



salt 8: Shigeyuki Kihara

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August 2, 2013 through January 5, 2014

In the graceful Samoan *taualuga*, a solo dancer's subtle facial expressions and elegant hand gestures symbolize the daily activities of village life, revisit the memories of ancestors, and tell stories of political negotiations. Traditionally, the *taualuga*, which translates literally to 'last dance,' is a celebration that serves as the culmination of Samoan social functions. An enduring symbol of Samoan culture, today the *taualuga* tradition is passed from generation to generation.

In 2002, Shigeyuki Kihara performed *Taualuga: The Last Dance* at the 4th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane, Australia. Since then, Kihara, who was born in Samoa in 1975, has continually revisited this performance, shaping it into a poignant social commentary that weaves together past and present colonialism, the subjectivity of native women, and the present and future consequences of humanity's impact on the earth. Like the traditional dance, Kihara's *taualuga* is a tribute to her ancestors and a celebration of Samoan life, or *Fa'a Samoa*. Her strong, confident movements are reminiscent of her ancestors' persistent struggle against colonial powers for independence. Yet, her performance is also a lamentation. Rather than wear the traditional woven mat designed for ease of movement in a tropical climate, Kihara has chosen to dance in a black, corseted, high-necked, long-sleeved, full-length Victorian mourning dress¹.

While researching in the photographic archives at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Kihara zeroed in on an 1886 portrait of a Samoan woman wearing a Victorian mourning dress [fig 1]. Of her discovery, Kihara remarked, "I looked at this picture and

¹ In nineteenth century Britain, high mortality rates, coupled with a lack of medical knowledge and the political strength of the Church of England, made stringent mourning customs a part of everyday life. Queen Victoria set the standard by wearing full mourning attire for more than half of her life, and image-based advertisements offered similar black fashions at all price points. Though Samoa was never officially part of the British Empire (it was a colony of Germany and then



fig 1. Thomas Andrew (New Zealander, 1855–1939), *Samoan half caste* from the album *Views in the Pacific Islands*, 1886. Albumen silver print, 140 x 95 mm. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, O.037952.

saw that she looks very comfortable in this dress, and her gesture just oozes confidence and *mana*². And I wanted to understand the context of what was happening at the time the photograph was taken."³ Titled *Samoan half caste*, the photograph was taken by New Zealander Thomas Andrew who, like other local photographers of his time, profited from 1) an insatiable

New Zealand), Christian missionaries introduced the Victorian era's rigid rules of etiquette to the island chain.

² A word common to the languages of Southeast Asia and the Pacific that refers to a supernatural force or spiritual essence within people, spirits, or inanimate objects; power, authority, honor.

³ Were, Virginia. "Dance of history and light." *Art News New Zealand*. Summer 2012.



fig 2. Shigeyuki Kihara (Samoan, born 1975, lives Auckland, New Zealand). *My Samoan Girl*, 2005. C-print, 80 x 60 cm. Edition of 5 + 2 AP. Courtesy Shigeyuki Kihara Studio and Milford Galleries Dunedin, New Zealand.

demand for photographs for the postcard, encyclopedia, and newspaper industries, 2) a desire by museums to develop “Oceanic” collections, 3) a voyeur market for images of partially clothed bodies, and 4) a need for colonial propaganda⁴. In an earlier photographic series [fig 2], Kihara restaged these ubiquitous turn-of-the-century photographs. Mostly studio portraits, they presented anonymous native Samoans as romantic, primitive ‘noble savages,’ objectified by the colonial gaze. Polynesian women, in particular, were presented to European audiences as ‘dusky maidens,’ symbols—

⁴ Quanchi, Max. “The Euro-American Psyche and the Imaging of Samoa in the Early 20th Century.” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 2007. pp 1-10.

⁵ For an analysis of Kihara’s earlier work as it relates to these photographs, gender, and the colonial gaze, read Wolf, Erika. *Shigeyuki Kihara’s Fa’a fafine; In a Manner of a Woman: The Photographic*

rather than humans—of the exotic, erotic, and dangerous appeal of the islands⁵.

But, *Samoan half caste* is an anomaly for its time period. Its female subject, at ease in her European clothing and staring directly at the viewer, is not presented as a sexualized exotic object, suggesting that the sitter commissioned the portrait herself⁶. This image of a Samoan woman demanding autonomy and subjecthood denies colonial oppression and instead suggests the possibility of a comfortable cultural hybridity. Even though it is a historic rarity, this photograph is representative of the complexities of colonialism that shaped the Samoan people. Embracing this image as a metaphor for the impact of colonialism, Kihara performs the tauluga as this unknown woman. Her black mourning dress signifies a lamentation of the loss of authentic Samoan life, but her persistent movements in the restrictive garment signify the resilience of the Samoan people and the fusion of different cultural traditions. Of the unknown woman, Kihara says, “Whenever I am performing it, she is on my mind; she is the muse behind my performance.”⁷

Kihara loosely refers to her muse as Salome, a biblical character whose story is fleshed out in Oscar Wilde’s 1891 play *Salome*. Wilde, a provocateur of the Victorian era, deeply explored the power of the gaze, of looking and of being looked at, in his retelling of the tragic tale. Wilde’s Salome is a complex character. Part femme-fatale, part victim of objectification, she kills the very man she desires. But, her passion, her ability to desire, gives her an agency that stands in opposition to the play’s overwhelming treatment of her as an object of desire. Over the last decade, Kihara has been channeling the unknown Samoan woman and Salome as she dances *The Last Dance*. Her tauluga is one of dichotomies: of subjecthood and spectacle, of celebration and lamentation, of assimilation and rejection, of memories and hopes.

Theater of Cross-Cultural Encounter. Dunedin: University of Otago, 2010.

⁶ Poland, Natalie. *Shigeyuki Kihara: Undressing the Pacific. A Mid-Career Survey Exhibition*. Dunedin: University of Otago, 2013.

⁷ Gifford, Adam. “Shigeyuki Kihara: A lament for the lost.” *The New Zealand Herald*. September 8, 2012.



fig. 3. Shigeyuki Kihara (Samoan, born 1975, lives Auckland, New Zealand). Still detail of *Siva in Motion*, 2012. Single-channel HD digital video, silent 8 min 14 sec. Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Auckland. Courtesy Shigeyuki Kihara Studio and Milford Galleries Dunedin, New Zealand.

Last year, Shigeyuki Kihara brought her Samoan Salome into the studio and produced the video works *Siva in Motion* [fig 3] and *Galu Afi* [cover image]. In both works, her character dances alone in darkness with warm light playing off her hands while her mourning dress fades into the shadows. Her movements and expressions are informed by the tauluga, but they are performed at a greatly slowed rate, in the absence of sound, and without an audience. Though presented in real time, her body's motion is multi-tracked in post-production to collapse her gestures on top of one another, mimicking

⁸ Teaiwa, Katerina M. "An Interview with Interdisciplinary Artist Shigeyuki Kihara." *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*. Issue 27, November 2011.

⁹ On September 29, 2009, an 8.0 magnitude submarine earthquake

the effect of late nineteenth century chronophotography. The chronophotographic studies of artist/scientists like Eadweard James Muybridge (British, 1830-1904), Étienne-Jules Marey (French, 1830-1904) and Georges Demenÿ (French, 1850-1917) also captured successive images of the moving body against a black background for added precision and clarity [fig 4]. Using the visual language of a medium that defined modernity by exposing the infinite divisibility of time, Kihara poses new questions about contemporary perceptions of reality and the interconnectivity of the past, present, and future.



fig 4. Georges Demenÿ, (French, 1850–1917), *Chronophotographie d'un exercice d'assouplissement du tronc. Inclinaison latérale du tronc, bras tendus en station écartée*, 1906. Chronophotography on glass plate negative, 90 x 120mm. © Iconothèque de l'INSEP, Reference MS18662.

"When I function through dance and performing arts," says Kihara, "I seek for mystery and mana to draw people into exploring ancient Samoan principles by using today's cutting edge technology. It is my hope that through dance I can trigger important discussions about the state of our world today."⁸ In both videos, Samoan Salome mourns the loss of ancient traditions as well as the very recent loss of life due to the devastating 2009 tsunami.⁹ In *Galu Afi*, which translates to 'wave of fire,' the zoomed-in horizontal format of the video focuses on the twisting and undulating rhythm of her multiplied wrists, palms, and fingers. Mimicking the powerful tsunami, her hands warn of future climate change that oppresses like a past colonial master.

sparked a tsunami that slammed the islands of Samoa, American Samoa and Northern Tonga, destroying entire villages, killing 192 people, and causing more than \$275 million in damages. Statistics sourced from the NOAA/WDC Tsunami Event Database.



fig 5. Paul Gauguin (French, 1848–1903), *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, 1897–98. Oil on canvas, 139.1 x 374.6 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Tompkins Collection—Arthur Gordon Tompkins Fund, 36.270.

The silent videos put the terrible event in the context of Samoa’s history. As an island nation near the active Pacific/Australian tectonic plate fault line, tsunamis have been part of Samoa’s history, but increases in data collection, global media coverage, population, and concern about climate change have raised awareness of their potential threat. Though there are differing perspectives on whether climate change will affect the earthquakes that cause tsunamis, it is generally agreed that warmer temperatures will melt the polar ice caps, causing the overall sea level to rise. Not only will a rise in global sea level eat up the inhabited coastlines of island nations, it will also cause tsunami waves to penetrate further inland.

While memorializing the victims of the natural disaster and lamenting a lost sense of security, the steady deliberateness of the dance is also a meditation on future action. The swell and power of the waves are certainly represented in her movements, but the overall rhythm of the dance is calming, suggesting an assurance in the earth’s cyclical nature and a belief in the resilience of an already tested people. Like Wilde’s *Salome*, it is as though Samoan Salome proclaims, “Neither the floods nor the great waters can quench my passion.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Wilde, Oscar. *Salome. A tragedy in one act: translated from the French of Oscar Wilde*. London: Elkin Mathews & John Lane, 1894.

¹¹ Kihara directly references her status as a fa’a fafine in earlier bodies of work that focus on identity, gender, and colonialism. Fa’a fafine, a

These two works represent the start of a new direction for Shigeyuki Kihara. Though she is physically present in both works, her personal identity plays less of a role than it has in her previous bodies of work.¹¹ In *Siva in Motion*, her face recedes into darkness allowing the viewer only infrequent glances at her pained and saddened expressions. In *Galu Afi*, the frame is cropped at the bridge of her nose, preventing the viewer from connecting with her eyes. In these videos and a new series of photographs, Kihara assumes the role of a stylized specter. Though the history of representation and subjectivity is not absent from the work, she employs the power of symbolism and allegory more than the politics of the body as she looks through the lens of local Samoan culture to investigate larger issues affecting a global landscape.

Kihara’s most recent work, the 2013 photographic series *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* tracks the Victorian Samoan Salome character as she visits different parts of present day Samoa. Again, the viewer is denied access to her face

Samoan term that translates literally to “in a manner of a woman,” may refer to a biological male who adopts female social roles, to non-heterosexual or queer members of the Samoan community, or to a dual combination of both male and female energy. Wolf, 23-4.



fig 6. Shigeyuki Kihara (Samoan, born 1975, lives Auckland, New Zealand). *Agelu i Tausi Catholic Church After Cyclone Evan, Mulivai Safata*, 2013, from the series *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* C-print, 595 x 840 mm. Edition of 5 + 2 AP. Courtesy Shigeyuki Kihara Studio and Milford Galleries Dunedin, New Zealand.

and assumes the voyeuristic role of watching the mourning woman survey the scene. Captured in black and white, the photographs have a vintage feel that further suggests this ghostly guide is from the past. Like her video works, this series posits the past, the present, and the future as interconnected and informing each other in a nonlinear fashion.

Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going? is also the title of a 1897-98 allegorical painting [fig 5] by Post-Impressionist Paul Gauguin (French, 1848–1903) that offers various points of view in response to the title's questions. Gauguin, who immigrated to Tahiti in 1891 in search of a more "pure" society, could be compared to the Western photographers who objectified and falsely eroticized the Polynesian people. He painted a brightly colored paradise and numerous naked native bodies, but in actuality, Tahiti was a conservative French colony that had been thoroughly Christianized. Even so, by the turn of the century, Gauguin had to navigate a vastly different world than the one he knew just ten years before.

Ever-increasing global trade, migration, and communication rendered his romantic ideals falsities of the past. In her new series, Kihara turns to Gauguin's same existential questions to consider our rapidly changing world. Specifically, she examines the global consequences of interconnected economies and human interaction with the environment.

In 2011, the 450-person village of Mulivai in the Samoan district Safata embarked on a water sanitation project when the youth group from the local Catholic church received a grant to build trash cans. In September of 2012, Mulivai's school opened a new library and computer center thanks to grant support and donations. On December 13, 2012, Cyclone Evan ripped through Samoa, tore the roof off of Mulivai's Catholic church, and demolished its school. Taken shortly after the category 4 cyclone, Kihara's photograph *Agelu i Tausi Catholic Church after Cyclone Evan, Mulivai, Safata* [fig 6] captures a glimpse of the destruction. The church, with its recognizable missionary style, speaks of colonial history and the central role of the Christian faith in



fig 7. Shigeyuki Kihara (Samoan, born 1975, lives Auckland, New Zealand), *Departure, Faleolo International Airport*, 2013, from the series *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* C-print, 595 x 840 mm. Edition of 5 + 2 AP. Courtesy Shigeyuki Kihara Studio and Milford Galleries Dunedin, New Zealand.

today's Samoan villages. With floodwater at her feet, the woman in mourning looks at the ominous sky that is exposed through a gaping hole where the church's roof should be. Perhaps she is considering the precarious future of Mulivai.

Earlier this year, in an attempt to boost the country's tourist economy, the Samoan government issued two companies licenses to operate casinos. Chengdu Exhibition and Tourism Group (ETG), a Chinese company awarded a license, plans to open a 500-acre resort complete with a hotel, marina and casino at Mulivai. The resort could spur the local economy and create jobs, but many in the village are voicing concern about the greater implications of such a giant development. Could First World corporations hide a new form of economic colonialism behind the promise of new jobs and foreign dollars? As of May 2013, the project has been put on hold while ETG's chairman is being investigated for corruption linked to previous land deals.

Samoa's economy relies heavily on tourism and family remittances from overseas. Kihara depicts the locus of both economic engines in her photograph *Departure, Faleolo International Airport* [fig 7]. The potential for the airport to facilitate tourism is real, especially when multi-national corporations like ETG promise to fly in gamblers on direct flights from China. But, Tafa Aukusitino, the mayor of Mulivai, is more interested in the possibility that the resort could dissuade community members from pursuing jobs overseas.¹² It could be said that the Samoan people have been migratory ever since they settled the island chain about 2,500 years ago, but the 'brain drain' has increased exponentially in modern times. The tourism industry can play an important role in boosting the economy, but it is reliant on the preservation of the beaches, forests, rivers and coral reefs that have always been part of Fa'a Samoa. The future of Samoa is dependent on the sustainability of such developments. It is with a watchful eye that the Samoan Salome observes the airport terminal.

¹² Tupufia, Lanuola. "Mulivai hasn't been consulted, says Pulenu'u." *Samoa Observer*. Feb 25, 2013.



fig 8. Shigeyuki Kihara (Samoan, born 1975, lives Auckland, New Zealand). *Saleapaga Primary School After Tsunami Galu Afi, Saleapaga*, 2013, from the series *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* C-print, 595 x 840 mm. Edition of 5 + 2 AP. Courtesy Shigeyuki Kihara Studio and Milford Galleries Dunedin, New Zealand.

In *Saleapaga Primary School after Tsunami Galu Afi, Saleapaga* [fig 8], the viewer sees the back of the woman as she stands alone in the abandoned structure of an old school building. Saleapaga saw the worst of the 2009 tsunami. Walls of water more than 34 feet high washed most of the coastal village out to sea and took the lives of thirty-one people, twenty under the age of eight. But, in the three years since the tsunami destroyed the school, nature has reclaimed the space and a carpet of blooming plants now covers the school floor. The clean lines of the white architecture read more as majestic ancient ruin than site of devastation. After the tsunami, in an act of resilience, the people of Saleapaga considered their possible future and decided to relocate to higher ground. Saleapaga 2 was rebuilt away from the coast with rescue and relief assistance from the World Bank, the Peace Corps, Japan, New Zealand, and many other NGOs, nations, and private individuals. From her vantage point in the old school, the woman mourns the loss of life and coastal lifestyle, but she must be reaffirmed by her people's resourcefulness and willingness to adapt.

These videos and photographs channel the past while considering the present and looking ahead. Shigeyuki Kihara's performed character, the Victorian Samoan woman in mourning, denies the colonial fantasy of the sexually provocative native. She is more a symbol of time than of the body, and her presence connects the forces of history with the impacts of the present. Through her, Kihara is able to express the complex balances of life: risk and reward, loss and resilience, preservation and adaptation.

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Shigeyuki Kihara (Samoan, born 1975, lives Auckland, New Zealand) investigates the complexities of cultural identity, colonialism, globalization, representation, gender roles and spirituality through performance, photography, and video. Her work has been exhibited at museums in Australia, Canada, China, Great Britain, Italy, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Taiwan, and the United States. In 2008, Kihara's solo exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art was the museum's first presentation of Samoan contemporary art. Her work has been represented at the Auckland Triennial, Asia Pacific Triennial, and the Sakahan Quinquennial and can be found in numerous public collections including Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand, the Queensland Art Gallery, the University of Cambridge Museum of Archeology and Anthropology, and Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 2012, Kihara was named the Paramount Award Winner of the 21st Annual Wallace Art Awards and won the New Generation Award from The Arts Foundation of New Zealand. In 2013, she had a solo exhibition at Milford Gallery Dunedin and a mid-career survey exhibition at the University of Otago that included an academic symposium devoted entirely to her work. In the fall of 2013, Shigeyuki Kihara will be an artist in residency at the International Studio and Curatorial Program in New York City.

salt 8: Shigeyuki Kihara is the eighth installment of the Utah Museum of Fine Arts' ongoing series of semi-annual exhibitions showcasing work by emerging artists from around the world. *salt* aims to reflect the international impact of contemporary art today, forging local connections to the global and bringing new and diverse artwork to the city that shares the program's name.

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