



Figure. 14.1. *Le loimata o Apaula; Tears of Apaula* (Dip tyck), 80cm x 60cm, Mixed media and Photography. Courtesy of Photographer S. Coyle and Artist S. Kihara.

Shigeyuki Kihara, An Interview with Jim Viveaere

It's mid morning, Wednesday 29th September 2004, and I have an appointment to interview Shigeyuki Kihara at my house. I've made an event of it, kind of dressed up, styled the kitchen table with a potted flowering antherium and lemons and bananas and unripe mangoes. The jug has boiled and I've placed teacups and saucers and made a plate of small glazed boysenberry and fresh strawberry flans.

My first encounter with Kihara's work was at a Wellington fashion show in the late 90's. As a student she presented a collection made remarkable by the models and the Asiatic details on her garments. Then years later she had an exhibition at Archill Gallery in Auckland, *Adorn to Excess*, twenty six monogrammed T-shirts, vacuum packed and sitting like frozen food-stuffs in a hired supermarket freezer.

Now we are neighbours, 5 minutes away, maybe longer from her place, as it's a steep up hill climb. Yuki arrives. She's been partying the night before and assures me that she's in the right space to undergo interrogation, slightly hung over and open for shop. In fact she suddenly excuses herself rushes off to the Dairy at the top of the street to buy a toothbrush and toothpaste and a couple of litres of orange juice. Settled and seated at the table we 'do' morning tea and alternately hum and hah into a dinky hand size recording system.

J. Good morning Yuki, you realize that my intention for interviewing you is to give Hawaii some insight into which you are as an artist. Maybe you could give a general outline of your involvement in the arts; tell me a story.

Y. I received an email from Rosanna Raymond telling me about this conference that was taking place in Hawaii, and then I was contacted by Pamela Rosi who invited me to attend and be part of the forum. I was really interested in some of the issues that were going to be presented and felt that they reflected a lot of my personal views and inquiries into my own practice.

I suppose I see myself as a multimedia artist. In 2000 I made a commitment to become a fulltime artist (which coincided with me shifting to Auckland). I've had to supplement this direction by working in various other disciplines, fashion, theatre and perfor-

mance related work and usually in the background under the supervision of others. In fashion shoots, working as a fashion stylist, I work collaboratively with the creative team and the magazine editor who selects the fashion editorial.

When it comes to my own photographic artwork I have learnt the process and I'm the one in control. What I can't do in a fashion editorial is what I do in my own artwork.

J. What I find interesting about who you are as an artist is perhaps the ethnic and cultural ties that define you. Born in Samoa, a Samoan mother and Japanese Dad; bought up in Samoa, Indonesia, Japan and New Zealand. I think as an artist you've got lots to share, beyond those boundaries. What kind of work are you going to show in Hawaii?

Y. I'm going to show my recent work called *Vavau — Tales of Ancient Samoa* [figs. 14.1-14.5], which was my first solo exhibition at the Bartley Nees Gallery in Wellington (July 2004). Some works from this show were selected for *Prospect 2004*, the Biennial survey of contemporary art in New Zealand held at the City Gallery Wellington. I guess I am considered as one of 50 artists that are making waves in New Zealand.

What was interesting with the marketing of this work is that my art dealer deliberately selected the month to show my work to be aligned with the group exhibition at the City Gallery Wellington. This dual exhibition serves to impact the arts community and the buyers in raising the standard and credibility of my work as an artist and also creating hype around it. It's a logical strategy for any dealer to maximize the moment.

J. Are you empowered or influenced by the work of say artists like Cindy Sherman or Yasumasa Morimura who practice this genre of photographically imaging themselves, mimicking or morphing into other characters.

Y. Yes I know who they are, but I don't really identify with their work. As a child and even now I look at photos of myself and wonder how my life would have been if I wasn't a Fa'a fafine/transgender, or what my life would have been if I had lived in one country,



Figure. 14.2. *Le loimata o Apaula; Tears of Apaula* (Dip tyck), 80cm x 60cm, Mixed media and Photography. Courtesy of Photographer S. Coyle and Artist S. Kihara.

assumed one gender, experienced one culture, one religion and spoke one language.

My life has multiple facets and in principle I can be every thing all at once. What I like about my *Vavau* work is that I am basically telling a story, and of course, I end up taking on a variety of guises in order to realise the different narratives. By imaging myself as a Samoan, it was an opportunity for me to connect with my Samoan heritage and ancestry. There was a time when I didn't really acknowledge or understand that I was Samoan. My family shifted to Indonesia after I was born until I was 5 years old. We then went to live in Japan until I was 12, back to Samoa, then coming to New Zealand when I was 16.

J. Who are you talking to as an audience; your friends, the Samoan nation, I wonder who you are telling this story to?

Y. I'd like to think that I'm speaking to everybody even though my work extends from a Samoan cultural platform. I do believe that a lot of the issues that I speak of in the artwork are universal. If some people don't like it or don't get it then it's fine with me. The Samoan elders who have contributed by telling me the folklore have supported and appreciated my photographic work, so I think I've done my job.

J. I saw a great exhibition the other day, Martin Ball's super large canvasses, oil paintings of John Pule, Lisa Reihana, Ralph Hotere and Elizabeth Ellis. A palagi painting Polynesians. I ask the same rhetorical question, who'd buy them? Such incredible dexterity and draughtsmanship, I guess he probably gets commissions.

With regards to your portraits Yuki, being the creative mind and all, you don't actually press your finger on the shutter; you work collaboratively with a technician. Dumb question, is he recognized as partly responsible for your work?

Y. The photographic work that I've been doing is a collaborative process. I'm very much reliant on other people's capabilities when conceiving my work. I mastermind and fund the project and feel that I have the right to claim it as my own artwork. I have an agreement with my photographer that if the work gets published that he gets credited. I could say that the photographer is in part, one of my 'tools' for making my work

J. What sets you apart is that you're more than the sum of the parts. You started studying to be a dress/

clothes designer that veered into making art; your T-shirt installation, screen-printed canvasses, photographs and then quite recently your performance work with the Pacific divas. Do you make a separation between your performances and your other work — your photos for example?

Y. I feel that there is a strong link between my visual art and my physical performance work, because a lot of my performances are informed by the critique of my visual art so they do reflect each other. When I'm doing a performance the music, gesture, emotion and movement is centred on an artwork that I have already made or am thinking about making.

J. It was good timing that Ann D'Alleva witnessed your performance at the Den Adult Store and I understand that she and Rosanna are delivering a paper in Hawaii referencing your work. In fact Rosanna is creating a performance piece; I wonder if she'll get a chance to see Markarita Urale's brilliant documentary beforehand. What do you think of Rosanna's intentions?

Y. It's quite an honour that the performance has affected some people, even now people are still talking about it. However, I have no control of people responding to what I do.

J. I remember being at a conference in Wellington "Under Capricorn, Is art a European idea?" (1994) and Yasumasa Morimura gave a paper, obviously he didn't look like any of his personae, very conservative he had a black suit on and...

Y. Sounds like my Dad (giggles).

J. When you go to Hawaii, in principle you'll be a total stranger. Will you make your entrance as one of your characters?

Y. I think I'll walk in with my jandals and lavalava and be myself really. But in terms of a persona or a character, I'm in 'drag' everyday anyway.

J. I'm sure Hawaii will be looking forward to your appearance and...

Y. I hope so. I hope they love me. I'm sure that I'll love them.

J. I understand that you have a show at Sherman Gallery in Sydney next year. Is that going to be an extension of the works that you'll be showing in Hawaii?



Figure. 14.3. *Tonumaip'e'a; How she was saved by the bat*, 80cm x 60cm, Mixed media and Photography. Courtesy of Photographer S. Coyle and Artist S. Kihara.

Y. It is going to be photographs again, self-portraiture but different all together. This time I'm exploring ethnographic images of Samoans in the 19th century. In many ways I'm playing with issues of the European gaze.

J. Are you going to be using a lot of different characters — photoshopping? I recall Morimura's face being a piece of fruit in a French impressionist still life by Cezanne, Braque or Matisse.

Y. I'm going to mimic the poses that derive from these ethnographic postcards keeping in mind that a lot of the photographs were posed and structured around the orientalist art movement. I've been digging up a lot of information about this period. What, how and why this image making took place. Basically I want to come in and re-occupy the whole gaze issue and make it gutsier from what was formally romantic.

J. Maybe you'll do some research at the Bishop Museum.

Y. Oh yes it will be great.

J. Yuki as a young, emerging career driven Polynesian artist, have you any marketing strategies. Your movement in the art world is contingent on having a dealer. Do galleries sell your work, how many dealers have you got?

Y. I have three dealer galleries so far. Bartley Nees in Wellington, Whitespace in Auckland and most recently Sherman Galleries in Sydney. How I manage things is that I make a distinctive body of work for each gallery. For obvious reasons, dealers don't like leftovers that have been shown at other galleries. Because I'm bursting with ideas I see myself as an ideas machine; making new work is not a problem. I just need time and the money! Having dealers in three different cities I'm able to tap into a new audience and market as well and it allows me to have an excuse to travel to my openings and meet up with friends.

J. Because you're multi-dimensional multi-talented lots of multis...

Y. (Laughter)

J. Not only are you marginalized on ethnic levels but also gender levels. This kind of characteristic that you were born with or that you've engineered, is it something that you have to work with or against, in terms of your art practice. You've been in frivolous

beauty contests and serious film documentaries. Do you make a separation?

Y. The only thing I don't do is to sensationalise and bull shit about it. What I am is what you get and I'm not going to change anything for anyone just because they feel insecure about what I am and what I do. I also wish that people would see the art for what it is rather than it being marginalized. When white artists have an exhibition people go along and see art for what it is, but when you're not White, not straight and not a man people immediately perceives your art as something political. I remember one time walking into a dealer gallery, seeking representation, showing them my artwork, and the director of the gallery said, "I'm not interested in your work as we are only interested in contemporary New Zealand art" and I replied by saying "then what is contemporary New Zealand art?" and he couldn't answer my question.

I do get these attitudes as though I'm bracketed as queer, and that my work could be construed as low-brow. I do feel that there are things working against me. But I feel resolved about my work, and what I do and I can't change it and I've learnt to deal with other people's indifference and not take it so seriously.

Every year I'm invited to the various arts schools in Auckland to give lectures to the students, which I really enjoy, it gives me the opportunity to tell my story, my journey...

J. As you were talking I was thinking of the performance artist Luke Roberts. These personas "Pope Alice"... Will you make films? It's photography now... maybe acting...

Y. I went to Fashion Design School not Fine Art School. So I've been involved in a similar creative activity but a different industry I'm bringing all those experiences into my current practice. Where am I going now?... Video is something I would like to become involved in. When I imagine an artwork for the photos it's like imagining a still from a movie and I'm the lead actor of this film. I've done female impersonations on stage in clubs and would imagine myself as a character from a movie or from a music video. I watch a lot of movies and MTV and I'm constantly inspired to do something similar. Pope Alice? Fantastic. Oh there is the Cremaster series as well. Being aware of all these things makes me want to do my own versions.

J. I'm thinking of Tracey Moffat's photographic work as well. Are you looking forward to going to Hawaii? Are there people that you need to connect with?



Figure. 14.4. *Taema ma Tilafaiga; Goddesses of Tatau*, 90cm x 70cm, Mixed media and Photography. Courtesy of Photographer S. Coyle and Artist S. Kihara

Y. I am looking forward to meeting other participating Pacific Island artists at the conference. I really think it is important to connect and share about what we are doing, and to encourage each other to keep on doing what we do.

J. I look forward to seeing you when you get back. I wish you all the best.

In 2008, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acquired two of Kihara's works for their permanent collection. Following that Shigeyuki Kihara had her first solo museum exhibition in North America at The Metropolitan Museum of Art entitled, *Shigeyuki Kihara; Living Photographs*. This was a survey of her early art practice. On exhibit from 7 October 2008-1 February 2009, this exhibition surveyed her early art practice from 2002 till 2006.



Figure. 14.5. *Maui Ti'eti'e Talaga; Maui and the first fire of Samoa*, 80cm x 60cm, Mixed media and Photography. Courtesy of Photographer S. Coyle and Artist S. Kihara.

