

# Yuki Kihara's 'A Song about Samoa サーモアについてのうた': Reimagining the Pacific through Japanese Relations

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## Abstract

Yuki Kihara's work 'サーモアについてのうた [Sāmoa no uta] 'A Song about Sāmoa' (2019) is a series of five installations, each made up of garments blending two traditions into one new medium: the siapo-kimono. Focussing on the first two series, 'Vasa' [Ocean] and 'Fanua' [Land], the present article discusses the ways in which this hybrid medium should be understood in terms of kimono culture, and in the context of other aesthetic appropriations of kimono, such as Serge Mouangue's WAfrica Project (2007-2017) and the 'Imagine Oneworld Kimono Project' (2005-2020). The siapo dimension of Kihara's work is subsequently explored with reference to Visessio Siasau's tapa installation, 'o onotu'ofe'uli- onotu'ofekula' (2014), and Dame Robin White's ngatu work, 'To See and to Know Are Not Necessarily the Same' (2021) which was created in collaboration with Taeko Ogawa and Ebonie Fifita. On the strength of this analysis, it is argued that Kihara's work does not seek to innovate the traditions of siapo and kimono so much as to engage with the contemporary political issues depicted on the siapo-kimono's surface. Kihara's work should thus be understood in terms of its political message and as a form of mural. The latter part of the article explores the implications of this idea, highlighting the way Kihara focuses on the Japanese influence in the Pacific, and asks finally whether 'A Song about Sāmoa' is in fact, Kihara's 'Guernica'.

## Introduction

In the preface to *The Social Life of Kimono* (2017), Sheila Cliffe describes how she had always considered herself "handicapped as a kimono wearer" because she had "no memories of family members wearing kimono", nor had she worn them "on Japanese ceremonial occasions when kimono is de rigueur" (xv). In fact, the kimono researcher prefaces her research by highlighting her position in 1985 as a newcomer to Japan and the world of kimono; underscoring her outsider status by noting that she had never inherited a kimono collection from "a grandmother, mother, or aunt" (p.xv).

In direct contrast, polymathic artist Yuki Kihara, when interviewed about the first phase of her work 'サーモアについてのうた [Samoa no uta] 'A Song about Samoa', tells the story of how she discovered her grandmother's kimono and was struck by the similarity of its brown fabric to that of Siapo, an iconic textile in Sāmoa. This connection proved to be the origin of the work as Kihara decided to create a series of kimono that combined the two backgrounds of her heritage. 'A song about Sāmoa' is founded, then, on her mutual belonging to Japanese and Sāmoan cultures through her father's Japanese and mother's Sāmoan backgrounds.

In the interview that features prominently on the Milford Gallery website (Milford Gallery, 2019), 'サーモアについてのうた [Samoa no uta] 'A Song about Samoa' is presented as an engagement with Kihara's personal heritage from an insider's perspective. This position of authenticity is reinforced by details of the research she undertook to create the hybrid siapo-kimono, rigorously engaging with craftspeople in both Japan and Sāmoa. Moreover, the making of the work is rooted in these traditional crafts, including working from home, alongside members of her family, and with skilled craftspeople from both the siapo and kimono traditions. In the same interview, Kihara explains the origins of the work's title. Referring to a Sāmoan melody dubbed over

with Japanese lyrics that was used in an NHK documentary about Sāmoa, Kihara describes how she found it ironic that this Sāmoan song was adapted for Japanese audiences. This is a polite way of indicating the cultural appropriation used by NHK to effectively domesticate the foreign song for its audience. Using a Sāmoan melody dubbed with Japanese lyrics is the perfect way to assimilate a largely unknown country in the South Pacific for Japanese consumption. Equally apt however is Kihara's reappropriation of this title for a work that presents a counter-vision of Sāmoa (and Japan) from what the artist describes as an "indigenous perspective" (Milford Gallery, 2019).

The title: 'サーモアについてのうた [Samoa no uta] 'A Song about Samoa' reminds viewers that Kihara's work belongs to both heritages, a position in relation to the work and its materials which is key to its functioning. Significantly, through Kihara's use of kana in the bilingual title, this act of reclaiming is inscribed with the mark of a cultural insider to both heritages. In other words, only Kihara could have made this work, and it is her deeply personal song that we hear expressed by it. By taking back the title, Kihara asserts her voice and uses it to sing a new song about Samoa (and Japan).

Replacing NHK's use of the Sāmoan melody, Kihara's work is the song of a mature artist whose nuanced message is precisely articulated. Not only is it a pointed reply to outsiders' views of Sāmoa as a timeless island paradise, but the work also challenges both Sāmoan and Japanese viewers to reconsider their relationship to one another. This challenge is articulated through the materiality of the siapo-kimono works, the panoramic imagery displayed on them, and their display as an installation within a gallery context.

This article explores these three dimensions of 'サーモアについてのうた [Samoa no uta] 'A Song about Samoa', arguing that Kihara presents a complex visual language that engages with multiple audiences in such a way as to surpass debates around identity. With its

strong ecological focus and historical reference points, Kihara provokes viewers to engage with contemporary political issues facing the Pacific in the fullness of their deeper historical origins. Moreover, through its use of nihonga style and the gallery context, Kihara engages with the very institutions within which her work is shown, transcending typical approaches to cross-cultural or ‘East

meets West’ hybridity. The aim of this article is therefore to explore the meanings and context of サモアについてのうた [Samoa no uta] ‘A Song about Samoa’ with the goal of amplifying its song and contextualising its various calls to arms within Kihara’s wider body of work.



**Fig. 1:** サ-モアのうた (Sāmoa no uta) a song about sāmōa - fanua (land) (2020/21)  
5-piece installation; samoan siapo, textiles, beads, shells, plastic, kimonos: 1750 x 1410 x 250 mm each, installation dimensions variable. Source: Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin.



**Fig. 2:** サ-モアのうた (Sāmoa no uta) a song about sāmōa - fanua (land) (2020/21)  
5-piece installation; samoan siapo, textiles, beads, shells, plastic, kimonos: 1750 x 1410 x 250 mm each, installation dimensions variable. Source:

## Siapo-Kimono

Lisa Wilkie (2020) presents the first appraisal of Kihara's work in a commentary in *Art News New Zealand*. In her presentation, the first five parts of 'A Song about Samoa' are described as the deliberate combination of two traditions: kimono and siapo.

Wilkie is attentive to Kihara's focus on the process of selection that such a combination involves, and the traditional contexts to which each craft belongs. The article presents a brief but careful account of the respective traditions; kimono tracing its origins to the Heian Period, siapo recalling its roots in South-East Asia and Pacific migrations. While kimono is presented as a "rich visual language" "retained and developed" since the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and whose wearers were involved in choices of fabrics and motifs would help them communicate within social codes, siapo "possess and display forms of knowledge that may be 'read' by those familiar with its cultural language" (2020, p.75). The work is thus described as a singular example of the blending two visual languages whose traditions must be negotiated. Wilkie presents Kihara's work as a hybrid that translates two distinct traditions into a unique form described as a combination of two codified visual languages.

As of writing, 'A Song about Samoa' is a collection of ten works exhibited as two series. Within the overall project, which forms a single work, one can imagine a further two phases composed of five *furisode* (long-sleeved) kimono each. The kimono are made of siapo and feature embroidered and beaded sections. They are exhibited on frames which display kimono as typically used in boutiques, departments stores, and museums. Each kimono is made from a single piece of siapo, but forms part of a wider image. Significantly, each series of five kimono forms part of one panoramic image. The first phase (Fig. 1) is called *vasa* (ocean), depicting the oceanscape off Saleapaga village in Upolu, a tourist destination and one of the hardest hit areas by a tsunami in 2009. The second phase (Fig. 2) is called *fanua* (land). It features landmarks in Apia being inundated by a combination of heavy rain and high tides (Milford Gallery 2021), an image of a bull on the Vaisigano bridge, and endangered species amid rising waters. The landscape is contiguous with the oceanscape, forming a collection of symbolically and historically charged images. The work commands attention at the level of the siapo-kimono fabric, at the level of the individual kimono, and as a panoramic vision.

At the level of the siapo-kimono fabric, as Wilkie notes, the combination of material and form involves the selection of traditional motifs that are integrated into the overall design. This process requires deliberate inclusion and exclusion of certain motifs and designs. Wilkie describes the combination of these designs to underline the affiliation of the work to both kimono and siapo traditions.

Kihara works with the symbolic representation of flowers (Fig. 3): the chrysanthemum being the symbol of the Japanese Imperial family, and the siapo designs of leaves and shells. However, when interviewed (Wilson 2019), she makes a point of explaining how the



**Fig. 3:** Kimono 3 of series 1, *Vasa*. Sky and ocean are composed of traditional Japanese and Sāmoan patterns. Source: Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin.

designs are a fusion of motifs used in siapo and kimono. For example, the siapo design incorporates cherry blossom leaves to create a hybrid interstitial form. Kihara's selection of motifs identifies her work with siapo and kimono traditions, marking them as both Sāmoan and Japanese, whilst intermingling them with hybrid forms that create new idioms within her dialogue with the two traditions. The effect of this approach creates an object that is both strange and familiar at the same time.

### Rethinking exoticism and the Siapo-kimono as an exotic object

An early theorist of exoticism, poet Victor Segalen (1878-1919) despised typical 19<sup>th</sup> century exoticism. His aversion to the cliché and superficial renderings of the world's diversity led him to theorise a new form of exoticism that he described as "*une esthétique du Divers*" or an aesthetic of Diversity. In his notes for a comprehensive essay on the subject, Segalen rejects the notion of the exotic as limited to tropical scenes or *couleur locale* and sought to define it as "that which shakes us from our everyday understanding of the world" [my translation] (Segalen, 1995, p.748). This process, however, relies on a recognition of something familiar and recognisable in that which we encounter, accompanied by a confrontation with something unrecognisable and completely other (p.767). It is this combination of partial identification with an object and the subsequent recognition of its alterity, which, according to Segalen, makes something exotic. It is this type of encounter that inspires the sensation of exoticism, in life as in art or music.

Segalen's conception of exoticism developed in opposition to typical 19<sup>th</sup> century images of the South Pacific. And his own depictions of Tahiti stood in opposition to Loti's idyllic scenes of Polynesia. Segalen's depiction of Tahiti in his novel *Les Immémoriaux* (1907), translated as *A Lapse of Memory*, undermines mythical imaginings of Tahiti as an Eden through its politicised and historical depictions of pre-contact Maohi society. His definition of exoticism can help us to articulate the sensation of familiarity and strangeness when encountering Kihara's work. On one hand, for some viewers the form of the kimono is recognisable, on the other, its siapo material is strange. On the other hand, for other viewers familiar siapo patterns and the image of a local beach are recognisable and familiar, yet they are portrayed on a kimono, which is strange. The siapo-kimono is therefore 'exotic' in the way that Segalen defined the term.

Moreover, as an exotic object, it functions to disrupt the viewer's habitual ways of seeing the world. For Segalen, such disruption was a revitalising force against the homogenisation of the world under the influence of colonialism and western modernity taking place at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For Kihara, making work in a 21<sup>st</sup> century context, the multiple points of reference and hybrid forms thoroughly disrupt the viewer's understanding of both kimono and siapo, whilst presenting a confronting image of Sāmoa. The image of the oceanscape is an example. For some viewers, the wave, as Wilkie notes, recalls Hokusai's Great Wave of Kanagawa, and the fe'e octopus is recognisably Japanese in a distinctive nihonga painting style. For others, the eel recalls the myth of Sila and the eel, an association reinforced by the floating coconut in the water. However, for yet other viewers, the coconut featuring on the same kimono is also a symbol of the Sāmoan diaspora resiliently migrating around the Pacific; a motif referenced by Kihara in her show *Coconuts that grew from Concrete* (2017). In this way, each part of the work engages different viewers in multiple ways, all of which are both strange and familiar. This is a feature that we contend can be understood as exotic in the Segalenian sense of the term. In response to this exoticism, one may ask how viewers are expected to engage with the work. Being at once a form of siapo, a type of kimono, and an art installation, how can the work be understood?

### Fashion systems and traditional dress

Cliffe's study of kimono mentioned in our introduction is helpful for answering this question. Cliffe approaches her study of kimono in terms of fashion. Her study is an analysis of historical and contemporary kimono as a 'clothing system' that aims to prove that kimono functions as a form of fashion, not as a form of traditional dress.

This project developed in response to art historians and fashion theorists, such as Liza Dalby (1993), who argue that traditional forms of dress cannot be considered fashion. The articulation of this position (Dalby, 1993, 65) is presented in her account of how kimono shifted from being everyday wear to 'traditional' attire in the Meiji period (1868-1912):

As Japanese politicians became disillusioned with European and American civilization in the 1890's, kimono staged a triumphant comeback as an expression of Japaneseness. In the end, however, the rehabilitation of kimono was only half a victory- its revival was primarily for women, and an expression of tradition rather than fashion. An official, national version of tradition, transcending regional variation, began to radiate from the Meiji regime, centred in Tokyo, Japan became obsessed with its 'national essence' and, in looking for essence, in effect created it. Language and education were becoming standardized. So was clothing. During the late Meiji, the kimono could still assert itself, yet in taking up the banner of tradition, kimono pointed the way to its future fate.

In western fashion theory, 'traditional' dress styles have been considered to exist as the polar opposite to 'fashionable' clothing. Whereas European clothes change shape rapidly within a system of modern industrial production, non-western traditional styles of clothing do not alter their shape and are produced through craft (Cliffe 2017). Cliffe's study is thus a direct challenge to this opposition between modern European fashion and traditional non-European dress. This is significant because African, Indian, and East Asian clothes, as well as Pacific dress, are considered to express traditional craft and folk identity that excludes fashion by definition. This fashion-tradition opposition was then deployed in accounts of non-western dress styles to attribute their modernity to the influence of European cultures. Kimono and Siapo could then be grasped as typical examples of 'traditional', 'premodern' and distinctively 'non-western' forms of dress that became symbols of traditional dress in a nation that modernised through contact with the West. Part of the ongoing definition of these dress styles is that they are not subject to changing fashions but remain unchanging and consistent, making them capable of communicating the essence of a culture.

This familiar dichotomy informs Wilkie's presentation of Kihara's work in *Art News New Zealand*. She aligns the work with traditional dress – which is considered as non-western traditional craft. Quite correctly, this approach highlights Kihara's integration of her work into the two traditions from which it has developed. Discussion of the work's origins in the kimono in the Heian period and the heritage of Siapo as a traditional craft provide a neat account of the work as the harmonious melding of two compatible systems that belong to non-western traditional crafts. Part and parcel of this traditional heritage is their functioning as a form of highly contextualised visual communication. Wilkie presents Kihara's work as exploring the in-betweenness that such a hybrid siapo-kimono can embody. She argues that, for Kihara, this is an expression of the Pacific way of conceiving of the space in-between as the *vā*, which is compatible with the Japanese concept of *ma* 間 or space in Japanese. This presentation of Kihara's work is effective in drawing our attention to the complementarity which exists between the Sāmoan and the Japanese dimensions of the work, and in their underlying epistemologies, both of which view space as relating rather than separating objects. It is indeed true that Kihara's work brings Japanese and Sāmoan culture into relation to one another causing viewers to rethink



their understanding of the relationship between both cultures.

Nevertheless, Wilkie's reading, continues to rely on the underlying opposition between modern western fashion, and premodern non-western traditional forms of dress. This means that, by focusing on Kihara's work as a hybrid between two traditional cultures / visual languages, kimono are treated as "traditional" and "timeless" carriers of an essential Japaneseness, which, historically speaking, was a product of the Meiji era efforts to define Japanese "traditional" and "modern" national identities. To better understand how Kihara's work avoids falling into the familiar grooves of such established oppositions: East-West, art-craft, modern-traditional, it is instructive to compare the siapo-kimono to other hybrid forms of kimono.

### WAfrica Project – Serge Mouangue (2007-2017)

In 2007, a designer and artist from Cameroon, Serge Mouangue developed a hybrid kimono design. Describing his work, Mouangue states (2017):

As a designer, I give shape to things. My official job in Japan was creating concept cars for Nissan, but the artist in me thought, I can't leave here if I haven't produced something that tells the story of my life in this country. The first thing I did was to take something iconic from Japan — a kimono — and something iconic from West Africa — brightly patterned wax-print cotton — which I merged into an item that would tell not just a story of two cultures, but a new story in and of itself. It doesn't belong only to Africa or to Japan, but carves out its own new territory, a third aesthetic.

Mouangue's combination relies on the introduction of West-African fabric into a kimono form, with additions to the *obi* or belt. The designer describes the areas of compatibility that he exploited in the creation of his collection (2017):

When I lived in Japan, I was often astonished at the many things that felt familiar to me. Animism — the belief that a living spirit is in nature, a god is everywhere — is very strong in both cultures. Social hierarchy and understanding a person's age and rank are also very important, along with the use of ceremonies and rituals to hold society together. Of course, there are also major cultural differences, like with planning. I found that life in Japan is typically scheduled, where Africans are much more spontaneous.

For Mouangue, the compatibility of traditional cultures and the resonances between their forms of visual communication allows for the creation of a third-aesthetic expressive of his identity and experience across cultures.

The WAfrica project potentially engages with Hommi K. Bhabha's notion of the "third space". It could present a critical approach conceived to reveal the socially constructed nature of identity and challenge exclusions based upon their supposed naturalness. It could create a third space that presents an alternative and counterexample to what one imagines were natural or essential qualities of kimono. And yet, in Mouangue's case, although the kimono is reimagined using West-African fabric, it does not question the idea that the kimono is essentially Japanese. Rather, it is an expression of his West-African encounter with Japan



**Fig. 4:** Serge Mouangue Kimono made of wax-printed cotton. Source : <https://ideas.ted.com/a-deft-beautiful-blend-of-west-african-and-japanese-design-and-culture/>

which has resulted in a happy synthesis of two distinct cultures. The kimono (Fig. 4) is West-African in its materiality, whilst retaining the traditional form of the kimono. Consequently, it does not express an in-betweenness designed to highlight the constructed nature of conceptions of 'Japaneseness' but explores the complementarity of traditional aesthetics and culture. In other words, the Cameroonian designer uses the term 'third aesthetic' to describe a synthesis of two largely complimentary fashion systems that says 'Look, a West-African kimono is possible'. It is thus an example of an exotic form of kimono.

This approach is evident in two further works; the first being a carving of a West-African figure supplemented with Japanese lacquer, the second being the introduction of elements from West-African shamanism into a performance of Japanese tea ceremony. Significantly, in describing these two works, Mourangue (2017) points out his collaboration with a Japanese master craftsman:

Next, I decided to combine two specific cultural treasures: thrones and lacquer. In a series called "Blood Brothers," I took vintage wooden stools — a traditional African item — that had been hand-carved by Pygmy sculptors in southeastern Cameroon and brought them to Masaru Okawara, a ninth-generation lacquer artisan in Japan. The lacquering, which involved applying layers of tree sap followed by rounds of polishing, was a 21-step, two-year process. To me, the project represented the new and enlightened international consciousness that can emerge when unique treasures are juxtaposed.

The synthesis of the traditional crafts was created to highlight "an enlightened international consciousness". In the same way, the integration of shamanism into a performance of the Japanese tea ceremony highlights the similarity and complementarity to ways of seeing the world in animism, Shinto and the type of esoteric experience possible through Zen Buddhist elements of the tea ceremony.

The synthesis of materials and techniques from different traditions certainly produces interesting effects and yet, it only appears radical when traditional arts and crafts or folk cultures are assumed to be pure unchanging forms that reflect the essential aspects of a national culture. This understanding of kimono and arts such as tea ceremony (Chanoyu), fails to appreciate the former as a living contemporary form of fashion, and the latter as an



**Fig. 5:** Independent State of Samoa. Imagine Oneworld Kimono Project (2005-2020) Source: [https://www.reddit.com/r/Samoa/comments/opz0em/samoa\\_design\\_for\\_the\\_imagine\\_one\\_world\\_kimono/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Samoa/comments/opz0em/samoa_design_for_the_imagine_one_world_kimono/)

ongoing practice with contemporary forms. Cliffe's research into historical and contemporary kimono demonstrates this fact that kimono is not a static form of traditional dress but has evolved in multiple and dynamic ways as part of a Japanese system of fashion which continues to grow today. The significance of this point is that the use of kimono as a shorthand for Japaneseness is a reflection of the view that kimono are iconic, traditional and static. Kihara is not using the Kimono as a short-hand for Japaneseness, but in the same breath, her siapo-kimono are not engaging with kimono as a form of contemporary fashion. In this regard, the hybrid nature of the kimono, and its display become increasingly important to the work.

Mourangue combines one traditional element with another to create a hybrid 'third aesthetic' that displays the complementarity of the two cultural elements. It is an expression of sythnthesis and a transcendent perspective. However, in the history of kimono, it can be viewed as simply the addition of one more dying technique, pattern, and fabric. In other words, Mourangue's West-African kimono could equally be described as kimono with African designs. Thus, although Mourangue argues that the "enlightened international culture" made conceivable through his works is more necessary than ever to combat rising nationalism, his work serves to demonstrate the way that kimono, and Japanese culture more broadly, can incorporate other cultural elements, and assimilate them to its own forms, as it has done throughout its history.

### ***Imagine Oneworld Kimono Project (2005-2020)***

The Imagine Oneworld Kimono project was inspired by the 2020 Tokyo Olympic games. A private organisation based in Japan set out in 2005 to design 213 kimono, representing each nation competing in the Olympics, and some additional categories. The kimono have a standard long-sleeve shape (furisode), but were designed by different Japanese kimono designers who were given broad guidelines. Each kimono is effectively a themed garment and makes up part of the collective.

In one sense, this project is paradoxical. Inspired by John Lennon's song "Imagine", it seeks to go beyond national, ethnic, and religious boundaries to posit a singular unified world. On the other hand, each design reinscribes national boundaries and symbols through their incorporation into the kimono's design. The project demonstrates an extraordinary assimilation of national symbols into kimono fashion. Samoa, for example, is presented using shades of blue, hibiscus flowers and the southern cross motif. The obi belt features red ginger flowers and panadus leaves.

The thematic nature of the Oneworld Kimono project allows Japanese kimono designers to display their craft, while drawing inspiration from their imagined source country. As in typical use of exotic external elements, the periphery stimulates and reinvigorates the centre. The criticism here is not that the Oneworld project is appropriating other cultures, or that its attempt to transcend national differences effectively reinscribes them. It is that the approach adopted by the Oneworld Kimono project is ethnocentric; subtly asserting the centrality of Japan and the fundamental importance of kimono. Its attempt to transcend national boundaries basically incorporates a vision of the world of nation states and their symbols into a distinctly Japanese national form, the Japaneseness of which is at once downplayed and celebrated. To clearly see this, one may imagine two alternative approaches to achieving the same goal. The first is the opening ceremony of the Olympics when athletes enter the stadium wearing national uniforms. All united and yet all distinct through their national identities. The other would be a project that, in celebrating the Tokyo Olympics, would invite designers and crafts people from around the world to design a garment that reflected "Tokyo 2020" from diverse perspectives. In such a project, one might imagine a west African kimono that combined Cameroonian printing on cotton and the highly recognisable form of the kimono. As it turned out, the Oneworld kimono for Cameroon featured tribal designs printed on silk, with an obi featuring indigenous butterflies (Koikishu, N.D.).

The point of this critical discussion of attempts to create an international consciousness through hybrid forms of national dress is not to cynically strike down their idealism, but to highlight how they actually reinscribe the importance of national identity and its symbolism, as well as reinscribing oppositions between western and non-western, art and craft, modern and primitive. In this regard, they represent the contemporary variant of a very old form of exoticism that uses the periphery and the 'other' to reinforce the centre and the discourses that sustain it. Although the Oneworld Kimono project is a wonderful platform for kimono designers on the global stage that highlights the beauty of traditional kimono design, it also distracts from the contemporary and more innovative forms of kimono that are highlighted in Cliffe's study of kimono understood as a clothing system, as fashion. For the traditional image of kimono, the one linked essentially to 'Japaneseness', is but one narrow tradition whose importance and links to nation were solidified in the Meiji period (Cliffe, 2017).

### Siapo-kimono: Materiality and Form

Returning to サーモアについてのうた [Samoa no uta] 'A Song about Samoa', it is immediately clear that Kihara's work is not part of this type of this exoticism or the idealised internationalism that it promotes.

One detail that demarcates the work is its presentation of the kimono as a series of interrelated art installations. In Morangue's WAfrica project and the Oneworld Kimono project, the kimono are modelled by non-Japanese and Japanese models, presented on fashion runways and displayed as exhibits. This presentation reveals the different elements of the kimono, including the *obi* or belt and the under garments. In contrast, Kihara's kimono are deliberately not modelled, and it is only the single outer layer of the kimono which is on display. It is not known to the viewer which colour undergarments will be worn, or how the siapo-kimono will be combined with a belt. Though it is common for kimono to be displayed on their own, without under garments or obi, such presentation is used in boutiques, museums, and exhibitions. It transforms the kimono into objects of visual consumption and separates them from the clothing system of which they were or are potentially will be part.

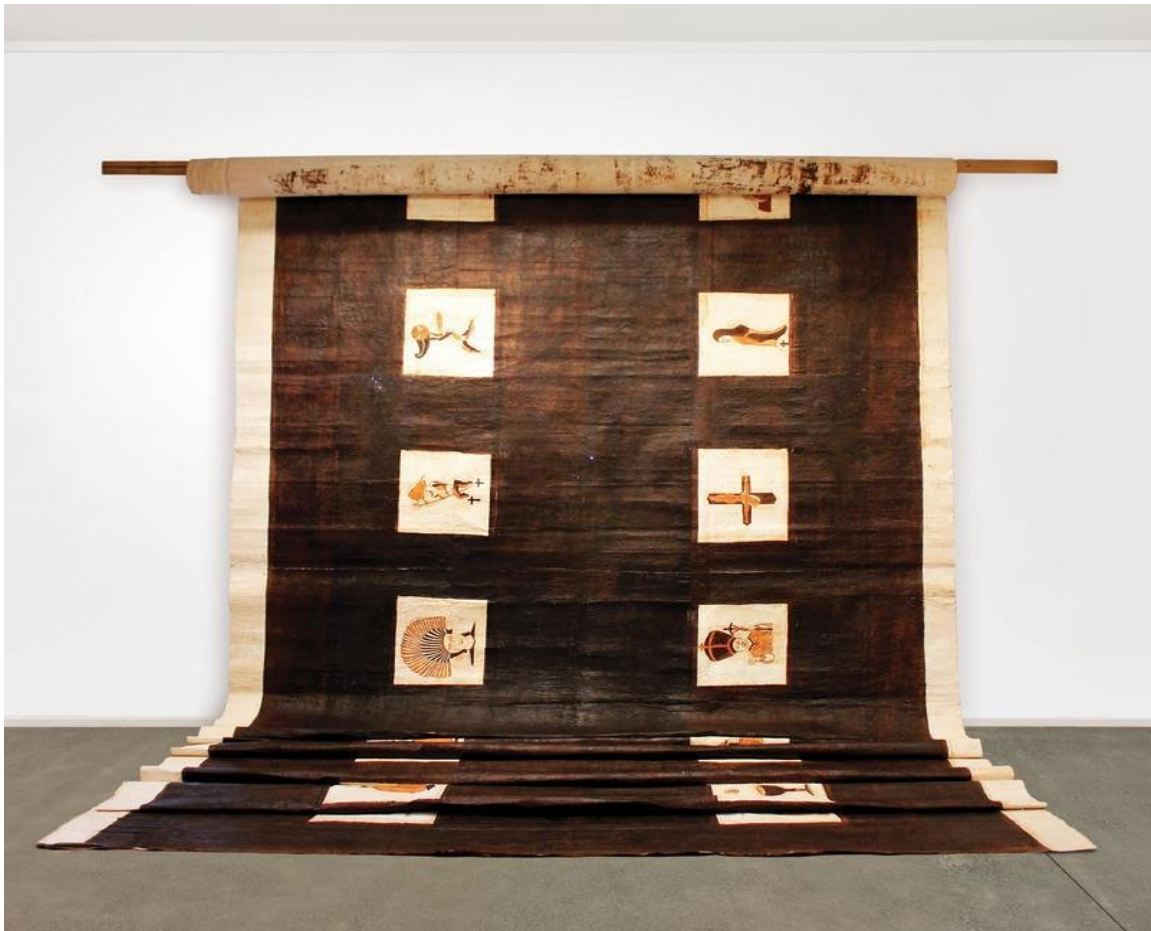
In the Milford Gallery exhibition of サーモアについてのうた [Samoa no uta] 'A Song about Samoa', the first five kimono were installed with her grandmother's kimono displayed within the same space. The work is therefore presented with its origin story, including a photograph of her grandmother wearing a crested family kimono. Such a curatorial choice is important for our understanding of the work. The kimono are presented as descendants of authentic kimono, and the hybrid nature of the siapo-kimono fabric is highlighted. This new form of kimono has its roots in an authentic garment with patrilineal origins. The viewer is encouraged to see the work as a form of hybrid kimono, and not as a radical form of siapo. Accordingly, examples of authentic or traditional siapo are not displayed in the gallery, nor are images of Kihara's Sāmoan family.

Clearly, the origin story that accompanies the work provides an accessible and important key to the work. However, this story nevertheless influences our view of the work as an art installation. The viewer is encouraged to see サーモアについてのうた [Samoa no uta] 'A Song about Samoa' as a series of kimono, made of siapo, that use a fusion of traditional designs from two traditions to create a unique vision of Sāmoa and Japan. And yet, the work is not presented as a collection of garments within a clothing system with distinctly Japanese characteristics, but as a surface on which a broader image is presented. In this respect, the kimono is reduced to the formal dimension, while siapo provides its material aspect.

This raises the question: Should we view Kihara's work as siapo in the form of kimono?

### Contemporary Installation and Painting using Tapa and Ngatu

Winner of the Paramount Award in the 2015 Wallace Art Awards, Visessio Siasau is a Tongan artist working with ngatu, a form of bark cloth or tapa, akin to siapo. His work 'o onotu'ofe'uli-onotu'ofekula' completed in 2014 is an example of a contemporary installation drawing on traditional materials and Tongan epistemology. It is a large-scale installation that confronts the viewer by its scale and the depth of its



**Fig. 6:** Visessio Siasau Tongan Tapa Cloth 'o onotu'ofe'uli- onotu'ofekula Tongan customary pigments and dye on bark cloth, 18060 x 4040mm, Wallace Collection, Auckland.

subject matter: creation. As Lisa Wilkie's interpretation of Kihara's work discussed above illustrates, Kihara's work can be encountered as the deployment of traditional siapo and Sāmoan epistemology in the modern gallery context. However, in contrast to Siasau's work that presents the tapa suspended on the wall and able to be unrolled, Kihara uses siapo within its function as material for clothing.

While Siasau's work leads to an encounter with an almost overpowering scale of ngatu, Kihara integrates the siapo into the form of the kimono, combining the traditional designs with her new combinations. The materiality of the siapo is therefore contained in its role as support for the patterned surface, onto which the broader image is painted.

This submission of the material of the siapo and the form of the kimono to their supporting role for the broader image establishes a clear hierarchy in the encounter with the Kihara's work. It is first and foremost an art installation, and in this respect, is comparable to Siasau's work. However, due to the use of nihonga style painting and the creation of a series of contiguous images, it could be argued that Kihara presents less a series of kimono, than a collection of large-scale paintings on siapo.

Another artist who combines ngatu and painting is Dame Robin White. Her work provides yet another

informative comparison that allows us to consider how to approach サモアについてのうた [Samoa no uta] 'A Song about Samoa'.

Kihara's use of siapo is similar to the use of ngatu by Dame Robin White's works shown in the McLeavey Gallery in Wellington, as part of her exhibition *Aio Ngaira (This is Us)*. As Robert Leonard (2022) notes:

White's eclectic ngatu combine different traditions (Fijian and Tongan) and draw their imagery from here and there. They bridge the customary and the contemporary, the individual and the collective. While they have a cross-cultural dimension, they are also a product of the artists' Bahi'i faith, which stresses the fundamental human unity underpinning cultural diversity (p.85).

Leonard's account of White's works explains the familiar process through which they were created from a collaboration between the artist and a group of master craftspeople. Moreover, the work itself has been created in a dialogue with Matisse in reference to that artist's sojourn in Tahiti. This context is important because Robin White's ngatu engage in a dialogue across time and space that integrates memories, imaginaries, objects and materials to create works that reinterpret White's own prints from earlier moments in her artistic journey. The collapsing of time and space into the images, which depict rooms filled with objects painted on ngatu, whilst incorporating elements of customary design into the picture, results in a painting that resembles overhearing a conversation. The works depict hybrid spaces into





**Fig. 7:** Robin White with Taeko Ogawa and Ebonie Fifita, *To See and to Know Are Not Necessarily the Same* 2021, earth pigment, ink, plant-based liquid medium, and soot on barkcloth (masi), 1860×2200mm, collection Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Source: <https://www.artnews.co.nz/profile-spring-summer-2021/>

which the viewer is invited, and which one must explore and decode. One striking work, created with Taeko Ogawa and Ebonie Fifita, *To See and to Know are Not Necessarily the Same* (2021) provides us with a striking comparison with Kihara's サーモアについてのうた [Samoa no uta] 'A Song about Samoa'. Both works combine siapo and ngatu traditions in distinct ways that are exceptionally well integrated into the work. Both works use perspective to present an image of a space. However, whereas White presents enclosed, almost, timeless rooms, Kihara's spaces are rich in their particularity and familiar in their use of symbolic locations and landmarks. Both works are highly readable and invite the process of visual decoding. Moreover, both works insist on their materiality whilst reducing its role to support of a larger image. In other words, White's world of enclosed rooms serve as a contrast to Kihara's broad vision of Sāmoa and Japan which jump out at the viewer through their use of colour, dramatic imagery, and nihonga painting style. Rather than intimate and closed spaces, Kihara presents an expansive vision that is distinctly political – images of bleached coral and flooding highlight the effects of climate change, while floating coke cans and the image of the bull point the finger at global capitalism.

In this article so far, we have briefly compared Kihara's siapo-kimono with other adaptations of kimono and artworks that have used ngatu. The point of this contextualisation has been to better understand how to approach the work. In this respect, it is argued that Kihara's use of the siapo-kimono material-form, and its installation within the gallery space should lead us to

consider the work as a form of large-scale painting featuring distinctly political content. Accordingly, rather than a collection of kimono or an artistic appropriation of siapo depicting a statement about hybrid identity, we argue that Kihara's work should be understood in the context of another type of large scale politically informed painting genre: the mural.

### Kihara's *Guernica*?

The viewer encounters サーモアについてのうた [Samoa no uta] 'A Song about Samoa' either directly in an exhibition space, or indirectly via images and videos of the work online. In both types of encounter the kimono are presented as a series whose visual impact is reinforced by the mounted display which transforms the individual garments into one mural-like picture plain. The material dimension of the works also becomes secondary to the surface created, especially when viewed online where viewers have limited ability to examine the detailing of the *siapo* material. The question thus becomes: If read as a mural, what is Kihara's message and how can it be understood?

In the study *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940*, Leonard Folgarait begins by situating his analysis within a global context. In Europe in the 1920's and 1930's nationalistic and revolutionary forms of cultural processes which relied on promotion and distribution by and for the state developed in Italy, Germany, the Soviet Union. While Italian fascism developed its nationalistic aesthetic through an all-encompassing mix of architectural modernism and various other art forms, German national socialism



**Fig. 8:** 'Mural combining the origin narrative and the experience of the dictatorship'

Source: Cortés, A. (September 2016) *The Resurgence of Collective Memory, Truth, And Justice Mobilizations: Part 2: Artistic and Cultural Resistance. Latin American Perspectives*, 43(5), 71.

(nazism) focused on themes that valorised the Fatherland, and enforced hierarchies based on race, gender, and class. These were depicted within strict forms of classical realism and cinematic propaganda. In the Soviet Union, an early period derived from Cubism and the avant-garde gradually gave way to an academic realism considered to best express the ideals of communism. In the United States, state-sponsored art in the 1930's provides both a contrast to and convergence with the nationalist propaganda in Europe. As Folgarait notes: "As a response to the Depression, official policies of President Roosevelt's New Deal, especially the Federal Art Project, addressed a nation in need of social, economic, and cultural healing" (p.3). This translated into a combination of nationalistic posters, mural paintings, and other types of public art that were distinctly political in their motivations and distribution. They expressed patriotism and nationalism in a style described as "modernist realism" which "conflated traditional and progressive strands of state ideology" (p.3).

What this brief contextualisation shows is that whether on the political left or right, in the 1920s and 1930s a range of nationalistic forms of public art were developed by states that sought to consolidate "new" national identities for themselves. Public art was therefore created and distributed in myriad intertextual forms. The mural was central to these multidimensional combinations of media.

The mural, however, is by no means exclusively linked to state sponsored institutional artwork but has a counterpart in grassroots political movements and graffiti. In the Chilean context, for example, though inspired by the Mexican post-revolutionary works of Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco, murals in La Victoria, a

blue-collar part of Santiago, play a key role in what Alexis Cortés calls "a politics of popular memory" (2016, p.63). This term describes an ongoing process in which murals originally painted under the Allende dictatorship (1973-1990) are repeatedly painted to reinscribe the memory of those who were disappeared, as well as to signal the resistance of those locals still engaged in ongoing political struggle. Cortés demonstrates how the murals form a central part of the local imaginary, and while forged in opposition to the dictatorship, they have continued to be painted in the struggle against "mechanisms of amnesia set in motion by the official truths imposed by the compromised democratic transition" (p.63). Cortés describes the role murals play in an ongoing struggle within the community to preserve its understanding of the past, one that the ruling elites and government officials would most readily have the public forget. By maintaining the practice of painting and then repainting the erased murals, locals in La Victoria are engaged in a symbolic struggle for ideological control. One key battleground for such struggles is the field of collective memory, another is the field of collective dreams and aspirations. As Cortés concludes:

The murals of La Victoria may be seen as a permanent source of creative renovation of muralism in general for their special role in the re-creation of the territorial identity of the neighbourhood, proposing a particular signification of the relationship between the past, present, and future, acting as one of the main repertoires in pobladores' politics of memory. On the walls of this neighbourhood, a new graphic discursive style problematizes the present and even provides direction for the future (p.75).

Although the viewer encounters サーモアについてのうた [Samoa no uta] 'A Song about Samoa' as an installation in a gallery or online, the mural-like effect created by the combination of the works simultaneously recalls the state-sponsored institutionalised artworks of the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the grassroots activism of urban street art illustrated by muralism in La Victoria. In other words, Kihara charts a course that draws on both high and low forms of artwork and craft (the street and the institution) to engage in an aesthetics / politics that is rooted in her own personal idiom, the siapo-kimono. Her work is engaged with questions of Sāmoan identities and grass roots ecological struggles.

In this respect, it is worth casting our mind's eye back to Kihara's first major work called 'Bombacific', which was purchased in 1995 by the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Known as the "Graffiti Dress", the work performs the same high-low combination of street wear and high fashion through its materials and form. The dress, made of Dupont Lycra and other fabrics, features fabric decorated with graffiti bands by artist Vito Malo. For Kihara, the text and images in the graffiti reflect the negotiation of two-worlds: "Aotearoa's urban Pacific subculture and the life and customs of their home islands" (Arts online TKI). The dress is, in fact, a reimagined mu'umu'u (a long, loose-hanging dress) that reflects the negotiated identities of urban Pacific youth who are part of Pacific diasporas in New Zealand. Kihara designed the dress for a Dupont sponsored competition and the work was subsequently purchased by Te Papa. The importance of the work is signalled by

its inclusion on an official New Zealand Ministry of Education website, which features the work in teaching materials for high school students. 'Bombacific', which plays on the idea of a graffiti bomb and evokes nuclear testing in the Pacific which was still being undertaken by France in the mid-1990s, was a provocative statement by the then emerging artist. Through this work, Kihara asserted the dynamism of Pacific youth and affirmed their dual identities. The intersectional nature of the dress – somewhere between urban streetwear, conventional Pacific dress, and high fashion – allowed Kihara to voice her own identity as a young person from the Pacific living in urban Aotearoa, and hence, astride worlds.

In a more nuanced fashion, through the evocation of the mural, サーマオについてのうた [Samoa no uta] 'A Song about Samoa' performs a similar type of intersectionality that is no less political in its message. Moreover, in both the Graffiti Dress 'Bombacific' and the siapo-kimono, Kihara succeeds in creating her own distinctive idiom through which to express her aesthetic / political vision.

#### **Vasa - the first phase of サーマオについてのうた [Samoa no uta] 'A Song about Samoa'**

'Vasa' presents an oceanscape that inspires reflection upon identity, migration, and the effects of climate change in Sāmoa. Despite the beautiful colours and sequined adornment of the kimono, this series of five kimono forms an image permeated by death.

The fifth kimono in the series (when viewed from right to left) features Saleapaga beach with its palms, beach *fale*, *tuli* birds, and the image of a sea turtle. It contains the elements of a tourist destination, which at first glance, offer the unwary viewer a stereotypical image of the Pacific islands. On closer inspection, however, the turtle is attempting to eat a plastic bag.

A foundational piece of symbolism in Polynesia, the turtle could be read as a reference to the legend of Fonueau and Salofa, a sublime tale of how a blind woman and her daughter are forced into the ocean to escape starvation, but ultimately return to the beach in the form of a shark and turtle. As Nina Jones (2022) recounts in one version of the story:

One year, villages near her home suffered the effects of a great famine. Because of her blindness Fonueau was not able to find food. After many days of intense hunger, she and her daughter smelled the wonderful aroma of soi as it baked in the ground ovens of the village. Foneau and Salofa waited for food to be brought by villagers, but it never arrived.

The woman and her daughter were so desperate, they decided to cast their fate upon the sea. The mother took her child by the hand and together they jumped off the cliff into the surf below.

As they swam to the surface, their bodies transformed. One became a turtle and the other a shark. They swam away from the villagers who did not care for them. When they arrived in Vaitogi, a village in American Samoa, they resumed their human forms. They were welcomed with food and clothing by Chief Letuli and his people.

The two women were so appreciative of the chief's tender care that they vowed to return to the ocean to live just beyond the cliffs, returning when called upon to dance and entertain the villagers.



**Fig. 9:** Graffiti Dress 'Bombacific', 1995. Museum of Source: New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa number FE010561 TLF resource R3716.

They left a beautiful song with the Samoans that could be used when the shark or turtle were needed. Today, when villagers gather along the shore of that legendary site and sing the sweet melody, it is said that a turtle and a shark appear.

The bittersweet legend contrasts the cruel indifference of one set of villagers with the kindness of another. The kind villagers would sing a beautiful song to the ocean and in appreciation, the turtle and shark would appear in the lagoon. Though not a direct reference to the myth, Kihara may well be associating the sublime tragedy of the story with the reality for sea turtles in the waters around Sāmoa. Sadly, sea turtles often starve to death having eaten plastic pollution thinking it is food. Further, for those familiar with the story, the turtle can be understood as a reminder of the moral injunction of the tale to show kindness and solidarity to those less fortunate in difficult times. This image of the turtle is then a resonant one, provoking the viewer who is accused of indifference to the fate of endangered sea life. Indeed, it is the same sense of culpability one may feel when coming across images on the internet of sea turtles pursuing plastic bags, and other sea creatures trapped in plastic debris. Kihara invokes such imagery through her work, which presents a mix of symbolic traditional motifs and the popular western imaginary full of internet images of sea turtles (Fig. 6). The beautifully printed image of a turtle is, therefore, a haunting reminder of environmental degradation, and a sharp criticism of people's indifference.





**Fig. 10:** Part 5 of series 1, Vasa. Source: Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin.



**Fig. 12:** Part 4 of series 1, Vasa. Source: Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin.



**Fig. 11:** Change.org image. Source: <https://www.change.org/p/walmart-save-the-sea-turtles-by-banning-plastic-bags>

In a broader sense, the story of Fonueau and Salofa, can also be read as signalling another instance of misrecognition. Foneau was unable to find food despite being able to smell it. Her blindness could thus be interpreted as alluding to the contemporary fate, not only of the marine life in Sāmoa but also to a nation overdependent on tourism. The subverted image of the tropical paradise is, in fact, an easily recognisable tourist setting due to the beach *fale* depicted in the background. These shelters provide shelter for tourists but do not constitute a home for local people. In other words, tourism, like a plastic bag, presents the false promise of nourishment for Sāmoa, but could very well lead to the destruction of the nation's economic foundation.

Although this reading of the beach scene is possibly stretching the critical interpretation of the work, through her interweaving of myth and images from the global imagination Kihara questions two key aspects of life in contemporary Sāmoa (as it exists within a process of globalisation). Kihara fearlessly points out the

potentially catastrophic overreliance on tourism in the Pacific and accuses the wider tourist industry of indifference to the degradation of life in the moana.

The fourth kimono (Fig. 12) features a crayfish, a floating coke can, and Pacific golden plovers or *tuli*, migratory birds which fly from Sāmoa to Alaska via Japan. The entire series of the kimono can be read in conjunction with one another. These birds not only form a visual connection, but also link Sāmoa and Japan through their migratory patterns, underlining the connection that Kihara embodies in her own life. The *Tuli* thus remind the viewer that her work seeks to point out the ongoing relationship between the two countries, one based on historical migration and more recently, international aid and development projects.

In the fifth kimono (Fig. 10) the *tuli* on the beach is scavenging on the remains of a crab, Kihara links this bird to the fourth kimono through her depiction of a crayfish. This comparison between the bird eating the remains of a crustacean, and its richer counterpart roaming on the reef with a *tuli* soaring above, suggests the riches and abundance available through migration. The *tuli* are migratory birds that leave the islands to breed and prosper. In this sense, they can be interpreted as symbolic of the success of the Sāmoan diaspora finding wealth in the Pacific rim and further abroad, whilst regularly returning home and sending money through remittances. The slim pickings on the beach (crabs) are contrasted with the rich wealth available overseas (the crayfish).

This migratory imagery highlights the role that remittance payments play in the Sāmoan economy and the importance of the diaspora, which is part of this





**Fig. 13:** Part 3 of series 1, Vasa. Source : Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin.

migratory dimension to Sāmoan life. Finally, in contrast to the non-descript plastic bag causing harm to the sea turtle, the red can with a logo is without question Coca-Cola. It therefore symbolises American or Western corporate interests and globalisation more broadly. In this respect, it is possible to read the floating can as a source of wealth (as symbolised by the crayfish), but also as a recognisable form of pollution.

Extending her reflection on the influence of Western culture and the globalisation, Kihara juxtaposes the floating can of coke with the floating coconut. The dialogue between the two objects is important. Kihara nuances her symbolic representation of the West, by indicating that the US is not simply a source of cultural and material pollution, but the destination country for members of the diaspora who are represented by the floating coconut drifting away to take root abroad and subsequently becoming suppliers of Western influences from corporate America. The material and cultural pollution is part of this complex image of Sāmoan identity which exists within global networks, one that is inextricably bound to migration in search of opportunity, and to the creation of a diasporic nation entangled with Western influences, both positive and negative.

The ambivalent image of the West is compounded in the third and central kimono of the series. What the western viewer may have anticipated to be a rich seascape of tropical fish replete with multicoloured corals, turns out to be an image of death. In an interview discussing the work (Milford Gallery, 2021), Kihara points out that the skull is, in fact, recalling a local rumour, according to which the bodies of the victims washed away from Saleapaga in a major tsunami in 2009 may still remain lodged in the reef. Kihara completed research into the extent of coral bleaching and hence imagined the



**Fig. 14:** Part 2 of series 1, Vasa. Source : Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin.

seascape as a site of “devastation”, which (needless to say) is due to the impacts of climate change in the form of rising temperatures and more frequent and more intense weather events.

This central image in the series reflects Kihara’s desire to undermine the rose-tinted visions of tropical island paradises in the minds of tourists. The reality that she wishes to highlight is one marked by death and decline due to global processes that have disproportionate effects on Pacific-island nations. Coral bleaching is an excellent example of a pernicious and widespread issue that remains obscured by promotional images for the tourism industry. This imagery is important then, as it highlights Kihara’s concern for the environment and her mission to confront viewers with such uncomfortable realities. Though much less visible than imagery of the destruction caused by tropical cyclones and tsunamis, coral bleaching and plastic pollution are no less devastating. The seductive colours and the beautiful design of the siapo-kimono surface attract viewers who are then disabused of their illusions.

The second kimono can be read in terms of the myth of Sila and the eel (Fig. 14). A foundational story throughout the Pacific, Sila and the eel is told in many versions. While the tale explains the transformation of the eel into the coconut palm, it is also an image of death in the sense that the eel transgresses his relationship with Sila, with whom he falls in love, and is killed. Clearly, the eel is not a symbol of death and devastation as depicted in the third kimono, but it presents a deep mythical root that unites the Pacific. It is instantly recognisable to Pacific viewers, in the same way as the playful dolphins in the waves are for global audiences. If the eel evokes a clear mythical and familiar story, the image of dolphins in the waves is another image that



**Fig. 15:** Part 1 of series 1, Vasa. The Fe'e or Octopus.

Source: Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin.

recalls copious tourist brochures and promotional videos throughout the Pacific

Finally, we can turn to the fe'e or octopus, that intelligent and sensitive creature renowned for its transformative abilities and flexibility. Could there be a more fitting metaphor for the artist herself? Or alternatively, a joyous and optimistic image of a creature and a people that has demonstrated its ability to adapt and transform its traditions and culture throughout the diaspora? Speculation aside, if viewers turn to Sāmoan mythology to understand the connection between the Fe'e and the underworld, they will discover that the fe'e is roaming the depths looking for the ungrateful rat who insulted him; and that it can harness the powers of the underworld. In this respect, the fe'e represents the passage to the underworld, that dimension coexisting with our own familiar world.

Earlier in this article, it was suggested that Kihara's work presents viewers with an installation that is 'exotic' in the Victor Segalen's sense of the term. Segalen was not interested in "mystery" or cliché notions of difference that characterise the Other as strange or mysterious. Rather, Segalen theorised the exotic as an encounter with a source of alterity, the depths of which could not be fathomed. In his reflection on the exotic encounter, one that he understood as an engagement with 'Diversity', Segalen describes the experience of encountering something which is momentarily recognisable but then undeniably different. The Other reveals itself in its difference, as a source of alterity, which lies beyond the comprehension of the subject. For Segalen, the effect of such an encounter is a feeling of deep shock that marks one's recognition of the unbridgeable distance which exists between oneself and

the Other. The French poet elevates this experience to the realm of the sacred, likening the experience to a religious encounter, a revelation. The encounter with the exotic is a source of revitalisation and recognition of the self. Indeed, for Segalen, it is only via an encounter with such sources of alterity that one can truly glimpse the self. For Segalen, diversity is thus described as "*le Divers*", which, as Marc Gontard has argued, should be understood phenomenologically as a passing from the dimension of particulars of being to an encounter in the realm of Being itself (Gontard 1993). Segalen theorises this realm of Being as an "*arrière-monde*" a world-behind-the-world. The term "exoticism", according to this philosophical conception, refers to the aesthetic encounter with that which enables a glimpse of the otherworldly, this dimension of Being. It is an encounter that sheds light on one's own identity, and more deeply, the Being that underpins the self. When encountering the fe'e roaming the depths of the siapo-kimono, the viewer can potentially experience this type of aesthetic encounter with a creature whose familiarity and strangeness work in tandem to suggest this otherworld of myth and shadow, the alterity of the depths of the moana and of other subjectivities. On this reading, it is appropriate that the fe'e anchors the beginning of the series as well as the entire work: It points to a primordial origin and the depths of Being. The first kimono in the series presents an optimistic and strange image of this octopus that anchors the work in all its strange complexity. Beneath the typically exotic image of dolphins in the waves, swims an altogether more mysterious and exotic (in the Segalenian sense) creature of the deep.

### Fanua (land)

Having established a nuanced portrait of a Sāmoan identity rooted in myth and adapting to globalisation, the second series of kimono continues Kihara's engagement with environmental issues. At first glance, the viewer readily assumes that the wave from Vasa crashes ashore as a tsunami. However, on closer inspection, one realises that there is a more local and specific explanation. As Kihara indicates, when interviewed about the work (Milford Gallery, 2021), the image depicts localised flooding caused by a combination of high tides and swollen rivers; the excess water from heavy rainfall cannot effectively disperse into the lagoon, which results in flooding. On the siapo-kimono's surface the brown river water collides dramatically with the rising tides of the lagoon. Both the increased bouts of heavy rainfall and the higher tides due to rising sea levels are a direct consequence of climate change (Hugo 2010; Jolly, 2018). This dramatic image thus represents a specific and local effect of the more broadly understood, but often vaguely referenced, 'effects of climate change'. This specificity adds weight to the critique, which explains why Kihara is so careful to provide interviews that help viewers recognise what is being depicted. It is the combination of the work plus its commentary that is fundamental to the successful transmission of its political message.

Emphasising this collision are the collapsing governmental institutions, represented by the leaning fale, the upturned kava bowl on the riverside, and the





**Fig. 16:** Part 2 of series 2, Fanua. Described in the text as kimono 7. Source: Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin.

colonial era clocktower as well as the damaged hotel on the oceanside. The clocktower is a symbolically charged icon linked to New Zealand colonialism. It was erected to commemorate Sāmoan soldiers who fought in the first world war (RNZ, 2020), and is a sacred civic monument in Apia town centre. The toppling of the clocktower and the damage it is causing to the hotel suggest that the effects of climate change are going to undermine tourism, as well as other efforts by both the local government, and external influences from New Zealand to shape the country.

The connection between climate change and migration is also a feature of the two kimono, as the toppling structures lead the viewer's eye towards a departing jumbo jet. Sāmoa is deeply affected by migration patterns and its diaspora, which are linked to the effects of climate change. In his study of displacement and migration under the influence of climate change, Grahame Hugo notes that mobility and displacement form two ends of a spectrum which encompasses a diverse range of responses to climate change (Hugo, 2020). Although it is often assumed that small island populations will inevitably be displaced as sea-levels rise, the reality in the Pacific is far more complex. Not all communities that move are displaced (forced to move due to the impossibility of remaining), and not all communities that are able to move are willing, those villages situated near frequently flooding rivers, for example. The capacity to adapt to changing conditions (resilience), the ability to move (mobility), and the willingness to do so (agency) are all influenced by complex factors relating to older patterns of migration, relationships within the diaspora, gender related factors, sense of place, and economic concerns (Hugo, 2020). Kihara draws the viewer's attention to these complexities through the image of the departing jumbo



**Fig. 17:** Part 1 of series 2, Fanua. Described in the text as kimono 6. Source: Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin.

jet which embodies them. Not only is Kihara adept at creating such simple symbols to denote complex problems; her work systematically develops a short-hand vocabulary for referencing such problems.



**Fig. 18:** Part 3 of series 2, Fanua. Described in the text as kimono 8. Source: Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin.

In the central kimono of the series, a Madonna statue floats off-balance, leaning towards the Apia clocktower and the jumbo jet. While the inundated religious icon indicates one side of the wider scene, it is also caught in dialogue with the bull placed just above it. This symbol of the churches' influence in Sāmoa is central to the series. That is, the central kimono in the Fanua series features this statue of the Virgin Mary being caught up in the turmoil. It is pictured beneath two other symbols: an on-the-loose bull and the Vaisigano bridge. The imagery of the Virgin Mary being swept away not only extends the message from the first two kimono, as the Catholic church plays a major role in local governance (MacPherson, 2011), but it also shifts the focus from primarily environmental to political and economic considerations. Through her placement of the religious icon, Kihara notes that climate change is not the only broader force affecting local life. The Madonna is represented as being inundated by the effects of climate change as well as being under the influence of wider political and economic forces represented symbolically by the bull and the bridge. In fact, as Macpherson (2011) describes, the church plays a key role in village governance in Sāmoa, but this role comes at a certain price (306):

...contributions made to churches impact both village and national economies. Our interest in the issue arose from casual discussions with relatives and friends in Sāmoa who outlined plans for agricultural development projects and small businesses that they claimed they were unable to start, and in some cases to operate, because of ongoing financial commitments to their churches. Some expatriate Samoans expressed frustration that remittances they sent to provide investment capital for family and friends had been given instead to churches. They noted that attempts (some over many years) to provide relations with means of becoming economically self-sufficient were routinely frustrated by church-related demands and that their relations remained dependent on remittances to live.

Kihara is not suggesting that the church is corrupted by external influences, such as international aid, but more pointedly, she is suggesting that the churches are implicated in the maintenance of a local-global economic system which keeps Sāmoan people economically dependent.

In this regard, the siapo-kimono constitutes a return to a theme that Kihara explored in 'Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?' (2013), a series of large photographic works that while drawing its overall title from the soul searching work of Gauguin, is focused on documenting the then recent effects of cyclone Evan. In these photographs, she adopts the persona of Salomé, a young woman in a Victorian era mourning dress which was inspired by a 19<sup>th</sup> century photograph (Poland, 2013). In character, she contemplates symbolic scenes of beauty and devastation. In the works of this and later photographic series, the character Salomé is always pictured with her back to the viewer, as she contemplates sites and situations from the past and present. The monochrome images invite the viewer to reflect on their historical significance and contemporary relevance. The images themselves are often sublime and poignant, at other times they make



**Fig. 19:** Agelu i Tausi Catholic Church After Cyclone Evan, Mulivai Safata (2013). Source : Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin.



**Fig. 20:** Aquatic Centre, Tuanaimato (2013) Source : Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin.



**Fig.21:** Fearless Girl by Vialo State Street, New York. Source : <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/nov/28/new-york-fearless-girl-charging-bull-wall-street>





**Fig. 22:** Part 5 of series 2, Fanua. Described in the text as kimono 10.  
Source: Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin.

pointed political commentaries by highlighting uncomfortable historical truths to unaware contemporary audiences. New Zealand's role as a colonial power in Sāmoa and its repression of the Mau independence movement are examples. A key work in this series, features Salomé in an inundated church which has been stripped of its roof in the cyclone; the flood waters from the cyclone remain, forming a reflective pool (Fig. 19). In another, Salomé contemplates the Aquatic centre which forms part of the Faleata Sporting Complex. Constructed for the 2007 South Pacific Games (Fig. 20). Significantly, such high profile facilities are made possible by international aid, but often result in ongoing running costs that commit Sāmoa to ongoing international assistance (Tupufia. 2016). The politics surrounding development and international assistance are a complex feature of the Pacific. Kihara specializes in provoking the viewer to reflect on these issues. The statue of the Madonna on the surface of the siapo-kimono is another example, and its juxtaposition with the bull-on-the-loose and the Vaisigano bridge is therefore the continuation of the political project initiated in this earlier photographic series.

Equally powerful is how this dialogue with locally significant imagery becomes interwoven with globally recognisable icons: Above the Madonna statue is a bull, which in the local context refers to the importation of Australian cattle since 2015 to boost numbers and improve the genetic stock of the herds. This seemingly positive response to declining numbers of local cattle numbers was sponsored by the World Bank (The World Bank, 2015). However, Kihara highlights in her interview about the siapo-kimono that this policy has



**Fig. 23:** Part 4 of series 2, Fanua. Described in the text as kimono 9.  
Source: Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin.

raised the issue of exotic weed species introduced along with the animals (Milford Galleries, 2021). Environmental problems associated with agriculture sponsored by external parties, the need for imported fertilizers and pesticides to control, for instance, thus form a central concern of the siapo-kimono. The bull becomes the nexus and symbol of these issues where the global and the local intersect. Moreover, through its colouring and off-balance pose, Kihara's bull mirrors Arturo Di Modica's bronze sculpture, *Charging Bull*.

Since its placement in New York in 1989, the *Charging Bull* sculpture has become an icon of Wall Street, home of the US stock exchange. Kihara's inclusion of this reference can be read in terms of the local impact of imported fertilizer for grazing on the eco-system (Milford Gallery, 2021), or more searchingly, in terms of the destabilizing influences of global financial institutions on the role of the church in people's economic lives. Irrespective of the reading viewers may favour, the overall structure of the image on the siapo-kimono recalls the statue *Fearless Girl* (2018) by Kristen Visbal (Fig. 20), whose placement and attitude defied the charge of the charging bull: Youthful, feminine power standing up to the male-dominated financial world. Though addressing local climate issues rather than feminist ones, Kihara's reference is important as political movements such as #Occupy Wall Street, continue to appropriate images of the *Charging Bull* (and the since removed in 2018) *Fearless Girl*, to



**Fig.24:** *Guernica*, oil on canvas by Pablo Picasso, 1937; in the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid. 3.49 × 7.77 m. Source : <http://www.picassotradicionyanguardia.com/08R.php> (archive.org)

communicate their own agendas (Ritchel, 2018). By placing the Madonna in strife below the bull, Kihara could be considered as suggesting that these external forces are contributing to the effects of climate change in destabilising local institutions and values.

Further, by placing the bull in front of the recently completed Vaisigano bridge, Kihara frames this icon of global capitalism in specifically Japanese terms: Identifying Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA) with global capitalism, the World Bank, and their potentially negative impact, which is to say, the corruption of local institutions and the creation of ongoing economic dependence. As Masami Tsujita observes (2012, p. vii):

Among academic observers, crucial aid studies view foreign aid as furthering dependency assuming that aid primarily facilitates the donor's interests while undermining the economy, social fabric and accountability of recipients.

Tsujita's commentary is important for at least two reasons. On one hand, Kihara explicitly refers to Tsujita's work in her description of the scene depicted on the siapo-kimono, on the other hand, Tsujita took the above observation as the starting point of her research that sought to reconceptualise how foreign aid, and Japanese aid to Sāmoa in particular, could be understood. She coined the term "aidscape" to represent the complex role aid plays in the Sāmoa and the Pacific. The term denotes a shift away from the paradigm that criticised foreign aid as an effectively self-serving enterprise for donor countries, towards an appreciation of the myriad ways that aid not only affects recipients but serves to redefine physical worlds and their imaginaries as complex multiple hybrid spaces. As Tsujita explains (2012, pp. vii-viii):

Borrowing ideas from Appadurai's "s-cape" and Soja's concept of Thirdspace, I coined the term 'Aidscape' to conceptualize foreign aid as a spatial practice that produces culturally hybrid, politically connected, and socially reflective space composed of constantly changing realities in both lived and imaginary worlds. I use human geography concepts of *situated knowledge* and *lifeworld* to explore the multiplicity accounts of aid constituting the Aidscape.

This conceptual shift is designed to better grasp the intersectional nature of aid's influence in people's lives. It is also the frame through which Kihara's should be viewed. That is, the central image of Fanua is composed of three key elements, the Madonna, the bull, and the bridge. Through their juxtaposition and framing, they enter into a dialogue that can point to the erosion of institutions, and their transformation as they are undermined by the effects of climate change, and the impacts of international aid and investment on local economies and values. The strength of Kihara's work is that it is very specific in this argument, pointing to the issues related to agriculture and international assistance projects, such as the Vaisigano Bridge. The impacts of these projects are ambivalent as they produce a mixture of economic benefits and dependency, while changing the social fabric and the landscape.

The final two kimono in the series present the relationship between economic development and the natural landscape. Kihara again offers the viewer a highly symbolic scene. In the foreground stands one of the most endangered birds in Sāmoa, the Manumea. According to the Sāmoa Conservation Society, with only 150 remaining in the wild, it is suffering from habitat loss, predation by cats and other introduced animals, and is often a by-catch of local hunters. The manumea is unique to Sāmoa and was chosen as the national mascot for the 2007 South Pacific Games that



Sāmoa hosted (N.D). Significantly, efforts to study and protect the manumea require funding from international aid donors, such as the BIOPAMA program, and universities in New Zealand and Australia, which highlight not only the precarity of their existence, but also their dependency on external funding for survival. Furthermore, the manumea is a type of pigeon which consumes large tree seeds ignored by other birds. It is thus a fundamental support for the propagation of large forest trees. This indigenous bird and symbol of Sāmoa itself, is key to the survival of the forest itself.

As Kihara points out in her interview (Milford Gallery, 2021), the manumea stands on the leaves of the foifoisevua vine, whose leaves are used in traditional medicines to treat measles. The veiled reference to the 2019 measles epidemic, which caused 5707 measles cases and 83 measles-related deaths (Craig et al. 2020) affecting mainly children, is another example of a highly local reference. However, what Kihara is pointing to through the juxtaposition of the foifoisevua leaves and the manumea bird is that the habitat for the birds is being impacted by the introduction of invasive species. The vine and the manumea are linked to the image of the bull. Moreover, Kihara also suggests more obliquely that the destruction of the environment through economic development is accompanied by the destruction of indigenous knowledge of medicinal plants and indigenous ways of life, which are symbolically represented by the manumea and the foifoisevua vine.

The aidscape encompasses both the literal and the metaphorical relationships depicted symbolically in Kihara's work. These symbols are important because they embody the ambivalence of various solutions to local problems. That is, the manumea is endangered by development and agricultural practices, but it also requires international support to help it survive. This type of ambivalence, where traditional practices are rendered secondary to introduced ones that require ongoing support from overseas, populate the aidscape throughout the Pacific.

Such dependency is represented by the blue lorry delivering imports (70 percent of beef is imported, for instance (The World Bank, 2015). The truck passes a yellow bulldozer which is clearing native vegetation for development on one side, and a landslide caused by forest clearing and road construction on the other. Crucially, it is not just any tree that lies in the path of the bulldozer. It is a banyan. The Samoan Conservation Society (N.D.) takes this tree as part of its symbol. In their description of the tree's role on the logo, they highlight its significance:

The banyan tree (aoa) and its roots on the left represent the green forests and land of Samoa and all the plants that are important in Samoan culture. The massive aoa itself is a "tree of life" – a host to a myriad other species of plants and animals including food and habitat for our native birds, flying foxes, reptiles and insects. Kihara depicts development as destroying the forest behind the tree of life. It is perhaps a hopeful sign that development has yet to threaten this core aspect of the Sāmoan ecological and cultural life.

## Concluding discussion

The latter part of this article began with the title: 'Kihara's Guernica?'. This question was prompted by my first impression that the two series, Vasa and Fanua, present the collective image of a tsunami induced flood. That is, a large-scale rendering of a disaster with an overtly political message. And yet, closer comparison of Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) and Kihara's サーモアについてのうた [Samoa no uta] 'A Song about Samoa' reveals the works as opposites in key ways. Whereas Picasso's commissioned mural for the World's Fair in Paris in 1937 is painted on a single roughly 4 x 8 metre canvas in a brilliant lead white and matt black, Kihara's work is brilliantly coloured, adorned with sequins and other detailing, and is printed onto several series of siapo-kimono. Though both works present large-scale depictions of destruction, and though the content is political in nature, Picasso's monochrome abstraction innovates classical historical painting whereas Kihara appears to draw on socialist murals. If Picasso presents a universal cry for peace through the depiction of the horror of the Nazi attack on Guernica, Kihara uses a kind of socialist realism to depict the particularity of local situations in Sāmoa and their linkages to global forces. Further, the hybridity that courses through Kihara's work is reflected in its materials and form, and content. Kihara's depiction of the oceanscape and aidscape reveal complexity, ambivalence, and multiplicity, rather than Picasso's universal condemnation through an essentialised and symbolic vision of destruction.

Similar to Picasso, however, who references newspaper reports of the attack but abstracts them through his own idiom, Kihara draws on the imagery from mass media and the internet, references local news reports and issues, but translates them into her own symbolic vocabulary. サーモアについてのうた [Samoa no uta] 'A Song about Samoa' is thus unlike *Guernica* in many ways, but informative as a comparison which serves to highlight Kihara's originality.

Her work is an art installation but serves the function of a mural. It is composed of multiple inter-related parts whose collective impact presents a complex and ambivalent picture of contemporary Sāmoa. The destruction and desolation can be easily decoded as challenging the myth of the Pacific idyll, but Kihara goes much further in her message, which is made possible by her symbolic vocabulary. Kihara's ecologically focused lexicon presents complex issues in simple interlocking imagery that provokes shock and dismay. This vocabulary is not limited to 'A Song about Samoa' ・ サーモアについてのうた', but echoes similar concerns in other works.

Aesthetically, the beautiful colours of the siapo-kimono evoke an exotic object, one that is at once recognisable as a kimono or siapo, but which is simultaneously different through its composition as a hybrid siapo-kimono, and as an art installation functioning as a political mural. The scene portrayed is dissonant with the harmonious form, as it thematically links the influences of development projects and global capitalism with introduced problems and destruction.

The kimono form chimes in with the recognisably Japanese-constructed bridge in the centre, which allows Kihara to capitalise on this resonance: This is an unmistakably “Japanese” work.

Within her wider body of work, which has focused on the body, gender, Sāmoan-ness, colonialism, and postcolonial resistance to exoticism, サモアについてのうた [Samoa no uta] ‘A Song about Samoa’ introduces a new element to her oeuvre. Kihara boldly broaches the question of the region’s dependence on foreign aid and the impact it is having on the local environment. The work also inscribes Japaneseness more visibly into Kihara’s globalised identity as an artist. Both moves are important given Japan’s prominence in the Pacific aidscape and in relation to bilateral aid to Sāmoa, and in terms of Kihara’s ongoing exploration and affirmation of all aspects of her heritage.

When it was first suggested that サモアについてのうた [Samoa no uta] ‘A Song about Samoa’ should be read as a mural, we contextualised the work in terms of left and right wing nationalisms from around the world. This was then nuanced with a discussion of community murals in Chile, which carried on the struggle against unfulfilled promises of democratic reforms. These murals in La Victoria engage in a politics of memory, aimed at controlling historical narratives of the past, demonstrating ongoing struggle in the present, and nurturing aspirations for the future.

Interestingly, Folgarait makes the following observation with regards to the contemporary place that the murals of the post-revolutionary period in Mexico occupy today:

In a critical period of world history directly after major political revolutions and the first World War, it was important for nations to assert their global presence in terms of a stressed nationalism, but also to make loud cultural proclamations to the rest of the world of their political survival and territorial ambitions. Mexico did not share in these imperialistic interests, partly due to its underdeveloped condition and partly to its geographic location. In spite of this marginalisation, the Mexican paintings are today better known worldwide than official paintings of the Third Reich or the Soviet Union. This is perhaps because they come from a nation not loaded down with Cold War and post-Cold War implications, that they represent an exotic Other that the developed West has found easier to assimilate and appreciate, and that they do not threaten the world order (4).

Folgarait points to exoticism to account for the popularity and renown of Mexican mural painting. However, in a deliberate contrast to this use of the term ‘exotic Other’, in this article we introduced Victor Segalen’s conception of the exotic, understood as *le Divers* [Diversity] to articulate more precisely the way in which Kihara’s work provokes a sensation of exoticism; that is, an encounter with an object that is both partially recognisable and familiar, but which confronts the viewer with aspects of alterity, capable of provoking a sense of irretrievable distance, and consequently, a glimpse into one’s own sense of identity. For those viewers who think they know Sāmoa, or who consider themselves to be familiar with Japanese culture, the siapo-kimono presents an exotic encounter that disturbs and disrupts. It is suggested therefore, that

Kihara uses this form of Segalenian exoticism to entice the viewer and amplify their shock: The impact of the destruction represented is intensified by its beautiful combination of familiarity and difference. The siapo-kimono escapes classification and thus intrigues.

And yet, importantly, as an art installation / mural it is not designed to present some mysterious and exotic object for aesthetic consumption, but on the contrary, Kihara, through her interviews and commentaries, underlines the necessity of understanding the work and reading its message in the scenes and symbols. Her commentaries are an essential element to the work as they scaffold the viewer’s experience, thereby enabling its political message to resonate loud and clear. For it is this political message that is the true focus of the work, as it reflects Kihara’s genuine and profound engagement in the environmental, social, and political issues affecting Sāmoa, the Pacific, and the world. Kihara wants the viewer to open their eyes and to think, reconsider and act in response to the ambivalent challenges facing us all. It is this message that we should listen for when encountering Kihara’s サモアについてのうた [Samoa no uta] ‘A Song about Samoa’.

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## Keywords

Japan, Sāmoa, Pacific, New Zealand, kimono, siapo, aidscape, murals