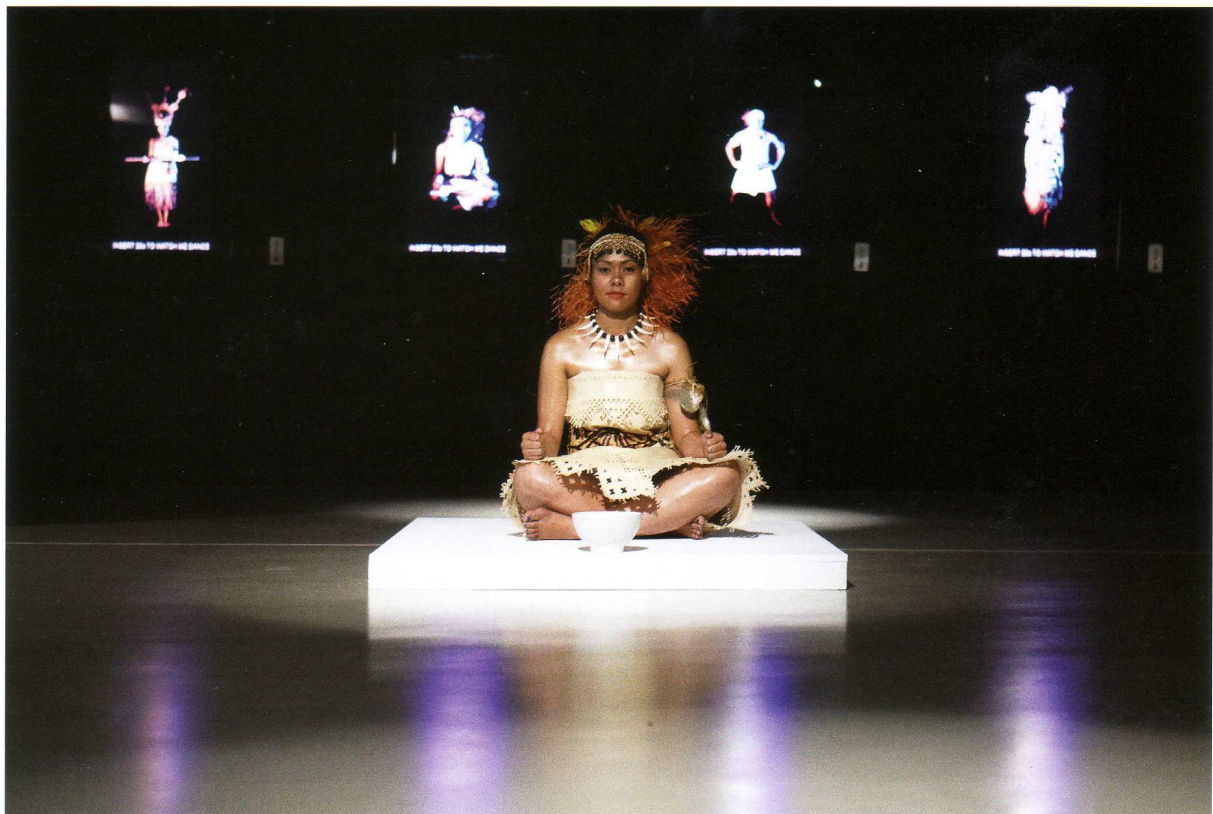
"In my years of practice using my face in the photograph I've become very aware of people's responses – how they see the photographic work and how they see me outside the gallery space. I wanted to present a series of work where the focus is on something else. I decided that the next work is not about identity, but about the dance as

social commentary. I wanted people to be seduced by the dance while being conceptually challenged by it."

The post-production use of multi-tracking in *Galu Afi* and *Siva in Motion* is related to the photography of Futurists, such as Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne Jules Marey, whose early experiments in capturing movement were an essential step toward the development of cinema. Marcel Duchamp's famous painting *Nude Descending A Staircase* is another obvious antecedent. Whereas these artists were engaging with modernity, looking forward and trying to anticipate the future, Kihara's work is a conscious look back into the past – a lament for the lost and an affirmation of the wisdom of ancient Samoan traditions in the face of present-day challenges – the lingering psychological scars of colonialism, the recent tsunami, global recession and climate change.

"I like the idea of using this cutting-edge technology to reference old things. The more we move into this age of technological advancement, the more I want to look back."

Also embedded in this series of performance-based works is a reference to the Mau movement, which was established in 1908 as a way for Samoans to assert their claim for independence from colonial rule. The movement came to an abrupt end in the streets of Apia on 28 December 1929 when New Zealand military police fired on a procession attempting to prevent the arrest of one of their members. Up to 11 Samoans were killed and that day became known as Black Saturday. The Mau movement eventually led to political independence of Samoa in 1962.



Opposite page: Shigeyuki Kihara, *Culture for sale*, 2012. Live performance and exhibition commissioned by Campbelltown Arts Centre and 4a Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, for Sydney Festival 2012. Courtesy of Shigeyuki Kihara, Campbelltown Arts Centre and 4a Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney. Photo: Susannah Wimberley

This page: Shigeyuki Kihara, *Siva in Motion*, 2012, performance video still. Commissioned by the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki. Courtesy of Shigeyuki Kihara Studio and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki

Kihara says as well as being a dance of mourning, *Galu Afi* was a way for her to restore her faith in nature. Thus her hand movements, as well as signifying the destructive force of the waves, can also be seen as beautiful, graceful and life affirming – just as they're intended to be in that ancient dance, the taualuga.

"My first induction into Samoan dance was when I was seven or eight. I was staying with my great aunt in American Samoa and she told me to join in with my girl cousins and learn to dance. But her dance training was vigorous – every time we did something wrong she would hit us with a broom. I really didn't enjoy it, and everyone in my family used to laugh at me because I was really awkward at it.

Performing the dance in front of a camera is very different from performing for an audience, she explains. Each sequence of movements is precisely choreographed for the camera and filmed in real time, although when you see the video it looks as if Kihara's movements have been slowed down.

"I had to do several takes and go by my inner rhythm; that was the first time I'd performed in silence and it was really difficult – it really took me out of my comfort zone."

Alongside her art practice are Kihara's socially engaged projects in which she collaborates with community and cultural groups to create live performances and relational artworks. A recent one of these was *Culture for Sale*, which reflected on the commercialisation of Samoan culture in the wake of the 50th anniversary of the Independence of Samoa this year. It's an interdisciplinary work featuring a live performance and a video installation, which was conceived by Kihara and presented in January this year at the Campbelltown Arts Centre in Sydney. Samoan dancers in the gallery gave brief performances – only when the audience put money in the bowls at their feet. The four-screen video installation echoed this interchange by encouraging visitors to insert 20-cent coins into coin slot machines next to each monitor in order to see the dancers on screen perform.

Culture for Sale references the *völkerschau* or 'human zoo' – a popular form of exotic entertainment in Germany during the colonial era. Last year Kihara travelled to Germany where she researched museum archives, following the historical footprints of several groups of Samoans – men, women and children – who toured big cities in Germany where they were exhibited behind a fence in a *völkerschau*.



As part of winning the Wallace Art Awards Kihara will spend six months in residence at the International Studio and Curatorial Programme in New York in 2013. While there, she plans to spend time in the Margaret Mead Hall at the American Museum of Natural History, researching the archival material behind the anthropologist's famous book *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Of particular interest to Kihara is the fact that after Mead's death many of the women she interviewed in American Samoa have said that everything they told Mead about their lives was based on lies.

Judging by the intelligence and acuity of her past work, looking at Samoa's colonial past and its echoes and reverberations in the present and the future, Kihara is sure to apply her particularly potent form of alchemy to this historical archive and create something extraordinary.

Shigeyuki Kihara Touring Survey Exhibition 2000-2013, solo exhibition at Hocken Gallery, University of Otago, Dunedin, from 19 April to 17 June 2013.