Playing with Gender at the Tropenmuseum

by Millie Riddell

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Millie Riddell visits the group exhibition in which Yuki Kihara is currently participating in the Netherlands. Titled What a Genderful World*, the show is on at Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam until January 2021, before reopening at Wereldmuseum, Rotterdam in February.*

In the foreword to *Samoan Queer Lives* back in 2018, Yuki Kihara observed that fa'afafine have become a 'hot' topic in the West.[01] A source of fascination for contemporary documentary filmmakers, anthropologists and travel writers, Kihara noted that fa'afafine have been employed as a foil to Western identity and its heteronormative gender binaries.[02] At the Tropenmusem in Amsterdam, where Kihara is featured in the group show *What a Genderful World*, the museum's marketing campaign strangely echoes Kihara's observation: "gender is a hot topic", the website boasts, proud to have its finger on the pulse.[03]

In a video positioned just outside the entrance to the exhibition, Australian drag queen Courtney Act delivers 'Gender 101'.[04] "Gen der", she tells us, "basically refers to each culture's traditional social roles for men and women." She speaks slowly, and puts a heavy emphasis on the word "traditional". It's a short, playful video, peppered with colourful graphics and celebrity Instagram

screenshots, flitting back to Act as she carefully runs through gender terminology. In quick succession, we hear about the terms cisgender, transgender, intersex and gender fluid, and the difference between gender identity and gender expression. Act's video boils down to a simple instruction to viewers before they enter the exhibition: It's ultimately about respecting and learning about people.

Act's fun and didactic video sets the tone for the rest of the show, a festive setting that promises an immersive, if rather chaotic, crash course in how gender is experienced around the world. The exhibition invites audiences to "dive into the world of gender and discover how this is expressed and experienced worldwide".[05] It's not a turn of phrase - near the end of the exhibition there is an actual ball pit audiences can dive into. It's exactly like one you might find in a children's playground, only the usual colourful balls are replaced by a sea of plastic breasts. The fittingly titled *Sea of Objectification* (2018) is credited to That Lady Thing, not an artist's pseudonym or a collective (as I first assumed) but the creation of American ad agency Eleven. *Sea of Objectification* was originally part of Eleven's pop up exhibit in San Francisco, launched to coincide with International Women's Day in 2018, and not so much an art exhibit as a marketing campaign. Audiences could float in the ball pit of boobs, scale the "Corporate Climb" rock wall, or pose with fake dollar bills (a 'critique' of the gender pay gap, apparently), encouraged all the while to post as many selfies as possible. As the ad agency described its campaign as "the activist pop-up for the Instagram generation",[06] Sarah Cascone at Artnet wondered if this was the moment feminism jumped the shark: "Does reducing the pay gap to a colourful Instagram moment belittle the real challenges inherent in such important issues?" she asked. Seeing the work now at the Tropenmuseum, I find myself wondering something very similar. It's not clear what immersing yourself into a ball pit of variously toned plastic boobs actually tells us about female objectification, if anything. It's also not clear what an ad agency gimmick, designed purely to generate selfie opportunities and social media buzz, is doing in an anthropological museum - beyond generating selfie opportunities and social media buzz.



What a Genderful World, installation view, Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, 2020. Photo: Marvin Duiker/Shot by Marv. Courtesy of Tropenmuseum.



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What a Genderful World is littered with playful exhibits like *Sea of Objectification*. Tactile, interactive works dominate the space. Audiences can weave through enormous banners depicting familiar celebrities who defy gender norms (Eddie Izzard, Miley Cyrus and Sam Smith, for example), or pose before a camera with real-time playback “as a girl” or “as a boy”. If it gets overwhelming, they can take their rage out onto sex organs (and perhaps onto the societal preoccupation with body parts as gender identifers) in the form of giant punching bags in the shape of the taco and eggplant emojis.

But somewhere between all the plastic boobs and eggplant punching bags, *What a Genderful World* sets out to educate audiences about how gender is experienced and expressed around

the world. Lining the walls are images of an Iranian men-only tea house and a nineteenth century print of Onoe Kikugorō IV, a Japanese male Kabuki actor who primarily played female roles, while a collection of heeled shoes worn by men in the Persian army is arranged on plinths. “The higher the heel, the more powerful and more masculine the wearer”, the text tells us. The wall texts of the exhibition are simple and littered with rhetorical questions, explicitly calling attention to the fact that these geographically diverse examples disrupt gender ‘norms’. Alongside a print of *The revenge of Kālī*, the Tropenmuseum’s label tells us that the Hindu goddess’ “unplaited hair, scant clothing and unpredictability represent the opposite of ideal femininity. She shows that she is dangerous and powerful - qualities you are not supposed to have as a woman.” Peppered through the wall texts there’s a tone of received, communal understanding of what those ‘qualities’ are, with exhibits explained through Western conceptions of gender roles and social norms. Underneath a photograph, credited to the Fijian Government House, of police officers wearing *sulu tavatava*, the caption tells us, “in Fiji both men and women wear a skirt.” Much of the exhibition seems to be pitched to children - not only through its interactive, playground-like feel, but also through its straightforward, educative messaging. “What do you think about this?” the wall texts ask, often.

But among the documentary photographs, historical prints and ethnographic displays, a number of contemporary artworks stand out for their complexity and nuance. Jill Peters’ *A Solemn Declaration, Sworn Virgins* (2009-2013) appears to be a portrait series of dignified, if slightly weathered, older men. As it happens, Peters’ subjects are *burrneshat*: Albanian women who choose to live and dress as men. A centuries-old tradition, choosing to live as a *burrneshat* is less about individual gender identity than it is about social and legal restraints. Historically unable to inherit property, drink, smoke, travel alone or vote, *burrneshat* live as men to access freedoms unavailable to them as women. There is a trade-off, though. *Burrneshat* translates to “sworn virgin”, that is, the women take an oath that in choosing to live and be accepted as a man in society, they will remain virgins for life.



Nermine Hammam, *The Break*, from the *Upekkha* series, 2011. Image courtesy Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.



The revenge of Kālī, India, Ravi Varma Press, 1900-1950. Image courtesy Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.



Police officers wearing sulu tavatava at the Fijian Government House, Suva, Fiji. Photo: Mike Robinson, 2013. Image courtesy Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.

London-based Egyptian photo artist Nermine Hammam's *The Break* (2011) also offers a double take on masculinity. Hammam depicts a young Egyptian soldier eating a pot of yoghurt against an idyllic postcard backdrop. The solider appears in the image twice, side by side, first facing the camera and then flipped so his back is to the viewer. His posture is relaxed, resting on one hip as he concentrates on the yoghurt. Hammam was struck by the vulnerability of the soldiers called in to suppress Cairo protesters during the Arab Spring in 2011. "I couldn't help but notice their youth", she recalled in an artist statement.[07] "They were the sons of anxious parents… Not the angry stereotypes of masculinity through which our narratives of the army are articulated."[08] Ham mam transports the young soldier from reality into an idyllic landscape, juxtaposing his military uniform against a fantasy setting of pink flowers, rolling green hills and snow-covered mountains, one form of role play replacing another.

Other works explore the relationship between consumerism and constructions of gender. I find myself absorbed by an exhibit of Barbie dolls, including a clip from the animated Barbie television show. In the video, Barbie is showing off her enormous walk-in wardrobe and endless array of makeup to two friends as she preps

for a date with Ken. It is not the saccharine girlishness of Barbie's wardrobe that hits me, but the scale of it - the sheer amount of *stuff* she has. Maybe I'm projecting, but even Barbie's sidekicks seem not so much impressed as overwhelmed and a little repelled. There's a similar sensation to South Korean artist JeongMee Yoon's *The Pink and Blue Project* (2006-2008). Yoon photographed children in their bedrooms, with all of their pink (for the girls) and blue (for the boys) belongings arranged around them. The effect is simple yet visually overwhelming, calling attention to how gender identity is formed through a forced affinity to colour and, more alarmingly, through excessive consumption. The small children are lost among all their possessions, and it's compelling to see the lens turned on children themselves - in an exhibition that seems to be designed specifically for them.

About halfway through the exhibit, I find the work I've come to see: Yuki Kihara's *Fa'afafine (In the manner of a woman)* (2004-5). Kihara, who will be New Zealand's representative at the next Venice Biennale, has been working as a research fellow at the Dutch Museum of World Cultures, comprised of the Tropenmusem, the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden and the Afrika Museum in Borg en Dal. With an interdisciplinary practice that maps the complexities of colonial histories in the Pacific and their intersection with fa'afafine perspectives, Kihara was scheduled to have a solo exhibition at the Tropenmuseum later this year, but it's been postponed.

In the meantime, *Fa'afafine (In the manner of a woman)* hangs in the corner of the hallway visitors pass through on their way from the punching bag emojis to the ball pit of boobs. Three nearly identical photographs of Kihara are arranged vertically. She sits upright on a nineteenth-century divan, legs stretched out along the chair, with an arrangement of tropical foliage behind her. Actual historical photographs of 'exotic' women line the walls leading up to Kihara's work. After passing reclining nineteenth-century nudes from Senegal, Indonesia and South Africa, at first glance Kihara's sepia-toned photographs look like a continuation of the same: another historical artefact depicting the sexually submissive 'dusky maiden', an Edenic projection of the male colonial fantasy.

Explicitly recalling historic representations of Pacific women by Europeans, Kihara reorients the passive depiction of the dusky maiden on her own terms. There is an obvious comparison, drawn by Erika Wolf, to Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) who "created unease due to the brazen gaze of the subject back at the viewer".[09] Kihara also looks directly at the viewer, but while Olympia's posture is still in the languid tradition of the reclining nude, Kihara sits upright, propped on one elbow, her torso matching her confrontational gaze. Her posture, hair and makeup are identical in all three images, drawing our attention to the subtle differences across the three photographs: from the presence, then absence of the grass skirt, to the depiction of Kihara as a fa'afafine in what Kihara has described as a "trip tick".[10]



Yuki Kihara, *Fa'afafine (In the manner of a woman)* (2004-5), Apia, Samoa; University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge. Image courtesy Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.



Lukas Avendaño, *Zapotec*, Mexico, 2015. Photograph featuring Mario Patiño and Lukas Avendaño as models. Image courtesy Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.



JeongMee Yoon, *The Pink and Blue Projects*, 2006-2008, Korea. Image courtesy Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.



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Fa'afafine, as the work's title tells us, can translate to "in the manner of a woman" and is considered a third gender in Samoan culture. As Dan Taulapapa McMullin explains in the introduction to *Samoan Queer Lives*, "fa'afafine was used as a postcolonial transition word, a liminal space encompassing all genders and sexualities, not in opposition to heteropatriarchy, but not in equilibrium with it either".[11] That liminal space, made visual in Kihara's images, might also be called the vā, what Albert Wendt described as "the space between, the betweenness. Not the space that separates but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, space that is context, giving meaning to things."[12]

"I'm taking control of all of this", Kihara tells the audience in a short video alongside the work, positioning that liminal space, the vā, at the centre. Kihara, as critics Lana Lopesi and Lousia Afoa have observed, is "in complete control as both subject and author of these depictions of her body … moving away from a Eurocentric depiction of a Polynesian female body reclaiming the photographic space as her own." "I am not a substitute of a woman, I am not a substitute of a man either", she tells the audience in the video. "I think everybody else is a substitute of me".

The thought of the vā as the space that relates, that brings separate entities together, feels significant in the broad geographies and myriad perspectives presented in *What a Genderful World*. In a recent text on *Queer Algorithms* at Gus Fisher Gallery in Auckland, Frances McWhannell questioned the suitability of large-scale group shows to display LGBTQIA+ works, with smaller solo shows offering artists more agency and space to communicate. In that respect, Kihara is served well by the video accompanying her work, giving her space to speak directly to the audience. And while large-scale group shows might leave little room for individual stories and agency, they theoretically open up space for works to speak to each other, to relate. Prominent in the exhibition is a photograph of Lukas Avendaño. Male torso exposed, Avendaño is dressed in a billowy pink skirt, with silver lipstick and dangly earrings. Avendaño is a Mexican *muxe*[13] artist who works through dance and performance, a practice encompassing queer interventions into traditional Zapotec culture. It would have been

interesting to see his work in dialogue with Kihara's, to consider where they meet and where they diverge.



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But a persistent tone of anthropological curiosity tends to overshadow the possibility for works to speak to one another. Maybe this is to be expected. The Tropenmuseum is, after all, an ethnographic museum (Tropenmuseum translates to "museum of the tropics"). But the exhibition does not, for example, distinguish between historical photographs and artefacts, advertising agency gimmicks, and contemporary artworks.

In her recent book *The Whole Picture*, Alice Procter sets out to consider the invisible legacies of colonialism and empire in museum collections and curatorial practice.[14] She devotes a whole chapter to what she calls 'The Playground': the increasing trend in contemporary art exhibitions toward interactive displays, "heavy on experiences and installations".[15] Such exhibitions tend towards selfie-friendly photogenic works, with viewers encouraged to post using a dedicated hashtag to generate social media

interest. Visitor engagement becomes part of the work, and in blockbuster artworks and exhibitions addressing traumatic subjects and histories, the audience's inability to look past the "fun" is often revealing.

There is a telling moment: after I've taken in Kihara's photographs from up close, and after I've watched the video, I step back a few paces to look at the work from a distance. In the empty space I free up in front of the work, a man approaches to view the photographs. As he's looking, his family comes up behind him - a woman and two primary school age children. Over his shoulder he sees his children approaching, quickly, he jumps in front of the third photograph, arms spread, shielding it from the children's view.

It's a delicate balance - to engage audiences with the complexities of the exhibition at a pitch that is lighthearted and seems geared toward entertainment. There is a persistent optimism to *What a Genderful World*'s light touch, with audiences repeatedly invited to consider that gender norms are not historically embedded nor universally experienced. As the contemporaneous blockbuster *Mas culinities* at the Barbican in London (2020) is being criticised for being too centred on European and American depictions of masculinity, *What a Genderful World*'s commitment to global voices and its extensive research and sensitive messaging feels refreshing, and urgent. Viewers are invited to question their own understanding of gender and the ways this is socially constructed, to consider that Euro-centric norms are not necessarily the starting point: though at times this seems to veer into a superficial use of global histories and perspectives as tools for a European audience to self-reflect. There is, nonetheless, potential to bring positive change, provided the audience climbs out of the ball pit of boobs long enough to consider it.

Footnotes

01. Yuki Kihara "Foreword" in *Samoan Queer Lives*, edited by Dan Taulapapa McMullin and Yuki Kihara (Little Island Press, Auckland, 2018), p. 2.

02. Ibid.

03. www.tropenmuseum.nl/en/whats-on/exhibitions/what-genderful-world

04. “Courtney Act Talks… Gender Terminology!” *MTV International* (7 November 2017) www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjs3MZiTkMM (accessed 5 September 2020).

05. www.tropenmuseum.nl/en/whats-on/exhibitions/what-genderful-world

06. www.eleveninc.com/experience-design/that-lady-thing

07. slate.com/culture/2013/09/nermine-hammam-upekkha-tranports-soldiers-of-the-egyptian-army-to-a-different-type-of-paradise-photos.html

08. Ibid.

09. Erika Wolf, “Sigeyuki Kihara’s ‘Fa’afafine: In a Manner of a Woman’: The Photographic Theatre of Cross-Cultural Encounter” Pacific Arts 10(2) (1 January 2010): 23-33, p. 28.

10. Ibid, p. 27.

11. Dan Taulapapa McMullin, “Introduction” in *Samoan Queer Lives*, p. 8.

12. Albert Wendt, “Tatauing the Postcolonial Body”, Span 42-43 (April-October 1996): 15-29.

13. In Zapotec cultures of Oaxaca, a muxe is a person assigned male at birth who dresses and behaves in ways otherwise associated with women.

14. Alice Procter, *The Whole Picture: The colonial story of art in our museums and why we need to talk about it* (Octopus Publishing Group, London, 2020).

15. Ibid, p. 180.

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.



Millie Riddell has a BA Honours degree in Art History from the Victoria University of Wellington and has just completed an MA at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. She returned to New Zealand in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic and wrote her thesis on New Zealand expatriate and pioneer of video art Darcy Lange in lockdown in Nelson. In September this year Riddell started her six-month stint as the latest Adam Art Gallery Intern at Te Herenga Waka. She is currently based in Wellington, New Zealand.

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