

VOGUE LIVING AUSTRALIA

KELLY WEARSTLER'S CALIFORNIAN DREAM

WOMEN
IN
DESIGN





YUKI KIHARA

The transgender ARTIST crosses many frontiers with her focus trained on *extrapolating* the truth behind HISTORICAL *narratives* and the politics of *CULTURE* and identity.

By ANNEMARIE KIELY

Box-ticking or media baiting? Let's drag the curatorial elephant into the middle of the room and query culture's current rush to commodify black and non-binary identity. So begins a virtual exchange with transgender artist Yuki Kihara, whose *Paradise Camp* — "a provocation against the stereotypical ways we understand place, gender, sexuality and their intersectionality" — represented New Zealand at the 59th International Biennale Arte in Venice in 2022 and reveals soon at Sydney's Powerhouse Ultimo. If Kihara's selection as the first Pasifika artist and first fa'afafine (Samoa's third 'liminal' gender) to represent New Zealand was tokenism, it was an unassailable triumph with record attendance figures, a torrent of international press and the sell-out companion tome. "Yuki not only speaks to our times. Her art is universally resonant, deeply poetic, socially engaged and powerful," says the exhibition's curator Professor Natalie King OAM of Kihara's lush unravelling of the post-colonial Pacific myth in a work that played right to the 59th Biennale's want 'to imagine a world where everyone can change'. >



This page, from top Si'ou alofa Maria: Hail Mary (After Gauguin) (2020); and Genesis 9:16 (After Gauguin) (2022) by Yuki Kihara from the Paradise Camp series for the 59th International Biennale Arte in Venice last year. Opposite page artist Yuki Kihara at her Paradise Camp exhibition in the New Zealand Pavilion in Venice.

Yes, the artist is appreciative of the media attention and its amplification of the marginalised fa'afafine voice but deems it all just a perfunctory “jump on the social justice bandwagon” when the real-world implications of inclusivity are ignored. “Back in 2019, I cut a deal with the commissioner of the New Zealand Pavilion saying, ‘If you would like me to represent your country at La Biennale, and expect me to frequent your office, you must fit it with a gender-neutral bathroom.’ New Zealand was good for its word, but the La Biennale office just didn’t walk the talk.”

And the “talk”, which tackled the existential “biggies” of what defines as human and determines the responsibilities we have to all people and planet, issued volubly from the director of the 59th Biennale Cecilia Alemani, a long-time curatorial interrogator of inequity. “Surely equity implies that every citizen’s needs are met,” argues Kihara of the gesture politics that denied her a non-binary water-closet. “That’s what it is to be a human in a heteronormative world. Talk is so cheap. No, the art world is not perfect.”

But its duplicity never darkens Kihara’s filmic folly of fa’afafine, who in *Paradise Camp* she cast in faithless re-creations of Paul Gauguin masterworks, as manifest in 12 mise-en-scène photographs (mostly shot in Upolu Island, Samoa, with a local cast and crew), archive material and the moving image *First Impressions: Paul Gauguin* (2018) — a talk show of fa’afafine piss-taking Gauguin’s post-impressionism with a laugh-out-loud oblivion to his weight in the Western art canon.

Kihara similarly messes with the male gaze in *Paul Gauguin with a hat (After Gauguin)* (2020), a prosthetically enhanced self-portrait that quietly pokes at the patriarchy while subverting Gauguin’s contrived persona as the savage. The ensemble of works, set against a vast wallpaper of Samoa’s Saleapaga Beach (flattened by the 2009 tsunami and first attended by the care-giving fa’afafine), ironically sited within the Venetian Arsenal, the centuries-old shipyards where vessels once built to facilitate, trade, conquest and colonising instinct. It’s the full circle of imperialism from first plunder to planet in climate crisis and people lost, and for Kihara — “Same shit, different era”.

But its stink is tempered by a sweet technicolour camp (à la Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific*) applied to a wabi-sabi awareness of transient beauty that the artist traces back to her Japanese father and Samoan mother. She recalls a peripatetic pathway to art from primary school in Osaka, stints in Jakarta and fashion studies at Wellington Polytechnic, where skills gleaned grew sideways into editorial, theatre and film production. “But art was always meant to my creative space,” says Kihara with cast back to the seeding of *Paradise Camp* in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2008 when prepping for her solo acquisitive exhibition *Living Photographs*, she requested silent, solo access to the masters as per *Night at the Museum*, the film in which exhibits come to life and lampoon the imperial fictions of history. “I arrived at dawn with the cleaners and remember walking through the Renaissance section to get to the moderns and for the first time seeing Gauguin’s art on something other than a pencil case or scarf.”

Struck by the sitters’ attitudes in Gauguin’s Tahitian paintings, Kihara recalls an essay delivered at Auckland Art Gallery in 1992 by Maori scholar Dr Ngahua Te Awekotuku who identified some of Gauguin’s models as Mahu, Tahiti’s third gender. “For me, they also resembled the fa’afafine in Samoa, which was strange. It started an itch,” that incurred the scratch in Samoa’s colonial archives where, aligning photos with Gauguin’s Tahitian phase (1893-1903), Kihara discovered an uncanny sameness of posturing and place. Gauguin never set foot in Samoa, Kihara notes, but records show he visited Auckland Art Gallery in 1895, which presumably afforded access to Thomas Andrew’s photographs of Samoa’s people and places. Thus began her reclamation of Gauguin’s Pacific myth into *Paradise Camp*.

At the heart of its high-chroma humour is the ethical hard ask about a world that sets the current value of a Tahitian painting by Gauguin (who died penniless in 1903) at a quarter of the GDP of Samoa; an archipelago whose coastline and culture is washing away in the wake of paternalistic, post-colonial policies that continue to put a legal ban on homosexuality. Call it box-ticking or break-out surprise, Kihara’s must-see art delivers the sucker punch of paradise lost with all the illusory lightness of a travel brochure. ■ *Paradise Camp is on at the Powerhouse Ultimo from March 24–December 2023; maas.museum*

This page Paul Gauguin with a hat (After Gauguin) (2020) by Yuki Kihara from the Paradise Camp series.

