

ART

Art of the absurd: Is this Iiu Susiraja's big moment?

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As the Finnish artist's show opens at New York's MoMA , we sit down with her to talk inclusion, using her body as a prop, and heading stateside

Finnish contemporary artist Iiu Susiraja is a master of balancing hyperrealism with absurdity, and melancholy with humour. As her art stardom has skyrocketed, so has the array of adjectives used to describe her work. Mesmerising. Confounding. Brave. Vulnerable.

Susiraja does not have a statement for her career milestone: her first-ever solo museum show in the US, she prefers to let the visitors do the thinking and feeling. "I think it can be somewhat detrimental to act like a conductor for other people's thoughts or feelings," she says matter-of-factly. And one thing is for certain, thoughts and feelings are likely to arise when visitors are let into Susiraja's world.

Her self-portraits are brutally honest and weirdly beautiful in their radical overturning of the conventional concept of beauty. In a world ruled by filtered and staged selfies, Susiraja puts her unique, ridiculous vision squarely on the table, offering her audience the opportunity to feel whatever it is that they are feeling – and to sit with that feeling. With the help of mundane everyday items: scissors, umbrellas, hotdogs, baked pastries, and, er, dead fish, Susiraja's universe is as inviting and familiar as it is peculiar.





Susiraja is often perceived as a political artist, a beacon of light for inclusiveness and unconventional beauty. But even though the finished artwork might end up in the political realm, it never begins there. “There is no political message or intent when I start working on a portrait,” says Susiraja, “everything starts with the object. After the portrait is done and I’m reviewing it, I can sometimes sense it being political in one way or another, but that is never my main consideration,” she says.

Plus-size women on gallery walls are not a new phenomenon, Susiraja says. After all, Ruben painted plus-size women hundreds of years ago. But there is a very crucial difference between the two. Where Ruben’s women were the objects, it is Susiraja who is behind the camera. But who is in charge?

“I’m the one pressing the camera shutter and deciding which photograph will move on from my computer. I’ve never had issues looking at my own self-portraits, not even when it comes to what I considered my strongest work, such as the Dalmatian series,” she says.





Dalmatian, a 12-portrait series shows the artist lightly dressed and her body and face covered in bruises. The objects in the portraits consist of various food items, such as hot dogs and pizza, as well as clothes hangers, dish gloves, and a horse figurine. “It was my mum who suggested that I should take the portraits while still having the bruises. ‘Do it in a flirty manner,’ she joked. So I kept taking my pain meds and took photos every day for a couple of weeks,” Susiraja says.

But when it comes to the backstory on how she got the bruises, Susiraja remains tight-lipped. “How I got the bruises is not important. The point of the portraits is that the audience can create their own story as a backdrop for what had happened and why. Some might even mirror their own history or past into that story,” she says.

Susiraja's mother keeps reappearing when the artist is describing her career path and artistic milestones. It was her mum who encouraged her once “insanely shy” daughter to ask for a show at a small local gallery in Turku. She never ended up showing there, but that's not really the point is it. Susiraja says that she also inherited her sense of humour from her mum. “My mum has always said that humour is our best family trait,” she says.

Susiraja grew up in a working-class suburb of Turku called Hepokulta. She describes her family and upbringing as ordinary. “There were no artists living where I grew up, or I at least never met one.” It wasn't until much later, that Susiraja realised that being an artist is a real profession, one that she really wanted to pursue: “I suck at drawing and painting, so I never thought that I could become an artist,” says Susiraja.

Her defining moment was seeing Finnish artist Heli Rekula's work, Hyperventilation, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma in Helsinki. Rekula's portrait depicts a naked woman in a strong pose, wearing a gas mask. “It had a major impact on me. It has such power to it,” she says.

After earning an MFA from Finland's Academy of Fine Arts, Susiraja's career went on an upwards trajectory, showing work in the very same museum, Kiasma, where she had originally spotted Rekula's portraits. Susiraja's work has since been on display at Makasiini Contemporary Gallery in Turku, along with Nino Mier Gallery in Los Angeles, and Ramiken in New York, where her Dalmatian series found a home.

Now, nearly 50 of her photographs and 13 videos will be shown in New York. Susiraja – jokingly – once said that the only reason her work has not become even more potent is that her parents are still alive. She tells me that she will continue to push her work towards realms of the uncomfortable.

And what of reception? The artist says that she doesn't worry too much over bad critique. Susiraja uses social media to interact with her audience and even though her art can at times be divisive, she maintains that she has very few haters. “That's what the deleting-comments-and-blocking-people-tools are for,” she laughs. The good critique, however, is like a “pay day” for the solitary artist. “Whenever someone tells me that I have made them braver or that my work is giving them the inspiration to pursue their own path in art, that is the cream on top of my sundae.”



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