

Press release

DARWIN IN PARADISE CAMP: YUKI KIHARA'S FIRST SOLO EXHIBITION IN THE NETHERLANDS AT WERELDMUSEUM LEIDEN

In one of the photographic works from Yuki Kihara's *Paradise Camp* series, a group of figures is arranged within a carefully staged landscape. Their poses are stately, almost classical, as though they have stepped straight out of a nineteenth-century painting. The composition feels immediately familiar: it evokes the idyllic scenes of Polynesia painted by the French artist Paul Gauguin at the end of the nineteenth century. But on closer inspection, something has shifted. The bodies, the gazes, and the symbolism within the image tell a different story. Where Gauguin depicted the island as an exotic paradise populated by young women whom he rendered as sensual figures, Kihara instead shows a community representing itself. These reinterpretations form a key element of her solo debut in the Netherlands.

***Yuki Kihara: Darwin in Paradise Camp* marks the spectacular Dutch solo debut of the internationally renowned Japanese-Sāmoan artist, on view at Wereldmuseum Leiden. In this visually rich exhibition, Kihara critically examines, from a queer and Indigenous perspective, the cultural legacy of two influential figures in Western history: the painter Paul Gauguin and the biologist Charles Darwin.**



*Still from 'Darwin Drag' (2026) video by Yuki Kihara
Photo by Gui Taccetti, courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand*

This vibrant exhibition reveals what has been suppressed by Western systems of knowledge and imagery, while raising cultural awareness around representation. Through video installations, photography, and textile works, Kihara articulates – both incisively and with humour – how ideas about nature, gender, and culture have been shaped by colonial and Eurocentric frameworks, inviting audiences to engage with these

silenced perspectives and broaden their cultural awareness.

“(In) the expansive world of the Japanese-Sāmoan artist (Yuki Kihara) ...a reconsideration of what it means to be human requires a reevaluation of the origin of the species.”

-Art Review, April 2025

“At once playful, subversive and deeply moving... a necessary reevaluation of the past through playful theatrics and camp aesthetics... a radical reclamation of identity and a rebuttal of Gauguin’s exoticizing gaze.”

- Observer, February 2026

“A utopia... created for the Fa’afafine community... a love letter... a space where nobody is being judged for who they are, who they love or how they live their life.”

-Corridor8, November 2025

“One of the most remarkable names to emerge from this year’s Venice Biennale.”

-ELLE U.S.A, 2022



Still from video Talanoa between Yuki Kihara and Paul Gauguin by Yuki Kihara, 2022

FROM STEREOTYPE TO SELF-REPRESENTATION

One of the central points of departure for the exhibition is the work of Paul Gauguin, who painted in Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands between 1891 and 1903. Through his depiction of Polynesian women – rendered as sensual and exotic – he played a significant role in shaping the Western image of Oceania. In his work, he constructed an imagined vision of the local population, reinforcing colonial stereotypes of the region.

Yuki Kihara reverses this perspective. In a series of photographic works, she upcycles

Gauguin's compositions by restaging them with models from the Sāmoan fa'afafine community to which she also belongs to. Fa'afafine, meaning 'in the manner of a woman', is a recognised non-binary gender identity. Through these reinterpretations, the gaze shifts from exoticisation to self-representation.

In the video series *First Impressions*, members of the fa'afafine community see a painting by Gauguin for the first time and share with the viewer what they see, offering a direct and personal response to these historical images.

YUKI KIHARA X PARADISE CAMP

Yuki Kihara was born in Sāmoa and is part of the fa'afafine community, which plays a central role in her work. The models in her photographs and videos often come from her own social circle and appear not as exotic objects of a Western gaze, but as active participants in a retelling of history. In the *Paradise Camp* series, Kihara recreates various compositions from Gauguin's paintings using members of the Sāmoan fa'afafine communities. In doing so, the perspective shifts: 'paradise' is no longer seen through the eyes of a European artist but presented by the people themselves.



Yuki Kihara, *Two Fa'afafine on the Beach (after Gauguin)*, 2020

DARWIN IN PARADISE CAMP

The exhibition engages not only with the history of art, but also with that of science. In a video installation titled *Darwin Drag*, the nineteenth-century biologist Charles Darwin appears as a character who is playfully examined by Kihara. Alongside Alfred Russel Wallace, Charles Darwin developed the theory of evolution by natural selection – an idea that profoundly transformed Western understanding of the natural world. However, more recent studies by biologists such as Ross Brooks and Joan Roughgarden show that the animal kingdom displays far greater diversity in sexuality and gender than Darwin described. By placing Darwin both literally and figuratively in drag, Kihara shows how scientific knowledge is often shaped by the social norms of its era.



Yuki Kihara, *Moana Queer Taxonomy*, 2026

PREMIERE OF NEW WORK PRESENTS THE OCEAN AS A QUEER ARCHIVE

Yuki Kihara presents new work in the exhibition. *Moana Queer Taxonomy* (2026) consists of twelve embroidered pandanus mats – known in Sāmoa as *fala su'i* – depicting marine life from around the Sāmoan archipelago. Biologists have identified a wide range of sexual and gender diversity among these species: fish that change sex, species that simultaneously exhibit male and female characteristics, or form long-term pairings with partners of the same sex. By presenting these animals under their original Sāmoan names, Kihara shows that other ways of naming and classifying the natural world existed long before European taxonomies. The mats were produced with the assistance of the

embroiderers from the Tovio family of the Moata'a Aualuma community on the island of Upolu, one of Sāmoa's main islands, which gives the work a collective dimension.

VĀRCHIVE: YUKI'S ARCHIVAL RESEARCH

Archival research forms a continuous thread throughout Kihara's practice. For *Darwin in Paradise Camp*, she brings together historical photographs, books, and documents in what she calls her *vārchive*: an archive that connects different times, stories, and perspectives. Colonial photographs of Sāmoa and nineteenth-century missionary accounts reveal how European visitors sought to understand the islands through their own worldview. At the same time, these sources demonstrate how local knowledge and traditions offer alternative ways of understanding gender and the natural world. By placing these historical materials alongside her own artworks, Kihara shows how history is continually being rewritten.



Portrait of artist Yuki Kihara, Photo by Ralph Brown

FROM COLONIAL GAZE TO CLIMATE REALITY

The exhibition also engages with pressing contemporary issues. In Oceania, the effects of climate change are already clearly visible: rising sea levels, coastal erosion, and increasingly intense cyclones are having a profound impact on the islands and their inhabitants. For Kihara, these ecological changes are closely linked to the region's colonial history and to the ways in which nature has been framed within Western systems of knowledge and imagery. Her work invites viewers to recognise these

connections and reflect on the interrelationships between culture, nature, and history.

With *Yuki Kihara: Darwin in Paradise Camp*, Wereldmuseum Leiden continues to bring historical collections and contemporary art into dialogue. By presenting them together, space is created for alternative narratives and perspectives on the past, while also making visible the multiple histories of the present. Just as archival materials from the colonial period acquire new meaning in relation to contemporary perspectives, Kihara's work demonstrates how stories about nature, identity, and culture remain in constant flux.

Yuki Kihara: Darwin in Paradise Camp

From 8 May 2026 to 3 January 2027

Wereldmuseum Leiden