

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT ARCHETYPE AND FETISH

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This article reviews the use of archetype and iconography, within the Western colonisation process, of the Pacific region. The traditions that have fed this topic are world views that used, and continue to use, notions of absolutes such as authenticity and truth. This has created a sense of dualism where the ambiguities within situations become shadow by-products to these concepts, creating division and segregation, both within and without the individual. The colonised person becomes an object as opposed to a subject. This objectification leads to what I call a fetishisation of culture, or, culture fetish. My experiences socially have been informed by my own ancestry, in part Tongan, Scottish and Spanish, and have come from negotiating conflicted cultural spaces. I will be looking at works from Pacific artists that I feel express and convey these conflicts.

Traditionally archetypes and iconography are used as aural and visual mnemonic triggers for learning the myths and stories of cultures. Not only do they illustrate stories from the past, but they help to form a world view. One worldview can seed the creation of stereotypes about cultures and peoples which ultimately help a coloniser objectify them. This objectification becomes a culture fetish and has been used as a powerful tool to subjugate and undermine colonised people. As a response to this, through reframing the stereotypes, some Pacific artists and other 'minority' groups are beginning to reclaim their identities.

Two common archetypes are the Dusky Maiden and the Noble Savage. These particular archetypes have fuelled many contemporary stereotypes and though this thinking may not have been ill-intentioned the outcome was excessively patronising, objectifying and misplaced. The Dusky Maiden and the Noble Savage are Victorian fetishistic stereotypes created in part by colonial desire and its concomitant guilt. Victorian England was controlled through its dualistic sexual repression and misogyny that Victorian Christianity anchored this culture with. This repression created a vacuum of absence which needed to be filled. Guilt became a predominant emotion.

Perceptions of sexuality and gender from a Victorian English Christian morality conflicted with that of a pre-colonial Pacific people's morality. Aided by a sense of inherent superiority, European missionaries, settlers, intellectuals, poets and writers all illustrated and expressed, in various ways, these stereotypes. For example, with the advent of photography the ethnographic depiction of the Dusky Maiden and Noble Savage was distributed world-wide. As a proactive move many Pacific artists have manipulated these images "with the intention of highlighting these absurd notions and of reclaiming control over their own images and identities. These stereotypes highlight issues of cultural transference, from coloniser to colonised, and the objectification and fetishisation of Pacific cultures particularly as it has been reflected through photography. This conversation has been explored by Pacific artists such as Chris Charteris, Sofia Tekela-Smith and Niki Hastings-McFall, epitomised in their exhibition invitation *1 Noble savage 2 Dusky Maiden*, and by Shigeyuki Kihara in works such as *Tauluga: the Last Dance* and *Fa'afafine: In the Manner of a Woman*.

There is a critique of the cliché, of the ways in which the islands and their people are represented. Posing in such a way as to recreate the ethnographic photograph, Chris Charteris, Niki Hastings McFall and Sophia Tekela-Smith became *1 Noble Savage* and *2 Dusky Maidens* the critique of this cliché balanced their respect for a cultural heritage with their reinterpretation of the Western stereotype.¹

The Charteris, Tekela-Smith and Hastings-McFall exhibition invitation recreates ethnographic photographs from the initial colonisation period. The artists have put themselves in the positions of the Dusky Maidens and the Noble

Savage thereby humorously critiquing and reclaiming identity from the colonial Pacific fetish of the European gaze to Pacific people.

In *Fa'afafine In a Manner of a Woman*, Shigeyuki Kihara reframes the Dusky Maiden concept and pushes these boundaries even further. Kihara places his/her self in the place of the Dusky Maiden unravelling a multi-layered conversation about the time and space between cultures by referring to both gender *and* sexuality. Through this culturally conflicted space Kihara begins to reclaim an important part of his/her personal identity as Samoan and by exhibiting this also reclaims an important part of Samoan identity in a public forum. S/he reclaims a perception of gender that has been hidden publically through colonisation. Fa'afafine is a third and valid gender, within a Pacific context, as opposed to a perversion or abnormality as conceptualised in western culture. Through this triptych Kihara explores, the colonial gaze, the Samoan gaze, and the uneasy space between them.

Kihara's photograph is clearly staged in a studio but uses background props to create an illusion of being set in the natural world... In his influential writings on photography the theorist Roland Barthes coined the term 'punctum' to describe an, at first inconsequential detail that pricks at you as it does not seem right.²



Figure 1. 'Fa'afafine; in a manner of a woman' (2005) triptych 1/3, Shigeyuki Kihara, Courtesy of Shigeyuki Kihara and Sean Coyle.

Figure 2. 'Fa'afafine; in a manner of a woman' (2005) triptych 2/3, Shigeyuki Kihara, Courtesy of Shigeyuki Kihara and Sean Coyle.

Figure 3. 'Fa'afafine; in a manner of a woman' (2005) triptych 3/3, Shigeyuki Kihara, Courtesy of Shigeyuki Kihara and Sean Coyle.

Simulation and illusion are two strong ingredients punctuating these images. The dusky maiden is an illusory concept, an erotic object created in the space between colonial culture and the colonised. This is the first punctuation. The second punctuation is that the setting is simulated. The trees and other paraphernalia are bought into a studio setting from outside, creating a theatrical atmosphere. And thirdly, but not least, is Kihara's slow strip from appearing female to being both sexes or Fa'afafine. According to Kihara it was not unusual for sailors and colonials to have had a male mate instead of a female. This was seldom publically acknowledged, possibly due to the fact that homosexuality was illegal.

These images illustrate the disparities between cultures. The images focus on the internalised anxiety that colonial Europeans historically projected onto Pacific people around gender and sexuality. We are talking about a culture that imprisoned people for homosexuality and then in more 'enlightened' times locked people up and gave them electric shocks as a way to cure them of their 'abhorrent' nature. Although these practices are no longer endorsed they still influence western thinking. Some of these differences are inherent in notions such as Drag (Queen or King), as opposed to the notion of Fa'afafine. Within a drag context gender is parodied and traditionally theatrical, seen as a perversion from the normal, whereas Fa'afafine is a third and valid gender.

The crux of this cultural dissonance could, come from an emphasis placed on a concept of space or *Va* (Pacific word for space). *Ta Va* or time and space in Pacific cultures often conflict with Western notions around these concepts.

According to Kihara, Fa'afafine exists in the *Va*, or the space between, genders. Kihara's work explores and challenges the effects of the binary gender code of Western Culture and how it effects and has influenced traditional Samoan culture.

Using art as the *Va* / space to challenge and reclaim identity, Kihara subverts the colonial gaze into a broader Pacific one. She pulls the

iconography from the dualistic and divided colonial space into a more open and considered, ambiguous space of a colonised Pacific, creating new archetypes from the old and limited fetishistic perspective of European colonisers.

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Shigeyuki Kihara is a performance artist whose recent solo exhibition was held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET), New York. Titled *Shigeyuki Kihara: Living Photographs* (2008/09), this exhibition featured, amongst others, Kihara's self-portrait nudes in provocative poses which critique the portrayed colonial images of Polynesian women as sexual objects. Kihara's work has been shown in major international events, amongst others, Asia Pacific Triennial; Auckland Triennial; Videonale and Sakahàn; 1st International Biennial of New Indigenous Art. Kihara's performances have been staged at, amongst others, Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand; National Gallery of Victoria International (Melbourne), Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Berlin); Musée du Quai Branly (Paris) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York). www.shigeyukikihara.com

- 1 Stevenson, Karen, *The Frangipani Is Dead; contemporary pacific art in New Zealand 1985-2000*, (Wellington, Huia Publishers, 2008). p. 126
- 2 Wolf, Erika, Shigeyuki Kihara's Fa'afafine; In the Manner of a Woman: the Photographic Theatre of Cross-Cultural Encounter (University of Otago), p.25 http://otago.academia.edu/ErikaWolf/Papers/1076542/Shigeyuki_Kiharas_Faa_fafine_In_a_Manner_of_a_Woman_The_Photographic_Theater_of_Cross-Cultural_Encounter; accessed 25/08/2012