

An interview with the curators of  
'Paradise Camp'

Aotearoa New Zealand at the 59th  
Biennale di Venezia

by Contemporary HUM, Ioana Gordon-Smith, Natalie  
King

Published on 24.05.2022



Natalie King, Venice 2022. Photo: Luke Walker. Courtesy NZ at Venice.



Yuki Kihara, *Paradise Camp* installation view, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Ioana Gordon-Smith, Venice 2022. Photo: Luke Walker. Courtesy NZ at Venice.



Yuki Kihara, *Paradise Camp*, curated by Natalie King. Installation view, Biennale Arte 2022. Photo: Luke Walker. Courtesy NZ at Venice.



Yuki Kihara, *Paradise Camp* installation view, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

*Traversing the topics of small island ecologies, queer rights and decolonisation, Yuki Kihara's Paradise Camp at La Biennale di Venezia 2022 marks a number of firsts for the Aotearoa New Zealand pavilion as the artist selected is Pasifika, Asian and Fa'afafine, Sāmoa's third gender. Kihara's timely and ambitious presentation, curated by Natalie King, encompasses archival research, photography, video and socially engaged methods to explore the ongoing Sāmoa-New Zealand relations from a Fa'afafine perspective.*

*For this project, Kihara "upcycled" paintings by French post-impressionist artist Paul Gauguin, created during his time in Tahiti and the Marquesas between 1891 and 1903, and drew on her own extensive research, or Vārchive, on the Sāmoan origins and gender-neutrality of many of Gauguin's models. This produced a suite of eleven elaborately staged and vibrant photographic portraits, shot on location in Sāmoa, with an additional self-portrait of Kihara as Gauguin. Kihara's photographs are presented against an immersive wallpaper of a coastal landscape decimated by the 2009 tsunami,*

*making Paradise Camp a reclamation of Gauguin's imagined Pacific through a contemporary Pasifika, Fa'afafine lens.*

*As the only Aotearoa publication on the ground at Venice during the opening week, HUM visited the New Zealand pavilion in the Arsenale and sat down with Curator Natalie King and Assistant Pasifika Curator Ioana Gordon-Smith. In this interview, King and Gordon-Smith talk to the HUM team about the challenge and excitement of bringing this exhibition to Venice, working with Yuki Kihara and the Fa'afafine community, and their experiences of collaborative curating during turbulent and uncertain times.*

*Don't miss the other part of our Venice coverage, [where we spoke to Yuki Kihara](#).*

CONTEMPORARY HUM     Natalie, you said that you went on-site to Sāmoa during the filming of *Paradise Camp*. Was that your first time there and first time meeting the local Fa'afafine community with Yuki Kihara? How was this experience and, in contrast, what is it like to be in Venice now? How are these international audiences reacting to the work, which is so contextual, so based in local experiences and communities?

NATALIE KING     In March 2020, I went to Sāmoa to witness the final phase of Yuki's photoshoot for *Paradise Camp*. It was my first time in Sāmoa, and it was quite a culture shock for me. Yuki had selected very specific locations for her photographs, including villages, plantations, waterfalls and a *fale* (house) to tell her story.

There was a cast of close to 100 people, so it was a very elaborate production. Yuki works like a cinematographer, so choosing a location, cast and crew, as well as lighting. The way that she worked was specific and purposeful. And I felt really privileged to be able to watch. It's always a joy, and quite rare, for a curator. I guess it was like being in a live studio when Yuki was on location, making the work in situ.

I also got to spend time with the Fa'afafine community. Every night we had dinner with Yuki's friends. And they told us naughty stories, funny stories, as well as harrowing stories about

discrimination and being rejected by family. But also stories of hope, their lavish pageants, and I just absolutely loved being there.

In retrospect, it was a miracle, because it was two weeks before lockdown. So, in fact, if Yuki hadn't had such a carefully planned *Paradise Camp* shoot, I don't know how we would have made the work. But fast forward to now, here we are at the Venice Biennale, presenting Yuki's work.

There's been a tremendous response, even though there's such geographical distance between Sāmoa, the Pacific and Venice. Yuki's looking at issues that are pertinent—small-island ecologies, environment crises, decolonisation and intersectionality. These are issues that affect all of us, and especially Venice, which is a fragile lagoon, one that is hugely impacted by tourism and by the tides in *acqua alta*.

HUM                    A question increasingly raised, not just at this Biennale, but also in recent years, is who is speaking for whom? Whose voices and stories are being represented? This is also why Yuki started the *Firsts Solidarity Network*. It shows, hopefully, not just a trend in the contemporary art sector but a sincere desire to bring more opportunities for marginalised perspectives and more diversified representation of society.

*Paradise Camp* has a curator and assistant curator with different backgrounds and cultural/national affiliations. Can you tell us more about this decision and how you curate a project that falls outside of your own lived experience? What were your roles and how did you work together to support the artist, to make a complementary team and bring your own situated experiences, knowledge, networks, etc., to the table?

IOANA GORDON-SMITH     I'm Sāmoan but was born and raised in Aotearoa, and so a lot of my experience is within the Pacific Arts community there, which is how I know Yuki in the first place. I don't remember how we first met, but I've worked with her in the past. So we share a cultural background in New Zealand.



In terms of the limits of shared experience, I think that any discourse around decolonial politics or Indigenous knowledges that doesn't also incorporate a challenge to heteronormative norms is an incomplete decolonial discourse. These are part of one shared, greater movement to challenge the colonial inheritance of gender, of sexuality, of identity. In terms of supporting someone who has faced different challenges to me, I think, ultimately, you have to be quite mindful of ensuring that someone can speak to their own experience without thrusting expectations upon them of what their varied experiences might be.

What I really enjoy about the exhibition is that there is a spectrum of stories and characteristics that come through. On the one hand, there is this identification of the histories that continue to impact Fa'afafine. But on the other hand, you've also got this embrace of different personalities, especially, I think, through *First Impressions*. You've got the laughter, the tenderness, the cackling. You've got a group of women and Fa'afafine that Yuki has empowered to represent themselves and share their own first impressions of Paul Gauguin, who stands as a figurehead for the colonial treatment of Pacific peoples.



Yuki Kihara, *Paradise Camp*, curated by Natalie King. Installation view, Biennale Arte 2022. Photo: Luke Walker. Courtesy NZ at Venice.



Yuki Kihara, *Paradise Camp* installation view, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Yuki Kihara, *First Impressions: Paul Gauguin*, 2018. *Paradise Camp* installation view, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Yuki Kihara, *Genesis 9:16 (After Gauguin)*, 2020. Hahnemühle fine art paper mounted on aluminium, 73.2 × 91.5 cm. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand.

NK As the curator of *Paradise Camp*, I see my role as an enabler and an ally to Yuki, an accomplice. Most importantly, I work to amplify her stories and her voice. Even though Fa'afafine isn't my lived experience, because of my expertise working internationally and having curated Tracey Moffatt in 2017 in the Australian Pavilion, I feel like I'm tasked with presenting Yuki's work in the optimum way possible: so that it's fully resourced with a comprehensive publication and that we can share her work to as wide an audience as possible.

IGS Yuki is a global citizen in the world. We want to acknowledge that, in addition to being a Sāmoan and a Fa'afafine, she is an international artist.

HUM She has exhibited overseas a lot.

NK                    That's how I knew her work, because she had been in a number of Biennales, including Honolulu (2017), Bangkok (2018), the Asia Pacific Triennial (2002 and 2015) and the Sakahàn quinquennial (2013). So even though her work is deeply local, it also has a global resonance.

HUM                    It's never easy for the New Zealand representation to come to Venice, but the pandemic made it near impossible this time. Plus, Venice is one of the most challenging places to put on an exhibition because everything is protected, so there are many geographical as well as logistical questions that come into play, especially this year.

Tell us how and why you picked this venue. The first thing we noticed entering the space is that the room is split in two and shared with the national pavilion of Albania—this is one of the first years that the New Zealand Pavilion doesn't have its own space. How do you work around that and is there a consideration for previous New Zealand pavilions in making those decisions?

NK                    In November 2019, Yuki, myself and Creative New Zealand made a site visit to select Yuki's venue. New Zealand has been participating in the Venice Biennale since 2001 and because it doesn't have a permanent pavilion, the artists can select a venue that is optimum for their work. So we looked at various sites, from palazzos to warehouses, and we felt very strongly that we wanted to be in the Arsenale.

It's important for Yuki to coexist alongside other artists. And also, look at the throng of people around us. This is where the footfall is, so we wanted to be in the hub of the Arsenale—Creative New Zealand managed the leasing arrangement with La Biennale. We have certainly had huge audiences coming through, and it's barely day three, so I think the venue was really key, it's very significant.

The Arsenale is a former artillery factory, and the walls are very high, five metres tall. We wanted to work with the height and the volume. So on the walls, you see two very large wallpapers. One is in Sāmoa, of an oceanscape that was decimated in the 2009 tsunami.

And while it might look like paradise and a beach scene, actually it's a sign of destruction and despair. We worked with a fantastic exhibition designer, Anita Gigi Budai, and Amber Baldock, who's our exhibition manager.

We have a really talented team—I know it's a cliché, but you need a really great team to deliver the Venice Biennale, especially under the conditions that we've all been working under for the past two years, with all the complexities of lockdown, travel, freight and customs. But we made it and we're thrilled!



Yuki Kihara, *Paradise Camp* installation view, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



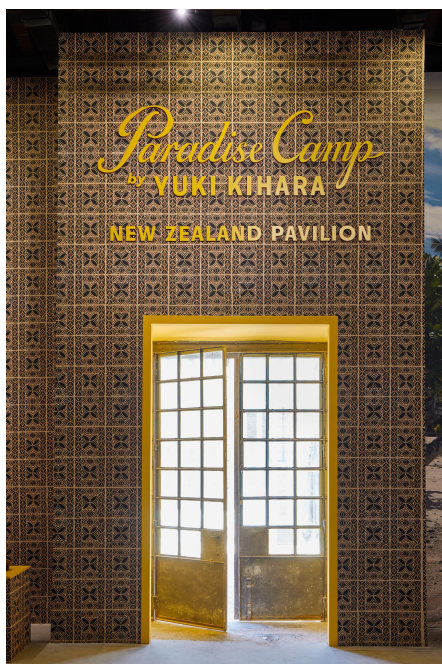
Yuki Kihara, *Paradise Camp*, curated by Natalie King. Installation view, Biennale Arte 2022. Photo: Luke Walker. Courtesy NZ at Venice.



*Paradise Camp* contrasted next to the minimal Albanian Pavilion. 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Yuki Kihara, *Fonofono o le nuanua: Patches of the rainbow (After Gauguin)*, 2020. Hahnemühle fine art paper mounted on aluminium, 139 × 375 cm. *Paradise Camp* installation view, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Yuki Kihara, *Paradise Camp*, curated by Natalie King. Installation view, Biennale Arte 2022. Photo: Luke Walker. Courtesy NZ at Venice.



New Zealand pavilion entrance, Biennale Arte 2022. Photo: Luke Walker. Courtesy NZ at Venice.



HUM                    We were reflecting back on Lisa Reihana's presentation for the 2017 New Zealand Pavilion all the way to Yuki's work this year, and how they're both reinterpreting historical artworks containing racist stereotypes and colonial interpretations of people in the Moana—both by French artists although from different periods—from an Indigenous point of view. Lisa's work *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* was triggered by her discovery of the wallpaper *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*, produced by Joseph Dufour in 1804, while Yuki made her own versions of Paul Gauguin's paintings from 1891–1902. Both projects started with the artist encountering a museum collection item and a reaction that prompted them to retell the story and refute the depiction they saw. This is visible in Yuki's huge archive of research presented in the exhibition catalogue under the title *Who is looking at who?* This year it is also visible in other parts of the Biennale, for example in the Polish pavilion, where the artist Małgorzata Mirga-Tas has created 12 large-format textiles that offer an alternative narrative from a Polish Roma perspective, based on the 12-month frescoes of the Renaissance Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, Italy. How does Aotearoa New Zealand's pavilion sit in the context of these other examples of historical rewritings, reimaginings and reappropriating to include under- or misrepresented voices?

IGS                    We were at dinner a couple of nights ago, and Yuki and I were trying to pick through the international context of New Zealand, Pacific and Māori art, which we both think is quite strong. We were trying to identify why it is so strong, and we came to one thought, which is that we're quite a small community that works frequently together.

There are shared, though specific, concerns that we will often discuss as a group, that enrich our own understanding of how history has affected us, as specifically positioned peoples. And if you think about *Paradise Camp*, it was inspired by Yuki's 2008 visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which reminded her of a lecture presentation by Ngahuia Te Awakotuku, who's a Māori emeritus scholar.

Another example is the talanoa symposium we're organising in October, which is titled after a quote from Merata Mita, who is a pioneering Māori filmmaker. So I think that together, across all of these artists, we're building a rich but nuanced discourse that we can all pull from in order not to start decolonial methods from scratch.

We take that body of knowledge that is shared, and specific to each of us, and then we use that to move forward to a new inquiry or a new body of research. And I suppose I'm bypassing your question, because I'm not saying that Yuki's work was compared to Lisa's, or was inspired by Lisa's. But rather, that they are both emerging from a really rich, intellectual tradition that is, to some extent, rich, because we can share ancestral tension, we can share decolonial methods, and decolonial thinking, and artistic strategies. And through that, we can become quite incisive in the way that we approach visual histories of us, that were made without us. And I think that the other Biennale presentations that have similar Indigenous premises show that the decolonial or the Indigenous really can't be ignored, but also that there is something about galvanising across solidarity networks, which is why the Firsts Solidarity Network came together. This idea of alternative networks and alternative knowledges that cross over is actually pivotal to amplify all of our voices.

HUM                Yuki anticipates that *Paradise Camp* will travel to New Zealand, Sāmoa and Sydney. Will there be any differences in the presentation between what you're showing here and what you'll show to a Pacific audience, or to an Aotearoa audience? Will that be a different project, with more elements?

NK                To be honest, we haven't resolved the configuration for other venues, but there certainly is a wish to have the exhibition evolving, and we'd like very much to work on site. For example, the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney have a comprehensive collection of Sāmoan photographs, so Yuki may look into their collection. But we're still resolving some of those

details. The main thing is that we're thrilled to take *Paradise Camp* to the Southern Hemisphere, to return it to the Pacific.



Artist Yuki Kihara and Curator Natalie King speak at the *Paradise Camp* press preview, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, 20 April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Yuki Kihara, *Paradise Camp*, curated by Natalie King. Installation view, Biennale Arte 2022. Photo: Luke Walker. Courtesy NZ at Venice.



Yuki Kihara, *Two Fa'afafine (After Gauguin)*, 2020. Hahnemühle fine art paper mounted on aluminium, 94 × 72 cm. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand.

HUM                    Indeed, what we understood from our interview with Yuki today is that, while for some artists the Venice Biennale is a career objective, for her it's a stepping stone to return the work to her community, whom she wants to empower. It's an interesting method that questions and attempts to reappropriate the power of such institutions and the historically assigned value of certain cities or centres of activity.

NK                    It's a way of rerouting resources.

HUM                    If we look at shifts in curatorial practices in recent times, would you say there is a move towards more collaborative curating? We recently published an essay about *Naahdohbii* in Canada, a project you were involved in Ioana, which was an Indigenous curatorial collaboration between different nations. For *Paradise Camp* you have also worked together; Natalie was appointed as curator but once the project was confirmed, Ioana,



you came on board. Is this something that you are looking to continue, these collaborative projects?

NK                    Definitely. I feel like I'm always collaborating. You're only as good as your team and I'm not really interested in that authorial, singular, uber-curator model. I think that's really outdated and patriarchal for me, so I always like to work with others. And I think that we're seeing more of this kind of methodology—*documenta* is curated by the collective ruangrupa this year and the individuals are not named. We can think curatorially about how we can collectivise and become a community as a way to amplify voices and work together in a way that's meaningful. So that's what's important to me. Also, the word 'curator' comes from the verb *curare*, which means to take care. So we need to take care of each other, and artists, and ideas, primarily.

IGS                    Yes, I'd agree. I think it's cool for a couple of reasons. Curators bring with them a social network or a body of knowledge, so the more curators can contribute on a project the more you can diversify the artists and the different knowledge systems they represent. Also, I think it's great to work together in order to have a support network as you navigate the systems of various exhibition realities.

And I think it can often be quite isolating if you're going to a particular structure, trying to navigate challenges. And even just working as a team means that you have some kind of conversation or network. I have questioned Natalie, who's been at the Biennale before, on very basic things, like how to navigate the city and find places, but also knowing what the preview might look like, or what the expectations are around press material.

NK                    Sure. And there's also a lot of trust. I know I can run something by Ioana, and share a text before it's ready to show anyone else. You've got these touchpoints, which is enormously valuable, rather than working in isolation; and hopefully, we offer that to Yuki as well.



Yuki Kihara, *Paradise Camp* installation view, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Yuki Kihara, *Paradise Camp* installation view, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Artist Yuki Kihara speaking with visitors at *Paradise Camp*, New Zealand Pavilion, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



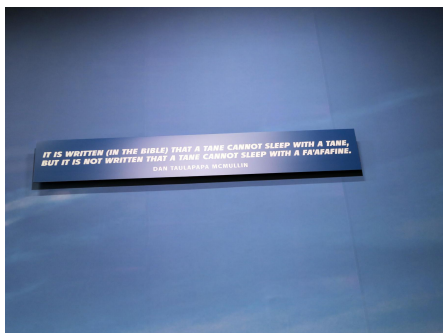
Yuki Kihara, *Paradise Camp* installation view, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



*Paradise Camp* exhibition catalogue in Biennale bookshop, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Artist Yuki Kihara and Curator Natalie King at *Paradise Camp*, New Zealand Pavilion, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Yuki Kihara, *Paradise Camp* installation view, 59th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, April 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

HUM                Natalie, you have been to the Venice Biennale several times, do you feel that the discourse changes over time? Are people asking different questions or seeing things differently this year?

NK                I feel that this edition of the Biennale is a turning point in terms of putting the spotlight on overlooked or marginalised artists. Moreover, Cecilia Alemani has curated the large exhibition and not only is she the first Italian woman to do it, but—in a refreshing curatorial approach—the Giardini has only women and gender non-conforming artists. I think the pavilions that tell counter stories of resilience and hope—such as Poland with the first Romany artist, Malgorzata Mirga-Tas, Nepal with Tsherin Sherpa, and the UK with Sonia Boyce—are especially resonant in exposing hidden histories. I am very proud to be a curator in this particular Biennale, which is like a symphony rather than a series of solos.

HUM                Ioana, I remember you said in the [online talanoa](#) conversation organised before the opening that you were honoured to be able to follow Yuki's research process, and that's such a big part of her practice. What was it particularly about *Paradise Camp* and the research behind it, that you enjoyed learning about, following, or seeing?

IGS                There are two parts. One is that collections worldwide hold images of Indigenous people, often without our knowledge, and without our ability to access them. And often, you must pay to reproduce them or to use them. So there's this strange system where visual records of our histories and our people are very opaque. And Yuki, because she has had such an international practice, has been able to go into the archives physically, identify an image, recognise it for what it is, and then use it in her work, surfacing it for a Pacific audience. I've really enjoyed that. I didn't know there were so many images of us in museum collections all over Europe. Just to be able to retrace those is such a foundational step that needs to happen.

The second thing I like about Yuki's process is that it's not often you get to watch the creative spark happen. When you'll see a photo, and you will see another thing entirely, you'll be like, "Those look somewhat similar. What's going on here?" And it appears throughout the publication as well, so she draws comparisons between the molecular structure of coronavirus and hiapo. And that is worlds apart. It's not often you get to witness that process—to share her visual material is such a fun part, especially for someone who's not an artist themselves.

HUM                    Thank you both for your time and congratulations, it's a huge feat, especially being here in person and despite pulling it off with a reduced team to what would usually be possible!

Don't miss the other part of our Venice coverage, where we sat down to [interview Yuki Kihara](#).

### *Biographies*



Yuki Kihara is an interdisciplinary artist of Japanese and Sāmoan descent. Working across a range of media including performance, lens-based media and sculpture, Kihara's research-based approach has led to a comprehensive body of work and curatorial practice that examines gender roles, consumerism, (mis)representation, and the past, present and future societal issues from an Indigenous perspective. Kihara lives and works in Sāmoa, where she has been based over the past 11 years.

Kihara's works are in the permanent collections, among others, of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, British Museum, Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts and Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Her works have been presented at the Asia Pacific Triennale (2002 and 2015), Auckland Triennale; (2009), Sakahan Quinquennial (2013), Daegu Photo Biennale (2014), Honolulu Biennale (2017) Bangkok Art Biennale (2018) and Aichi Triennale (2022). Kihara has been appointed by the Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa to represent New Zealand at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022. Kihara is a research fellow at Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Kihara is represented by Milford Galleries Dunedin and Queenstown.



Contemporary HUM is the first centralised platform dedicated to documenting New Zealand projects abroad. HUM publishes conversations, reviews and essays on the international projects of New Zealand creative practitioners.



Ioana Gordon-Smith is a Sāmoan/Pākehā arts writer and curator living in Aotearoa New Zealand. Across her work is a commitment to Moana arts practices and their histories. She has held roles at Artspace Aotearoa, Objectspace and Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery, and currently works as the Curator Māori Pacific at Pātaka Art + Museum. Ioana is the Assistant Curator of *Yuki Kihara: Paradise Camp*, the Aotearoa New Zealand Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale, and co-curator of the international Indigenous triennial, *Naadobhii: To Draw Water* in Winnipeg, Canada. She is also the co-founder and co-editor of *Marinade: Aotearoa Journal of Moana Art* and a trustee for Enjoy Contemporary Art Space, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. As well as writing for art journals, magazines and exhibition catalogues, Ioana has contributed to publications produced by Thames & Hudson, Routledge, ARP Books and Te Papa Press.



Natalie King is a leading Australian curator, writer and senior researcher engaged with artists and institutions across the Asia-Pacific region. Currently Enterprise Professor at the University of Melbourne, Natalie has extensive curatorial experience in contemporary art across Australia, Asia-Pacific and Europe. She was the curator of Tracey Moffatt's exhibition for the Australian Pavilion at the Biennale Arte 2017.

King is President of AICA-Australia (International Association of Art Critics, Paris); a member of CIMAM (International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art) and Metro Tunnel Arts Advisory Panel; and a mentor for Mentor Walks. In 2021, she was awarded a University of Melbourne Excellence Award: The Patricia Grimshaw Award for Mentor Excellence.



ARTS COUNCIL OF NEW ZEALAND TOI AOTEAROA