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PARADISE FOUND

How multidisciplinary artist Yuki Kihara is redefining the art world

From Samoa to MoMa



Yuki Kihara photographed at Ōtara Flea Markets. Photo / Gui Taccetti

Interdisciplinary artist Yuki Kihara has the art world's attention. Her piercing, queer, indigenous perspective offers new ways of storytelling, reframing history and asking the tough questions, writes Amanda Linnell.

It's a cold, misty morning at Ōtara Flea Market. Stallholders are setting up their displays and early shoppers swoop through with enormous bundles of coriander, trolleys carefully laden with trays of eggs and bunches of colourful flowers. The crowds build as the sun pushes its way out from behind the clouds, the smell of fried food fills the air and music pumps from different corners of the market.

Squeezed between a busy stand selling colourful "carpets, carpets, on special today, come on people" and a table laden with bottles of fragrant coconut oil "jasmine, frangipani, sandalwood, \$10 a bottle or three for \$28" is a *Viva* cover shoot. Curious passers-by stop to look at the set with its image of a colourful tropical garden as a backdrop and a glamorous model posing in front of the camera.

Dressed in designer labels she sparkles in the sea of black puffer jackets, fleece tops and slouchy tracksuit pants. "Who is it?" people ask.

It's Yuki Kihara, one of Aotearoa's most successful and influential artists.

An Arts Foundation Te Tumu Toi arts laureate, her works are held in more than 30 permanent collections around the world — from the Metropolitan Museum of Art to the National Museums of Scotland, the British Museum to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Australia.

She made history as the first Pasifika artist, the first Asian artist and the first fa'afafine artist to represent New Zealand at the prestigious 59th Venice Biennale in 2022, where the impact of her work *Paradise Camp* not only captivated audiences, garnered unprecedented coverage and international media acclaim, but ultimately became highly sought after by art institutions around the world.

The Museum of Modern Art in New York has just acquired three of her works making her the first Pacific artist to become part of its permanent collection, while the highly regarded Sainsbury Centre, in Norwich, UK, will be mounting a solo exhibition of her work in March next year. Her art can sell for up to \$325,000.

So what makes Yuki so special? To start she doesn't shy away from controversy. In fact, she has a reputation for facing it front-on. Her motivation? To challenge assumptions and create change. The interdisciplinary artist is determined and fearless. She has had to be. As a transgender fa'afafine, her personal journey has been far from straightforward. Identity, gender equality, the impact of colonisation and environmental issues are all major motivations — and highly topical.

"I don't make this work to be famous. Yes it gives me recognition, but I do it because I want to change the system," she says with a steely look in her eye. "I want to change it from the inside."

This burning desire to challenge the status quo started early.

With a Japanese father and a Samoan

mother, she had a special childhood. She was born in Samoa, spent her early years in Samoa and Japan before moving back to Samoa permanently, where she was surrounded by her mother's friends, many of whom were fa'afafine.

"The reason why I'm such a bad-ass bitch now," she laughs, "is because of them. They were incredible role models. I was inspired by their strength, resilience and fa'afabulousness. I would leave boarding school in New Zealand at the end of each term and spend the holidays at home surrounded by these strong people that I kind of emulated. It's always about having the right people around."

Her choice to shoot for *Viva* at the Ōtara Markets comes from her time when, after leaving school, she studied fashion at Wellington Polytechnic. Her parents wouldn't allow her to go to art school. It was the 90s and Yuki not only felt she was up against the system as she tried to source and include Pasifika designers in fashion magazines, she had also started to transition as a trans woman. "While I'm not from Ōtara, the market and diversity of people and the eclectic vibe here represent my journey. To be dressed today in designer garments, including pieces from Māori and Pasifika designers, shows how far I've come."

Fashion school never felt right for Yuki, however, and it was while working on an assignment that everything fell into place for her. "I was at Te Papa researching Pacific textiles, exploring photographic archives, and analysing different museum collections. It was this experience that led me to become an artist and formed the conceptual backbone of my artistic practice today. This and the fact that I never went to art school, which can shape you to a particular way of thinking, helped set me apart. It's how I found my X-factor."

She initially moved into working in film, television and the performing arts

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— Roxana Marcoci



'Nafea e te fa'alipoipo? When will you marry?' (After Gauguin), part of the *Paradise Camp* (2020/2022) photographic series by Yuki Kihara. Photo / Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin

as a young fashion stylist and costume designer, and it was here she first became front page news with a range of T-shirts she'd designed as a side-hustle for Pacific and Māori hip-hop artists and DJs that got her into trouble. "I was playing with big brand logos — turning Warehouse into Whorehouse, Countdown into Coconut Brown," she explains, "subverting capitalist systems."

The T-shirts ended up as part of an exhibition at Te Papa and it was here a journalist questioned if Yuki had copyright permission. "I hadn't, of course, and it blew up. It was all over the media, Paul

Holmes' producer wanted me on the show. I was getting hate mail. I wanted to challenge the system, yes, but it backfired when the system, I believed, sensationalised me." After collecting all the newspaper articles, she featured them in her portfolio to help secure gallery shows. She never looked back.

"I discovered that the art world and gallery spaces were my platform. I could talk about anything I wanted to talk about, so long as I had an audience for it."

The art world allowed Yuki to explore and express her personal journey. She developed a character, *Salome*, based on a photo by the 19th-century photographer Thomas Andrew, of a Samoan woman dressed in a Victorian mourning dress.

"I would dress up as her and developed a series of performances. *Salome* was inspired in part by drag. The fa'afafine community at the time were into a lot of showgirl-type drag, but I wanted my own version — drag in a post-colonial context, I wanted to use *Salome* through the lens of historical revisionism. The heaviness of the dress reflected the mood of that era, the political upheaval that was happening at the time the photo was originally taken in Samoa. My *Salome* performances started to gain a lot of traction especially overseas, as they were more open to talking about the issues it raised."

A curator from New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met) saw Yuki's live performance of *Salome* in Paris and invited her to exhibit. "I was given a 54m corridor that connected the modern art gallery and the Oceania gallery. It was like a bridge between two worlds. It was an honour to be recognised by such an important institution."



Aotea'ula Fo (Pōhutukawa/Harakeke) 2021/2022 by Yuki Kihara. Photo / Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin



Take me to heaven (2023) by Yuki Kihara. Commissioned by the Powerhouse Museum, Gadigal land Sydney. Photo / Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin

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— Yuki Kihara

Yuki wears Shjark blouse, Ruby trenchcoat and Swarovski earrings. Leather trousers and heels Yuki’s own. Photo / Gui Taccetti



Fonofono o le nuuanua: Patches of the rainbow (After Gauguin) by Yuki Kihara. Part of the Paradise Camp (2020/2022) photographic series by Yuki Kihara. Photo / Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin

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Yuki was the first Pacific artist to have a solo show at the Met in 2008, and it was here Roxana Marcoci of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) first saw her work. As one of the MoMA’s senior curators and acting chief curator of photography and C-MAP co-chair of Southeast and East Asia, Roxana says the exhibition, *Shigezuki Kihara: Living Photographs*, left a lasting impression.

“It made me think of how history can be reimagined through studio tableaux and performances enacted for the camera, and how the artist portrayed herself in poses that invited critical reflection of colonial representations of Pacific Islanders. The fact that the exhibition was staged in an encyclopedic museum in New York was not lost on me. With these works, Yuki not only questioned a Western way of ‘othering’ Pacific culture, gender roles, and indigenous spirituality, but also sought to rewrite the Eurocentric art historical canon. Yuki indigenised photography, making it play a constitutive, and not merely documentary role, in reframing ethnographic clichés.”

Roxana followed Yuki’s career and was pivotal in MoMA’s decision this year to invest in three works from *Paradise Camp*.

The ensemble exhibition centres around 12 photographs shot on locations throughout Samoa. Working with a local cast and crew totalling nearly 100 people, Yuki drew on her research into the works of Paul Gauguin and turned her queer Pasifika gaze on the French artist, recreating his paintings meticulously with members of the Samoan fa’afafine community as the subjects. While Gauguin never travelled to Samoa, Yuki discovered he spent a brief time in Auckland in the late 1800s, and believes he collected photographs of Samoa taken by the photographer Thomas Andrew.

By upcycling the late 19th century paintings created by Gauguin during his time in Tahiti, Roxana believes Yuki has underscored the formative role these works have played within France’s colonial imaginary and narratives of modern art.

“Gauguin spent a decade during the late part of his life in French Polynesia

exoticising young, underage indigenous women,” says Roxana, “some with whom he had predatory relationships — it’s a complicated legacy that was partly exposed in the exhibition *Gauguin Portraits* at the National Gallery in London, in 2019.

“Although Gauguin never set foot in Samoa, only travelling around the islands of Tahiti, some of his major paintings were inspired by Samoan postcards of people and places there that he claimed for himself. Yuki is fittingly reappropriating these images, reclaiming that heritage.”

Tania Moore, head of exhibitions at the Sainsbury Centre, first saw *Paradise Camp* in Venice and is excited to be bringing to life Yuki’s first solo show in the UK next March. “*Paradise Camp* was instantly invigorating in its vibrant use of portraiture and colour. I was profoundly drawn to the work and the important themes it was addressing, so I got in touch with Yuki to propose working together,” she says.

“I hope by presenting Yuki’s work [next year] alongside those by Gauguin, people will view Gauguin’s works differently. We will have a full set of the prints that Gauguin created for his *Noa Noa* journal, from the Courtauld Institute of Art and a painting created when Gauguin was living in Tahiti, generously lent by the Barber Institute of Fine Arts. These are wonderful works of art, and I want visitors to enjoy

them, but we will also be pointing out the stereotypes and fetishisation behind the depictions of the people of Tahiti. This may be new or challenging for some, but I believe it is an important message.”

The Sainsbury is currently looking to raise the funds to acquire Yuki’s work because, says Tania, “it would completely change how we can interpret many aspects of our collection. Yuki’s work will allow us to interrogate the impact of the colonial gaze on indigenous populations, therefore allowing us to reassess objects from Europe as well as the Pacific.”

Never one to rest on her laurels, Yuki leads a busy life.

She is often requested to appear on panels, this year alone she has appeared in artist talks in Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia, France and Britain. She has helped front fundraising events and, along with Australian documentary maker Kieran McGee, pitched for and received initial funding from Screen Australia for a project based around taking *Paradise Camp* home to Samoa — something Yuki did in June this year and where the exhibition is currently on display until the end of January.

Along with creating new pieces to add to the ever-evolving *Paradise Camp*, her kimono series *A Song About Sāmoa — Vasa (Ocean)* has been acquired by the National Museums of Scotland, after it appeared in its exhibition *Rising Tide: Art*

and *Environment in Oceania* earlier this year. Yuki drew on her Japanese heritage and used five kimonos made from Samoan barkcloth to continue her questions about identity, ecological legacies and climate change.

Dr Ali Clark, senior curator Oceania, global arts, cultures and design at National Museums Scotland, says its decision to acquire a kimono came from the museum’s commitment to “revealing and sharing the full range of stories about imperial and colonial activities associated with its collections. Part of this work involves purchasing contemporary works that expand upon those historic narratives enabling the museum to broaden its understanding of Pacific art and culture through Pacific perspectives and voices.”

The five major kimono works, in five successive years, represent Yuki’s work ethic and breadth of artistic achievements, says Stephen Higginson, the director of Dunedin’s Milford Galleries, which represents her. “Individually and collectively, these have excited leading institutions worldwide, being shown in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Scotland to date. Two major announcements of very prestigious acquisitions concerning the kimono series will be made soon.”

Right now, however, you will find Yuki in her temporary studio in Henderson developing new works, including the reprisal of *Salome* and a series exploring New Zealand’s flora and fauna which will be shown at the Milford Galleries in February 2025.

As for *Paradise Camp*, discussions are under way to ensure it will continue to travel the globe and continue to challenge people’s assumptions and thought patterns.

“Ultimately,” says Yuki, that steely look still in her eye, “we need a greater understanding of intersectionality as a tool for understanding invisible power relations and how they shape inequality, not identity.”

“The best way for me to contribute to change is through my art.”

• *Paradise Camp* is currently showing at Saletoga Sands Resort & Spa in Samoa until January 31, 2025. Find out more at Paradisecamp.us



Roman Catholic Church, Apia (2013) by Yuki Kihara. Photo / Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin

Photographer / Gui Taccetti. Fashion director / Dan Ahwa. Photographer’s assistant / Ralph Brown. Fashion assistant / Isabelle Carson.

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