Encounter and exchange - Acts of making, unmaking and remaking in contemporary photographic work by Fiona Pardington, Mark Adams and Shigeyuki Kihara

Deborah Lawler-Dormer

Joint Doctoral candidate, College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales and National Institute of Creative Industries, University of Auckland.

deborah.lawlerdormer@gmail.com

Abstract:
What postcolonial strategies are enacted in contemporary photography from Aotearoa, New Zealand? What characteristics are at play when notions of identity, culture and location are encountered? How are relational exchanges activated in specific works by Fiona Pardington, Mark Adams and Shigeyuki Kihara? These three artists actively negotiate, in their art practices, the contemporary and the historical through the referencing of art and ethnographic traditions. The resultant practice reveals our present-day political challenges of shifting and unstable identities.

Paper:

“I suspect that our localities mean we are both used to having to work actively to locate ourselves, rather than be located.”

Recently there has been a proliferation of exhibitions and public forums that curate and debate national and regional artistic representation and strategies. They convey a range of perspectives regarding the local contemporary art sector and its place within a local, regional and global context. Collectively these projects indicate a rich and complex nuanced dialogue regarding the positioning of contemporary art practice from Aotearoa/New Zealand within frameworks variously addressing bi-culturalism, bi-nationalism, our place within the Pacific region and globalisation. These projects variously include amongst others: Unnerved: The New Zealand Project at the Queensland Art Gallery (2010); Oceania: Imagining the Pacific, City Gallery Wellington (2011); Home AKL, Auckland Art Gallery (2012); Date Line: Contemporary Art from the Pacific in Berlin (2007) a partnership project between Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (NBK); Paradise Now? Contemporary Art from the Pacific at the Asia Society Museum (2004) and Islanded: Contemporary Art From New Zealand, Singapore and Taiwan at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in Singapore (2005). In short, it appears, as Bywater noted above, that we are ‘having to work actively to locate ourselves’.

Thinking about location is complex. Thinking about identity, culture and location even more so. As Nikos Papastergiadis has observed: ‘The representation of both

---


2 Aotearoa, New Zealand has been officially bicultural since 1990 – an attribution sited within a contested national history connected to the legal treaty – The Treaty of Waitangi (1840) – between the Crown and Maori where Maori are referenced as tangata whenua or people of the land and Pakeha as those largely of European descent.
culture and identity are not only related to each other but are part of broader ruptures and flows of globalization. The boundaries of an authentic cultural identity are no longer framed according to neat and exclusive territorial coordinates. Nor can we assume that cultural identities are locked in rigid time-frames. Cultural identities are also formed by the ambivalent desires for mobility and attachment and shaped by the contradictory forces of local traditions and global culture. ... Culture and identity are increasingly being constructed in hybrid ways.”

Recently, Aotearoa, New Zealand’s location within the Pacific region has been increasingly explored. As Peter Brunt explains: ‘The question of New Zealand’s situation in the Pacific has been a crucial one for settler culture in the past as it has faced the “post-colonising” question of the distinctiveness from British and European origins and the nature of its place and history, not only here in relation to Maori and the colonisation of this land, but in the Pacific where it has played an equally significant colonial role, along with Australia, as Empire’s deputy. New Zealand was a staging post in the missionisation of the Pacific in the 19th century; it held colonial administrative roles in Samoa, Niue, the Cooks, Tokelau, and elsewhere; it was a key player in the political decolonisation of the Pacific in the postwar decades; and it continues to wield political influence in the Pacific Islands where it is a major power.”

It is within this complex postcolonial territory, and its inherent relational exchanges, that the artists Fiona Pardington, Shigeyuki Kihara and Mark Adams are operating. Their work has variously been included in most of the aforementioned group shows. Additionally, each artist has sustained a practice with wide international and local exposure. Within their photographic practice they utilise specific strategies that engage with this complex postcolonial situation. Their photographic practice subverts art and historical colonial (mis)representations of Maori and Pacific peoples and sites. Their practices problematize the contemporary and historical and highlight our present-day political challenges of shifting and unstable identities.

All of the artists are based in Aotearoa New Zealand and their works are an encounter with diverse issues such as cultural displacement, possession and dispossession, migration, Western notions of the ‘exotic’ and the unpacking and repacking of identity inclusive of race and gender. Their works raise questions about the ongoing negotiation with the politics of the present, the legacy of the past and the imagined futures we are evolving. Each artist has worked with the photographic archive and the museum collection, deeply researching and considering their work as artists. Their thoughtful photographic practices can be sited within a recognisable post-colonial strategy of accessing archives for ‘potent’ imagery in order to question historical representations, power relations, classification systems and the relationship between scientific enquiry and human identities. They seek to expose the power structures and to question

---

diverse interpretations and usages based on various frameworks from outmoded scientific practices, the exotic and voyeuristic, the surveying of assets including land for control and ownership, and various classification systems for cataloguing flora, fauna, people and places. Their practices are consequently complex and nuanced, offer an exchange with the historical opening up multiple channels of discourse. They inherently involve both the recovery of suppressed histories and the critique of those histories contained within institutions such as museums and the historical archive.

In 2010 Fiona Pardington (Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Māmoe, Ngāti Waewae, Pakeha) produced a series of large scale photographs entitled Āhua: A beautiful hesitation. These photographs re-present the life casts held in the collections of the Musee Flaubert d'Histoire de las Medecine in Rouen, the Musee National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris and the Auckland Museum. The life-casts were created by Pierre-Marie Alexandre Dumoutier during French explorer Jules Dumont d'Urville's South Pacific voyages from 1837 to 1840. These three dimensional life casts of Pacific peoples are solid-cast in plaster-of-paris by Dumoutier who was a medical scientist and phrenologist. Dumoutier, as a phrenologist, created the life casts so he could record the skull’s contours and appearance in the belief that these would convey the individual’s character and capacities. The resonant photographic rendition of the life casts brings back into the contemporary arena an aspect of colonial art for reappraisal. The busts show the signs of handling, labelling and damage from the various histories of collection and storage. The connection with anthropological and ethnographic museum objects and
Portraiture is an abundant source of contemporary art practice and Pardington’s process, in particular, claims back these museum objects giving them a new life helping to address their problematic histories. She observes that upon discovering Dumoutier’s life casts she “instantly saw the complexity and the unique way these life casts could speak through an additional layer of meaning in the form of the photographic portrait.”5 She goes on to say: “My understanding is that Māori would say that the ancestors are inhabiting the āhua [life-cast] and that the ancestor had come from behind the greenstone veil and that they are here all the time its just that we can’t see them – in fact there’s not a great deal of separation between the living and the dead.”6 Some of these busts depict Pardington’s own ancestors, part of her direct geneology and consequently reflect a remarkably resonant journey.

Anne Salmond in her essay Et La Tete. Casting Heads in the Pacific explains: “… in the Maori world a person’s geneology, the head, and the hair are intimately entwined, each hair on the head a descent line, binding them to their ancestors” and later: “Like Dumoutier’s casts, Pardington’s photographs are ontological paradoxes – objects that capture a moment when worlds collide. While they might evoke the age of Antiquity for a European viewer – Attic heads carved in marble – for those who dwell (at least some of the time) in te ao Māori, they are likely to send a shiver down the back of the neck – te ihi, te wehi, te wana – the awestruck, fearful reaction inspired by ancestral power.”7 Ross Calman further observes: “In being able to regard these images today, we are indebted to two voyages: the first made by Dumoutier over one hundred and seventy years ago, and one more recently by Fiona Pardington. Dumoutier was bringing the likenesses of people of a foreign – what they would have perceived primitive – culture to Europe. Now Pardington has brought these likenesses home where they belong, where we the descendants of the founding cultures of Aotearoa, and those who have come after, can mihi (speak greetings) to them, tangi (weep) over them or simply gaze in respectful appreciation.”8

The series of photographs are larger than life size and framed in heavy black frames. Each cast is precisely lit exposing fine details and composed with an equivalency of space and accompanied by titles that indicate their original museum classification. They have considerable presence when physically viewed. Due to the process of casting in plaster-of-paris, each life bust depicts the person with eyes closed and with the nostril holes evident that aided breathing. They have a potent sense of uniform calmness.

Within the series is an unknown Maori warrior entitled Matoua Tawai (fig 1) from the Bay of Islands. Matoua Tawai is notable for his moko, highlighted through the dramatic bleached tones of the photograph. He has been

6 Pardington, F. Ahua: A beautiful Hesitation. Auckland, N.Z.: Two Rooms 2010
photographed front on, from the back and side, a common trait of ethnographic photography where subjects were carefully photographed in a studio setting. As Nicholas Thomas observes these anthropological photographs: ‘... have become notorious as expressions of a colonial objectification of indigenous humanity and of the complicity between science, and anthropology specifically, with imperial power.’

Over a period of four years, the series of photographs Āhua: A beautiful hesitation grew in to a much larger project entitled The Pressure of Sunlight that consisted of a touring exhibition and a substantial book project designed by her brother Neil Pardington containing in-depth scholarly essays.

Prior to the Āhua: A beautiful hesitation series, Pardington had explored objects found in museum collections in several other projects including the Hei Tiki series. Photographed from the collection of the Auckland Museum, Little River Hei Tiki (female, Ngai Tahu) 2003 [fig 4] is worn down by continued use showing, in its uneven wear, its treasured life. The works are black and white and have a

---

luminosity captured through complex analogue processes and printing techniques. “These taonga occupy a territory between present and past, confronting us directly, yet never losing their connection to times and people gone by. For Pardington, this is reflective of the ‘immanence of the tipuna of the Ngāi Tahu taonga.” Her interest in respectfully photographing these taonga is to uncover them to be appreciated today by the people to whom these objects are treasures concurrently removing them from their museum ethnographic place, so often a matter of historical confiscation. She painstakingly ensured that the hapu connected to each item gave permission for the hei tiki to be photographed prior to capturing the item and also ensured correct acknowledgement within the titling of each work. These images traverse difficult territory between the museum, the artist, those related to each object’s tribal affiliation, public display and resultant viewer engagement in a contemporary art context.

Figure 3: Mark Adams: Indian Island, 360 degree panorama after William Hodges’ “View in Dusky Bay” 1998, gelatin silver print toned with gold. Courtesy of the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, gift of the Patrons of the Auckland Art Gallery, 2001

Adams who is Pakeha (New Zealand European) creates work that participates consciously with the local complex colonial history and its connection to Polynesia. Colonised by European explorers, Aotearoa was often depicted through an aesthetic style that reinforced a European landscape tradition. These romantic portrayals of the land conveyed a fixed vantage point. Adams’ photographic reprisals are wide-ranging and show a wealth of rich detail that offer a complex consideration of the territory portrayed. They reveal conflicting histories and multiple perspectives in an intricate and elaborate photographic offering for our consideration. He focuses on the landscape as a way of understanding questions of history, ideology and the economics of resource use. In the process he has developed a different, aesthetic, photography without adjectives, the articulation of pure facts. The photographs are waiting to be read like prose.” Several of his projects have been published as book projects and have been developed in collaboration with historians, scholars and anthropologists. In these projects facts, prose and photographs sit side-by-side providing layers of meaning and interpretation.

10 Milburn, F. cited in Rogers, A (ed) Te Puawai O Ngāi Tahu: Twelve Contemporary Ngāi Tahu Artists, Christchurch Art Gallery 10 May – 24 August 2003, p64
Captain James Cook, on his second voyage to the Pacific in 1772, engaged the services of William Hodges – the first professional European artist to depict the Pacific at this time. Adams visited the sites that Hodges recorded and set up the camera on the same spots from which Hodges would have produced the initial sketches and journals. He explains: “It’s the bloody cross-cultural history of colonialism in the Pacific, what’s going on here now, how did that happen, what does it mean. ... It’s a self-conscious engagement with the histories of conflict and also the resistances and accommodations and other forms of representation, engaging with the colonial image bank.”

Adams’ work *Indian Island 360 degree panorama after William Hodges' View in Dusky Bay 1998* [fig 5] is a contemporary re-visioning of Hodges’ work. *View in Dusky Bay* is believed to be Hodge’s only circular painting. It is a depiction of his first sighting of Maori. The subject is shown standing on a rocky outcrop in Dusky Bay and was painted on his return to Europe reflecting a romanticised exoticised vision of the ‘noble savage’. Thomas speculates that the round

---

12 Adams, M quoted in Gifford, A. *In the footsteps of Captain Cook*, New Zealand Herald 16.08.2006 p4
painting “reproduces Hodges’ first sighting of the man, through a telescope that was passed among the gentlemen, as their boat approached the rock.”

Adams revisits what is believed to be the site that the painting depicts and creates a photographic panorama of the view from the rocky island. He, in effect, reverses the gaze, looking out on a 360 degree intensely detailed landscape that shows the particularity of the land – the mists, rain, vegetation – with a level of detail and accuracy absent in Hodge’s work.

*Indian Island 360 degree panorama after William Hodges’ View in Dusky Bay* 1998 is captured using an 8x10 camera that produces extremely high resolution negatives and resultant prints. This work is comprised of 8 large-scale photographs. Adams often places the final work in sets of shots that are mounted beside each other with space in between rather than producing one single photograph. “That interest in context has prompted Adams to move, increasingly beyond the single shot as the constitutive element of the photographic work. His resort to sets of two, three and more images, that come together without merging, is a way of saying that we need to keep looking at what’s adjacent, what’s part of the picture in a historical or cultural as well as a literal sense, yet also acknowledge that there are limits to what can be done, that our efforts are inevitably incomplete.”

Many of the landscapes Adams captures have been sites of colonial battles and concurrently sites of contestation evoked through such forms of legal redress as the Waitangi Tribunal. They also reveal an interest in 19th century ethnographic and survey photography. He raises specific and complex issues involving the role photography had to play in colonialism, land confiscation and their subsequent archiving and classification with the museum collection. In the series *Land of Memories* Adams visits sites in the South Island of significance to Ngāi Tahu. At the time the series was taken, Ngāi Tahu was assembling a claim for the Waitangi tribunal. This photographic series resulted in a book entitled *Land of Memories*

---

13 Adams, A and Thomas, N. *Cook’s Sites. Revisiting History.* Dunedin: University of Otago Press with Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, Australian National University 1999 p56

and further inscribed with the whakatoki (proverb), ‘Whenua I maharatia, haehae nga takata – Land of memories, scarred by people’. The book was produced in collaboration with writer and historian Harry Evison and in close consultation with the South Island iwi Ngāi Tahu.

Tipene O’Regan states in the foreword that the book depicts “...memories which can readily escape us as we rush about the land. A hill there, a rock here, a tree, a cairn, a vignette of landscape – all carry memories ... Their call to us is to pause – and to remember. As we do, we are driven to do better – for the land and for its people.”  

9.4.1992 Piopiotahi - Milford Sound, Atawhenua – Fiordland, 2006 [fig 7] is a triptych from this series. It records a famous viewpoint of the Milford Sound often seen in tourist depictions of this World Heritage Site. It is also the viewpoint taken by the anonymous artist of the Acheron Survey of 1851, when a British Navy ship was sent around the coast to see what the Crown had bought.” Only in this photograph, the scene is veiled in mist and the focus of attention, Mitre Peak, is shrouded from sight. This site, treasured by Ngāi Tahu, is known for its pounamu (greenstone) resource. Adams’ photo depicts a site that at the time of photographing was contested, although later in 1997, the Pounamu Vesting Act was passed protecting this resource.

Thomas notes: “Mark Adam’s work emerges from a distinctive visual intelligence, and I’ve often been struck, when we have travelled together, by the time he wants to take, just to look, not only at the objects and sites that he anticipates photographing, but at the places and environments that happened to be about, that in one sense or another provide their contexts. His photography has to take place slowly. It has to come out of this sustained attention, out of dwelling in places, or camping by them, out of revisits rather than mere visits.”

---


16 Gifford, A and Simei-Barton, P. Scarred landscapes. Recent South Island Photographs by Mark Adams, Art New Zealand 67 Winter 1993 p101

Shigeyuki Kihara, also spends considerable time researching, viewing and considering the collection, classification and use of colonial ethnographic portraits of Pacific peoples and places. She raises questions concerning the codification of gender and race and subsequent power relations. Kihara is of mixed Japanese and Samoan descent and is Fa’afafine. As she explains: “What people see with me is the surface of what’s being presented to them, but not necessarily what you would call a reality. I am Polynesian, I am Asian, I appear publicly and live as a woman within my male anatomical body – this is known as Fa’afafine in Samoa – third gender is the closest western interpretation. The Fa’afafine work questions the western classification of races, gender and sexuality. I can never fit into them, but at the same time I ask myself – are they worth fitting into?”

She goes on to say: “... the idea of beauty and harmony across the Pacific and specifically to Samoa is possessed through a dual combination of both male and female energy. Hence, the reason why people like myself are allowed to exist within the context of my Samoan culture is for living

in the va or space between men and women.” 19 Through the use of such concepts as va Kihara is reinforcing a specifically Samoan ontological philosophy.

Her photographic series Fa'afafine; In the Manner of a Woman (2004-2005) contain three works entitled Teine Samoa – Samoan Woman [fig. 9], Tama Samoa – Samoan Man [fig 8] and Ulugali’I Samoa – Samoan couple [fig 10] that addresses these classifications and turns the ethnographic and exoticised gaze around. These works reveal a consideration of the pacific cultural stereotypes of the ‘dusky maiden’ and ‘noble savage’. As Caroline Vercoe explains: “The agency of cultural stereotypes, like the dusky maiden or noble savage, coalesces around their limited frames of reference. They deny the possibility of individual recognition. They are familiar types, located within a collective imaginary.” 20

19 Kihara, Y quoted in Wolf, E. Shikeyuki Kihara’s Fa’a fafine; In a Manner of a Woman: The Photographic Theatre of Cross-Cultural Encounter, p24
These photographs replicate the standard ethnographic portrait with its inherent rules including subjects holding artefacts and holding a direct gaze while being captured front on.

Kihara stages this photographic series in a studio, with the subjects face on holding selected artefacts thereby referencing this tradition. Kihara specifically referenced ethnographic photographs that are held in the Sydney Powerhouse Museum. She also speaks to her Fa’afafine status through posing as both male and female in all three works in the series Teine Samoa – Samoan Woman, Tama Samoa – Samoan Man and Ulugali’i Samoa – Samoan couple. In terms of the male rendition, Kihara has photoshopped her face as a man on to a man’s body. Various props are used within the photographs such as a seed necklace to denote that the man is of high class and the woman is holding a fan and wearing a necklace made by another contemporary Samoan artist Ela To’omaga Kaikilekofe. As Jeanette Mageo states: “Through zones of ambiguity... producers
and artists, along with their audiences, cast cultural meanings back into conceptual play in which the fictive and constructed nature of gendered and raced identities become visible and hence subject to revision.” Kihara problematizes the ethnographic portrayal of Samoans resisting the placement of Victorian values through a colonial gaze. The colonial gender binary oppositions of Male vs Female, Man vs Woman and Adam vs Eve are denied reasserting gender as existing outside of the anatomical. The artist researched into the history and strategies that Victorian sexologists with their social Darwinist and Eugenic values, missionaries and colonial administrators imposed ‘civilising’ values that caused the Fa’aafine to be made ‘other’.

Importantly in 2010 Kihara reflected that: “I am interracial, intercultural and intergendered. I am not a clashing point but a meeting point where all these factors meet and have a dialogue, and the artwork is an outcome of it.”

Kihara’s photographs are realised through the direction of a team of technicians to produce these artworks in which she features as performer. Last year Kihara produced a suite of 18 large photographs entitled Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? (2013). The title of the series is taken from a Gauguin painting executed in Tahiti in 1897. In each of the photographs Kihara appears dressed in a fictitious guise of ‘Salome’ in a Victorian black taffeta mourning gown. Unlike the earlier series, in this work she (Salome) consistently stands facing away from the camera looking at various sites within Samoa. These places are significant for their current political, historical, cultural and environmental resonances. Each work contemplates a recent aspect of Samoan history including variously the tsunami of 2009, 50 years of independence and damage caused by Cyclone Evan in 2012. Just as in previous work there are multiple layers of interpretation available in these works.

---

21 Mageo, J quoted in Wolf, E. Shikeyuki Kihara’s Fa’a fafine; In a Manner of a Woman: The Photographic Theatre of Cross-Cultural Encounter, p30

22 Kihara, Y quoted in Wolf, E. Shikeyuki Kihara’s Fa’a fafine; In a Manner of a Woman: The Photographic Theatre of Cross-Cultural Encounter p32
The Victorian mourning gown reappears in Kihara’s work inspired by a Thomas Andrew photograph held in the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa’s collection. This photograph entitled *Samoan half caste* from 1886 shows a Samoan woman wearing a Victorian mourning dress. This image, unlike the usual exotised dusky maiden, shows a woman confidently wearing the mourning dress and exudes a level of comfort that suggests that instead of the usual postcard or museum destination, this photograph was a commission. The image also shows ease in the cultural fusion expressed and this unknown sitter has become something of a muse for Kihara. This mourning figure is also redolent of Salome from Oscar Wilde’s 1891 play. As Whitney Tassies explains; “Wilde, a provocateur of the Victorian era, deeply explored the power of the gaze, of looking and of being looked at, in his retelling of the tragic tale. Wilde’s Salome is a complex character. Part femme-fatale, part victim of objectification, she kills the very man she desires.” Kihara thus evokes, in the wearing of the Victorian mourning gown, these contrasting aspects.

---

The photograph Agelu I Tausi Catholic Church after Cyclone Evan, Mulivai Safata 2013 [fig 11] shows Kihara in mourning dress lamenting the destruction of the church as a result of the category 4 Cyclone Evan. For the small village of Mulivai, often dependent on donations and grants, the loss of this church and the local school is devastating and exposes the levels of economic dependency on external funding. The architectural features of the church reference the missionary traditions in Samoa and the role of Christianity within its colonial past. The impact of the missionaries from 1830 caused significant loss of local traditions and the encouragement of Victorian values. Samoa was under German control from 1899 until 1914 and then under New Zealand’s governance until 1962 after which it gained independence. The loss of indigenous culture was significant within this changing governance.

Similarly, Departure, Falelo International Airport, 2013 [fig12] reflects on current political and economic concerns. The 2009 tsunami resulted in a 30% drop in the country's economy and further losses were experienced after the cyclone. Samoa is economically dependent on its tourism industries and is considering the development of casinos in partnership with multinational companies. Many Pacific Island people live outside of the islands with major populations residing in Auckland and California. These populations vastly outnumber those left in Samoa itself. The airport reflects this migratory loss and the increase in tourist trading.
Pardington, Kihara and Adams supply photographic works that significantly contribute to the inherent notion of relational exchange within postcolonial practice. As Anita Herle notes: “The common typically polemical notion is that rapacious museums are merely a final resting point for captive static objects, with repatriation viewed simply as a restorative compensation ... utterly fixed unambiguously owned by individuals, communities and institutions, in to a more relational understanding of the dynamic links between people and things. A central premise of relational models is that the entities (both objects and people) emerge from (and thus require substance, meaning and value through) the relations in which they are enmeshed. A relational approach to the museum and the objects it contains highlights the productive potential of museum collections and exhibitions to link people and ideas over time and space ... Furthermore, contemporary art practice, often involving members of diasporic communities, provide an insightful and powerful commentary on ideas about appropriation and reciprocity.”

These works represent a cross-cultural dialogue that is rich with nuance and entanglement. As Conal McCarthy observes: “In this regard postcolonialism is seen as part of a process of decolonisation in which both the coloniser and the colonised disengage from former relationships and form new ones. Rather than the binaries Pakeha/coloniser and Maori/colonised that are inscribed into the

---

colonial encounter, these new relationships are relational and open, allowing for plural identities to blend and emerge.”

Collectively these artists question both contemporary and historical framing of peoples and places calling attention to current political issues and to displaced, mobile and changing identities. Their practices are unique and provide audiences with an encounter evoking questions coupled to notions of ownership, confiscation, migration, cultural and gender stereotypes through presenting us with multiple viewpoints. They both recover and expose suppressed knowledge through reflecting on the past, the unfixed present and the potency of tomorrow.

---