

## Stephen Friedman Gallery

BBC Culture

Gauguin's 'strange, beautiful and exploitative' portraits

Holly Williams

21 October 2019

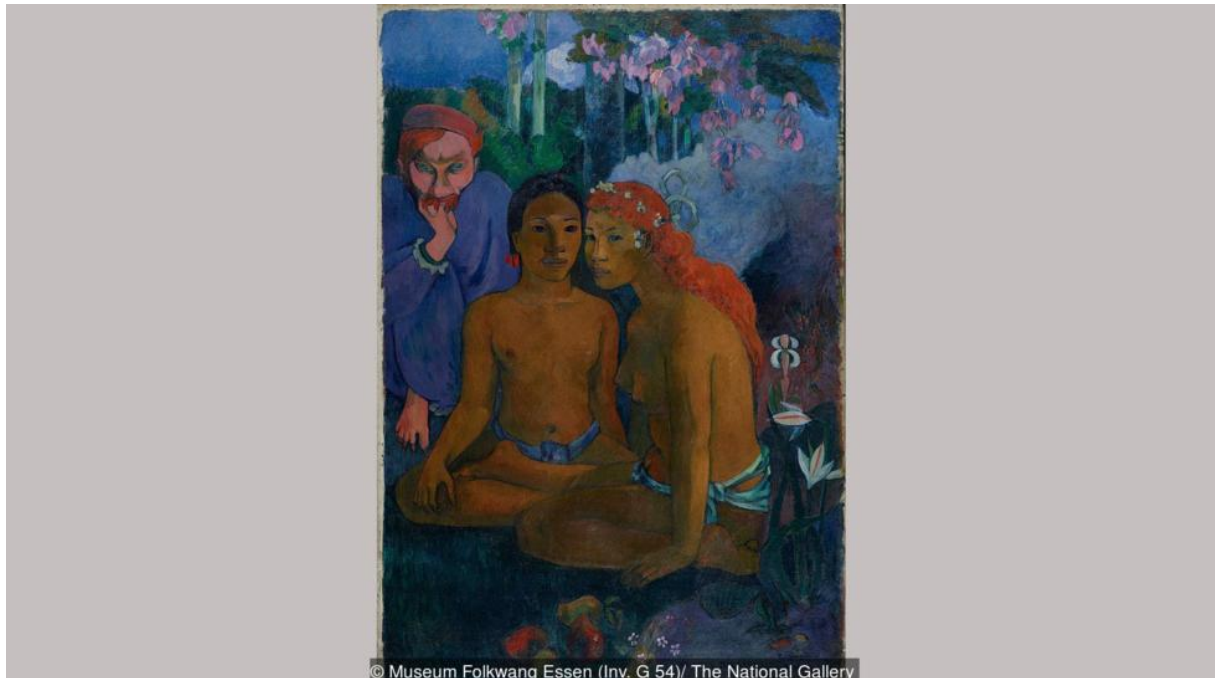


Paul Gauguin's portraits painted in Tahiti 'expanded the parameters of portraiture', but they were exoticised for a Western market. Now, modern artists are subverting this legacy.

The backdrop to the portraits is Tahiti. The sitters are feminine, sensual, proffering ripe fruits and wearing flower garlands. The colours are bright: tropical yellows, hot pinks, mango orange and cobalt blue.

This description applies to some of the paintings in a new exhibition, Gauguin's Portraits, at the National Gallery. It is, astonishingly, the first major show to focus on Paul Gauguin's portraiture – strikingly odd as it often is, filled with symbolism, narrative, strange juxtapositions, and frankly, unflattering angles.

But that description also applies to a series of photographs by Swiss-Guinean photographer Namsa Leuba, part of the inaugural exhibition at Boogie Wall, a new London gallery dedicated to female artists. Entitled Illusions – The Myth of the Vahine Through Gender Dysphoria, Leuba's series of photographic portraits adopt the colour palette of Gauguin's most famous works, but subvert the stereotyped imagery of exoticised, eroticised Polynesian women (vahine) by using transgender sitters.



Barbarian Tales by Paul Gauguin (1902) – Gauguin first went to Tahiti in 1891

"Gauguin's depictions of Tahiti have very much become the default visual legacy of Tahiti in an art-historical sense, which has emphasised the sense of 'otherness'," says Leuba, who divides her time

## Stephen Friedman Gallery

BBC Culture

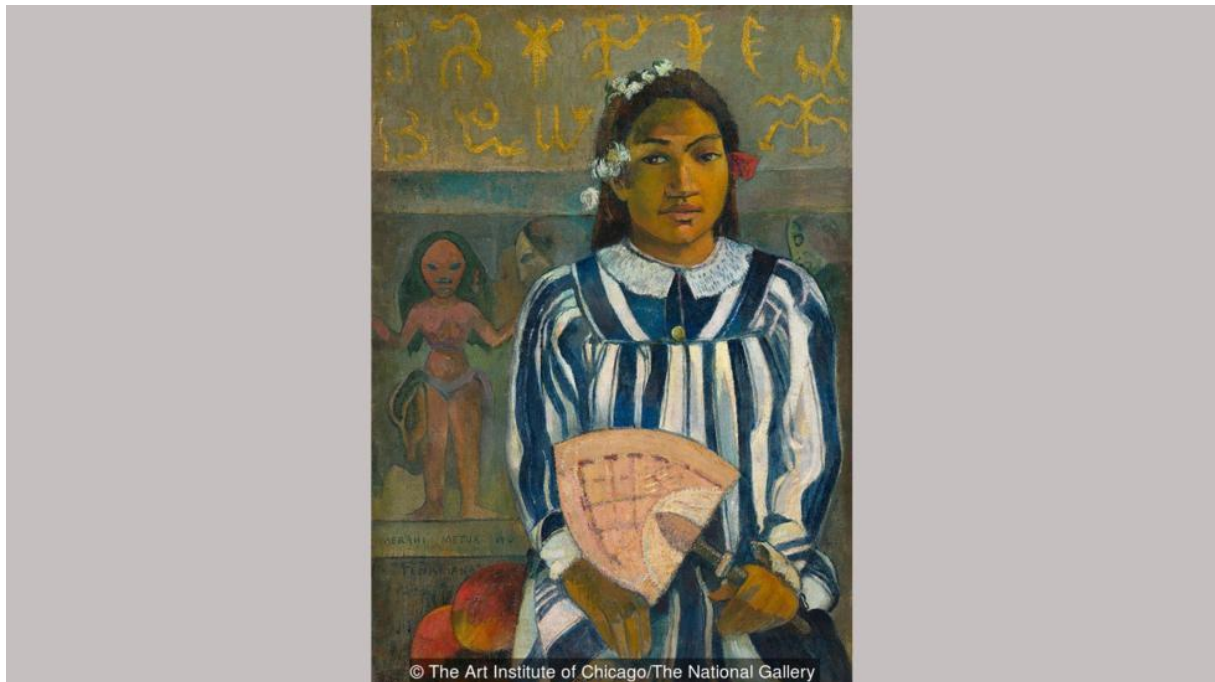
Gauguin's 'strange, beautiful and exploitative' portraits

Holly Williams

21 October 2019

between Europe and French Polynesia. "In Gauguin's colonial depictions, Polynesian women were beautiful and subservient." She wants her work to form an "ideological challenge to the visual codes initiated by Gauguin and his search for the 'primitive'".

Gauguin has been accused of looting other cultures' traditions for 'exotic' imagery. Gauguin's portraits from Tahiti, and later the Marquesas Islands in the South Pacific, have certainly long attracted controversy: while there is something heady, lush and swimmily off-kilter in his colour and compositions, the works also embody a crude colonial attitude. The French artist (1848-1903) first went to Tahiti in 1891, abandoning his family, and having sexual relationships with girls he claimed were as young as 13, giving many of them syphilis.



The Ancestors of Tehamana by Paul Gauguin (1893) – the hieroglyphs in the background of this portrait are nonsensical

Co-curator at the National Gallery, Christopher Riopelle, says that "Gauguin radically expanded the parameters of portraiture", in part through this mixing of aspects of traditional Western portrait-painting with apparent celebrations of indigenous Polynesian culture. But he has also been accused of merely looting other cultures' traditions for 'exotic' imagery to make his paintings of a fantasy version of Tahiti more floggable to wealthy Parisians. Gauguin played fast and loose with his Primitivist, mystical imagery: the hieroglyphs in the background of *The Ancestors of Tehamana* are nonsensical, for instance, while various deities in his paintings were copied from photographs of statues of Indonesian and Indian gods.

Separating the art from the artist

## Stephen Friedman Gallery

BBC Culture  
Gauguin's 'strange, beautiful and exploitative' portraits  
Holly Williams  
21 October 2019

And can we – should we – be willing to overlook the predatory sexual behaviour of an artist, when considering their paintings of young women? It is not a good look in 2019, frankly. Art critic Alistair Sooke has used the show as an opportunity to dub Gauguin a “[19th-Century Harvey Weinstein](#)” (although he still gave it five stars). But there is perhaps no winning for the gallery here: The Guardian’s critic [accused the curators of cowardice](#), for actually showing very few of Gauguin’s more overtly sexual nudes – and thereby swerving the discomfort, and the debate. Most of his pictures that depict young Polynesian girls in the exhibition are ones where they’re covered up by the brightly coloured, high-necked dresses introduced by Christian missionaries.



Namsa Leuba wanted to reframe images of Polynesian women in art

Leuba doesn’t condemn the show – but she certainly wants to open up the conversation about how Gauguin’s oeuvre speaks to us, and how our view of Polynesian culture has been coloured by a Western art tradition.

“For my Illusions series, I picked up Gauguin’s colour palette and staging, and used it to reframe the image of Polynesian women in art, pushing past the boundaries of binary gender representations, and creating an empowered portrait of indigenous Polynesian femininity,” Leuba tells BBC Culture. But while her photographs might use familiar signifiers – the fruit, the flowers, the colours – the images also have a smooth, glossy, hyper-real quality.

Rather than exoticise the sitters’ brown skin (as, arguably, Gauguin did), Leuba takes a more surreal approach: her models are painted with very bright body paint, in hot, tropical colours. Painting literally on the body reminds the viewer of the way Western art has painted such bodies as ‘exotic’ and ‘other’, on canvas. By blurring the boundaries between myth and reality in her pictures, she

## Stephen Friedman Gallery

BBC Culture  
Gauguin's 'strange, beautiful and exploitative' portraits  
Holly Williams  
21 October 2019

hopes to “question the reality of the primitivist depictions and narratives produced by Western gaze and art history”.



Leuba painted her sitters in eye-poppingly bright colours

And by painting her transgender sitters with eye-poppingly bright purple or pink, Leuba also highlights the similar artificiality of the accepted narrow narratives told about Polynesian women – or, indeed, women in general. What is femininity; how has it traditionally been coded and signified in art – and who is allowed to perform it, to paint themselves that way?

### The third gender

Within Tahitian society, there has in fact long been an established place and role for a third gender, the feminine male. Leuba's subjects were biologically male at birth, but now identify as female, or perform femininity, in various ways. Broadly, these come under two terms in Tahiti: Māhū, an effeminate man, and Rae-rae, a transgender woman.

“Māhū all have the manhood of a man and all the sensitivity of a woman. They have existed since the beginning of time and they have always been part of Polynesian society and culture,” Leuba elaborates. “When the missionaries came to Tahiti, Māhū were arrested and not accepted by the Christian society. However, luckily things have changed, and in today's society they are accepted as they are.” Many Māhū are dancers and performers, and she found working with them “a culturally rich and joyous experience”.

Gauguin himself depicted androgynous figures in his paintings

## Stephen Friedman Gallery

BBC Culture  
Gauguin's 'strange, beautiful and exploitative' portraits  
Holly Williams  
21 October 2019

“The difference between Rae-rae and Māhū was distinguished around 1960s, when transgender people had opportunities to start transforming and changing themselves,” says Leuba. Māhū are regarded as an integral part of the Māori tradition but Rae-rae are generally less accepted in Tahiti. Rae-rae are regarded more of an equivalent to the drag queens of the Western world and they have closer ties to homosexuality, in contrast to Māhū which identify more with femininity and ‘sweetness’.”

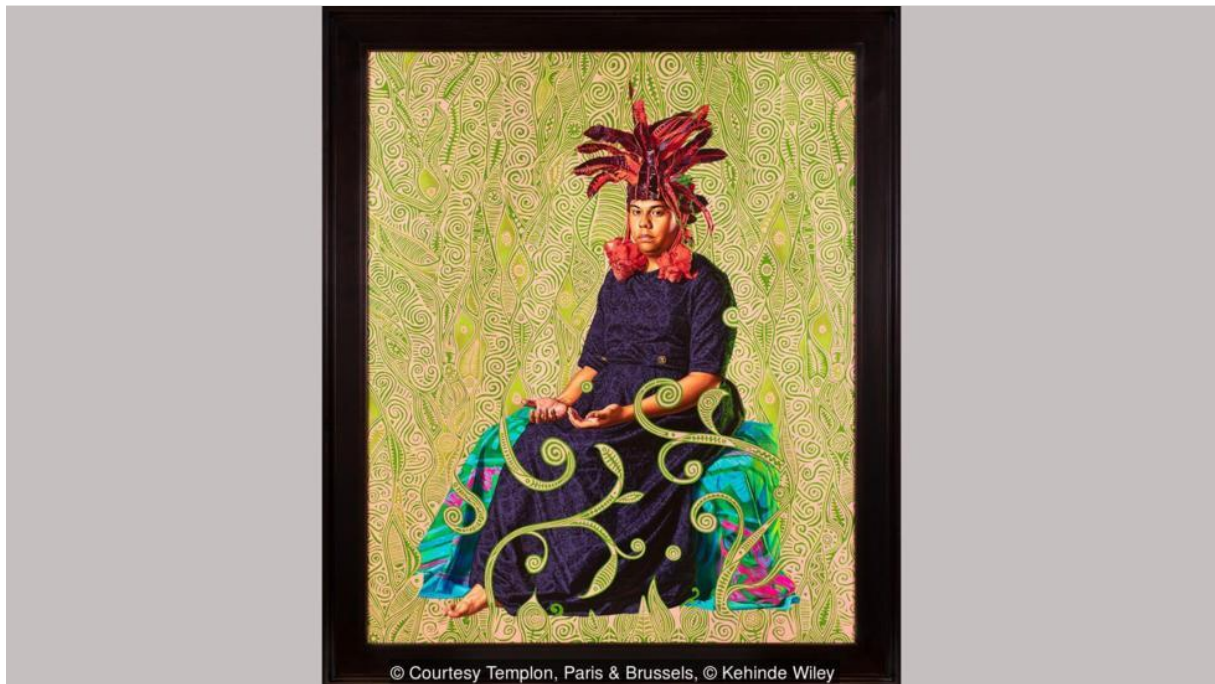


Working with Māhū was “a culturally rich and joyous experience” for Leuba

Leuba wanted to work with the sitters in order to “reframe the ideas of sexualised Tahitian women by reclaiming their identity and empowering themselves”. But she’s not the first artist to be inspired by the Māhū. Gauguin himself depicted androgynous figures in his paintings; it’s been suggested that the ‘man’ in Marquesan Man in the Red Cape, a painting included in the Portraits show, could have been inspired by Māhū, as has the ambiguous figure in Pape Moi. Likewise, the central character in his masterpiece Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going? has been claimed by some art historians as Māhū.

## Stephen Friedman Gallery

BBC Culture  
Gauguin's 'strange, beautiful and exploitative' portraits  
Holly Williams  
21 October 2019



Portrait of Tahiatua Maraetefau by Kehinde Wiley (2019) – Wiley posed his Māhū sitters to recall Gauguin

Indeed, it was a sense that Gauguin's possible images of Māhū were also eroticised that prompted another contemporary visual artist to take Māhū as their subject. Just earlier this year, Kehinde Wiley – Obama's official portraitist – exhibited a show in Paris called Tahiti. It featured portraits of Māhū painted against brightly patterned backgrounds, in poses that recall those of Gauguin's works – but with a direct gaze and bags of added attitude.

Wiley has made a career of innovative portraiture that uses the traditions of Western art to celebrate and give status to people of colour, depicting them in the style of Old Masters, with a revisionist lens. But Wiley's aim with Tahiti was to "reference and confront Paul Gauguin's celebrated works... fraught with historical undertones of colonialism and sexual objectification".

## Stephen Friedman Gallery

BBC Culture

Gauguin's 'strange, beautiful and exploitative' portraits

Holly Williams

21 October 2019



Portrait of Shelby Hunter by Kehinde Wiley (2019) – Wiley uses traditions of Western art to celebrate and give status to people of colour

Can we appreciate 'good' work by 'bad' people?

He didn't just tear Gauguin down, however: that would be trite, the artist told [Artnet](#) at the time, adding that he thought his job was to "somehow imagine a newness within that bankrupt vocabulary". His portraits – like Leuba's – were made in collaboration and conversation with his Māhū sitters, to give them personal agency in their own self-presentation, as they crafted "counter-poses" to the old familiar narratives from Gauguin. Some choose traditional clothing and elaborate feathered headdresses; some preferred red lace minidresses.

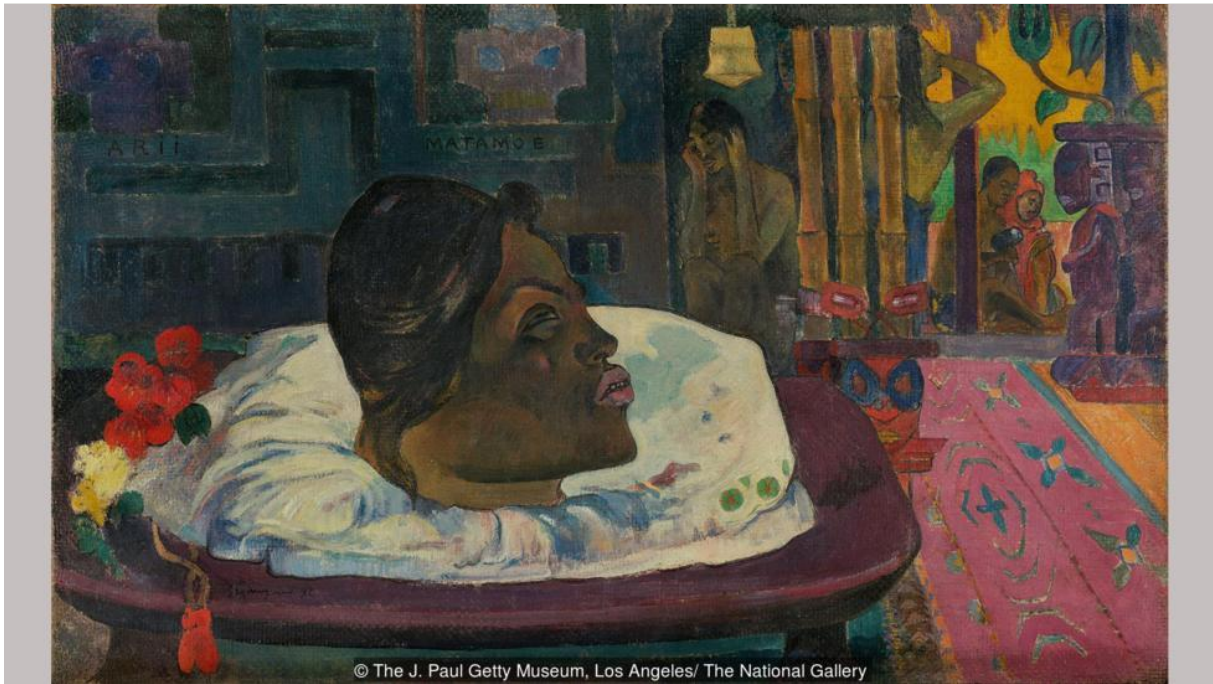
## Stephen Friedman Gallery

BBC Culture

Gauguin's 'strange, beautiful and exploitative' portraits

Holly Williams

21 October 2019



The Royal End by Paul Gauguin (1892) – Gauguin's paintings have a very male, very colonial gaze

Who is allowed to make art about whom – and whether we can still appreciate 'good' work by 'bad' people – are questions that, today, arise with increasing regularity, force, and thorniness. It can be hard to simply revel in the heat and colour of Gauguin's Polynesian portraits today, knowing what we do about him. They are strange and beautiful images, artistically exploratory, but also exploitative. And it's impossible to look at them without feeling discomfort at the work's very male, very colonial gaze.



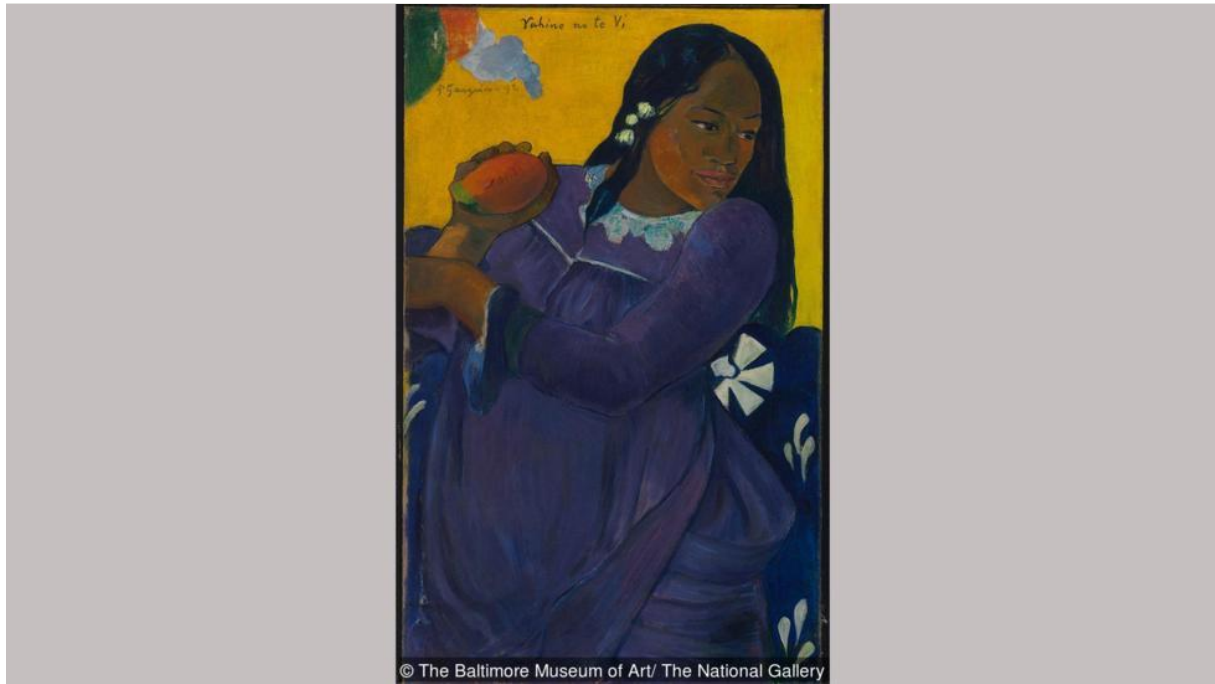
## Stephen Friedman Gallery

BBC Culture

Gauguin's 'strange, beautiful and exploitative' portraits

Holly Williams

21 October 2019



Gauguin's Polynesian portraits are strange, beautiful and exploitative

And unlike Wiley's portraits, we can't look Gauguin's subjects in the eye: there is something deeply troubling in the women's placid, averted, side-eyed expressions, their gaze always sliding away from us. Is this the wish-fulfilment of artist/sexual predator, an image of idealised, languid feminine passivity and cultural serenity? Is it a reflection of their powerlessness? Or could it be defiance – a glazed, protective, you'll-never-really-know-me stare? Well, we'll never know either.

Perhaps one solution to the discomfort around the continuing celebration of work that now feels so problematic is – rather than dismissing it all outright or attempting to hide the awkward bits – to multiply the narratives we tell elsewhere, to make sure we offer new perspectives. A different lens, and a different gaze. Which is why it feels particularly cheering that Leuba's work is being shown at an art gallery dedicated to women. Her photographs, and Wiley's paintings, both invite the viewer to look a little closer, to ask if the stories and stereotypes we've become used to may be nothing more than illusions.

Illusions – The Myth of the Vahine Through Gender Dysphoria is part of the group show Notre Dame / Our Lady at Boogie Wall until 27 October 2019.

Gauguin's Portraits is at the National Gallery until 26 January 2020.