



Gauguin

A Spiritual Journey

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Gauguin

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First Impressions: Paul Gauguin

YUKI KIHARA

"The Pacific is no longer untouched." —Charlize Leo, Miss Sāmoa Fa'afafine, 2017–2018 (from *First Impressions: Paul Gauguin*)

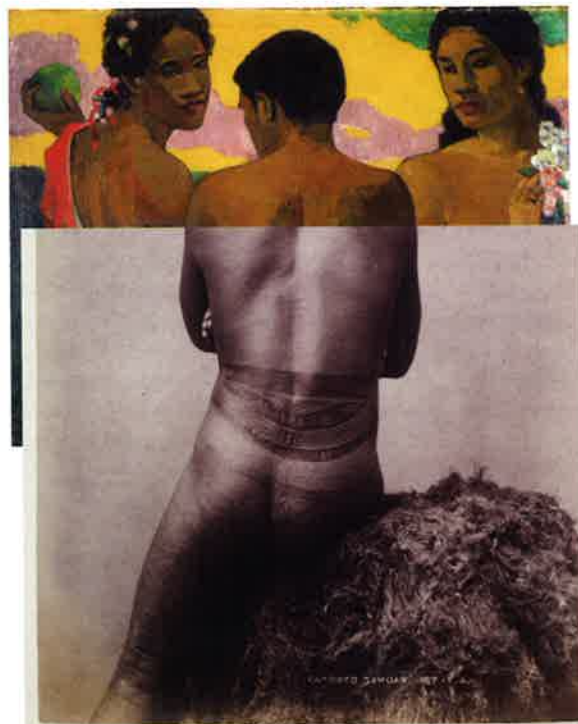
This year marks the 123rd anniversary of artist Paul Gauguin's arrival in Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland), Aotearoa (New Zealand), in August 1895, where he spent ten days en route to Tahiti for the second and final time. During his brief time in the city, Gauguin observed and made detailed sketches of Māori and Moana Pacific treasures held at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki and the Auckland Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira. He also took a small but vital collection of new images when he left Tāmaki Makaurau, several of which later appeared in his major paintings. One of these paintings, *Three Tahitians* (1899), which features a male figure in the middle with his back facing toward the viewer, directly references a nineteenth-century photograph depicting an unnamed Sāmoan man with the *pe'a*, a tattoo customary for Sāmoan men, taken by photographer Thomas Andrew (fig. 44). Andrew's photograph could have been one of the items Gauguin collected during his time in Tāmaki Makaurau. My collage work *Three Tahiti (Sāmo)ans [After Gauguin]* (fig. 45) seamlessly merges two male figures, depicted by Gauguin and Andrew, both as a way to observe their similarities and to critique Gauguin's intent behind his paintings and the context of the social and political climate he was part of. Although Gauguin never set foot in Sāmoa, there have been a number of artists from Western countries who have arrived in Sāmoa and produced paintings that, like Gauguin's works, envision a romantic life in a timeless village untouched by Western colonization and Christianity.

Gauguin posing as a "noble savage" as a form of "ethnic drag" in response to his time spent in Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands resonates with a work I produced, titled *Der Papālagi (The White Man)* (fig. 46).¹ The title is lifted from a book by Erich Scheurmann, a German national who lived in Sāmoa during the German colonial administration of the country from 1900 to 1914. Published in 1920, the book contains descriptions of European life seen through the eyes of Tuiavii, a Sāmoa chief. It was widely criticized, however, after it was discovered that Scheurmann had invented the character of Tuiavii and that the descriptions were in fact his own social commentary. It is believed that Scheurmann was trying to get his German readers to aspire to be like Tuiavii—a Sāmoan "noble savage"—by returning to nature at a time when the Naturalism movement was taking form in Europe. I responded to Scheurmann's book by orchestrating a public performance presented as a social experiment in which Christian and Barbara Durst—German migrants who have lived in Sāmoa for more than twenty-four years—"go native" to fulfill Scheurmann's deep desire to be a Sāmoan. Dressed in full indigenous Sāmoan regalia, Christian and Barbara made public appearances in five locations in and around the capital city of Apia. The varied reactions of the public to the German couple are captured in videos and photographs that depict these Papālagi as the "other" while also exploring the ethical boundaries between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation. The term *Papālagi* is used to describe non-Sāmoans,



especially European Caucasians. In Sāmoa it is also used to describe foreigners or anything considered not indigenous to Sāmoa or Sāmoan culture. *Pālāgi* is derived from the Polynesian root words *pā* (meaning “gates”) and *lagi* (meaning “sky” or “heaven”), hence the standard translation “gates of heaven.” Some say this was based on the reaction of the Sāmoan people upon seeing European explorers for the first time: the different color of their skin suggested to the Sāmoan people that the explorers were people who came from another universe. This myth faded under the influences of ongoing colonization and the introduction of Christianity to Sāmoa. Today, White people, who make up four percent of the population of Sāmoa, are increasingly adopting the Indigenous concept of Papālāgi as a cultural identity to differentiate themselves from other Whites in Western countries. Similar contexts exist across the Moana Pacific, including Pākehā in Aotearoa, Papa’ā in the Cook Islands, and Haole in the Kingdom of Hawai’i, to name a few.

FIG. 44
Thomas Andrew
Back view of tattooed Sāmoan man, ca. 1890
Photographic print
National Library New Zealand, Stephenson Percy Smith album 3,
PAColl-3089, PA1-o-469-67



I used to see Gauguin’s work featured in tourism paraphernalia like coffee mugs, postcards, T-shirts, posters, and cruise ship advertisements outside of Sāmoa. However, I never took notice of it until I first came across his actual paintings in 2008, when I presented my solo exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Mannahatta (Manhattan), New York. I remember thinking how strange it was to be in front of his paintings, as if time and space had collapsed. Here we were as artists from two different parts of the world having a dialogue in two different moments in history. I also remember seeing Gauguin’s paintings at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the Museum of Modern Art and noticing how I was the only Tagata Moana Pacific Islander in the gallery filled with people, with hardly any Tagata Māo’i Indigenous peoples in sight. For centuries, Papālāgi and other non-Indigenous artists, anthropologists, and museum curators have represented—and exoticized—Tagata Māo’i to non-Indigenous audiences.

FIG. 45
Yuki Kihara
Three Tahiti (Sāmo)ans [After Gauguin], from the series
Coconuts that grew from concrete, 2017
Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin

During the same time in Mannahatta, I met a handful of Tagata Moana who shared with me their experiences of living as an ethnic minority in Turtle Island (North America), being kept from accessing a variety of social services while being ignored by government policies due to their low population count. Similar factors led the United States and France to treat the Moana *motu* Pacific Islands as a military “playground”—“remote” islands far removed from the populated Western metropolitan centers—leading them to conduct more than 190 nuclear tests in the region in the 1960s and 1970s. This continues today, with the Moana situated in the midst of the threat of nuclear war between the United States and North Korea, all in a region well known for tourism. Pacific scholar Teresia Teaiwa described the symbolic relationship between military forces and tourism as “militourism,” which “ensures the smooth running of a tourism industry, and that same tourist industry masks the military force behind it.”²

As Teaiwa stated, tourism in the Moana is riddled with layers of contradiction. Tourism in Sāmoa, in particular, offers escape and much-needed replenishment and relaxation, provided inside the walls of luxury resorts, to exhausted tourists from developed countries. Outside the walls, local Sāmoans desperately cling to their lives while being ravaged by natural disasters and cyclones (such as the recent Cyclone Gita) and sea-level rise fueled by climate change, mostly caused by carbon emissions from the very developed countries from which the tourists originate. Sāmoa continues to grapple with the idea of sustainable development: finding a balance between maintaining and preserving culture and natural resources while responding to the needs of the local economy that relies on tourism. This tourism not only serves to commodify the culture, but also to extract natural resources and further the impact of climate change, including ocean acidification, coral bleaching, and sea-level rise up to 4mm a year (and rising). I remember during the 1990s, the majority of tourists in Sāmoa were coming from Europe, but these days an increasing number is made up of the Sāmoan diaspora that visits the islands to reconnect with their families; to undertake cultural obligations such as *matai* chief bestowment; and to have a holiday at the same time before returning to Aotearoa, Australia, and Turtle Island, where Sāmoa is linked through the history of colonialism. The remittances from the Sāmoan diaspora contribute to more than twenty percent of Sāmoa's local economy. These ideas are also explored in my photographic series *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* (2013), named after Gauguin's largest painting, which he produced in 1897–1898, shortly before he died (fig. 43). I use Gauguin's questions to frame my examination of Sāmoan culture and society following the 2009 tsunami; the 2012 celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Sāmoa's independence; and the destruction caused by Cyclone Evan, also in 2012.³

I have also felt Gauguin's legacy in the Moana indirectly when I've been approached by friends to consider applying to sail with Paul Gauguin Cruises—a luxury cruise line to Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands. Though popular with visitors

from around the globe, the experience is financially out of reach for many Tagata Moana. I've always wanted to travel to Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands but have never been able to afford it, so perhaps joining the cruise ship is one way to experience the islands and to visit several sites, including Gauguin's grave, located in the Marquesan island of Hiva Oa, and Taputapuātea *marae* complex, a ceremonial center located on the island of Raiatea, where Tautai Indigenous navigators across the Moana continue to gather, forge links, and strengthen the practice of Fōlauga Indigenous navigation. As a Sāmoan, however, I have to be mindful that I'm stepping onto another Moana *motu* and to respect the ancestral and cultural ties Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands have with Sāmoa, which have undergone a similar history of colonialism, missionization, and cultural revitalization.

Gauguin's life in Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands was experienced from a position of privilege at a time when Sāmoans and other Tagata Māo'i were being exhibited, exoticized, and dehumanized in human zoos in world expositions and performances across Europe and Turtle Island, including the California Midwinter International Exposition of 1894 held in Golden Gate Park—where the de Young museum is located—where Sāmoan performers were imaged in ways that, similar to Gauguin's work, created stereotypes of Pacific Islanders.⁴ Gauguin was inspired to travel outside of Europe after visiting a human zoo in Paris, and human zoos and museums worked collaboratively to exhibit Tagata Māo'i regardless of whether they were dead or alive. Tagata Māo'i today can't be expected to live in peace when their ancestral remains are held in museums and they do not have a voice in the interpretation of their visual culture.

My single-channel video work *First Impressions: Paul Gauguin* (fig. 47), filmed in Upolu Island, Sāmoa, captures the candid interviews with selected members of the Fa'afafine and Fa'atama community about their first impressions of selected figurative paintings created by Gauguin during his time in Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands. Some of these paintings are believed to depict Māhū, the Tahitian “third gender.” This video work literally returns the colonial gaze that has been imposed upon the Fa'afafine community, which Gauguin has been a part of, while questioning the Western value system placed upon Gauguin's work.

Fa'afafine are an Indigenous queer minority in Sāmoan culture known to be gifted in the spirit of more than one gender, or “third gender”; the term is also used broadly to describe those who are, in the Western context, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersexed, or queer. *Fa'afafine* also translates as “in the manner of a woman,” and is often applied to biological males with feminine characteristics; *Fa'atama*, on the

FIG. 46
Yuki Kihara
Still from *Der Papālagi: The White Man*, 2016
Single-channel video
Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin
Funded by Creative New Zealand, Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa, and the Government of New Zealand



other hand, translates as “in a manner of a man,” and is often applied to biological females with masculine characteristics. It’s my belief that the terms *Fa’afafine* and *Fa’atama* were developed in response to Western contact and colonialism as a method to categorize and differentiate those outside of Western cisgender binary and heteronormativity seen as the status quo. Prior to Western contact, there was no need among Sāmoans to mark people for their “difference.” What did and continues to matter for most Sāmoans are one’s contributions to the family and community, not who one appears as or is attracted to. When I was growing up in Sāmoa, the term *Fa’afafine* had negative connotations, partly fueled by media and religious groups. Today, many *Fa’afafine* are empowering themselves by giving the word a positive meaning, and the term *Fa’afafine* is now used broadly to describe the Sāmoan LGBTQ community.

The *Fa’afafine* who took part in the interviews for *First Impressions* were encountering Gauguin’s work for the first time, and their reactions are as varied as the individuals themselves. The success behind this work lies in the witty, vivacious, and big personalities of those who took part, who naturally camped it up during the interview. The video is intended to be humorous, as a way to subvert Gauguin as a

symbol of Western patriarchy. The interview features some of the cast members questioning Gauguin’s fixation with nudity, while others appreciated the use of color and composition; some are interested in whether the paintings sold or not. In addition, Gauguin’s paintings became an impetus for the cast members to talk about political subject matters relevant to Sāmoa, including Christianity, gender, and sexuality, while openly flirting with the talk-show assistant. The concept of the video work is inspired by the essay “He Tangi Mo Ha’apuani: Gauguin’s Models—A Māori Perspective,” by Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, which was presented to the Gauguin Symposium in September 1992 at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. In her essay, Awekotuku describes how Gauguin deliberately painted his models to appear androgynous and exotic as a reflection of his personal fascination with the *Māhū*—the Tahitian equivalent of *Fa’afafine*—which Gauguin described in his journal *Noa Noa*. Awekotuku makes similar observations about the androgyny in the models found in Gauguin’s paintings who looked similar to members of her *whānau* who are Takatāpui—also the equivalent to *Fa’afafine* in Māori culture in Aotearoa.

One of the paintings featured in my video work, Gauguin’s *Reclining Tahitian Women* (1894; pl. 65)—which Awekotuku



describes as featuring Māhū—is also noted by legal and public policy scholar Siobhan McDonnell as a painting featured in real estate signs used to sell customary land in Vanuatu. McDonnell describes how Gauguin's painting reinforces "the long established cultural motifs associated with Pacific landscapes, evoking both heterosexual masculine desire as well as an established cultural authenticity through which foreign ideas are transposed onto customary land in Vanuatu."⁵ This also contributes to the growing problem of anti-blackness in the Moana, where businesses in Melanesia and across the Moana favor romantic portrayals of light-skinned Polynesians in their marketing.

My initial criteria for selecting the Gauguin paintings featured in the video work was to choose those I felt resembled Fa'afafine, but I ended up including paintings that portray a variety of natives, because almost all the natives portrayed by Gauguin are fictitious.

Gauguin's romantic fascination with Māhū points to his fantasy of an exotic racial "other." This fascination continues to echo in the works of many contemporary Western documentary filmmakers, anthropologists, and travel writers who travel to Sāmoa in search of Fa'afafine, whom they assume possess a "primitive" gender and sexuality and are living close

to "nature" as measured against the "civilized" Western patriarchy. In her book *Sexual Encounters: Pacific Texts, Modern Sexualities*, scholar Lee Wallace argues that sexual encounters between colonialists and natives in the Moana have shaped the Western notion of gender and sexuality, including homosexuality and transgenderism.⁶ In fact, this very terminology is based on the Western medical disease model, where the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*—the American psychiatric disorder guidebook—classified homosexuality as a mental illness until 1987; further, the *DSM* classified transgender identity as a mental illness in 1980 and still does to this day.

First Impressions is part of a larger new body of work that I'm currently developing that focuses on Indigenous queer lives in Sāmoa, but this is not the first time I have made work addressing this topic. One of these earlier works was the photographic series titled *Fa'afafine: In the Manner of a Woman* (2005),⁷ for which I used my body as the medium in order to masquerade as a variety of characters and to pay homage to unnamed Sāmoans featured in colonial photographs taken by Papālagi photographers. What triggered me to return to the topic in my art practice is my experience having participated in a number of Fa'afafine documentaries over the years



directed by well-meaning cisgender people who often ask to film me applying make-up while looking at myself in the mirror, as if to insinuate that Fa'afafine's lives are driven by Western forms of vanity. I have become all too familiar with these and other routine narratives that perpetuate damaging clichés. And having to rely on such materials, which too often distort or sensationalize Fa'afafine life, as a resource for Fa'afafine empowerment has prompted me to produce works that "take back" what has been taken by people like Gauguin and other symbols of Western patriarchy in the Pacific by subverting the colonial gaze through the lens of Fa'afafine—a topic that is well-known to me and my art practice, as I also consider myself to be a Fa'afafine.

Gauguin's vision of a "genderless" Moana paradise is an ideal far removed from the reality of what many Fa'afafine in Sāmoa face today. On June 27, 2016, an early morning candlelight procession was held in Apia, the capital of Sāmoa, in Upolu Island, led by members of the Sāmoa Fa'afafine Association (SFA). They were holding banners with messages such as "End Media Violation of Fa'afafine," "Social Justice and Peace," and "End Violence and Discrimination of Fa'afafine." The banners were in response to a controversy over the reporting of the death of Jeanine Tuivaiki, a twenty-year-old student and Fa'afafine who died of a suspected suicide, in the *Sunday Sāmoan*, a local newspaper. The paper published on its front page an unblurred photograph of Tuivaiki's dead body and also referred to Tuivaiki as male throughout the story. The reporting sent shockwaves across Sāmoa, especially given that the Fa'afafine community had recently celebrated the replacing of the Crimes Ordinance of 1961, a law enforced during Aotearoa's Pākehā colonial administration of Sāmoa, which criminalized "the impersonation of a female" by any male in Sāmoa. The law was used to persecute Fa'afafine with fines or imprisonment, although it had effectively stopped being enforced by police in the early 1980s. The SFA said the repeal of the law was "a huge celebration for the Fa'afafine community and vindication for families who have lost members to acts of violence." While the repeal felt like a victory, the insensitive media coverage of this tragedy shows that there are still many social struggles for Fa'afafine in Sāmoa.

Aotearoa's milestones in queer history, including appointing the world's first openly Māori Takatāpui postoperative transsexual woman, Georgina Beyer, as a member of parliament (1999–2007); passing the Homosexual Law Reform Act (1986) and Marriage (Definition of Marriage) Amendment Act (2013); and the government formally apologizing to men convicted

of homosexual crimes under old laws (2017), are unfortunately not the same for those in Sāmoa, where Fa'afafine today continue to struggle to reform laws introduced by Aotearoa's Pākehā colonialism.

Today, the social equilibrium that had long existed across the gender spectrum prior to the arrival of missionaries has been greatly disturbed by, among other things, visual representations of Fa'afafine by the media and an inflammatory televangelism channel in Sāmoa run by religious conservatives. Recently, Fa'afafine have increasingly been used as scapegoats by religious and political leaders who blame them as the cause of homosexuality, HIV/AIDS, climate change, and other social problems whenever the Sāmoan society is under social, political, cultural, and economic pressure from the West.

I hope my work can contribute to local and global dialogues on how gender identity can be a catalyst to question how one's society is organized and structured under Western patriarchy. We must find ways to decolonize from institutional structures that retain a stronghold in Sāmoa, the Moana, and its diverse groups of people, and that keep all of them from fully realizing their freedom and sovereignty. My thoughts are echoed in what Tahitian poet, playwright, and activist Henri Hiro once said: "I would like today's culture to look back to its roots, to its source, which is Polynesian culture. From this encounter between the past and the present, something new will be born."⁸

Sāmoa, March 2018

I acknowledge the Indigenous custodians of the unceded and occupied territories of the Ramaytush Ohlone where my work is being presented.

FIG. 47

Yuki Kihara

Still from *First Impressions: Paul Gauguin*, 2018

Single-channel video

Commissioned by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen

Courtesy of Yuki Kihara; Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen; and Milford Galleries Dunedin