

## From the collection



As a teenager, Shigeyuki Kihara was sent in the late 1980s from the balmy climes of Samoa to the Marist school, St Patrick's Silverstream in Upper Hutt, for secondary education.

Already identifying as a fa'afine, a biological male who expresses a feminine gender identity, Kihara's experience of an all-male boarding school renowned for prowess on the rugby field was inevitably unpleasant. Yet Catholic imagery has proved an abiding influence on Kihara's subsequent production as an artist, both in the performance of ritual and in the production of iconic images which are used to tell creation stories such as this one.

Photoshopping her own features in male guise onto a husky male torso, Kihara presents her figure of Maui as Christ, *contre jour* or "against the light" as the convention used by Caravaggio and his followers, the Caravaggisti, in seventeenth-century Europe was described. This technique creates a moody effect, with the figure looming from a dark background, all shadow and warm flesh tones. Holding the source of the light by which he is illuminated in his hands, Maui gazes meditatively down, not looking at the flames but with a face rendered supernatural by them.

The staging of the photograph consciously evokes these art historical precedents. The titling of the series from which the image comes relates to a book, and therefore gives the work an illustrative role, to persuade viewers of the veracity of the story. In this way, the styling and approach recall the counter-Reformation approach to image-making using the human figure. Kihara's *Vavau: Tales from Ancient Samoa* derives directly from *Tala o le Vavau Myths and Legends of Samoa*, a collection of stories interpreted by the German folklorist Oskar Steubel and translated into English by the Catholic monk, Brother Herman, for publication in Wellington in 1967. It is a book of explanations: the Earth's creation, the origin of tattooing, coconuts, royalty and the miraculous feats of a variety of Samoan mythological figures including Ti'iti'i.

The Samoan legend of Ti'iti'i matches the fire myth of Maui in Aotearoa, locating the home of Mafuie the earthquake god in the land of perpetual fire. Ti'iti'i's father Talanga partly lived in the underworld and was a great friend of the

earthquake god. Ti'iti'i repeated his father's incantation in front of the rock that concealed the entry and followed him down below. Mafuie gave him fire to carry to his father. The boy quickly had an oven prepared and the fire placed in it to cook some of the taro they had been cultivating. Just as everything was ready, an earthquake god came up and blew the fire out and scattered the stones of the oven. Ti'iti'i was angry and began to remonstrate with Mafuie, breaking off one of his arms. To save his other arm, the god offered to teach Ti'iti'i the secret of how to make fire by rubbing two sticks together.

While her work is often related to the so-called "dusky maiden, velvet painting" genre where the exotic meets the erotic in the portrayal of Pacific peoples, Kihara likes to give her subjects some agency: "Where the velvet painters are notorious for portraying Pacific people from the colonial gaze, what I do is re-occupy that gaze" she says. "I come from a point of view from the insider."

Linda Tyler

Shigeyuki Kihara (born 1975), *Maui - Ti'eti'e - Talaga How Maui obtained Samoa's first fire*, 2004, digital type C print, 590 x 375mm

*Image: Courtesy of the artist and Milford Galleries, Dunedin.*