Fa'a fafine: In a Manner of a Woman, Triptych 1

» Shigeyuki Kihara (Japanese-Samoan, b. 1975)

Shigeyuki Kihara, *Fa'a fafine: In a Manner of a Woman*, Triptych 1, 2004–05
Fa'a fafine: In a Manner of a Woman series
C-print, 2007

In the Western world today, the dichotomy between man and woman, male and female is often taken for granted. In many parts of the world, and, in fact, during other periods in Western history, the two-sex, two-gender model was not the norm.

In Samoa, for example, there traditionally has been an accepted "third gender" category. Originally this group was comprised of biologically born men who lived as women. Today, individuals who identify as third gender, or fa'a fafine, might be gay, lesbian, transgender, or intersex.

Multimedia and performance artist Shigeyuki Kihara was born in Samoa to Samoan and Japanese parents. Kihara's identification as a Pacific Islander as well as a third gender individual is central to her triptych series Fa'a fafine: In the Manner of a Woman. In these three pieces, Kihara poses herself in scenes based on colonial photographs of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Taken by non-native photographers for purposes that ranged from the ethnographic to the pornographic, such images helped to create and fuel many stereotypes about the people of the South Pacific Region, among which was the fantasy of the Belle Sauvage, the beautiful, primitive woman who was simultaneously innocent, eroticized, and available.

In the first of the three images in the triptych, seen here, Kihara poses as this Belle Sauvage, reclining in a grass skirt with her breasts bared to the viewer. The second image shows Kihara in the same pose, only now completely naked. In this photograph, the artist appears to be physically a woman. The final image of the series is identical but for one striking difference—the artist's penis is revealed, her identity as a fa'a fafine uncovered. By undermining Western assumptions, many of which were adopted by Pacific Islanders during the colonial period, Kihara demands that her audience reconsider their assumptions about history, desire, gender, and the body.

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additional resources

Rosi, Pamela Sheffield. “About the Artist: Shigeyuki Kihara.” The Contemporary Pacific 19.1 (Spring 2007): vii–vii.

“Shigeyuki Kihara: Living Photographs (October 7, 2008 – February 1, 2009).” In Special Exhibitions. The Metropolitan Museum of Art Web site. http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2008/shigeyuki-kihara.

Tautai Contemporary Pacific Arts Trust Web site. http://www.tautai.org.

What becomes of the “colonial” body in post-colonial art?

European colonial imagery often emphasized the exoticism and sexuality of indigenous women. Many of the stereotypes these kinds of images created and reinforced for their European audiences have persisted even until today. Gauguin’s painting exemplifies the European fantasy of the beautiful, eroticized, yet innocent, Pacific Island woman. Kihara’s photograph is similar visually to Gauguin’s image, but ultimately works to complicate and subvert its message.

Shigeyuki Kihara, *Fa'a fafine: In a Manner of a Woman*, Triptych 1, 2004–05

The King's Wife, Paul Gauguin, 1896, Oil on canvas, 130 x 97 cm

Questions to Consider

- For both Kihara’s and Gauguin’s works, meaning is contingent largely on the identity of artist and audience. How does knowledge about the maker and the viewer impact the significance of each work?
- Gauguin’s image of a reclining Tahitian woman is based on a cultural fantasy of the Pacific Islands. How does Kihara’s work respond not only to images like Gauguin’s, but also to this European fantasy?
- Do you think Kihara’s dialogue with works such as Te Arii Vahine is a productive one? What do you think she might be trying to accomplish?

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Te Arii Vahine (The King's Wife)

» Paul Gauguin (French, 1848–1903)

The King's Wife, Paul Gauguin, 1896, Oil on canvas, 130 x 97 cm

Paul Gauguin abandoned his native France for most of the 1890s to live on the remote Pacific island of Tahiti, a French colony since 1881.

He was attracted to the faraway island and what he saw as the primitive culture of its people. Gauguin shared the fantasy of many Europeans of the time that Tahiti was a sort of Garden of Eden, a tropical paradise.

There was an element of eroticism in the French cultural imagination regarding colonized lands such as Tahiti. They considered the island's resources and tropical charms, as well as the island's women, to be, in effect, freely available. Gauguin's relationship to Tahiti is somewhat more complex. On the one hand, he strove to represent the richness of the island and the local culture and rituals in his work. On the other, Gauguin perpetuated the myths and stereotypes associated with Tahitian culture by freely transforming or even inventing seemingly authentic versions of these activities in order to make them look how he thought "primitive" culture should be.

This image of The King's Wife epitomizes Gauguin's erotic fantasy of Tahiti. The young, naked Tahitian woman seems to become part of the fertile landscape, both of which the artist represents as beautifully seductive. The central figure in Te Arii Vahine reclines on a grassy hill alongside several brightly colored ripe mangoes. There is a white cloth covering her groin, and she holds a large round fan behind her head. Her skin color, mask-like facial features, and the setting in which she is placed clearly mark her as a native. At the same time, her iconic pose is a reference to a European tradition of painting reclining nymphs, odalisques, and Venuses that dates back at least as far as the sixteenth century. Here, Gauguin merges those familiar erotic associations with the exotic, tropical imagery that fills his canvas.

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