



An interview with Yuki Kihara
Aotearoa New Zealand at the 59th
Biennale di Venezia

by Contemporary HUM

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Artist Yuki Kihara speaks at the *Paradise Camp* press preview, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, 20 April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Yuki Kihara, *Paul Gauguin with a hat (After Gauguin)*, 2020. Hahnemühle fine art paper mounted on aluminium, 45 × 38 cm. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand.



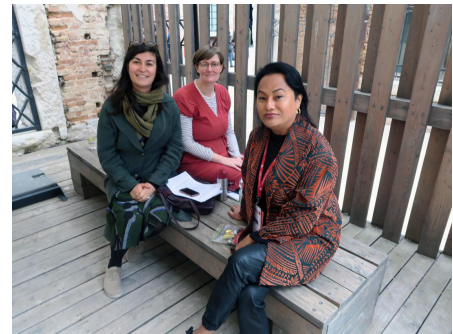
Yuki Kihara, *Two Fa'afafine on the beach (After Gauguin)*, 2020. Hahnemühle fine art paper mounted on aluminium, 69 × 91 cm. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand.



Yuki Kihara, *Paradise Camp*, curated by Natalie King. Installation view, Biennale Arte 2022. Photo: Luke Walker. Courtesy NZ at Venice.



Yuki Kihara, *Fonofono o le nuanua: Patches of the rainbow (After Gauguin)*, 2020. Hahnemühle fine art paper mounted on aluminium, 139 × 375 cm. Paradise Camp installation view, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



HUM team with New Zealand's representing artist Yuki Kihara, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, 21 April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

Traversing the topics of small island ecologies, queer rights and decolonisation, Yuki Kihara's Paradise Camp at La Biennale di Venexia 2022 marks a number of firsts for Aotearoa New Zealand's national pavilion as the artist selected is Pasifika, Asian and Fa'afafine, Sāmoa's third gender. Kihara's timely and ambitious presentation, curated by Natalie King, encompasses archival research, photography, video and socially engaged methods to explore the ongoing Sāmoa-New Zealand relations from a Fa'afafine perspective.

For this project, Kihara "upcycled" paintings by French post-impressionist artist Paul Gauguin, created during his time in Tahiti and the Marquesas between 1891 and 1903, and drew on her own

extensive research, or Vārchive, on the Sāmoan origins and gender-neutrality of many of Gauguin's models. This produced a suite of eleven elaborately staged and vibrant photographic portraits, shot on location in Sāmoa, with an additional self-portrait of Kihara as Gauguin. Kihara's photographs are presented against an immersive wallpaper of a coastal landscape decimated by the 2009 tsunami, making Paradise Camp a reclamation of Gauguin's imagined Pacific through a contemporary Pasifika, Fa'afafine lens.

As the only Aotearoa publication on the ground at Venice during the opening week, HUM visited the New Zealand pavilion in the Arsenale and sat down with Kihara to discuss her experience representing Aotearoa in the midst of a pandemic, her research processes and plans to bring the exhibition back to the Pacific, and the significance of bringing Fa'afafine narratives to an international audience.

Don't miss the other part of our Venice coverage, where we spoke to Curator Natalie King and Assistant Pasifika Curator Ioana Gordon-Smith about working with Kihara to bring Paradise Camp to Venice.

CONTEMPORARY HUM With the Biennale pushed back one year due to the pandemic, can you tell us about the impact on and changes to the project in your preparation for Venice in the last couple of years? For example, you originally wanted to bring mediators from Sāmoa to speak to visitors in the exhibition space but this wasn't possible unfortunately.^[01]

YUKI KIHARA The biggest hurdle that was felt from the global pandemic was the fundraising. This was the trickiest part because you can't fundraise over Zoom. So every time we were able to host gatherings in Aotearoa, my gallerists had to quickly organise a series of fundraisers across the country to galvanise support and to help fund the project. I also made additional artworks for sale in order to make it happen, because the Arsenale rent is really expensive.

I've had this space in mind since my site visit to Venice in 2019. I could see the wallpaper immediately because it was really

important for me with *Paradise Camp* that people feel really immersed, as if they're there in Sāmoa.

HUM And did you always know that you were going to have to share the space, which is divided in two, with another pavilion? The Albania Pavilion on the other side of the room is also very different to your presentation.

YK Yes, if I had the whole space to myself, I don't know what it would be like. But because I only took half of the space, a lot of the energy that I had scoped for a whole space instead became supercharged into that one half. Of course, I'm presenting my work to be very considerate of our neighbours, with regards to the audio from my video work leaking to other spaces.

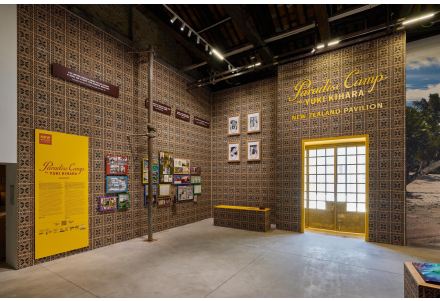
It's great, because it's such a stark contrast but we both complement each other.



(L-R) Ioana Gordon-Smith, Natalie King, Yuki Kihara and Caren Rangi. Photo: Luke Walker. Courtesy NZ at Venice.



Visitors watching Yuki Kihara's *First Impressions: Paul Gauguin*, 2018. *Paradise Camp* installation view, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Yuki Kihara, *Paradise Camp*, curated by Natalie King. Installation view, Biennale Arte 2022. Photo: Luke Walker. Courtesy NZ at Venice.



Yuki Kihara, *Paradise Camp*, curated by Natalie King. Installation view, Biennale Arte 2022. Photo: Luke Walker. Courtesy NZ at Venice.



Yuki Kihara, *Paradise Camp* installation view, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

HUM With the strict border policy still in place in Aotearoa in relation to Covid-19, very few people could travel with the project. How many people from the NZ at Venice team could finally come with you?

YK Six of us came from Aotearoa. There's Jude Chambers (Project Director), Caren Rangi (Commissioner), Ioana Gordon-Smith (Assistant Pasifika Curator), my gallerists Stephen Higginson and Niki Stewart from Milford Galleries, and myself. And Natalie King (Curator) joined us from Australia.

HUM In past editions of the New Zealand pavilion there has been a lot more official representation, as well as groups of art patrons and supporters who can make it over, so the situation this year is very challenging.

YK Usually it's a whole village showing up, and a group of patrons and supporters with a whole programme organised for them. I've done so many press meetings, and we received media coverage from the *Financial Times*, *CNN*, *Time* and *The Guardian*, to name a few. The New Zealand Pavilion was listed as a must-see in *The Art Newspaper*. It's a really busy week. I had the chance to meet the patrons briefly but they understand the significance of the international media coverage for *Paradise Camp* and made plans to catch up on my return to Aotearoa later this year. My team knows that I don't do any evening events. Five o'clock, I have my dinner. I'm back at the hotel by seven. Because by the time I have my hot shower and I put my feet up, oh my God, I'm so exhausted.

HUM To launch into the work, we want to ask you about your first encounter at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, with these Gauguin paintings that you then decided to recycle, or upcycle as you say.

YK In the context of sustainability, to upcycle means you take something original and then you improve it. I'm showing the improved version. So it's not re-enactment, it's not restaging, it's improvement.

HUM What's arresting is to think about those Gauguin paintings that you saw at The Met and consider how many scholars have looked at them, how many institutions have presented these works, and yet they didn't ask the subjects or descendants of the subjects in the paintings what they thought or saw in them. So, when you were looking at them, you were seeing something completely different to what the curators wrote on the labels

maybe. Can you tell us about this first encounter with those paintings, what you saw and how you felt?

YK It was back in 2008, I had a solo exhibition at The Met. If you go there you'll see that it's a really busy museum. There are people everywhere. You're bound to stand in front of a painting and bump into people. I asked The Met if there was a time in the day when I could have the whole museum for myself, when there's nobody around. They said if I showed up really early in the morning, at about 6.30 am, when the cleaners and the security guards arrived, and then I could have the whole Met to myself.

And I did. Oh my God, the whole museum by myself. I walk into the modern art galleries. I'm walking past Cézanne, van Gogh and all of this. Then I see a Paul Gauguin painting with brown bodies. Then I step in front and think, "Wow, so this is, like, the real thing." And then I began to ponder an unpublished essay that was written by Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, which she presented at the Auckland Art Gallery in 1992, which discussed her observation of Gauguin paintings from a Māori lesbian perspective. The closer I looked at the paintings, the more they reminded me of members of the Fa'afafine community, and the landscapes looked similar to those in Sāmoa. It was then that the two ideas came together as a way to 'camp' the notion of paradise, adding Pasifika Indigenous to drag and calling it 'In-drag-enous'.



Yuki Kihara's Vārchive. Installation view, Biennale Arte 2022. Photo: Luke Walker. Courtesy NZ at Venice.



Yuki Kihara's Vārchive. Installation view, Biennale Arte 2022. Photo: Luke Walker. Courtesy NZ at Venice.



Yuki Kihara's Vārchive. *Paradise Camp* installation view, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Paradise Camp installation view, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Yuki Kihara, *Paradise Camp*, curated by Natalie King. Installation view of Ancestor portraits, Biennale Arte 2022. Photo: Luke Walker. Courtesy NZ at Venice.



Paradise Camp installation view, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

HUM So you hadn't seen the paintings at The Met when you first read Ngahuia Te Awakotuku's essay, *He tangi mo Ha'apuani (a lament for Ha'apuani): Gauguin's models - a Māori perspective*, which is now published in the accompanying publication?

YK Not yet. So then, when I was at The Met, I began to think back to Ngahuia's essay, where she talks about how some of the models that Gauguin painted may have been Māhū, which is a third gender in French Polynesia. I thought, "Oh, this is what Ngahuia's is talking about." But I couldn't nail why it was that some of the models looked Sāmoan. Why did the background look Sāmoan? This was really strange, and I thought, "Okay, maybe it's just me."

I'd been looking at New Zealand colonial photography, and particularly colonial photography in Sāmoa by Thomas Andrews. He's from Hawke's Bay. He set up a studio in Sāmoa after his wife died in the early 1900s. I've been looking through his photographs over the past 20 years.

Then I saw one photo that matched the composition of a Gauguin painting, which was a photograph of a Sāmoan man, with his back to the camera, with a *pe'a* or men's tattoo. The silhouette of that Sāmoan man looked exactly the same as the silhouette in *Three Tahitians* (1899). The hair, the side of the face, were exactly the same, I was like, "Oh my gosh, is this just me?"

We are a similar culture to Tahitian and Marquesan, similar region, with a similar language group, so it must be one of those similarity things. Long-lost cousins.

I looked at other Gauguin paintings, including *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* On the far right, there was a group of people sitting down on the ground. A lot of the poses reminded me of a Manet painting. I said, "Okay, so he drew his inspiration from a variety of different places." I was eager to find whether there was a Sāmoan link as well, and there were many, not just one.

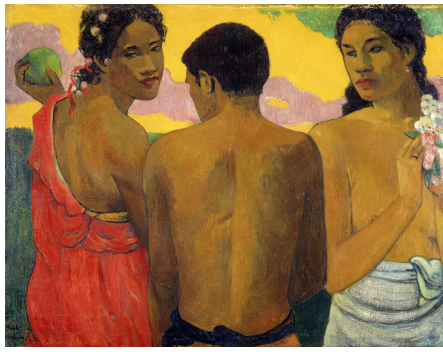
HUM You've said that in your research you found this connection between Sāmoa and Gauguin's paintings, and this is what inspired the project. You are not from Tahiti and it is not about speaking up for Tahitian people, but rather you saw something else that you identified with in those paintings at The Met.

YK When you go through Gauguin's journal, there are several photographs of Sāmoans taken by Thomas Andrews and other photographers. My theory of how Gauguin got hold of the series of Thomas Andrews photographs is that on the second-to-last trip to Tahiti, in 1895, he had to transit in Auckland. During these ten days he visited the Auckland Museum and Auckland Art Gallery, and made sketches of Māori taonga.

I think that it was during his ten days in Auckland that he may have picked up those postcards. I don't think he cared where they came from. He took them back with him to Tahiti, which became the main source of inspiration that led to the development of his significant paintings.

The reason a lot of people don't know this direct and indirect connection between Gauguin and Sāmoa is because Gauguin gave these paintings Tahitian names. They were disguised. The source material is Sāmoa, but he did a little trick and put a Tahitian name in there, so everybody thought they were Tahitian.

That's when I began to realise, if the source material is from Sāmoa, then any of his paintings could be from Sāmoa. So I went through all of his paintings, and selected 12 that I knew I could replicate and upcycle accurately in a Sāmoan context.



Paul Gauguin, *Three Tahitians*, 1899.



Yuki Kihara, *Three Fa'afafine (After Gauguin)*, 2020. Hahnemühle fine art paper mounted on aluminium, 73 × 94 cm. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand.



Paradise Camp installation view, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Yuki Kihara, *Si'ou alofa Maria: Hail Mary (After Gauguin)*, 2020. Hahnemühle fine art paper mounted on aluminium, 87.6 × 113.7 cm. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand.



Paul Gauguin, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, 1897-98.



Yuki Kihara, *Fonofono o le nuanua: Patches of the rainbow (After Gauguin)*, 2020. Hahnemühle fine art paper mounted on aluminium, 139 × 375 cm. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand.

HUM Yuki, your work, here in Venice and in past projects too, is very personal. It's about your private life experience as well as that of an artist. I was listening to you speak to visitors earlier, when I was in the Pavilion. You have to answer all sorts of questions about what it is like to live in Sāmoa, or what it means being Fa'afafine. You are asked questions that are not just about your artistic practice, and although you've shown internationally before, I'm curious to know what is your experience this week talking to audiences at the Venice Biennale opening, and how do you connect with these visitors?

YK It's a case of cultural translation and giving the audience enough sets of codes, and explaining the power dynamics, to understand where I'm coming from. The personal is often the political, so people understand the nature of being personal. What has got me here is because of my personal reasons, because art

making is very personal to me and it's also tied to a very specific place.

Although many of these visitors don't know where Sāmoa is, or where Aotearoa is, or even where the Pacific is, they find nuances they can relate to. When you make your work too general, like a fishnet trying to catch everybody, that's when you lose the magic. It becomes too universal. It means nothing.

But if I make it specific to a place, then people are interested in that perspective and how those people see the world. The Venice Biennale is essentially a microcosm of the world. The benefit of being here is that you're able to go to pavilions from places that you may never have the opportunity to travel to. It gives you a glimpse of that experience.

HUM You often upcycle—not just the paintings, but the racist processes that are behind the colonial photographic methods you repurpose. You make people question their gaze and their own implication in exotifying Indigenous bodies. A lot of the photographs that you're presenting here put those questions right in people's faces. You're being confronted with that as a visitor, and people have to question their own participation.

YK You see the video screen as soon as you walk into the pavilion, from any direction, as it is double sided. People are really drawn by the chatter, the panellists' mannerisms, the way that they camp up the chatter and the fun. The audience wonders what they are having fun about, and then they will sit and they watch.

They see this group of Fa'afafine critiquing Paul Gauguin's painting. Without having to read the wall text, they get it immediately. And then they come up to me and say thank you. And there's also the QR code that helps the viewer to navigate through the exhibition as well.

HUM We couldn't make it work when we visited but can you tell us what the QR code provides to the visitor?

YK It enables you to direct your camera onto various works and access information about them. There is a slide that starts from the Gauguin painting, and when you slide along on your phone it becomes one of my photographs. So you can see the faces on Gauguin's paintings, and then look at the models in the photographs, and they look very similar.

HUM One of the themes at this Biennale, from the Sámi Pavilion, the French Pavilion, also your work in the New Zealand Pavilion, is contested narratives. Changing the narrative of art history and questioning the Western art canon from new perspectives. Who speaks for whom, or who is getting the opportunity to tell their stories. You said that if you take this project back to Aotearoa or to the Pacific, you want to show at institutions that have gender-neutral bathrooms and that welcome the community whom you have made this work for. Institutions need to have integrity when they claim inclusivity.

YK The problem at the moment is that there's so much hype around trans and gender non-binary people, as if it's a fashion trend. I get offers here for this work to tour, and we have to ask them, "Do you have gender-neutral bathrooms?" And I have to say, "Oh, I'm sorry, I made this for the Fa'afafine community. Don't you think that it's paradoxical for your institution to be showing *Paradise Camp* when you don't have facilities that embrace all the audiences in your community?"



Yuki Kihara, *Spirit of the ancestors watching (After Gauguin)*, 2020. Hahnemühle fine art paper mounted on aluminium, 116 × 134.6 cm. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand.



Yuki Kihara, *The Wizard (After Gauguin)*, 2020. Hahnemühle fine art paper mounted on aluminium, 92 × 73 cm. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand.

HUM Are there non-gendered toilets here at the Biennale?

YK Not that I know of. Our commissioner Caren Rangī has talked to the Biennale about this, but unfortunately, I have to use the accessible bathroom.

HUM Is there anything else that these institutions could easily do to be more welcoming and be more inclusive?

YK There is LGBTIQ advocacy in every country, in every city. Ask them. The thing is, I actually made *Paradise Camp* for the Fa‘afafine community. They are the priority community. Coming here and showing it to audiences in Venice is an added bonus. But I don’t want *Paradise Camp* to be like a one-hit-wonder. I want the artwork to fight for us. In order to get what we want the show has to be good and convincing, to address the gaps in society that need to be addressed.

And I don't want *Paradise Camp* to be educational at all. I want people to be seduced by the art first, and then perhaps try and look at the world from my perspective.

HUM For many artists, the Venice Biennale is a career goal, but for you it's actually a stepping stone? Why did you want to come to Venice?

YK It's a stepping stone for me to be more in touch with the Fa'afafine community. I needed the resources of Creative New Zealand to make it happen, so I could have the community involved, so they can claim it, they can own it. Because it's made to empower them. What's really interesting is that I've had other gender non-binary and trans people come up to me in Venice and say, "Thank you for doing this for us."

I have a lot of people coming to congratulate me, which is great. They say, "Yuki, I don't know where Sāmoa is, but I know this is important."

HUM Where is the show going after Venice?

YK *Paradise Camp* will go to Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, then it's going to the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, and then it's going to go to Upolu Island, in Sāmoa, which is where the photoshoot took place with the cast and the crew. The stakeholders were the family. My mother did the catering.

HUM Will you invite Cindy from Sāmoa to perform?

YK If it wasn't for the pandemic, she would be performing here!



Yuki Kihara, *Two Fa'afafine going to church* (After Gauguin), 2020. Hahnemühle fine art paper mounted on aluminium, 73.7 × 92.1 cm. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand.



Yuki Kihara, *Fa'afafine with children* (After Gauguin), 2020. Hahnemühle fine art paper mounted on aluminium, 97.1 × 74.2 cm. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand.



Yuki Kihara, *Paul Gauguin with a hat* (After Gauguin), 2020. Hahnemühle fine art paper mounted on aluminium, 45 × 38 cm. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand.

HUM Finally, how do you navigate some of the stereotypes, which come from Paul Gauguin's paintings and that European audiences might carry, even if unconsciously, about the Pacific—the landscape with the idyllic beaches and coconut trees?

You've obviously gone for an aesthetic that is impossible to ignore, very colourful, very rich, very camp, very exuberant. There's a lot of celebration. But, as you say, it is seductive, and then once you start looking closer you see the serious undertones, the humour disappears, the violence is revealed. How do you reuse clichés and repurpose them so as not to reinforce them?

YK Those images of paradise used as wallpaper here, with the blue ocean, white-sand beach, with the coconut trees—they're like screensavers. They could be from the Caribbean, from anywhere. I have to play around with the cliché first and then start going in. I want to show that real people live there. The sea level does rise in those places. Those places are drowning. There are no fish there because there's no coral and there's ocean acidification.

HUM Do you have any plans to work with the Takatāpui community in Aotearoa?

YK I have before. They've been part of my working group. I haven't made any work specifically about them, but I have worked actively with the Māori Takatāpui community. Ngahua is a big supporter of this. It's great to have their support as well, for them to have my back. I'm very grateful.

HUM We should let you get on with your other commitments, but thank you so much Yuki, for your time and energy, congratulations on this major project!

Footnotes

01. HUM attended the Biennale and chose to ask questions that build on the content already widely developed and published before the opening so as to also tackle issues that may only be experienced as a visitor. For readers who may not yet be familiar with Yuki Kihara's *Paradise Camp* project, other interviews conducted before the opening are available [here](#) or [here](#).

Biographies



Yuki Kihara is an interdisciplinary artist of Japanese and Sāmoan descent. Working across a range of media including performance, lens-based media and sculpture, Kihara's research-based approach has led to a comprehensive body of work and curatorial practice that examines gender roles, consumerism, (mis)representation, and the past, present and future societal issues from an Indigenous perspective. Kihara lives and works in Sāmoa, where she has been based over the past 11 years.

Kihara's works are in the permanent collections, among others, of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, British Museum, Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts and Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Her works have been presented at the Asia Pacific Triennale (2002 and 2015), Auckland Triennale; (2009), Sakahan Quinquennial (2013), Daegu Photo Biennale (2014), Honolulu Biennale (2017) Bangkok Art Biennale (2018) and Aichi Triennale (2022). Kihara has been appointed by the Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa to represent New Zealand at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022. Kihara is a research fellow at Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Kihara is represented by Milford Galleries Dunedin and Queenstown.



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