

# The past is a foreign climate

Shigeyuki Kihara meets the Anthropocene



Nina Seja, *Auckland*

Top:  
Shigeyuki Kihara, *German Monument, Mulinu'u*, 2013, type-C photograph,  
edition 5/5 + 2 AP; Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane;  
image courtesy the artist and Milford Galleries, Dunedin

Opposite:  
Shigeyuki Kihara, *Mau Headquarters, Vaimoso*, 2013, type-C photograph,  
edition 4/5 + 2 AP; Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane;  
image courtesy the artist and Milford Galleries, Dunedin

A young Samoan woman stands constrained in a voluminous black dress. The black-and-white photographs emphasise a Victorian formality and sensibility. This ancestor from the past is Shigeyuki Kihara's Salome, a young ancient who stands at the interstices of the past, present and future. Surveying diverse topographies of the Pacific nation, she looks at what was, and is, and what will be. She is the common thread in Kihara's recent series 'Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?' (2013). The philosophical undercurrent about the nature of existence echoes Paul Gauguin's 1897–98 painting of the same name. But the self-reflexivity – a common trope in the oeuvre of this Apia and Auckland-based artist – renders Gauguin's Pacific through a postcolonial lens. Salome has returned after centuries have passed, to see, as Kihara reflects: 'whether the aspirations that she had in her time have been realised by the descendants, only to come back and perhaps be disappointed by some of the results.'<sup>1</sup>

Salome's landscape is both a geographic and an emotive one, rendered in dense blacks and bleak greys that call up cinematic stills. Kihara also drew from the influence of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* and Gustave Doré's nineteenth-century illustrations of the fourteenth-century text. In the latter's engravings, the nine levels of the underworld are rendered memorably macabre. Kihara's interpretation sees Salome visiting sites of destruction

and profound environmental change. This stands in contrast to the benign images that Samoa has become known for. 'I want [my photographs of] Samoa to contradict all of the passivity, and the tourism, and have the Gauguin stripped out,' Kihara says. 'While the world imposed the idea of paradise on Samoa, it is Samoa that is going through hell.'

Salome's world is polysemic – it is at the nexus of historical and contemporary exchange. She haunts a landscape marked by globalisation of the past and present: an aquatic centre at Tuanaimato, built with Chinese aid; Aggie Grey's Resort at Mulifanua (developed in anticipation of a large number of tourists who are yet to arrive); the Mau headquarters at Vaimoso, which saw a violent confrontation between New Zealand police and Samoan sovereignty activists in 1929; and – the facilitator of global movement – the Faleolo International Airport. These landscapes are far from Gauguin's South Pacific paradise. No longer is paradise a contained fantasy of a European in exile, but it too has been drawn into global networks of finance, mobile labour popula-

tions and the physical reshaping of a country's landscape due to the desires of international power brokers. In this light, Kihara's Mau headquarters has particular resonance. It indicates earlier resistance to the colonial New Zealand administration, which began soon after the First World War (the administration formally ended with Samoan independence in 1962). While Salome surveys a recent landscape, the roots of cultural strength and resistance remain.

But this lens of 'deep history' is not just limited to human interaction. Salome's dismay also takes in the wide swathe of environmental degradation. As such, 'Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?' is symbolic of not only Samoan cultural change, but also of broader global ecological change. The key term here is the Anthropocene. It is a new (and contested) geological period that describes the ways that humans have created planetary and ecological change on a mass scale, including extinction of plants and animals, pollution and global warming.

Climate change is one element of the Anthropocene. Kathryn Yusoff also argues the Anthropocene 'represents a new epoch of thought' – this therefore calls for new philosophies and forms of representation.<sup>2</sup> This period of time has been mediated through new representational modes such as data visualisation, but art photography carries the possibility of change on an emotive level through storytelling.

The Anthropocene is a form of deep history. It is change happening at a macro level, which is challenging for mere mortals to fully comprehend. As a figure able to navigate expansive periods of time, Salome is an apt translator of climate crisis. Kihara acknowledges that 'while Salome is focusing on Samoa, I wanted [Samoa] to be a mirror image to what is happening in the world'.

Salome's landscapes are ruined by nature's fury. In *Agelu i Tausi Catholic Church After Cyclone Evan, Mulivai Safata* (2013), Salome's eyes turn towards the heavens through the destroyed roof of a Catholic church. The floor is flooded, reflecting the stylised cross. Is religion of no use in this new and uncharted world? In *After Cyclone Evan, Lelata* (2013), Salome disappears into the murk of a severely hit village. Her pristine dress hangs heavily in the mud – even an angel of history appears vulnerable in the wake of rough winds. Climate crisis is boundless and Salome's path reiterates this. It cuts through a number of social strata; religion, villages, schools are all transformed.





Shigeyuki Kihara, *Old Courthouse, Apia*, 2013, type-C photograph,  
edition 5/5 + 2 AP; Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane;  
image courtesy the artist and Milford Galleries, Dunedin



Shigeyuki Kihara, *After Tsunami Galu Afi, Lalomanu*, 2013,  
type-C photograph, edition 4/5 + 2 AP; the University of Auckland Collection;  
image courtesy the artist and Milford Galleries, Dunedin

In another image, *After Tsunami Galu Afi, Lalomanu*, Salome looks out on and over the ocean. The white sands function as shorthand to the imaginary of the tropical paradise. But this placid body of water was responsible for a surge of destruction. 'I put her there because people have this idea of the ocean being very nurturing, and it is calm, and it is pristine,' Kihara considers. 'But this is the ocean that was once violent, so I am contradicting it.'

Salome's world is a hyperreal paradise, and it is logical to assume that Kihara, known for her performative and interdisciplinary work over the past decade and a half, constructed these landscapes. But what makes the series so important is that Kihara shot them just after Cyclone Evan had decimated Samoa in December 2012. She had received funding to begin the series at this time, but the impact of the cyclone meant she had to consider whether it was the most appropriate – and ethical – time to create. There was the loss of life, people living in emergency shelters, extensive failure of power and water supplies. But Kihara decided that the 'ruins and the aftermath of the cyclone might add to the reality of what is actually taking place in Samoa'. By doing so, the series powerfully demonstrates art intersecting with climate change in real time. Kihara thus contributes to creating a new visual language of the aesthetics of the Anthropocene.

'Where do we come from?' directly responds to the aftermath of Cyclone Evan, one example of extreme weather indicative of climate crisis. Salome pauses near large puddles of water. However, the sodden landscapes carry the additional threat of inciting epidemics. Kihara maintains: 'Now, it is not just the destruction of the land. It is also about disease-prone epidemics that are triggered by climate crisis, which helps to brew increasing numbers of mosquitos. These are then responsible for the outbreak of mosquito-borne diseases such as chikungunya and dengue fever that are passed through mosquitos on to people.' Kihara continues: 'There are warnings when you are going to Samoa to make sure you have protective clothing, in order to avoid the mosquitos.'

Does Salome believe that environmental and social collapse is inevitable? Is she angry, resigned to the fate we have created? Her cloistered, restrained Victorian demeanour is difficult to read. While she leads us through the landscapes, she looks away from us. Kihara notes: 'In a Samoan cultural context, to put your back to the audience is offensive.' But does she also grieve for us? She is not an angel of hope – remember she wears a mourning dress. There are emotional ramifications to climate crisis, after all. Salome's observation

outward over the ocean is also a gaze into the future. In her writing on mourning and environmental change, Ashlee Cunsolo Willox suggests that grieving and climate change can also be underscored by 'a sense of *anticipatory* grieving for losses expected to come, but not yet arrived'.<sup>3</sup>

Both Salome and Kihara are documenters of our legacy. Salome also functions as a witness and bearer to the scars of ecological change. 'Where do we come from?' therefore opens up a space of engagement and mourning for the viewer – what Willox maintains is an 'opportunity for individuals to connect with shared responsibility of this grief from a global process, and to understand this mourning as personal, political, and ethical ... We need to continue to share this ecological grief and to provide places for people to go and collectively mourn.'<sup>4</sup> The power of the series – while ethically ambiguous during the shooting due to it taking place in the immediate wake of the disaster – is that it now functions as a memento mori or memorial.

In this way, Kihara is also a guardian of the past. The risk of creating art during disaster means that we have an accurate depiction of the chaos of climate crisis. 'I am interested in learning from history and what it can tell us about our situation today,' Kihara reflects. 'Sometimes I wonder if I am an artist or an historian. I really like the investigative nature and putting together the puzzle. I think we as people, as humanity, keep re-perpetuating our past.' Salome's somber vision could provide a warning for the future. After all, Kihara announces: 'I am hoping that my art will become a catalyst for social change.'

1. All quotations from Shigeyuki Kihara in this essay are drawn from an interview conducted with the author, 6 March 2015.

2. Kathryn Yusoff, 'Anthropogenesis: Origins and endings in the Anthropocene', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29 April 2015, pp. 1–26; see [tcs.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/04/29/0263276415581021.abstract](https://tcs.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/04/29/0263276415581021.abstract), accessed 29 September 2015.

3. Ashlee Cunsolo Willox, 'Climate change as the work of mourning', *Ethics & the Environment*, vol. 17, no. 2, Fall 2012, p. 140.

4. Willox, op. cit., p. 153.

Shigeyuki Kihara's 'Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?' is being exhibited as part of the 8th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at the Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 21 November 2015 – 10 April 2016.