Shigeyuki Kihara ‘undresses the Pacific’ at Carleton University

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Shigeyuki Kihara is undressing the Pacific. Unravelling its history. Peeling off its stereotypes. Helping it slip out of the confines of Western minds and into something a little more comfortable.

She weaves an alternative narrative of Samoan history in a public lecture at Carleton University, using her art to reflect on the way the past seeps through the ages and paints the present.

Because the past, she says, is framed by agendas. Some parts are emphasized, others are excluded. In the Western world, history made the Pacific region an exotic land full of ocean and sand, where women were as easy as Sunday morning.

“Samoan people never got the chance to speak back to that legacy, which is why I’m doing it now,” Kihara said.

The legacy, she says, still persists. The developed world still looks at the developing world as utopia – a primitive place just waiting for people to come and occupy it.

Her work, she says, is heavily influenced by archival photos and classical art. Photos can say a lot about history – the representation is only the beginning, she says. When you pull back the layers of a photograph, a whole story is revealed.

Kihara intermingles past and present, stereotype and reality, in her work. Her triple self-portrait, *Fa’afafine (In the Manner of a Woman)*, depicts “a primitive, exotic woman on a chaise lounge” in three nearly identical images.

In the first picture, she wears a grass skirt. In the second picture, she is nude. In the third picture, she has a penis. The fa’afafine – physically a male yet with the spirit of a woman – challenges viewers to look at their own ideas of gender, and rejects heterosexuality as the only ‘normal.’

It is a post-colonial critique of the Pacific, says Dr. Allan J. Ryan, who organized the event as a special presentation of the New Sun Chair in Aboriginal Art and Culture.

“Art is a mirror of society,” Kihara says. She poses questions, but leaves people to ponder the answers on their own. Her works deal with broad themes – globalization, religion, colonialism, gender.

“I remember watching [*The Last Dance*] and it made me think: she’s in a tight, oppressive Victorian gown. She’s an indigenous woman and she’s doing a traditional dance in the gown. And I remember thinking, ‘That’s such an amazing metaphor!’” says Charlotte Hoelke, who has been studying humour and sexuality in indigenous art. The PhD student helped Ryan organize the event, after they met Kihara at the *Sakahan: International Indigenous Art* exhibition held at the National Gallery of Canada in May.

She doesn’t believe she interpreted the piece as Kihara intended, looking at it in a Canadian context instead of Samoan, but says that the issues transcend culture.

The triptych was displayed as part of the Sakahan exhibition. Jamie Koebel, who gave tours at the gallery during the exhibition, says she made a point of taking groups past the triple-portrait.

Several indigenous communities in Canada use ‘two-spirited’ to refer to someone whose gender identity does not match their physical body. Cree culture alone, Koebel says, has eight different genders.

Koebel says it is this common historical concept that had her so excited to show young people the triple-portrait.

“More often than not it was the adults, of non-aboriginal groups, that had sort of fear or cautiousness,” she said. “When I brought indigenous student groups in, they were very much open and welcoming of talking about *In the Manner of a Woman* very openly.”

The idea of the fa’afafine is very culturally specific, says Kihara. It belongs to the Samoans. But the bigger questions, about gender and sexuality, are universal.

Sexuality has come to the forefront in indigenous art recently, says Hoelke.

“There is something going on in Canada,” she said, “so it’s neat to see an artist from a completely different part of the world doing this kind of art as well, and looking at sexuality, colonization, gender . . . and how they all intersect together.”

Kihara’s muse – Salome – is a fictional woman born of this mingling of cultures.

She was inspired by *Samoan half caste*, a photograph by Thomas Andrew. In it, a Samoan woman sits wearing a black Victorian mourning dress. She gazes directly into the camera, comfortable and confident.

“I was very fascinated by her, because I rarely came across photographs of Samoan women like that – in a Victorian mourning dress looking gorgeous,” she said.

Kihara’s performance video featuring Salome, *Galu Afi: Waves of Fire*, won the prestigious Wallace Arts Trust Paramount Award in 2012. It was the first time that the award went to a video artist, said Ryan.

In the video, Salome silently performs the taualuga, a traditional Samoan dance. Afterimages of her hands blend and tumble over each other, creating the illusion of waves rolling and crashing endlessly. It is s memorial for the victims of a tsunami that devastated Samoa and the surrounding area in 2009.

“The video works make comment to Samoan history,” Kihara said, “where the elegant movements of the taualuga together with the melancholy and macabre undertone of the Victorian mourning dress became the vehicle for reclaiming and restoring colonized voices and the perspectives lost through time and space.”

Salome also features in Kihara’s solo exhibition, *What are we? Where did we come from? Where are we going?*

The series portrays her with her back to the camera gazing at Samoa’s landscape. She has returned to life, Kihara says, and is “contemplating whether or not this is the Samoa she was hoping for while she was alive.”

Art has not only been a means for Kihara to wed the past with the present. It has also allowed her to reframe the present for a better future.

Talanoa: Walk the Talk started when someone told Kihara her Japanese-Samoan heritage was an “odd mix.” She says she found herself wondering exactly what the right mix was. This, Kihara says, led to a desire to reframe the idea of ‘culture clash’ as ‘culture meeting.’

The first performance – a Chinese dragon dance set to Scottish bagpipes – featured non-indigenous groups, Kihara says. They relied on talanoa, a shared dialogue between two different groups that aims to find common ground.

“I was also interested in looking at how indigenous ideas that are very specific to Samoan culture could be applied in the cosmopolitan context,” she said. “It was a social experiment to see if cultures could meet, and have a talk.”

She only approaches communities with a solid musical tradition, saying that you can tell how established a community is by how well they come together to give a performance.

Then, she juxtaposes two contrasting communities, and helps them work out a performance that combines both cultures.

“When we ask people to talk about identity, it’s very awkward. But I think if they can talk about their identity through song and music, it’s much easier.”

The groups begin by talking about music, and from there expand into other aspects of their cultures. Kihara says she works as a catalyst to bring them together and an advisor as they develop their performances.

“You don’t have to go to China to learn about China. Chinese people live here in Ottawa,” she says. “That’s what I want to emphasize in my performances. These people are your neighbours. Your next-door neighbours. And this is an opportunity for you to learn about them.”

Kihara is currently working on a new series of solo shows, both in New Zealand and abroad, for 2014.

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