

# ARTIST CONCEPT OUTLINE

'Colonized peoples have been compelled to define what it means to be human because there is a deep understanding of what it has meant to be considered not fully human, to be savage.' [1]

-Linda Tuhiwai Smith

In April 2012 Patrick Richard Lam – a Samoan New Zealander and the coach for the Blues squad's rugby team made the national news headlines when he received vicious texts and threatening messages from the social media which blamed him together with the selected players in the Blue's team for the loss of 5 out of 6 matches in the Super Rugby game was due to them being Polynesians [2]. While many Polynesian rugby players today are actively being recruited by a variety of rugby clubs in New Zealand and internationally supposedly due to their body shape that can withstand the physical demands of the game [3], the rugby fans in return were quick to blame the race of the players for the loss of the game while demanding for their disciplinary actions in improving the performance of the 'savages' on the field.

This incident partly inspired the creation of '*A study of a Samoan savage*' (2015) - a body of work comprised of photographs and silent video works informed by a broad critique on the historical representations of Samoan men and their association to athleticism and prowess as a racial stereotype linked to the ideas surrounding the 'noble savage' from being fetishized as a subject and object of 'the other' by 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian science and exotic entertainment, and how these ideas continue to permeate in the postcolonial era.

'*A study of a Samoan savage*' (2015) series is comprised of 2 broad themes that are collectively explored together. These 2 themes are motion photography and anthropometry which both developed out a shared historical legacy of 'othering' colonized peoples where photography played a key role in establishing the classification and the study of the race, gender, human body, movement and evolution.

Captured in the film noir cinematographic spirit, the photographic series features Ioane Ioane, a Samoan New Zealander performance artist and a former rugby player appearing as a fictitious character named 'Maui' [4] a Polynesian demi-god performing a variety of movements, among others, informed by rugby training to Samoan cultural dances carefully choreographed and staged for the camera documented as sequential photographic analysis known as 'motion-photography' - a study of human movement through photography which can be seen in the works of British photographer Eadweard Muybridge and French photographer Etienne Jules Marey, both considered pioneers of the technique. Motion-photography was instrumental to the development of cinema and can be linked to the 'Futurist' movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Futurists championed speed, the forward march of linear time, and the rise of industry and mechanization.

The somber visual aesthetic of motion-photography featuring multiple figures gradually moving between dark and light carry layers of symbolic meaning, from Von Luschan's chromatic scale as a method of classifying skin color developed through the study of race and anthropometry; a scientific theory which suggests Polynesians deriving from Caucasoid peoples being 'almost White' as validation for the colonization of the Pacific region [5]; the seminal work of Frantz Fanon which argues colonized people's self-perception and their feelings of dependency and inadequacy in a Western world [6]; and a concept in Samoan Christian theology which describes pre-contact Samoa as 'Lagi e pogisā' ('days of darkness') when Samoans worshipped 'heathenistic' Indigenous gods in contrast to the arrival of Christian missionaries as 'Lagi e mamā' ('days of light') when Samoans denounced their Indigenous gods for Jesus Christ and the anticipation of the Last Judgment.

Maui's performances are also informed by the Samoan colonial experience during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including several groups consisting of Samoan men, women and small children who toured extensively around Germany and Europe to demonstrate a variety of cultural performances staged behind the enclosure of a zoo – a practice commonly known in Germany as 'Völkerschau' or a popular form of exotic entertainment and colonial theatre at the time. These cultural performances showcased Samoan men's athleticism and prowess including boxing, wrestling, running and cultural dances, where its success was determined by how well the patrons who paid an entrance fee were entertained by what they saw and believed to be people in their 'primitive state'.



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Courtesy of the Robert Louise Stevenson Museum, Vailima, Upolu island, Samoa

The actions of Samoan bodies ascending and descending a giant man-made water slide purposely built within the confinement of the zoo is one of the conceptual threads behind the photographic work entitled 'Maui descending a staircase I' and the silent video work entitled 'Maui descending a staircase II'. Both works references a painting by Marchel Duchamp entitled 'A nude descending a staircase No.2' (1912). While Duchamp's painting alluded to motion photography and the rise of industry and mechanization in the West, the multiple figures in Duchamp's painting also represents of a generation of peoples described by Linda Tuhiwai Smith as those in the 'West whose knowledge and science are 'beneficiaries' of the colonization of Indigenous peoples'.

Multiple figures in Duchamp's painting are subverted and replaced with figures of Maui as a shape shifter and time traveler through time and space. The combination of the visual aesthetics and underlying cultural paradigms of Western photography with forms derived from Maui also speaks directly to differing cultural constructions of time and space. 'A study of a Samoan savage' (2015) series ties together the (Western) medium of motion-photography with Samoan Indigenous reference to Ta/time and Va/space. Embedded in Maui's performance are Samoan Indigenous reference to Ta/time and Va/space, where Samoans walk forward into the past while walking back into the future, where the present is a continuous and simultaneous journey into the ancestral realm of the future.

The Samoans in the Völkerschau were hosted under inhumane conditions where many of them died of disease and loneliness during their tours. Human remains of a Samoan man with a pe'a (Samoan men's customary tattoo) who took part in the Völkerschau were publically exhibited from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century at the Royal Museum of Art and History in Brussels Belgium. However it was removed from display in mid-2000 in the wake of the global outcry with pressure from Indigenous organizations and the United Nations for museums to repatriate the human remains back to their Indigenous communities to heal the wounds of colonialism inflicted by Europe [7]. The human remains of the Samoan pe'a are still stored at the Royal Museum.

Whether the Samoan men arrived in Germany as part of a Völkerschauen troupe or as sailors in trade ships, they were seen as colonized people treated as a commodity to be emasculated by being examined, measured and photographed by anthropologists as a systematic process of collecting data for physical anthropology to question a variety of racial scientific theories, among others, the Social Darwinist ideas of the existence of racial hierarchy, the myth of the Aryan race and Eugenics.



'Faoli, Samoan. PR Coll. 23/10010' (circa 1873) Photographer unknown.  
Courtesy of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, United Kingdom [8]

One of many examples of the study of race in the Pacific region is illustrated in a publication entitled '*Essentials of anthropometry: a handbook for explorers and museum collectors*' (1926) by American anthropologist Louise Sullivan [9] who was the former curator of the American Museum of Natural History in New York and Bishop Museum in Honolulu.

In his book, Sullivan sought support from professionals to amateurs ranging from ethnologists, archeologists, physicians, army personnel, naval officers and travelers as pioneers of the American colonial empire to collect anthropometric data from Indigenous peoples in Polynesia, Micronesia, Melanesia and Malaysia as a way to study mankind at the expense of subjugating them in the process.

Sullivan also describes the essential measurements required for the scientific study of racial difference was stature, head length, head breadth, face breadth, anatomical face height, nasal height and nasal width. From these measurements derived the cephalic length breadth index, the anatomical face index and the nasal index. The measurements were also supplemented in addition to the descriptive observation of the color of skin, color of the hair, form of the hair, eye color, the epicanthic or Mongoloid eyefold, thickness of the lips, form of the upper front (incisor) teeth, the amount of beard development and the development of body hair. Sullivan also describes in detail how to use anthropometry tools which closely resembles those used to measure Maui.

Many of Sullivan's anthropometry research were presented at the International Eugenics Conference hosted by the American Museum of Natural History between 1912 till 1932. The International Eugenics conference was the global platform for scientists, politicians, and social leaders to plan and discuss the possibility of improving the qualities of the human species or human population.

Eugenics and Anthropometry was also exercised by New Zealand scientists, among others, included the late Maori anthropologist Te Rangi Hiroa also known as Sir Peter Buck who, in 1919 conducted an anthropometry investigation on the Maori battalion returning from England with tools borrowed from a leading Eugenicist Professor Arthur Keith of the Royal College of Surgeons in London. After measuring and collecting data from 814 men, Te Rangi Hiroa concluded that the Maori was the superior race of the Polynesians, while publically objecting the findings described in a publication

entitled 'A handbook of Western Samoa' (1925) published by the New Zealand government which described Samoans as being "the highest branch of the Polynesians". [10]

Maui performing in defiance while being measured with clinical Anthropometry tools alludes to the history of Samoan masculinity under Western scientific scrutiny, which is echoed in a poignant poem composed by Samoa based-artist Momoe Malietoa Von Reiche informed by her ancestor's experience and being observed by a group of British scientists:

*My Ancestor in a Museum (2007)*

*After a long journey  
They put him  
In a glass case  
At an English museum.  
People came to stare  
At his wooden genitals  
One professor said,  
"Some romantic notion of the  
Past, eh, what?  
Or is it cannibalism?"  
The other one said,  
"It's the savage titillation of  
Holding evil in the hand no doubt ..."*

*Every night he turned  
To the direction of home;  
Every morning they  
Straightened him up  
To face the West –  
With fear  
In their pale eyes. [11]*

Maui's performances which embody the visceral experience of Samoan ancestors provoked by historical events are allegorical responses to the Samoan experience in the postcolonial present.

**Yuki Kihara, Artist.**

Note: The exhibition of 'A study of a Samoan savage' (2015) series will accompany a display of 19<sup>th</sup> century photographic archives sourced from the Pitt Rivers Museum (UK). A further in-depth exploration of 'A study of a Samoan savage' (2015) series will be presented by the artist in various lectures and artist talks held throughout 2015 and beyond. For more information please contact [info@milfordhouse.co.nz](mailto:info@milfordhouse.co.nz)

- [1] 'Decolonizing Methodologies; Research and Indigenous peoples' (1999) by Linda Tuhiwai Smith
- [2] 'Blue's Pat Lam hits out at racist criticism' (2012)  
<http://www.stuff.co.nz/sport/rugby/super-rugby/6725018/Blues-Pat-Lam-hits-out-at-racist-criticism>
- [3] 'Kahungunu Barron-Afeaki, a sports lawyer and doctoral researcher on Polynesian sporting excellence, claimed that the distinctive physiology of Polynesians, as a large, muscular people with more 'fast twitch' muscle fibers, had evolved to meet the rigors of long sea-voyaging in cool Pacific climates.... In a contemporary setting, such physiology gave them an obvious advantage in sport – and one accentuated by the 'white flight' from rugby by those who did not wish to be injured by physically imposing Polynesian players. Professional sport was also attractive in offering potentially large income to more socioeconomically disadvantaged Polynesian people.'  
(Excerpt from *Few and Far Between; Maori and Pacific contributions to New Zealand cricket* [19<sup>th</sup> Feb 2007] by Greg Ryan. Published by Routledge.)
- [4] Maui is a renowned demi-god featured throughout many Indigenous creation stories across the Pacific region known for his use of tricks to challenge conventions and create order out of chaos. Kihara portrayed the character of Maui in her 2004 photographic series entitled 'Vavau; tales of ancient Samoa'.
- [5] 'The "discovery" of Polynesian Intelligence' (2013) by Maile Arvin
- [6] 'Black Skin, White Masks (*Peau noire, masques blancs*)' (1952) by Frantz Fanon
- [7] *The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007)
- [8] Anthropometric photographs of a Samoan man called Faaoli, a sailor who came to Hamburg in the 1870s and was photographed there for the Godeffroy Museum. Courtesy Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, United Kingdom (1998.236.9.1-3).
- [9] See the works by American anthropologist Louis Robert Sullivan
  - 'A contribution to Samoan somatology; Based On The Field Studies Of E. W. Gifford and W. C. Mckern' (1921)
  - 'Race Types in Polynesia' published in *American Anthropologist* (1924), pp. 22-26
  - *Essentials of Anthropometry* (1926)
- [10] 'Te Rangi Hiroa's physical anthropology' (1994) by John S Allen published in the *Journal of Polynesian Society*
- [11] Published with the permission of Momoe Malietoa Von Reiche on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2014.