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Critiquing the Nude: Kusama, Kubota, and Kihara Appropriate Duchamp's *Nude*

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Art History

by

Kylie Ching

Thesis Committee:
Professor Cecile Whiting, Co-Chair
Professor Bert Winther-Tamaki, Co-Chair
Associate Professor Roberta Wue

2017

DEDICATION

To

My Mom and Family

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Critiquing the Nude: Kusama, Kubota, and Kihara Appropriate Duchamp's *Nude*

By

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Master of Arts in Art History

University of California, Irvine, 2017

Professor Cecile Whiting, Co-Chair

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Almost sixty years after Duchamp completed *Nude Descending a Staircase (No.2)* in 1912, Japanese American artists, Yayoi Kusama and Shigeko Kubota implicitly and explicitly appropriated Duchamp's work in *Traveling Life* (1963) and *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase* (1976). Several decades after Kusama and Kubota completed their works, a Japanese-Samoan artist based in New Zealand, Shigeyuki Kihara, explicitly appropriated Duchamp's *Nude* as well in *Maui Descending a Staircase II (After Duchamp)* (2015). The lengthy time span between these works and their striking visual parallels suggest that there is still something suggestive in Duchamp's nude, especially to artists who have been marginalized from the art world because of their gender and ethnicity. I argue that these artists reworked Duchamp's nude to provide feminist and postcolonial critiques of the artistic category of the nude.

INTRODUCTION

Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* of 1912 (fig.1), radically challenged the traditional artistic representation of the nude by transforming it into a mechanized and moving figure. J. Nilsen Laurvik, an art critic, was the first to link Duchamp's painting to photography.¹ Duchamp explicitly credited his interest in cinema and the chronophotography of Etienne-Jules Marey, Thomas Eakins, and Eadweard Muybridge as sources for his *Nude*. Duchamp stated in his unpublished notes for his lecture, "Apropos of Myself," that he disregarded a completely naturalistic appearance of the nude by keeping only abstract lines of "twenty different static positions in the successive action of descending."² Duchamp created a human body in motion however, he defamiliarized it through multiplication and abstraction. Duchamp critiqued the idealized nude by creating an unrecognizable body.

The infamous painting sparked numerous reactions since its conception in 1912. Most notably, the painting evoked total confusion to moral outrage after its New York showing in the 69th Regiment Armory Show on February 27, 1913. Francis M. Naumann notes viewers found it so difficult to discern the body of the nude that *American Art News* offered a \$10 reward for its readers to "find the lady."³ Viewers and art critics alike considered the painting so unintelligible that it became the butt of jokes. Reviews parodied the painting as an "explosion in a shingle factory" and dubbed it "The Rude Descending a Staircase."⁴ At the same time however, the *Nude*

¹ Francis M. Naumann, "'An Explosion in a Shingle Factory': Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase (No.2)*," in *The Armory Show at 100* edited by Marilyn Satin Kushner and Kimberly Orcutt (London: New-York Historical Society, 2013), 207.

² Anne D'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, ed. "The Works of Marcel Duchamp: A Catalogue," in *Marcel Duchamp* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1973), 256.

³ Francis M. Naumann, "'An Explosion in a Shingle Factory': Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase (No.2)*," in *The Armory Show at 100* edited by Marilyn Satin Kushner and Kimberly Orcutt (London: New-York Historical Society, 2013), 207.

⁴ Amelia Jones, *Postmodernism and The Engendering of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 70.

created potential for artists to make progressive responses even years later, which Duchamp may not have anticipated.

Almost sixty years after Duchamp completed *Nude*, Japanese American artists, Yayoi Kusama and Shigeo Kubota implicitly and explicitly appropriated Duchamp's work in *Traveling Life* (1963) and *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase* (1976). Several decades after Kusama and Kubota completed their works, a Japanese-Samoan artist based in New Zealand, Shigeyuki Kihara, explicitly appropriated Duchamp's *Nude* as well in *Maui Descending a Staircase II (After Duchamp)* (2015). The lengthy time span between these works and their striking visual parallels suggest that there is still something useful, provocative, and suggestive in Duchamp's nude, especially to artists who have been marginalized from the art world because of their gender and ethnicity. Indeed, I argue that these artists reworked Duchamp's nude to provide feminist and postcolonial critiques of the artistic category of the nude.

SECTION I: YAYOI KUSAMA – *TRAVELING LIFE* (1964)

Although not explicitly part of the feminist movement, Yayoi Kusama provides a feminist critique of how the male views female sexuality in her sculpture entitled *Traveling Life*, 1964 (Fig. 2). Given Duchamp's fame in New York in the 1960's, it is quite likely that Kusama would have known his work. Duchamp re-emerged to the forefront of the art scene when his work was re-evaluated as an alternative to Abstract Expressionism. Most notably, Duchamp marked the end of modernism and prompted the shift towards postmodernism. He gained further attention after authorizing reproductions of his readymades in several editions, which challenged the notion of the artist and art.⁵ Soon after his first retrospective was held at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1963.⁶ In the same year Duchamp commented, "...[As] a picture, it really beat me, in that I disappeared for forty years because people talked about the painting..."⁷ With this resurgence of interest and popularity, it is not surprising that numerous artists during the sixties and seventies found Duchamp's *Nude* compelling.

Whether or not Kusama intended to reference Duchamp, her work contains striking similarities. If Duchamp's nude is mechanized and abstracted, Kusama goes a step further and places white high heels glued to each step of a ten-foot white ladder. She also covers the entire surface of the ladder with phallic protrusions that range between three to twelve inches long and two to four inches in diameter, made of sewn cloth stuffed with cotton, and painted white. The same phallic protrusions occupy the interior soles of the high heel shoes. In a 1964 interview, Gordon Brown asked if the "stuffed sacs" symbolized the phallus to which Kusama responded

⁵ Amelia Jones, *Postmodernism and The Engendering of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 95.

⁶ Amelia Jones, *Postmodernism and The Engendering of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 100 and 102.

⁷ Amelia Jones, *Postmodernism and The Engendering of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 70.

coily, “Everybody says so.”⁸ Kusama’s use of high heel shoes and the phallus immediately recalls the Freudian scenario of the fetish.

Kusama critiques the male view of female sexuality by subverting the Freudian scenario of the fetish. Sigmund Freud suggests that after the little boy recognizes that his mother is missing a phallus he substitutes a fetish object, like the high heel shoe, for it. The shoe allows the little boy to maintain subconsciously the illusion that his mother has a phallus, despite consciously knowing she does not. The fetish object both masks the little boy’s anxiety and brings attention to it simultaneously.⁹ Kusama’s work, however, centers on the source of the little boy’s anxiety and more importantly does not attempt to hide it and indeed multiplies it. Rather, Kusama places the phallic protrusions within the soles of the high heel shoes. The high heel shoes reference the cliché of the male fetish, while the protrusions represent real penises, which doubly amplifies and reveals instead of concealing. The protrusions and high heel shoes serve a metonymic function that stands in for the castrated male and phallic mother. Kusama exposes the mechanics of the fetish and engages in the fetish simultaneously.¹⁰

Kusama’s *Traveling Life* can also be viewed as a challenge to Pop Art’s nude and fetishistic representation of women. A number of well-known male Pop artists such as Mel Ramos and Tom Wesselmann represented the female nude in images that verged on the pornographic. Shortly after Kusama’s work, British artist Allen Jones produced a series of sculpture called “Women as Furniture,” which depict life-size female dolls in explicitly sexual positions functioning as chairs and tables (Fig. 3). After Jones hosted an exhibition at the Arthur Tooth and Sons Gallery in 1970, the Women’s Liberation Movement protested his demeaning

⁸ “Interview with Gordon Brown (extract) 1964,” *Yayoi Kusama* edited by Laura Hoptman, Akira Tatehata, and Udo Kultermann (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2000), 100.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, “Fetishism,” *Standard Edition* v. 21, 152-157.

¹⁰ Lynn Zelevansky, “Driving Image: Yayoi Kusama in New York,” *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama 1958-1968* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1998), 17-18. Zelevansky provides a similar discussion that links Kusama and Freud’s fetish, but not as a critique of the nude.

portrayal of women. In response, Laura Mulvey argued that Jones' art portrayed women fetishistically through Freud's theory of castration and the fetish. Thus, Mulvey suggested, "Man and his Phallus are the real object of Allen Jones' paintings and sculptures, even though they deal exclusively with images of women on display."¹¹ According to Mulvey, the fetish in Jones' work transformed women into spectacles for men to project their own narcissistic fantasies.¹² Lisa Tickner later expanded Mulvey's critique to describe all of Pop Art. Tickner argued that Pop Art's fetishistic representation of women could be viewed as a "modernized nude," which perpetuated the female body as an object for the male gaze.¹³

In contrast to Jones and other male Pop artists, Kusama reveals the Freudian scenario of the fetish explicitly through a humorous twist, in which her phalli are sculpture sewn from cloth. In this context, *Traveling Life* serves a feminist critique against the Pop Art nude by representing the male penis and negating its power. Kusama's use of sewing to construct the protrusions creates a humorous subversion since sewing is traditionally viewed as a "lesser" female craft." Midori Yoshimoto notes, Kusama's experience of sewing parachutes for the war may have influenced the conception of her soft or fabric sculpture.¹⁴ The use of needlework to construct the phallus undermines the way in which the fetish denies the female body's sexuality. Moreover, she serializes the phallus and transforms it into a powerless decorative element that blankets the ladder's surface.¹⁵ In doing so, Midori Yamamura suggests the phallus can be lost in Kusama's

¹¹ Laura Mulvey, "Fears, Fantasies and the Male Unconscious, or 'You Don't Know What's Happening, Do You Mr. Jones?//1972,'" *Sexuality* edited by Amelia Jones (London: Whitechapel Gallery Ventures Limited, 2014), 71.

¹² Laura Mulvey, "Fears, Fantasies and the Male Unconscious, or 'You Don't Know What's Happening, Do You Mr. Jones?//1972,'" *Sexuality* edited by Amelia Jones (London: Whitechapel Gallery Ventures Limited, 2014), 72.

¹³ Kalliopi Minioudaki, "Pop Proto-Feminisms: Beyond the Paradox of the Woman Pop Artist," *Seductive Subversion Women Pop Artists 1958-1968* edited by Sid Sachs and Kalliopi Minioudaki (Philadelphia: The University of the Arts, Philadelphia, 2010), 99.

¹⁴ Midori Yoshimoto, *Into Performance Japanese Women Artists in New York* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 55.

¹⁵ Midori Yoshimoto, *Into Performance Japanese Women Artists in New York* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 57.

multiplication of the phallus, which negates the power of the phallus.¹⁶ Alexandra Munroe takes Yamamura's suggestion a step further. Monroe views Kusama's sewn protrusions as the castration of the male and notes, "[Kusama's] violent possession and control over not one but thousands of penises represents perhaps a victory, the freedom from subjugation, from dependency and the glorious right to fight back."¹⁷ In Munroe's case, Kusama's serialization of the phallus indicates an attempt not only to negate the phallus of power, but also to possess its power. The high heel shoes that reach the top of the ladder despite the phallic field may also support Munroe's argument.

Kusama complicates her feminist critique and muddles any attempt to possess or negate the phallus' power by using white paint to render the high heel shoes, protrusions, and ladder. The white paint transforms the piece into a spectral form. The entire piece - the fetish protrusions, the high heel shoes, and the indexical trace of the nude - may vanish entirely. In doing so, Kusama erases the phallus and negates its power, while also erasing any trace of the female body and her attempt to gain power. The white paint creates two scenarios. One scenario renders women visible in attempt to resist or conquer the phallus. In contrast, the second scenario renders women invisible and negates any possibility of resistance. Kusama highlights these two oppositional scenarios alluding to the dual status of women as both invisible and visible subjects.

Kusama uses the duality of women to further Duchamp's critique of the nude and to question the status of women. Duchamp's nude is no longer mechanized, abstracted, and reduced to a static figure positioned in movement, but rather represented by indexical traces of the body.

¹⁶ Midori Yamamura, *Yayoi Kusama Inventing the Singular* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015), 111.

¹⁷ Alexandra Munroe, "Obsession, Fantasy, and Outrage: The Art of Yayoi Kusama," *Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective* edited by Bhupendra Karia (New York: The Center for International Contemporary Arts, Inc., 1989), 24.

Kusama's erasure of a physical nude prevents the sexualization and fetishization of the female body. There is no body for the male gaze to transform into a spectacle and fantasy. *Traveling Life* can be understood as a resistance to the Pop Art nude and the idealized nude. Kusama renders the index of the female body visible through the high heel shoes to hone in on and literalize the implicit movement of Duchamp's painting. She alludes to the movement of the female body and her possible ascension of the ladder. Although, Kusama does not use a staircase, like Duchamp, the movement of ascending and descending a ladder possess a similar connotation that distinguishes power, authority, hierarchy, and classification.¹⁸ In this context, the ascension of the ladder supports Munroe and Yamamura's theories, in which the female attempts to negate or possess the phallus' power.

Without a represented body however, Kusama creates movement whose direction is unclear; it is up or down? The uncertain direction in which the shoes move highlights the contradictory relationship between women and society. Alexandra Munroe observes that the shoes reach the top of the ladder despite the obstacles of phallic protrusions, which suggest women, too can "climb" the ladder and achieve potential equality with men.¹⁹ Zelevansky argues insightfully that although the shoes suggest an "upward climb," the domination of the phallic protrusions reveal Kusama's situation of being "surrounded, threatened, and almost overtaken by men as she attempted to fight her way to the top in the New York art world."²⁰ Despite the phallic threat, Zelevansky views the shoes upward climb as successful. Munroe and Zelevansky however, do not account for Kusama's ambiguity of bodily direction and movement. Without the actual body of the nude moving before the viewer it is impossible to tell if the nude descends or

¹⁸ Juhani Pallasmaa, "Stairways of the Mind," *International Forum of Psychoanalysis* 9 (2000), 11.

¹⁹ Alexandra Munroe, "Obsession, Fantasy, and Outrage: The Art of Yayoi Kusama," *Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective* edited by Bhupendra Karia (New York: The Center for International Contemporary Arts, Inc., 1989), 24.

²⁰ Lynn Zelevansky, "Driving Image: Yayoi Kusama in New York," *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama 1958-1968* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1998), 25.

ascends the ladder because in both motions the body faces the ladder. The nude's ambiguous movement creates two scenarios that result in drastically different implications. An ascending nude supports Munroe and Zelevansky's theories, which suggest women may succeed and fight societal oppression. In contrast, a descending nude positions women in a subordinate and oppressed status. The nude's ambiguous movement highlights the contradictory status of women. Kusama hones in on this contradiction and suggests women may be trapped within a cycle that allows them to ascend the ladder and forces them to descend the ladder.

I want to expand upon Zelevansky's observation that Kusama may have felt threatened by male domination when she strove to legitimize herself in the art world or New York City. Yoshimoto notes that in the 1950's and 1960's Asian female artists faced difficulty in gaining recognition due to the predominantly white male participation of avant-garde artists and critics. These women faced doubled discrimination because of their ethnicity and gender. Furthermore, the memories and experiences of World War II and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor remained in the minds of older Americans, which may have hindered interest in these Japanese artists' works.²¹ Despite these challenges, New York City symbolized a place of opportunity and freedom in contrast to Japan's societal limitations against women. In light of Kusama's directionally ambiguous body however, she reveals that women are entrapped within a cycle that allows them to fight for a position in a male dominated society that suppresses them at the same time.

Finally, the work may have functioned on a personal level to assuage Kusama's fears about sexuality. Kusama explains, "I began making penises in order to heal my feelings of disgust towards sex. Reproducing the objects, again and again, was my way of conquering the

²¹ Midori Yoshimoto, *Into Performance Japanese Women Artists in New York* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 4.

fear.”²² As a means of self-therapy, Kusama creates the protrusions obsessively to transform the phallus into something familiar. Although this paper discusses the complicated feminist and social critique *Traveling Life* poses, Kusama’s attempt to overcome her fear of sex through the recreation of the phallus suggest a possible personal function of the work.

Although Kusama’s work may help to overcome her fear of sex and the phallus, the subversive act of repetitively sewing phallic protrusions, covering a ladder in those protrusions, and placing high heel shoes on each rung in attempt to fight back against the power of the phallus or possess it remains figurative entirely. Kusama does however, manage to expand Duchamp’s critique of the nude to address Pop Art’s fetishized modern nude by subverting the fetish and revealing its mechanics. Her critique of how males view female sexuality underscores the male’s objectification of the female body and strongly suggests it must be worked against. Yet, Kusama complicates her feminist critique by emphasizing the nude’s ambiguous movement of descending or ascending the ladder. The uncertain direction exposes a cycle of entrapment, in which women ascend a ladder (the New York art scene and society) and yet is also forced to descend as well. Kusama highlights the contradictory and dual status of women to evoke complex questions in her viewers such as: Can women achieve parity with men? Can women dominate? Who is responsible for changing the contradictory position of women in society?

²² Yayoi Kusama, *Infinity Net The Autobiography of Yayoi Kusama* (London: Tate Publishing, 2001), 42.

**SECTION II: SHIGEKO KUBOTA – *DUCHAMPIANA: NUDE DESCENDING A
STAIRCASE (1976)***

Like Kusama, Shigeko Kubota resisted the sexualization of the female body during the 1960's and 1970's.²³ But she chose a different tactic. Rather than relying on material artifacts that recalled the Freudian scenario of the fetish, Kubota literalized Duchamp's nude within *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase*, 1976 (Fig. 4). She does so by embedding video monitors within a wooden staircase. The video depicts a nude woman going down an actual staircase. Kubota's nude is an actual recognizable female body belonging to a young, white woman and filmmaker, Sheila McClaughlin. Yet, even in displaying a recognizable nude, Kubota resists sexualizing the female body for male consumption.

Kubota would have been exposed to many idealized female nudes within Japan's art scene and this exposure would have increased when she moved to New York in 1964. In 1965, critic Barbara Rose noted, "The popularity of nude activity being what it is (nude dances, nude movies, nude announcements, etc.), one begins to have the idea that if you haven't seen your friends without their clothes they aren't really your friends."²⁴ Against this idealization of the female nude, feminist artists such as Carolee Schneemann challenged the sexualization of the female body during the 1960s and 1970s. In a 2007 interview Phong Bui asked if Kubota participated in the Feminist art movement of the late 1960's and 1970's, and she responded, "I didn't. Male or female art is art. People can put me in the Feminist category all they want, but I didn't think I can make any real contribution other than my work as an artist."²⁵ Although

²³ There are multiple versions that are not all necessarily on view. The video however, is available for viewing separately as an object. I accessed the video through the Getty Research Institute through their Special Collections.

²⁴ *Radical Bodies Anna Halprin, Simone Forti, and Yvonne Rainer in California and New York, 1955-1972* edited by Ninotchka Bennaum, Wendy Perron, and Bruce Robertson (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 48.

²⁵ Shigeko Kubota, interview by Phong Bui, *The Brooklyn Rail*, <http://brooklynrail.org/2007/9/art/kubota>, September 4, 2007.

Kubota resists being categorized as a feminist artist, her appropriation and transformation of Duchamp's nude arguably poses an implicit feminist critique of the nude.

Kubota critiques male representations of the female nude by fragmenting and defamiliarizing it. Such fragmentation may recall how Duchamp took apart the body; however, Kubota goes a step further and fragments an actual idealized nude. She switches repetitively and abruptly between a real nude and its other digitally manipulated forms. Kubota combines six representations of the nude in her video: the real nude, a haloed nude, a neon nude, the neon-outlined nude, an ethereal nude, and an obliterated nude (Fig.5-10). In other words, Kubota fragments the female body by presenting a nude that is multiple and incoherent. Furthermore, Kubota's erratic editing is seen in the radical switches from one type of nude body to another. In other instances she layers multiple forms over each other, which again fragments and defamiliarizes a coherent nude body. Nor does Kubota display the forms in a predictable pattern. In fact, Kubota's abrupt editing and overlaid images of the nude create a flickering body. In this vein it is interesting that Kubota's treatment of the female body also echoes Yvonne Rainer, a performance artist working around the same time. Rainer resisted the 1960's idealized and sexualized female body by fragmenting and serializing the body to create a "stuttering" body, which allowed her to communicate through the body's gestures and iterations.²⁶ Kubota's flickering body and Rainer's stuttering body both reflect attempts to defamiliarize the idealized female body.

Kubota goes beyond fragmentation and emphasizes the artifice of the idealized female body through the use of color. Kubota uses bright neon colors to make her artistic manipulation of the images explicit. For instance, Kubota transforms the real nude into an artificial nude by

²⁶ *Radical Bodies Anna Halprin, Simone Forti, and Yvonne Rainer in California and New York, 1955-1972* edited by Ninotchka Bannahum, Wendy Perron, and Bruce Robertson (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 135.

casting a sickly yellow-green tint over her skin (Fig. 5). The colored tint changes her body into something unnatural. For the other five forms of the nude Kubota plays explicitly with color to reveal the artifice of the idealized female body. She surrounds the haloed nude with pulsing neon digital cells to emphasize the nude's presence, outline, and the unnatural color of her skin (Fig. 6). The digital cells point to the digital technology Kubota uses to manipulate her video as well. The same cells also surround the neon-outlined nude, which is filled in with black (Fig. 8). This time the cells highlight the absence of the body and therefore, posits the nude as an illusion without substance to fill out its form. The neon nude also takes the form of female body, but Kubota fills in her body with an array of neon colors (Fig. 7). In contrast to the neon-outlined nude, the neon nude reveals the nude to be complete artifice because colors consume the entire body. There are not recognizable details that define facial features or the curvature of her breasts.

Kubota intensifies the artificiality of the nude as she leads up to its dissolution. She creates an ethereal nude of a ghostly white and pink color casted in high light exposure. Unlike the neon nude, she retains details of her facial features, the curvature of her breasts, and the indent of a belly button. The phantom-like aesthetic suggests the nude may not even be human, but perhaps spiritual or not of this world. The ethereal nude in combination with the other discussed forms of the nude use color to point to the various constructions of the nude. In doing so, Kubota fragments the representation of the nude even further from the idealization.

Ultimately she even obliterates the nude. The digital pulsing cells consume and obliterate slowly the nude's body, leaving behind black void space (Fig. 10). As such, Kubota goes beyond the artificiality of color. She proposes the nude is fiction - the ultimate artifice - by obliterating the idealized body completely. In this context, Kubota's work can be viewed as an attempt to disrupt the traditional discourse of the nude's representation and critique the traditional nude, in which

nudity implies sexual availability for male pleasure. She creates a nude that resists its sexualization.

Kubota's fragmentation of an actual idealized nude results in an optical frenzy, which denies the viewer any control over the image in time. Although Kubota presents the nude within a cycle of perpetual descending, the nude does not retain a sense of continuity or fluidity. As discussed previously, throughout the video Kubota's abrupt editing creates flickering and unpredictable images. She layers different nudes over each other, which serializes the body (Fig. 11). In addition, Kubota films the nude from different angles: above, below, in front, behind, close up, and upside down. Similar to the treatment of the nude's multiple forms, Kubota does not use the angles in a predictable pattern, nor does she privilege one angle over another. The use of multiple angles on the one hand, further fragments the idealized female body, but on the other hand its unpredictability bars the viewer from fully controlling and absorbing the image. Moreover, Kubota negates the viewer control of the figure over time. Comparable to her treatment of the different forms of the nude and angles, Kubota uses different speeds. She depicts the nude descending the staircase in slow motion, fast forward, and real time. Kubota does not use a predictable pattern for the speed changes. To further complicate the film, in the moments when she overlaps multiple images of the nude over each other Kubota sometimes presents one nude moving slow motion, while a separate nude moves in real time. The use of different speeds simultaneously prevents the viewer from controlling time and ultimately the female body, which results in a nude that cannot be visually consumed.

In contrast to the viewer's lack of control and agency, Kubota provides the nude with agency. Within the flickering images of the nude descending the staircase in multiple forms, angles, and speeds, Kubota enables the nude to return the gaze of the viewer (Fig. 12). At one

point in the video, Kubota displays the nude from an extreme low angle, as the nude descends the staircase. The viewer therefore, has the sense that they are seeing the nude from a lower position, which gives the nude a towering effect. The looming effect of the nude is emphasized by her downward cast gaze that further situates the viewer in a subordinate position. The nude's gaze reveals her awareness of being looked at. In doing so, Kubota transforms the nude into an active agent confronting the viewer.

Despite the powerful implication of the nude returning the gaze, Kubota complicates her work by referencing Mikio Naruse's film *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs* (1960). Naruse suggests that women may not be able to escape sexualization and the limitations of society.²⁷ In an interview with Bui, Kubota commented explicitly, "...Do you know the film in which the actress Takamine Hideko descended a staircase? I told [Nam June Paik], 'I connected that film and Duchamp's staircase...'"²⁸ The film depicts a middle-aged bar hostess named Keiko Yashiro, played by Takamine Hideko, who struggles to maintain her independence in a male-dominated Japanese society. At her age, Keiko has two options: to either remarry after being widowed or to open up her own bar. To uphold her honor and love for her late husband, Keiko chooses to open up her own bar. Kubota experienced a similar crossroad in her life before moving to New York. As dictated by Japanese society, Kubota needed to marry or become a full-fledged artist. Both female figures chose the more challenging route and the choice provided them with unprecedented independence. Throughout the film, Keiko accesses bars by ascending stairs, as if entering a world of financial independence requires a symbolic hurdle for women to overcome. Despite Keiko's attempts for success, she encounters constant financial difficulties and debt. Although many men attempt to woo her with monetary promises, she remains faithful

²⁷ *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs*, directed by Mikio Naruse (Tokyo, Japan: Toho Company, 1960), film.

²⁸ Shigeo Kubota, interview by Phong Bui, *The Brooklyn Rail*, <http://brooklynrail.org/2007/9/art/kubota>, September 4, 2007.

to her late husband and never accepts a suitor. Consequently, Keiko achieves independence from any males by turning down suitors, but at the same time she sacrifices any attempt at love. The film concludes hopefully with Keiko returning to work and ascending the stairs one last time, yet the ending remains unclear if she will be able to support the bar on her own. Naruse's ambiguous ending makes any conclusion regarding whether or not Keiko has successfully ascended the corporate ladder difficult to reach, suggesting that women may not be able to escape sexualization and the limitations of society.

The movie may have had personal resonance for Kubota because just as Keiko attempts to gain financial independence, Kubota also does so as an artist. In a 2009 interview, Kubota explained how her husband, Nam June Paik, discouraged her from creating *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase*. Despite Paik's discouragement, Kubota constructed her piece and it went on to become a success at Documenta in 1977 and was later purchased for the Modern Museum of Art in New York by curator Barbara London. Kubota commented, "Nam June was stunned. It was I who had earned cash money."²⁹ Although it may seem as if Kubota achieved financial independence and what Keiko could not do, upon closer inspection Kubota complicates her work to question women's position in society. Kubota recognized that Keiko must literally climb the staircase to access the bar, which is posited in the male realm and represents financial independence. Yet, Keiko must always descend the staircase as well, which suggests her place in the male realm remains impermanent. The continuous motion of ascending and descending creates a circular entrapment of the female body and her position in society. Kubota literalizes this circular movement by transforming Duchamp's two dimensional staircase into a three dimensional staircase. Kubota however, makes the staircase treads too large to easily climb,

²⁹ Shigeeko Kubota, interview by Miwako Tezuka, *Oral History Archives of Japanese Art*, http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/344-interview-with-shigeeko-kubota, October 11, 2009.

which emphasizes the struggle women experience climbing the corporate ladder. In addition, by embedding video monitors into the risers of the stairs, Kubota depicts a nude descending a staircase within a literal three-dimensional staircase. She remarks, “The image might live within the sculpture.”³⁰ This quote indicates that Kubota’s nude is possibly trapped within the staircase, in a cycle of reappearing and disappearing, and a cycle of attempting to ascend the corporate ladder and being forced to descend it. Kubota further emphasizes the nude’s entrapment in her video as well. At certain moments, digital pulsing biological cells consume the nude slowly before she reappears. Even though Kubota’s nude reappears she must also face continuous obliteration.

Kubota transforms Duchamp’s *Nude* into *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase* not only to further his critique of the nude, but also to question the male representation of the nude. In contrast to Kusama, Kubota retains the physical female body in attempt to disrupt the traditional discourse of the nude that sexualizes the female body. Kubota resists the idealized image of the female body through its fragmentation, defamiliarization, and artificialization. Her nude resists further sexualization and subjection to voyeurism by returning the viewer’s gaze. Although Kubota creates a female body that cannot be consumed her construction of a nude within a staircase poses a complex feminist critique that addresses the contradictory status of women. Both Kusama and Kubota acknowledge a seemingly perpetual cycle of ascending and descending on various levels such as financial independence and artistic status.

³⁰ Shigeeko Kubota, “13. Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase, 1976,” *Shigeeko Kubota Video Sculpture* edited by Mary Jane Jacob (New York: American Museum of the Moving Image, 1991), 28.

**SECTION III: SHIGEYUKI KIHARA – MAUI DESCENDING A STAIRCASE II
(AFTER DUCHAMP) (2015)**

Almost forty years after Kusama and Kubota's works, Shigeyuki Kihara poses a postcolonial critique of Duchamp's famous painting in *Maui Descending a Staircase I (After Duchamp)* (Fig. 13). She replaces his (presumably) female nude with a male Samoan body that she serializes and locates in multiple positions. Kihara's ambiguous nude not only challenges Duchamp and indeed an entire Western history of depicting the female nude, it also questions the anthropological representation of the Samoan body.

Of all of the artists examined in this essay Kihara most closely hews to the precedent of Duchamp. In comparison to Kusama's entirely white piece without a body and Kubota's digitally manipulated nude, Kihara intentionally retains Duchamp's brown and tan color scheme, so her work appears more aesthetically similar to Duchamp's painting. She films a nude interacting with a staircase that stands against a black background while casting a spotlight on the staircase to emphasize the nude's presence and movement. Furthermore, Kihara evokes a similar history of motion-photography, as does Duchamp, by using stop action film capturing the nude in various stages of movement. For instance, Kihara shoots the nude figure stopping at the first step followed by another shot of the figure stopping on the second step and so forth (both figures are played by loane loane). Moreover, she layers multiple shots of the nude in motion to reference the little white dashes found in Duchamp's painting that create ghostly traces of movement (Fig. 13). In Kihara's film however, the overlapping and moving figures found in Duchamp's painting are no longer static, but rather embody a stuttering and actual moving body.

Although Duchamp's title does not signify exclusively the female nude, a majority of nudes in the early twentieth century were female nudes. Kihara replaces Duchamp's mechanized female nude with a male nude portrayed by a former rugby player and performance artist named loane loane. Loane loane however, does not appear simply as a male nude. Rather he alludes to the Polynesian demigod, Maui, who Kihara references through the title, *Maui Descending a Staircase I (After Duchamp)*.³¹ Maui transcends temporal and spatial limitations because he has the ability to shapeshift and time travel through space and time. Kihara's work reflects Maui's abilities visually through the serialization of his body into ghostly traces, which enables him to occupy multiple positions simultaneously.

Maui cannot be visually possessed because Kihara positions him ambiguously in terms of space, time, and social position. At the start of one sequence, Kihara depicts one figure of Maui standing at the top of the stairs and a second shot of Maui standing at the bottom of the stairs simultaneously (both figures are performed by loane loane) (Fig. 14). Maui occupies multiple positions in space at once, but also social positions of both dominance and subordination.

Another notable moment depicts one Maui standing at the top of the staircase, while a second Maui crawls toward the bottom of the staircase (Fig. 15). The standing Maui gazes down at the crawling Maui. Contrastingly, the crawling Maui casts his head downward and does not look up. Kihara then serializes the body of the standing Maui as he descends the stairs, while the crawling Maui ascends the stairs on all fours (Fig. 16). Kihara does not serialize the body of the crawling Maui, which creates an uneven ratio of standing and crawling figures. The uneven ratio brings further attention to the disproportion of power between the figures. Kihara intensifies the dynamics of power when the standing figures trample through the single crawling figure and

³¹ Shigeeyuki Kihara, *Yuki Kihara a Study of a Samoan Savage* (Dunedin, New Zealand: Milford Galleries Dunedin, 2015), 42.

walk out of the frame. Kihara hones in on the powerlessness and vulnerability of the crawling Maui because he is literally walked on and through.

Kihara amplifies the contrast of power even further by reversing the crawling Maui's position from the subordinate to the dominant to emphasize an erotic implication. For a brief moment the crawling Maui appears to be the sole figure in the frame however, just before he reaches the middle of the staircase a second Maui appears laying beneath him (Fig. 17). This moment evokes the sensual and erotic through the lingering and stretched out movement of the crawling Maui, as he continues to climb the stairs. His exaggerated movements require him to twist his torso side to side in a gyrating-like gesture that brings his body closer to the stairs and the supine Maui. Kihara juxtaposes the active movement of the crawling Maui in contrast to the motionless and passive nature of the supine Maui, which also creates contrasting dynamics of power. Comparable to the standing figures' movement, the crawling Maui must move through and over the supine Maui, which establishes a physical and social hierarchy. Thus, the two figures enact opposing positions of dominance and subordination; however, this time they do so with possible sexual implications. Kihara once more reverses the position of power. After the crawling Maui exits the video frame, the supine Maui sits up on the bottom step of the stairs, looks straight ahead, stands up, and exits the frame (Fig. 18). Kihara no longer depicts him in a passive and vulnerable position. Instead the supine Maui transforms into an active and upright figure that suggests he possesses the power and agency he lacked previously. Kihara deliberately locates Maui's body in extreme juxtapositions of posture and expression to recall explicitly different social positions and power dynamics. Yet, more importantly Kihara reverses the positions and postures Maui enacts, which suggests Maui undergoes a continuous reversal and

exchange of power. Kihara therefore, creates an ambiguous nude to question the dynamics of dominance and subordination, including the relationship between Maui and the viewer.

Kihara subverts the viewer's typical power over the nude by enabling Maui to gaze at the viewer several times within the film. In one moment, a single figure of Maui descends the staircase as he stares straight ahead. Maui pauses however when he reaches the middle of the staircase, turns his head to gaze at the viewer, proceeds to descend the staircase, and walks off screen (Fig. 19). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson highlights the importance of staring: "Staring is a form of nonverbal behavior that can be used to enforce social hierarchies and access to resources... In humans, a stare can also communicate social status, conferring subordination on the staree and ascendancy on a starrer."³² To connect Garland-Thomson's explanation to Kihara's work, when Maui stares back at the viewer he challenges the position of the viewer. Previously, Kihara depicts Maui as a subject for the viewer to stare at, which references the gaze as a site of privilege that entitles one to look at a subject as an object of that look.³³ In doing so, the viewer possesses a more dominant position over Maui. Kihara however, subverts the viewer's access to this site of privileged looking by enabling Maui to stare back at the viewer and captures the process in which Maui transforms into an active looker and the viewer into a possible object of being looked at. In a second scene, Kihara depicts Maui gazing at the viewer from start to finish. Maui emerges at the top of the staircase, looking at the viewer. Maui continues to gaze at the viewer, while he descends the staircase and walks off screen. This moment does not capture Maui within a process of transformation from passive to active, but rather depicts him in an active mode of staring and by extension casts the viewer as a passive object. In each of these key

³² Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring How We Look* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 40.

³³ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring How We Look* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 41.

moments, Kihara subverts the viewer and subject relationship between the viewer and the nude by reversing and flipping the positions of power.

Kihara takes the gaze further by amplifying Maui's gaze into a doubled gaze to resist the possession and consumption of the nude (Fig. 20). Kihara depicts one figure of Maui standing at the top of the stairs and a second figure at the bottom. The two figures remain standing, while both of their bodies begin to serialize. The ghostly traces ascend and descend simultaneously until they pause at the middle of the stairs; both turn their heads and gaze at the viewer, and continue to ascend and descend. The moment when the two Maui's gaze at the viewer at the same time creates an uncomfortable situation for the viewer. Maui's double gaze outnumbers the single gaze of the viewer, which evokes a startling awareness of the viewer's own position. Kihara uses the doubled gaze to subvert the viewer's power even further through an intensified inequity of power and to challenge the supposed dominant position endowed to the viewer. By questioning the established positions of power, Kihara enables the nude to resist consumption and possession visually. At the same time, she also challenges how the stare reinforces the act of othering.

Kihara extends her postcolonial critique by questioning the Eurocentric view of the nude and the anthropological representation of the "other." Kihara's work serves as a response to 19th century anthropometry, the study of human diversity, and anthropological methodology. Anthropometry uses numerical data to produce standards based on averages and comparisons to establish hierarchies of human types. Mandy Treagus notes that Kihara was particularly influenced by Louis Sullivan and other "armchair" anthropologist studies on "primitive

peoples.”³⁴ Sullivan attracted amateur photographers such as Graham Balfour, who visited Samoa and took measurements of Samoan bodies. Balfour also took early motion-photographs using a chronophotographic fixed plate camera to capture Samoan bodies in motion. While European photographers such as Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne Jules Marey attempted to capture motion with photography, Treagus observes that anthropologists were attempting to capture human stasis and differentiate the “other.” In 1869, anthropologist, J.H. Lamprey advocated the use of a gridded backdrop in ethnographic photographs to better compare anatomical features of its subjects and create visual consistency between photographs. Lamprey also instructed his subjects to be unclothed and shot from particular angles. Treagus highlights the use of nakedness in ethnographic photography as a way to objectify the subject’s body for the gaze of male scientists and perpetuate the Samoan body as savage and as therefore, as the “other” through the act of looking.³⁵ In addition to photography, the World Fair and other forms of exotic entertainment such as the German Volkerschau further perpetuated stereotypical ideas of the Samoan body. In the mid-19th century, Samoan men, women, and children were sent to Germany to showcase cultural performances. Some performances demonstrated male athleticism, in which Samoan men repeatedly ascended and descended a giant man made waterslide. Kihara’s work alludes explicitly to the movement of the body interacting with the waterslide.³⁶ Similar to ethnographic photography, these performances situate European audiences in the position of the viewer and enable these viewers to situate the Samoan body as the “other” in a fixed subordinate and racial position.

³⁴ Mandy Treagus, “From Anthropology to Maui: A Study of a Samoan Savage,” *YUKI KIHARA: A Study of a Samoan Savage* edited by Andrew Clifford (Auckland, New Zealand: Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery, 2016), 2.

³⁵ Mandy Treagus, “From Anthropology to Maui: A Study of a Samoan Savage,” *YUKI KIHARA: A Study of a Samoan Savage* edited by Andrew Clifford (Auckland, New Zealand: Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery, 2016), 3-6.

³⁶ Shigeyuki Kihara, *Yuki Kihara a Study of a Samoan Savage* (Dunedin, New Zealand: Milford Galleries Dunedin, 2015), 20.

Kihara's attempts to ultimately reclaim the Samoan body through her ambiguous nude that works to resist objectification, consumption, possession, and classification as the "other." She plays repeatedly with the reversal of power by changing physical position and exploiting the power of the gaze. Kihara's nude therefore, takes on a dominant position that the Samoan body was previously denied. By doing so, Kihara also questions who gets to determine these positions of power by critiquing the beneficiaries of colonialism, or in other words, people who would have not only produced and saw the nude, but also those who benefited from the knowledge and science of anthropometry and ethnographic photographs.³⁷

³⁷ Shigeyuki Kihara, *Yuki Kihara a Study of a Samoan Savage* (Dunedin, New Zealand: Milford Galleries Dunedin, 2015), 20.

CONCLUSION

Although Duchamp created *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* in 1912, these three women artists still discovered something compelling about this painting. In part this was facilitated by a resurgence of interest in Duchamp in the 1960s. The *Nude* was considered “doubly offensive” because of its nonsensical cubic style and immoral title that satirized the ideal modernist nude.³⁸ Kusama, Kubota, and Kihara however, responded differently to the radical painting. Whether implicitly or explicitly, these three artists appropriated Duchamp’s nude to further contest the traditional Euro-American notions of the nude and for their own social and personal critique.

Kusama and Kubota both create feminist critiques that emphasize the social contradictions of the art scene in New York that enable women to succeed, while oppressing them at the same time. Kusama highlights the ambiguous directional movement of her indexical nude, and Kubota alludes to Naruse’s ambiguous ending to expose the contradictory social status of women. The cyclical nature of the staircase and ladder exposes the entrapment of women that enables women to climb the “corporate ladder” and enter the male realm. Yet, women are also forced back down and into a place of suppression simultaneously. The representation of entrapment poses complex questions about the ability of women to achieve parity with men socially and financially. Kusama and Kubota however, provide some hopeful insight regarding the representation of women. In attempting to resist the sexualization of the female body for the male gaze, these artists follow Duchamps’ lead and disrupt the traditional representation of the nude. These two artists provide alternate representations of women that cannot be reduced to passive objects for male consumption.

³⁸ Amelia Jones, *Postmodernism and The Engendering of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 70.

Instead of posing a feminist critique, Kihara creates a postcolonial critique through an ambiguous male nude, who resists consumption and classification as the “other.” In contrast to Kusama and Kubota’s emphasis on women’s entrapment in a circular movement, Kihara’s nude is not subjected to the same fate. Instead, Kihara references explicitly Maui, the demi-god who has the ability to traverse space and time. Maui’s divine ability enables him to occupy multiple spatial and social positions, various expressions, and power relations simultaneously, which prevents him from being possessed. Most importantly, Maui’s ambiguous position challenges who has the privilege of determining social position.

There is more to be said however, regarding how these artists use ambiguity and defamiliarization to update Duchamp’s nude. Kusama creates ambiguous movement, Kubota defamiliarizes the nude into something strange and fragmented, and Kihara creates a multi-positioned nude. As Duchamp worked against the Euro-American idealized nude, these artists rework and expand upon his use of ambiguity and defamiliarization for their own personal and social goals. Furthermore, these techniques also disrupt the traditional nude’s implications, which encourage its possession, objectification, and sexualization. Thus, these alternative representations of the nude provide opportunities to change the conditions through which the nude can be seen, and at the same time bring attention to broader issues, such as the status of women or and other non-western subordinated peoples.

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