

# **Contemporary Identity, Culture and the Art of Redress: Tokyo Street Style and Shigeyuki Kihara in Aotearoa New Zealand**

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Since the 1990s, contemporary Pacific and Maori artists such as Michael Parekowhai, Lisa Reihana, Niki Hastings-McFall and others have offered an image of Aotearoa New Zealand as variously and simultaneously a site of diaspora, transition, and migration, as well as the homeland for the indigenous Maori and European and other settlers. As Karen Stevenson has noted in relation to *Bottled Ocean: Contemporary Polynesian Artists (1994-95)*, “Artists draw upon a cultural knowledge of ideas and materials to re-present the myth and the cliché. ... these artists are creating traditions that bridge the world of their ancestors and their global urban reality, which reinforces the social and political agendas of their work” (Stevenson 2004: 32). This image of Aotearoa New Zealand, whilst malleable and contested, is useful for the way it allows the identification of regionally specific ideas and practices to emerge from particular cultural contexts; and for locating a shared experience of the flows, fluidities and homogenising pressures of an increasingly transcultural world which might be common to postcolonial and post-imperial nations. Hence, in this essay, I am going to focus on the work of New Zealand artist Shigeyuki Kihara, and the photographs of Japanese artist Shoichi Aoki, in order to engage their astute visual investigations into the utopian and dystopian flows of globalisation, and to map the intriguing ways in which they generate important critical dialogues around these disjunctions and the consumer landscapes which surround them.

## **TOKYO STREET STYLE**

Shown at the Dowse Museum as part of the 2004 New Zealand International Arts Festival, the exhibition FRUiTS: Tokyo Street Style, brought together a collection of photographs by Japanese artist Shoichi Aoki. Taken throughout the late 1990s, these smallish, glossy photographs were originally produced for inclusion within FRUiTS magazine (published by Aoki since 1997). Shown on the walls of the Dowse, the source location and function appears to be writ large throughout the images, and balancing a similarity in design and context across the exhibition with demands for close inspection and intimacy, the images suggest the paradoxical characteristic of magazines - that must communicate meaning effectively to readers who rapidly scan over the images, as well as to those who seek a more detailed engagement. Taken to document a particular, transient moment in Harajuku, Aoki's photographs represent the playful manipulations of fashion and identity that emerged when groups of teenagers regularly dressed up to congregate in the Hokoten ('pedestrian paradise') that occurred on weekends when car traffic was banned from a public square. Aoki notes that one of the extraordinary features of the street style associated with the Harajuku spectacle was the combination of traditional dress such as kimono, obi sashes and geta sandals, with designer fashion and alternative street-wear (Barrell 2003). In any one example, we are presented with montaged effects that have been built out of punk, cyber, gothic, new funk, wire accessories, human anatomy, children's toys, and various school, nurse, or Victorian maid uniforms. In response to the photograph of “Princess”, who is obsessed with “body organs”, Raymond, a 43-year old German visitor, says, “It reminds me of punk but more interesting.” “What does it mean?” he asks (Sarti 2003).

The avant-garde movement embodied by the young people represented in these images indicates the creation of a situation where Western (predominantly American) cultural imperialism is both asserted and subverted by the paradoxical incorporation

of traditional garments such as the kimono, and this contributes to the generation of renewed attention to contemporary Japanese cultural identity (Aoki 2001: 4). This practice of performative dress-up provides a hyperreal form of what the Japanese call 'cosplay' (or 'costume-play'), as well as a point of nexus between the old, the new, and various connected ideas about identity in relation to culture, gender, and youth (Kinsella 1995: 247-8). Emerging over a number of years at Harajuku, these activities challenged the certainty and singularity of terms such as 'authenticity', and engendered debate over the dominant dualistic understanding of culture as referring either to the aestheticised pursuit of a higher sensibility or to the objectification associated with an anthropological intention and outlook. At once both playfully incorporating and resisting elements of mainstream culture and associated conceptions of 'taste', 'distinction' and 'cultural capital', the teenagers photographed by Aoki expose these criteria of high culture to be artificially produced rather than natural in any way. As such, and despite their outward dedication to expressly superficial manifestations of collective fun, the complexity intrinsic to these criteria is actually heightened by the images taken by Aoki. The posturings, performances and styles originated, followed and critiqued by the Harajuku youth may be accounted for by the contention made by Rupert Weinzierl and David Muggleton, that:

The important implication that arises from this is that subcultural capital is valuable by virtue of its exclusivity; hence as new subcultural sounds and styles emerge they must be prevented from being continually coveted and appropriated by the 'mass'.... This attempt at demonstrating 'distinction' occurs through the construction of a commercialised subcultural or mainstream 'Other' as a symbolic marker against which to define one's own tastes as 'authentic' (2003: 10).

In Aoki's images, the performance of a defining but deeply derivative cutting-edge youth style (with its attendant, subcultural 'authenticity') in Harajuku provides a microcosm of the way that identity in Japan and elsewhere can be seen more generally as constituted by a hybrid and manifold practice that embodies the frivolous and potentially disjunctive practices of consumerism as enthusiastically as it embraces or draws from the more thorough intentionality of history and tradition (Iida 2000: 427 and Cazdyn 2000: 905-7). The week-to-week process of redefinition and redressing that occurred at Harajuku throughout this period illustrates subcultural capital as a crucial element in the continued realization of cutting-edge style. It also shows, however, the terms of appropriation, debate and critique as always being present by implication, which means that the questions of distinction, differentiation and the economies and scales of status associated with these become evident as highly complicated, deeply layered, and ever shifting processes within the photographs. Just as punk integrated signifiers of mainstream fashion out of an attempt to manifest subversion through a rendering awkward of the dominant terms and ideologies, participants in the Harajuku scene integrated the culture that they also sought to critique. This process was further complicated by the ambivalent nature of their critique, however, as they both challenged and embraced consumerism. Through the representational vocabulary and sphere created both by its participants and by Aoki, historical ritual can be seen as jutting up against the more disposable, contemporary practices of commodity culture (Sumitomo 2004: 32-33). Demonstrating identity and subjectivity to be constructed concepts, Aoki also portrays these to be commonly experienced and enjoyed through the frameworks of play, leisure, and entertainment. Undoubtedly connected to Yasumasa Morimura's provocation that art is a form of entertainment, Aoki draws art and life together to depict identity as subject to constant change and play; something that is made apparent by the young people represented

within his photographs. In one image, sixteen year-old “Snowflake” cites her current obsession as “looking at the sky and crying.” Further to the idea that fashion can be used to create new and enjoyable assemblages of key cultural images and coordinates, Aoki suggests that “fashion is an important form of communication” (FRUiTS 2003). As such, Aoki’s photographs illustrate the popular contention amongst cultural studies theorists that fashion is a system of signification that functions like a language. However, Aoki’s interest is in the transgressive ways that people express themselves through the interactive process of dressing, rather than the individual garments they wear. He is interested in the overall meaning that emerges from engagement with the complete experience of dress, performance and context (rather than just with the individual ‘words’ used). This signifying system is evidenced further by Aoki’s practice of recording the subject’s name and age, a description of their outfit in their own words, their current obsessions, as well as their main “point of fashion” or motivations for their style on the day they have been photographed. It is notable that in most cases, the language they speak is used to adorn their image. Rather than seeking to clarify or legitimate their choices, the integration of verbal language further decorates the image and style projected.

### **SHIGEYUKI KIHARA**

Also committed to the idea that fashion provides a form of communication, Shigeyuki Kihara received attention in 2000 for a series of 28 culture-jammed T-shirts exhibited at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, called ‘Teu Anoa’i: Adorn to Excess’. Living and working in Auckland, Kihara’s background is Samoan / Japanese and she is a fa’afafine, whose work foregrounds issues of race and gender. Using fashion and the body as her primary tools of expression, Kihara works across a variety of mediums and with a variety of subject matters. These include a critical engagement with exoticised historical and anthropological images of Pacific peoples, and the objectifying practices embodied by the ‘Dusky Maiden’ genre of velvet painting made famous by New Zealand artists like Charles McPhee throughout the 1950s and 60s (Pearson 2002: 187-8). Key to her strategies and sphere of representation is the issue of personal agency, and in locating herself and the figures she depicts as contained by or framed within the stereotypes and images of the Pacific that have proliferated throughout popular and high culture, Kihara demonstrates her subjects as either resisting or directly confronting the colonial or voyeuristic gaze. In relation to her 2004 ‘Vavau—Tales from Ancient Samoa’ exhibition, she explains, “What I do is re-occupy that [colonial] gaze ... I come from the point of view of the insider” (Hanson 2004). In describing Kihara’s identification as a fa’afafine or transgender person, and in accounting for the cultural significance of this, Jim Vivieaere explains:

Shigeyuki Kihara was born to defy categorisation. Her very existence blurs and challenges the organisation of mainstream thought and practise. What is special about her however is her successful negotiation of the interstices that could otherwise have rendered her incredible. She has stood uncompromisingly in her own marginalised space, fully intending the world to come to her (Vivieaere 2003: 33).

Kihara occupies a transgressive and liminal space both in relation to her everyday life and to her art practice, and in the Vavau series, she seduces the viewer by representing herself according to the colonial fantasies produced to effect by McPhee and others. In addition to deconstructing the field of symbolic references, these photographs are designed as a respectful and evocative homage to her Samoan heritage. They reconstruct central episodes from specific Samoan folktales or fagono according to traditional narrative models and modes of telling, and in ‘Fue Tagata—Ghostly Bodies’, 2004, we see the photographic subject—who

simultaneously is and is not Kihara—embodying a flight from the fixity associated with categorical, labelled, stereotypical, or dualistically bound forms of identity. Aiming to parody the practice and Western representational schemata that contributed to the popular allure of McPhee's paintings and the institutionalisation of the genre, Kihara also challenges the contemporary 'ironic' taste for these paintings as much-desired commodities prized by the fashionable retro chic of collectibles and interior design.

Through reappropriating the genre and subject matter of the 'original' Dusky Maiden velvet paintings, Kihara's photographs employ a strategy of mimesis. Rather than simply imitating the stereotype or providing a direct reversal of the model, Kihara integrates a more reflective style of re-interpretation, as well as the intention to generate new forms and viewpoints. Her practice of re-inscribing and re-making original motifs contributes to produce what identity-theorist Judith Butler refers to in *Gender Trouble* as a 'de-masking' of the original (Butler 1990). Through these strategies, Kihara threatens to subvert the apparent stability and 'naturalness' of gender and sexual identities as clearly and unproblematically differentiated categories. Informed by Butler's argument that identity is constructed according to cultural conditions so that it may even exist as a symptom of historical and cultural conditioning, Kihara's figures gain subjective agency according to notions of productive, performative practice, and the context or location that this happens within. She explains that, "I'm trying to find a sense of place, of meaning, for where I am now. By doing so, I also seek what's in store for me in the future. There's that saying: you won't know where you're going unless you know where you're from. Know the past to see the future." (Watt 2003) Rather than depicting gender as a fundamental characteristic of one's identity that motivates our actions, Kihara shows it to be constituted according to a continual process or enactment that produces precisely that which it names (Butler 1990: 6). As such, Kihara demonstrates gender as being a fundamentally unstable product, in contrast to identity, which appears to be more crucially connected to the ways that we choose to perform certain versions of our self. These productive performances of self also, importantly, contribute mannerisms and behaviours to a system of communication that is equivalent to the constitution of fashion as a language.

The garments and styling used for *Adorn to Excess* proposed a successful and exacting parody of the consumer culture that promotes the fetishisation of iconic logos and the economy of brand names (such as Polynesian Airlines, The Warehouse, and KFC), and the glamorisation of 'the Pacific' by the media, fashion and advertising industries. The exhibition also initiated a public form of criticism against transnational corporations that use this mode of advertising and that employ Pacific Islanders as low-paid workers (Corbett 2001). What made the condemnation of these practices especially biting, however, was Kihara's methodology; her appropriation of language vernacular to various Pacific Islands functioned as a kind of foil to the stereotypes often invoked by such language when it is used in a derogatory way. In replacing the cute 'Barbie' logo and fair-skinned blonde haired figure with the (equally) deceptively cute 'Fobie' logo and dark-skinned, dark-haired baby doll, Kihara demanded that visitors to the exhibition consider the way that cultural stereotypes come to have sustained currency within contemporary culture; 'Fobie' refers to the term 'FOB', or 'fresh off the boat' and is an offensive term used to denote Pacific migrants (particularly in the 1970s). As with Aoki, Kihara invokes fashion as offering a signifying system that can be used to critique the language that literally marks it; as well as the body wearing it. Also interweaving art, entertainment,

life, humour and commodity culture, Kihara's work has been constructed out of a more clearly subversive and directly critical agenda, so that she not only engages with fashion as a form of communication, but with broader ideas about the commodification and consumption of cultural stereotypes.

As with the cute but menacing Japanese characters used in manga and anime cartoons, the logos, captions and figures on Kihara's T-shirts may be seen to indicate dystopian despair at the all-encompassing and hegemonic domination of the interests of transnational corporations that threaten to diminish the political efficacy of regional specificity and pride by reducing the signs of local practice to the stuff of generalising and pejorative caricature. However, Kihara's practice works to subvert the definitive authority of any primarily dystopian image. The stereotypes she battles against are both gender-based and cultural, and Adorn to Excess reminded the viewer that such images and terms continue to be lived and experienced as well as actively manifested by ideological practices - something which was reinforced by the threat of legal action that was made by several large brand corporations against Te Papa if it continued exhibiting the work (Devereux 2001; Chapple 2003).

### **COSPLAY AND SUBJECTIVITY**

Critical engagement with versions of costume-play can be seen widely in contemporary artworks that aim to focus on identity and subjectivity issues, in Japan and elsewhere (Brunt 2004: 229-30; Papastergiardis 2005: 4-5). Indeed, as illustrated by the trend dominant in Harajuku today for more 'off the shelf' images, and the associated standardisation of figures like 'Elegant Gothic Lolita', 'Victorian Maiden' and 'Ganguro Girls' available from shops such as Baby the Stars Shine Bright, this practice may itself have been recuperated back into the consumer culture which it once aimed to challenge as well as champion. Despite this, however, the practice continues as a popular and effective strategy used by artists including Hiroyuki Matsukage and Gorgerous, Tomoko Sawada, and Noboru Tsubaki, all of whom contributed to the *Mediarena: Contemporary Art from Japan* show exhibited at the Govett-Brewster Gallery in 2004. The figurative photographs by Sawada in particular, resonate with the cultural struggles embodied by the performative approaches also used by New Zealand artists such as Lisa Reihana, in *Native Portraits n. 19897* (1997), and Michael Parekowhai's installations *Poorman, Beggarman, Thief* (1996) and *Portrait of Para* (2003). Also exhibited in 2004, these works contributed to the *Paradise Now? Contemporary Art from the Pacific* exhibition held at the Asia Society Museum in New York (Myers 2005: 273). Commonly linked back to the work of international and globally successful artists such as Cindy Sherman, Yasumasa Morimura and Moriko Mori, who position themselves as the object of their own, authorial gaze in order to subvert the dominant order whereby the model is rendered submissive both to the artist and viewer (Pothecary), each of these artists (including Kihara and Aoki) privilege an active interplay between the subjects represented and the audience. They do so by employing generally understood and culturally acute models, which are then presented according to a locally accented analysis of cultural stereotyping and cliché, and an analytical exploration of issues related to gender and sexuality. It may also be argued that this self-reflective attention to fashion as a language and to the performativity of the self is connected to cultural anxieties over the relationship between globalisation and regionalism (where local identity is already unresolved). Describing the contradictions of this situation in contemporary Japan, Fumio Nanjo writes:

Pouring all its resources and energy into national reconstruction, post-war Japan raced ahead and always in emulation of the United States and Europe. At the top of the

economic boom Japan appeared to have attained the height of prosperity. Now [in the aftermath of the collapse of the bubble economy], without a concrete goal, it seems to have lost its bearings, and with this loss of direction, its consciousness is also adrift. In such a time, art does not uphold lofty causes or overarching objectives, nor does it take on a political purpose or flaunt authority (Nanjo 2004: 15).

This passage suggests that a kind of baroque sensibility has taken root in Japan, where art is perceived by cultural commentators as turning necessarily to the tools and methodologies of small-scale subversion; to parody, appropriation and ambivalence (Osaka 2004: 15). Such domestic, internalising discourses work to refocus our attention back onto the body and identity of the artist, so that the question of individual subjectivity becomes a stage upon which the greater dramas associated with the politics of cultural identity can be performed; indeed, it is here that questions of authorship, control and institutional pressure are often asked (Iida 2000: 434). In this scenario, personal and public spheres are presented as becoming intimately entwined (despite the continued privileging of the public over the private), and in a clever move, this inter-implication itself often becomes the subject of public display and discussion. Showing not only that cultural hierarchies exist and how they function, this approach demonstrates how inter-personal boundaries are also established and maintained as part of this process.

One example of this is Tomoko Sawada's OMIAI \_\_ (wall version) (2001), in which the artist represents herself as both the generic Japanese girl (cute, happy, playful: adorable), and as an individualised subject trying to explore if not challenge the set of meanings categorised by this neutral model. However, the 'cute' in consumer practices is far from simplistic and superficial, and as Sharon Kinsella argues, its meaning is instead imbricated together by the contradictions, resistances and ironies produced by and experienced within contemporary culture (Kinsella 1995: 247-8). In this series, Sawada presents herself as embodying thirty different types of personality (or styles of femininity) in photographs of the type used by Japanese families to initiate arranged marriages. Functioning according to a kind of swap-card economy, potential brides are dressed in various outfits (including formal attire), and are photographed at a professional portrait studio. "The parents subsequently exchange and distribute cards featuring the photos to other families and relatives in hope of finding a suitable husband for their daughter. Seen together the images expose and thereby deconstruct a Japanese language of male desire involving the objectification of women." (Burke 2004: 24) Instead of choosing to directly critique the way that teenage girls express themselves in fashion and make-up, Sawada challenges the idea that individual girls should aspire to the logo or label used to categorise them; a point also made by Aoki's photographs of the Harajuku scene. Sawada's work shows that in Japan, as elsewhere, clothing has always functioned as an important system of signification, inter-personal communication, and self-expression, so that in addition to depicting the beauty and versatility of the girl displayed by these syntagmatic photos, they also, and possibly more importantly, illustrate the families' means to furnish or dress the needs of their future son-in-law (and his family). Motivated by a desire to reveal the fundamental and constitutive role that political structures play in the construction of individual identity, a deeper layer of critique exists within Sawada's series, so that she may rupture the cultural practice and institutional frameworks that have led to and provided the conditions necessary for the continued consumption and currency of this image of femininity. Illustrating what a tenuous (and relative) commodity identity can be, her photographs present a dialogue that is at once useful and obscuring; that simultaneously draws our attention to the small details available

only on close inspection, and to the transparency of the overarching politics that work to determine the broader cultural landscape.

### **THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF REDRESS**

The practice of re-appropriating cultural signifiers and stereotypes in order to critique the political framework supporting them is itself widely employed beyond Kihara's reconstruction of labels and typologies. In fact, this is increasingly recognised as an effective methodology by artists seeking to regain control over the images and language often used to pigeonhole cultural practice (and draw attention away from the imperial practices of the speaking subject), and Nikos Papastergiadis explains that, "The juxtaposition of different signs and the contrast of alternative perspectives is not only a recurring feature in the composition of artworks but also a strategy that artists utilise in order to provoke new forms of cross-cultural communication" (2005: 5). New Zealand artists deploying this strategy include Michael Parekowhai, who has reappropriated the term 'Hori', as both a common Maori name meaning 'George' and as a term that refers disparagingly to groups of Maori. In 'Poorman, Beggarman, Thief' (1996), Parekowhai presented a life-size, over-dressed mannequin wearing the nametag "Hello, My Name is Hori" in the gallery space. In a move that is effective due to the discomfiting ambivalence produced by the combination of tuxedo and ill-fitting hairpiece, the installation may be regarded as deeply personal: Or alternately, the intimacy evoked by the additional story (Parekowhai suggests the figure was modelled on his father) may be a defiant ploy motivating viewers to question the authenticity or naturalness of the connection between signifier and signified. Following on from this, Melissa Chiu suggests: "The pejorative meaning of the nametag, along with the titles of the works, contrasts with the figure's spiffy dress and presence in an art gallery. By parachuting an ugly cultural stereotype into the gallery, dressed as an urban sophisticate, Parekowhai is playfully turning assumptions about Maori on their head. Hori might mean George, but that does not mean George is a Hori" (Chiu 2004:17).

Also invoking this desire to rupture any naturalness in the connection between object and image, or person and label, Lisa Reihana has invoked dominant ideologies and signifying systems to provide a kind of applied or clearly demonstrated form of critique in her work *Native Portraits n. 19897* (1997), a video installation that occupies the gallery space in a heightened, protective (Smith 2004: 37), and strangely visceral way given the technicality of the monitors. Reihana made this work when commissioned by the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa to develop a new way of re-presenting the Museum's collection of nineteenth-century photographic portraits of Maori. Providing a bridge between Aoki's photographs and Kihara's 'Black Sunday' series (2001), Reihana's installation of re-framed and re-posed photographs animate the stereotypes that, despite being historicized, continue to resonate for many present-day Maori (Rauer 2004). The anthropological or ethnocentric gaze is subverted by this work, and in reconstructing historical scenes, Reihana has employed a change in the direction of the *mise-en-scene*. The original portraits have been replaced by images of her Maori friends dressed-up in combinations of historical costume and contemporary clothing (including official uniforms as well as the equally prescribed outfits worn by various white and blue-collar workers). *Native Portraits n. 19897* exposes the 'source' material as having been produced by an artist who was no less authorial than Reihana, and posed by a group of people who are being photographed according to no less performative models. These characterisations are no less true than those contained by the originals.

Animated by video, however, these thoroughly renewed subjects return the viewer's exploring gaze, with a direct and critical look of their own.

Unlike these works which centralise the relationship between body and the performance of identity, it is interesting to note the absence of the body from Kihara's *Adorn to Excess*. By separating the body from the works on display, Kihara draws attention to the way that these systems of meaning production function. This makes it evident that a syntagmatic system is constructed by the logos themselves, which 'speak' to each other according to the self-referential language used (in a context where the trend for logo-enhanced T-shirts also denotes something for its wearer). In removing the body from this equation, Kihara's work illustrates how deeply fashion functions as a system of communication, and suggests that it is inevitable that the dual articulations offered by the wearing of logoed T-shirts and by the meaning offered by the logos shows identity as being constructed in part at least by the clothing that we wear. In removing the body from the display, the ideological processes whereby certain meanings appear naturalised (by being included within popular spheres of commodity and youth culture) come to appear less innate or natural and more ideologically mediated (revealing, therefore, the ways in which ideology itself gains a transparency).

Viewers of cultural and gender stereotypes, regardless of whether they are located in museum or gallery spaces, on television, cinema, print media or elsewhere, are often encouraged (or conditioned) to adopt the gaze of the tourist, traveller, or anthropologist. In writing about the historical precedence for this, Caroline Vercoe explains that, "Like many indigenous peoples, Pacific Islanders have been the subjects of innumerable photographic studies, ranging from medical to anthropological to touristic. To cater to the booming nineteenth-century postcard industry, a plethora of exoticised images were constructed and photographed." (Vercoe 2004: 43) In 'Black Sunday' (2001), Kihara reappropriates and reinscribes the colonial convention for Western photographers to represent Pacific peoples. Within this series, the relationship of the body as explicitly marked or acculturated - regardless of its apparent naturalness or nakedness - becomes a point of dialogue. Sourced from museum archives, the subjects who populate these images have been reconstructed to present a kind of historical inversion (if not a caution) to Aoki's project - and to the possibility of any claims it may make for political neutrality. In one image, entitled 'Gossip Sessions' (2001), Kihara remakes the native bodies by actively posturing and parodying the Western representational tradition and taste for ethnographic and exotic images of Pacific peoples. Whereas in the original archival photographs, women have been depicted topless and submissive to the objectifying gaze of the photographer, in Kihara's reinscription, they have ironically been covered up by brightly coloured T-shirts and presented as refusing to meet the voyeuristic gaze. Describing this image, Vercoe explains, "the obvious artifice of their re-dressing highlights and counters the stereotyped conventions of the sexualised maiden and savage. They also parody the various missionary attempts to cover the natives' bodies in order to promote modesty and discretion." (2004: 45) What is most significant about Kihara's revision of these archival images is the way that they re-centralise the procedures implicit in the production of cultural knowledge.

### **MYTHOLOGIES OF THE APOLITICAL**

The veracity of mythology as an ideologically informed process is, as such, frequently challenged by Kihara's culturally sophisticated work. Through engaging with the methodologies used in the production of the images referenced (McPhee's *Dusky Maiden* paintings or the source photographs of the 'Black Sunday' series), Kihara's

work challenges the status and role of myth itself. It may even translate into visual form the argument put forth by Roland Barthes; that we each, individually and collectively, generate and use mythologies as a basic and constructive strategy for understanding and combating existing inequalities in specific places and situations, and for coming to terms with the more general things about our lives that we have difficulty rationalising (Barthes 1973: 109-15). Kihara's work is sympathetic to this project, which was designed to demonstrate how and why we produce the images and illusions that constitute our reality and that we accept, therefore, as being 'true', and her work shows that, like other aspects of our everyday life, this is both a cognitive and non-cognitive process. Instead of continuing to take these mythologies for granted as unquestionable statements of fact, Kihara's images ask us to look at the relationship between the end product or meaning and the processes that are involved in its 'becoming-truth'; they encourage viewers to interact literally with cultural stereotypes and the mediums of expression according to their semiotic constituents. As such, Kihara suggests that we actively 'read' the logo-ed T-shirts in *Adorn to Excess* as sites that promote dialogue and debate about meaning, rather than as simply perceiving them as proposing a counter-authoritative position. Her work asks the viewer to move away from the idea of the authentic body, and in the *Dusky Maiden* style images, in particular, we can see her desire to question the processes and procedures that have been involved in the naturalisation of such stereotypes. Kihara's work may be understood, therefore, as motivated to reappropriate clichés associated with Pacific culture; a purpose that Stevenson attributes to many contemporary Pacific artists for whom, the cliché of 'the Pacific' has itself been repositioned as the artist's muse (2004: 30).

Cultural identity is frequently portrayed in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand as the result of a hybrid and inclusive, polymorphous and multiple perspectivism that is seen to result in a "patchwork that binds together the stereotypes and myths, the authentic and traditional, the eclectic and eccentric, island and urban" (Stevenson 2004: 23). The main problem with this kind of interpretation is its ideological promotion of a version of contemporary culture that is all-inclusive and that "threatens no one", where fashion, popular culture, entertainment, and issues of style are all inherently apolitical. This forced depoliticisation can be apparent even in progressively democratic attempts to redraw national identity according to a model that avoids traditional boundaries and stereotypes, as expressed in a special "Pacifica" edition of the lifestyle magazine *More*:

Well, it's coming. ... A Pacific sort of feeling is starting to bubble through art, music, leisure, sport, lifestyle. ... It takes time for a nation to develop its personality. .... We're pulling together all the influences that make us a modern Pacific nation and creating something anew. Pacifica is a little bit Maori. A little bit European. Add a spice of Asia. A vibrant splash of Polynesia. An injection of California. ... It's not born of one culture. It's an expression of many. Therefore it threatens no one. It's a mood, a style, a feeling. This is Pacifica. The New Zealand of the new decade (Stevenson 2004: 23).

Granted this statement was made in 1990. However, it draws a recognisable profile that continues to be used in some contexts today. Critiqued at all levels throughout Kihara's work, this kind of approach has also, strangely, been expressed by Aoki—at least superficially. Produced as playful postcard-like images (in scale and appearance) that appear to objectify the teenagers portrayed, Aoki's images represent subjects to be consumed both by a Japanese audience who may have already seen the images in the *FRUiTS* magazine, and overseas viewers according to a distinctly touristic gaze.

He claims the images perform a deep ambivalence to political agency, and asserts that they are positioned as being just about leisure and play. However, perhaps we can understand Aoki's representation of the apolitical as offering a kind of provocation that is actually employed to illustrate the argument that there can be no such thing as political neutrality, and the corresponding idea that political neutrality is always already as equally ideologically informed as more overtly politicised statements. This would mean that when Aoki asserts, "People don't really choose their fashion with a deeper meaningful message and that's what I'm looking for as well, not some sort of deeper message, just something that looks good—just what they like. Just look for what looks good - no deeper message" (Barrell 2003), we might interpret this as illustrating a relationship with Morimura's correlation of art and entertainment. However, we might also understand it as a form of posturing that encourages the viewer to consider the politics of the consumer landscape more critically; especially given his disjunctive follow-up comment that the subversive style of the Harajuku movement was brought to an end by the re-opening to cars of the streets surrounding the public square that had functioned as 'a young people's haven' on Sunday afternoons. Explaining how "the momentary avant-garde and creative fashion ... mostly disappeared" (FRUiTS 2003), Aoki explains that, "About three years ago the streets were opened again to vehicle traffic so there is no longer really anywhere for young people to get together, so that movement has kind of stopped and is going back to the commercial base with the designers feeding style to young people" (Barrell 2003).

Rather than being used to achieve a kind of politically ineffective cultural unification or homogenisation, difference and rupture may therefore be identified as significant characteristics of contemporary global culture, especially in relation to the way it is actually lived, experienced and made real. This means that in adopting a DIY approach to fashion, the subjects in Aoki's photographs also publicly embody the possibility that dress and image is directly connected to identity. The cosmopolitan, mix-and-match style of the fashions appropriated (where recycled traditional Japanese garments are worn alongside Western fashion—often in disruptive or shocking arrangements) illustrate clothing to be an expression of creativity. However, this also shows the impossibility of political neutrality in this highly commodified environment, where debates of local and global identity come to inscribe and define the body so literally. In addition to depicting identity (cultural, gendered, collective, individual) to be produced rather than 'natural', the moments of rupture and disjuncture within these works are crucial for the way that they demonstrate how ideological meanings come to be naturalised.

### **SUBCULTURE AND HEGEMONY**

While politics can therefore be seen to dominate the interpretation of these images, the dialogue with urban youth audiences and the practices of consumption and fun—as equally political constituents—should not be overlooked. Contributing to the critical environment contextualising Aoki's photographs and Kihara's work, the projects by Sawada, Reihana and Parekowhai also contribute to an exploration of the institutional and regulative formation of cultural hegemony. Through Reihana's appropriation of museum costumes and Parekowhai's representation of security guards ('Portrait of Para', 2003) and hosts, these artists are particularly successful in showing cultural meaning as being inscribed through constant manifestation in everyday life and cultural institutions, so that the exhibition space of the museum or gallery can be understood as implicated within the production of cultural meaning. While for Reihana, Parekowhai, and Sawada, class and the distinctions between high

and low culture are significant, they tend to be less centralised by Aoki and Kihara's respective projects. In fact, these issues appear almost immaterial to the mode of address and meaning employed by these artists, and even when shown in galleries, the institutional nature of these spaces does not tend to succeed in overpowering the work - much the opposite in fact, so that the work appears instead to regenerate the space, and to deflect any kind of institutional pressure that may be applied. This is basically because these artists are working primarily within a space of popular, consumer culture that cannot be simply contrasted with or distinguished from high cultural spaces like the museum and gallery. Infiltrating all aspects of contemporary life, the space of popular culture becomes an ideal site for various identities to be tried out, explored, disposed of or maintained.

Both Aoki and Kihara draw on historical references to, and forms of, cultural representation, and in so doing, they link the 'authentic' traditions of history to practices of consumption. This intersection provides an important nexus for Kihara, who not only works commercially as a freelance fashion stylist for magazines including *Pulp*, *Staple* and *Pavement* (Watt), but who frequently re-presents traditional performance and costume in a contemporary context in her gallery-based work (see *Fale Aitu, House of Spirits*, 2003). For Kihara, the interweaving between contemporary popular culture and historical tradition facilitates an extension of the sense of contingency available to her work, so that it may be understood as having a relevance beyond the space of historical categorisation. She explains, "Although my concepts stem from a cultural platform, a lot of the issues that I speak about in my work, I believe to be universal." (Watt 2003) Whereas consumption is critically linked to Westernisation and an imperial effect in Kihara, Reihana, and Parekowhai's work, for Aoki it is both liberating and heterogenous, and homogenous. Aoki explains that Western fashion has been incorporated into Japan in a couple of ways; as a homogenising influence that provides a kind of uniform for salary men and women, and as material to be sampled by the Japanese youth he photographs. Contextualised within popular culture, this sphere of commodification offers a site of empowerment and subversion both for Aoki and Kihara through the interplay of various semiotic frameworks that are simultaneously specific to their particular national contexts, and eerily non-specific or universal in their referencing of generic kinds of 'popular culture' signifiers. Both Kihara and Aoki present fashion as centrally occupying a vital space of contradiction and possibility. In the sense that it can be either deeply traditional or frivolous (terms which themselves evade dichotomous distinction or categorisation), fashion always, according to its very nature, occupies this space of incongruity, however, for these artists, clothing becomes even more significant for the way that it offers a kind of language and dialogue. Accordingly, Aoki contends, "Here, 'fashion' is more about the art of 'putting things on' rather than about the art of making clothes" (FRUiTS 2003). This attention to performativity and the privileging of how a garment is worn and how a 'look' is articulated, becomes even more significant when looked at against Kihara's dedication to presenting identity as being constituted largely by performance.

The approach of parody, humour, and the appropriation of the strategies and materials of consumer and pop culture is a cultural practice that has unfolded in an area of interactive tension between globalisation and localisation. It has also emerged as an especially relevant signifying practice for youth culture, and practices such as the production and consumption of music and fashion have helped prise open sites of tension that exist between the globalised production of images (such as the 'Barbie' logo) and the local adaptation of images (such as the 'Fobie' logo) (Zemke-White

2004: 212-16). Both Kihara and Aoki have engaged directly with the context and tools of popular culture, and the Harajuku youth may, in particular, be seen to effectively embody and evidence the contention that pop as culture has always been connected with alternative ways of experiencing and understanding the world. Because it has always had fluid boundaries, pop has generally avoided becoming associated with a static ideology, and as Gabrielle Klein argues, “Pop is always transformation, dynamic movement. Cultural material and its social environments permanently re-shape each other in new forms while crossing fixed borders” (Klein 2003: 42).

The relationship between commodity culture, consumption, and pop highlights this further, if for no other reason than the disposability of the trends and fashions associated with pop culture ensure a constant and continual turn-over (Gottlieb and McLelland 2003). And whereas subcultures have traditionally been privileged by cultural commentators for the way that they have offered a rebellious and ritualistic resistance to capitalist structures, commodity-oriented subcultures (such as the Harajuku scene) have been living out consumerist ambitions since their very beginning—and in a manner that is fundamental to the production of their identity. Because consumption facilitates or enables the production of selfhood as multiplicitous and changing, subcultures have become complicit in the niche marketing of their own identities (Kinsella 1995: 226). Indeed, in the case of the Harajuku youth, “subcultures may serve a useful function for capitalism by making stylistic innovations that can then become vehicles for new sales” (Weinzierl and Muggleton 2003: 8). From this, we can also understand that instead of stifling difference, globalised culture may contribute to the production of difference on the basis that consumers continue to have different everyday life contexts and experiences; they are not unavoidably defined by their shopping or the logos they wear. Rather than simply being considered according to a dichotomous and value-laden relationship, the points of intersection between globalisation and localisation have to be taken into account when describing the circulation of pop cultural products, as well as the networks (and artworks) that propose a critique of this complex scenario.

This may contribute to developing a greater understanding of the relationship between homogenisation, difference, and hybridity. By adopting global elements, artists engaged in representing local practices may be able to find crucial points of critical juncture with the semiotic structures that are ultimately responsible for the reproduction of traditional, industrial and centrally circulating images of cultural typology and myth. At the same time as they do this, their work may also become different and resistant to stereotypes of globalisation because of the many local contexts of adaptation. This also grants greater agency to the viewers of the works who are also consumers of pop and commodity culture; a point which echoes Klein’s argument that:

The imitation of pop cultural images by consumers cannot simply be understood as an adoption of cultural industrial products at the cost of the authentic self. Globalised images can, rather, unfold their effectiveness by being duplicated mimetically and re-interpreted in a performative act of new construction by the consumers. If the performative negotiation of images succeeds, field-specific norms are extended in the process of mimetic identification. Popcultural practice can therefore not be described as a local representation of a global culture industry, but as a performative cultural practice (Klein 2003: 48).

This is especially important to Kihara's project, which seeks to publicly enact dialogues about the relationship between representation, typecasting, and lived experience. Fundamental to achieving this is the representation of identity as non-constant and itself subject to a myriad of forces and changes. The subjectivities performed by Kihara as part of her role in the Pacifika Divas performance group (curated by Lisa Taouma, and toured to the 4th Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at the Queensland Art Gallery, 2002, the 2003 In Transit Festival in Berlin, and the 2004 AsiaPacific Festival in Barcelona, Spain) and other works are, importantly, always immanent, and even the possibility of an 'authentic self' is questioned. Indeed, transnational flows and the issues of a fluid identity that may be elemental to these are further highlighted by recognition that "The fascination with the 'Other' can cut both ways", so that just as Aoki's subjects adorn aspects of "Western dress, costuming, and manners", Kihara's work makes it clear that these - existing also as an historical currency of exchange - "were also often copied by Pacific Islanders." (Vercoe 2004: 45)

#### **CONCLUSION**

Both Kihara's and Aoki's work achieves political agency through the artists' astute engagement with pop culture in general, but with aspects of youth culture in particular. The Adorn to Excess T-shirts effectively reference the passionate appropriation of Hip-Hop and other music styles initially associated with local American subcultural forms of expression (Zemke-White 2004: 209-10), and the performances of the Pacifika Divas and the styles embraced by the teenagers photographed by Aoki demonstrate an active repurposing and reterritorialisation of global diasporic Black and Asian cultures through their styles, music and representations, in a distinctively (if not unproblematically) postcolonial era. As such, the Harajuku youth exist as intimately localised (so that identity remains closely connected to style and the place of performance) as well as offering a convincing image for an increasingly transnational and desirable form of identity. The transient stylistic avant-garde moment of the Harajuku scene evidences how "youth, their ideas and commodities move easily across national boundaries, shaping and being shaped by all kinds of structures and meanings" (Weinzierl and Muggleton 2003: 17), but also shows how this comes to happen, as noted by commentator Tony Barrell. Interested in Aoki's depiction of people, and the recognition that individuals get from the magazine, he explains to Aoki, "It's like a kind of dialogue you set up, they see themselves in the magazine and then they feel that their style and their posture is legitimated by the magazine and so on and it creates a kind of community" (Barrell 2003). These processes are also acknowledged as important by Kihara for the way that this practice and the various manifestations of experience and identity that result from it demonstrate how the weakening of national boundaries can also result in the emergence of strange and previously unknown transnational, ethnically encoded forms of cultural hybridity, and for the ways that the individual bodies are marked, labelled, or differentiated by using fashion as a way to imitate the larger narratives of globalisation and personal subjectivity. As such, both Kihara's and Aoki's work function as sites for historical and contemporary, local and global, Asian, European, Pacific and African influences to intersect and produce new and hybrid products, processes and experiences.

Throughout this essay, I have been concerned to show how these characteristics and processes can be evoked to explore the representation and performance of global and local, transcultural identity within the context of popular culture. Kihara's work provides an especially interesting example of how complex the field of cultural

identity is in Aotearoa New Zealand, and by looking also at the subjects and styles represented by Aoki's photographs, we can see how fashion and the practices of consumption, leisure and fun contribute to maintaining the always-shifting conceptions of self that can work to challenge or maintain dominant images of cultural identity. Aoki and Kihara both attempt to demonstrate the always interactive and changing relationship between the representation and reality of culture and identity, and they also offer alternate methodologies for the retheorisation and reconceptualisation of youth (sub)cultural phenomena. Although their artworks may be seen to offer a political critique that is structured according to the light-hearted and often enjoyable vehicles offered by popular culture, each artist does this in order to demonstrate how global mainstreams and local substreams can be rearticulated and restructured in complex and uneven ways to produce new, hybrid cultural constellations for individuals to both embrace and challenge. As such, they each express a clearly framed ambivalence toward fixity and mobility in contemporary culture itself. They are concerned, in other words, to construct an effect which may encourage us to work through the zones of interaction, exchange and formation that are at once geopolitical, historically contingent, and symbolic.

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