

NINO MIER GALLERY

LOS ANGELES | BRUSSELS | NEW YORK | MARFA

A photograph of a person's arm holding a Heinz tomato ketchup bottle. The person is wearing a floral-patterned shirt. The background is a blue fabric with a repeating floral pattern. The text 'IIU SUSIRAJA' is overlaid on the image.

IIU SUSIRAJA

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BIOGRAPHY

IIU SUSIRAJA

b. 1975, Turku, FI

Lives and works in Turku, FI



Finnish artist Iiu Susiraja is known for her still and moving image portraits, which capture the artist in her own home or her parents' home, interacting with items such as housekeeping tools and pantry staples with prurient, deadpan humor. Her photographs and videos share what Hal Foster calls an anti-aesthetic, or the denial of an essentialist understanding of classical beauty and its delectation. Composition and light are not so precious to Susiraja, who favors photographs that surprise and disturb, rather than those that placate with their meticulous tableaux. Her work seeks to capture something felt, but is as yet inarticulable, about feminine performance and self-presentation. In an interview with Paula Korte, Susiraja noted "I don't actually do much consciously at all, other than list objects on paper and go and fetch them. The end result is a momentary dash that ends up on the camera screen. I don't deliberately think that I want to achieve a specific mood in any given picture: if the mood doesn't come, then it doesn't. Taking a picture is spontaneous, trusting in the moment." This aesthetic of the haphazard—of the unrehearsed and unrestrained—saturates her images with an energetic impudence, amplified by Susiraja's captured gestures.

Within her works, Susiraja dirties herself with food, lets her bare skin bulge and fold, and leaves her hair unkempt. She places some objects in and around her genitals—a turkey in front of her groin in *Snooker*, a buttered baguette sticking out from between her legs in *Baguette*—and others pressed against her breasts—plungers in *Road Trip*, a lollipop in *Zoo*. By approaching the habits and wears of domestic life so lewdly, she renders the actions and materials that make up daily rituals perverse. Amidst these gestures, Susiraja maintains a flat affect, as though bored by the demands placed upon her body, her habits, and her surroundings by the many cultural forces that push us to self-optimize. As critic Alex Jovanavich put it in *Artforum's* February 2022 issue, "by seeming to humiliate herself, she pointedly calls out those who cling to cruel misperceptions about the obese—that they're stupid, lethargic, gluttonous, etc.—by exaggerating such notions to preposterous degrees." The artist is ultimately grappling with constrictions of having a body, overdetermined at all times by various cultural forces: how a body should look, and for whom; how a body should behave, and for whom; what—ultimately—a body is for, and for whom.

*Iiu Susiraja (b. 1975, Turku, FI; lives and works in Turku, FI) earned an MFA from the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki, FI. Susiraja has held solo exhibitions at MoMA PS1, New York, NY, US; Nino Mier Gallery, New York, NY, US; SKMU Museum, Kristiansand, NO; KIASMA, Helsinki, FI; Kadel Willborn Gallery, Dusseldorf, DE; François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US; PS2 Gallery, Belfast, UK; VB Photographic Centre, Ramiken Crucible, New York, NY, US; and Fotogalleriet Format, Oslo, NO; among others. Her can be found in public and private collections worldwide, including the Adam Lindenmann Collection; the University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, US; the Rubell Family Collection, Miami, FL, US; Finnish Museum of Photography, Kaapelitehdas, FI; Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, FI; Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki, FI; among others. Susiraja has recently featured in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Artforum*, *Vogue*, and *AnOther Magazine*, among others.*

A woman with curly brown hair, wearing a red sequined top, is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. She is holding a large, colorful swirl lollipop in her right hand. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

SAMPLE WORKS

**sample selection does not reflect current availability*



Zoo, 2021
Archival pigment print
26 x 38 in
66 x 96.5 cm
Edition of 3 plus 1 artist's proof
(ISU21.093)



Sailor, 2020
Archival pigment print, framed
13 3/4 x 13 3/4 in
34.9 x 34.9 cm
Edition of 5 plus 1 artist's proof
(ISU21.008)





Airplane, 2020
Archival pigment print, framed
13 3/4 x 13 3/4 in
34.9 x 34.9 cm
Edition of 5 plus 1 artist's print
(ISU21.001)

Heelbread, 2023
Painted PLA plastic
5 x 22 1/2 x 3 in (each)
12.7 x 57.1 x 7.6 cm (each)
(ISU23.011)





Fountain, 2021
Archival pigment print
31 1/4 x 43 x 1 1/2 in (framed)
79.4 x 109.2 x 3.8 cm (framed)
Edition of 3 plus 1 artist's proof
(ISU21.091)

Happy Valentine's Day (Big Heart), 2022

Archival pigment print

18 x 25 in (framed)

45.7 x 63.5 cm (framed)

Edition of 5 plus 1 artist's proof

(ISU23.001)







Hot dog with lipstick, 2023
Painted PLA plastic
2 1/2 x 8 x 2 3/4 in
6.3 x 20.3 x 7 cm
(ISU23.010)



Hot Mona, 2023

Archival pigment print

13 x 20 in (image)

33 x 50.8 cm (image)

17 x 24 in (paper)

43.2 x 61 cm (paper)

Edition of 5 plus 1 artist's proof

(ISU23.013)

A photograph showing a person's hands holding a hot dog in a bun. The person is wearing a black top. In the background, a reproduction of the Mona Lisa painting is visible, held up by the person. The scene is set against a light-colored wall.

**SELECTED EXHIBITONS
AND PROJECTS**

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS AND PROJECTS

HOT STUFF

2023

NINO MIER GALLERY
NEW YORK, NY, US

A STYLE CALLED A DEAD FISH

2023

MOMA PS1
NEW YORK, NY, US

WOMEN'S WORK

2023

NINO MIER GALLERY
LOS ANGELES, CA, US



HOT STUFF

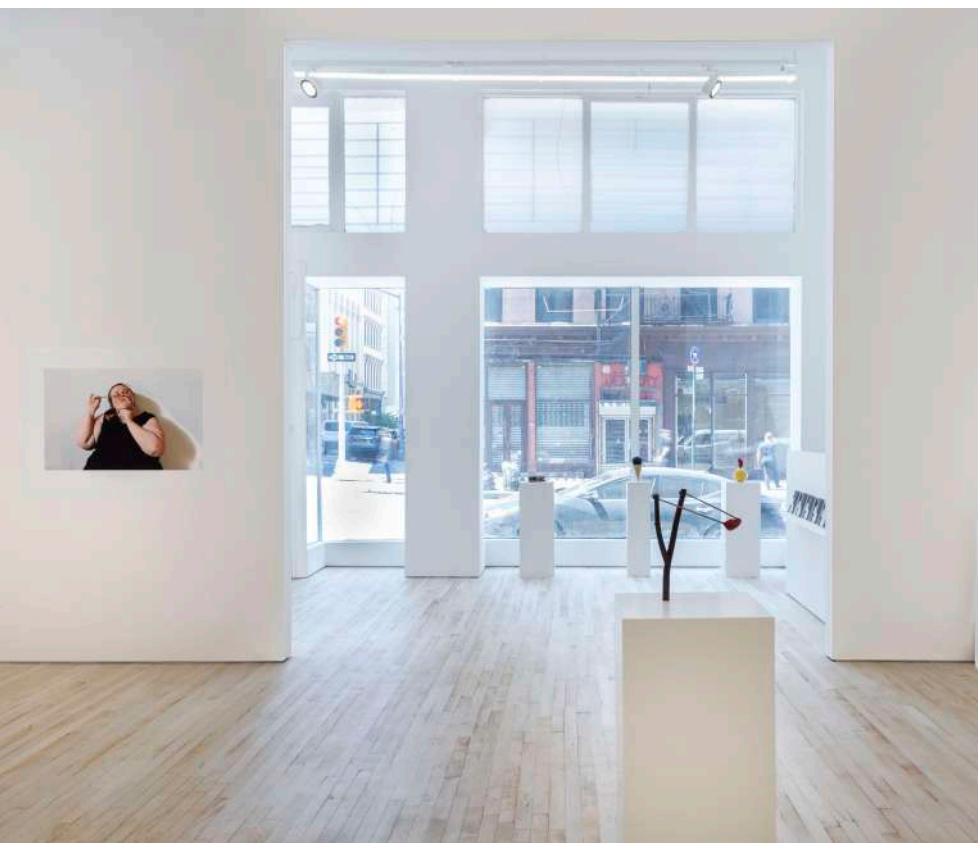
2023
NINO MIER GALLERY
NEW YORK, NY, US

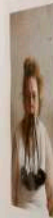
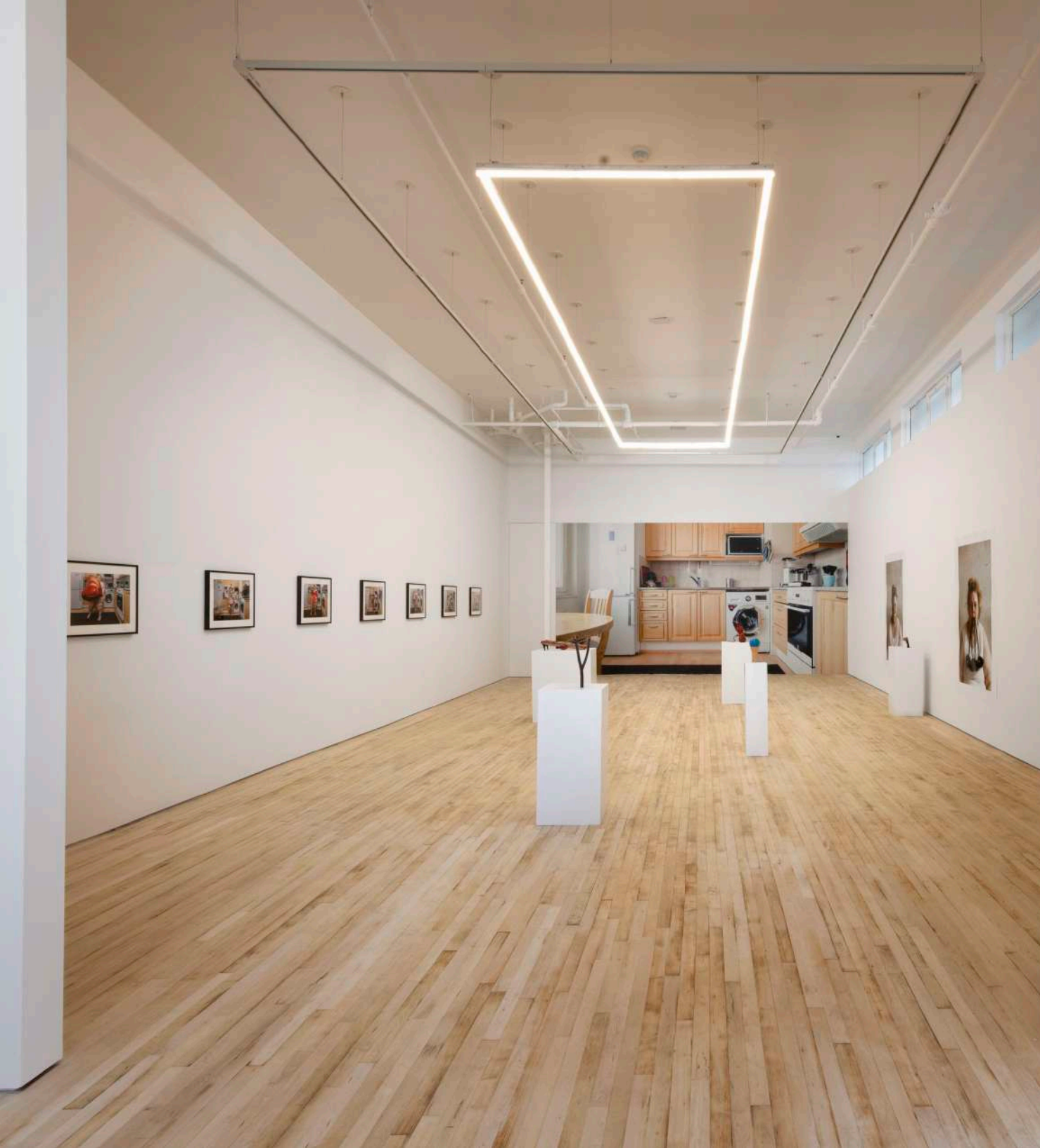
Nino Mier Gallery is thrilled to announce *Hot Stuff*, a multimedia exhibition by Finnish artist Iiu Susiraja. Her second solo exhibition with the gallery, *Hot Stuff* develops Susiraja's investigations of domesticity and consumption. Comprising video and photography, the show also features the artist's first foray into sculpture: 3D printed plastic manifestations of the absurdist objects found within her images. The gallery space will also feature a life-sized wallpaper replicating the artist's own kitchen, the location where she creates many of her still life self-portraits.

Susiraja's ludic self-portraits capture the artist within her own home or her parents' home, interacting with objects such as newspapers, balloons, flowers, and clocks. To construct each composition, Susiraja first begins with a simple list of objects, then generates new contexts for or juxtapositions of them. The result is something like *Balaclava cap beauty treatment* (2023), a photograph featuring Susiraja as she stands nude in her kitchen with balaclavas wrapping each breast and cucumbers adorning her torso between. A fabulist of daily ritual, Susiraja extracts the strangeness and contingency of the quotidian objects and habits we take for granted.

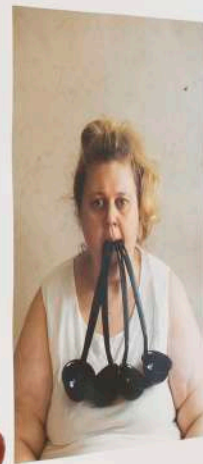
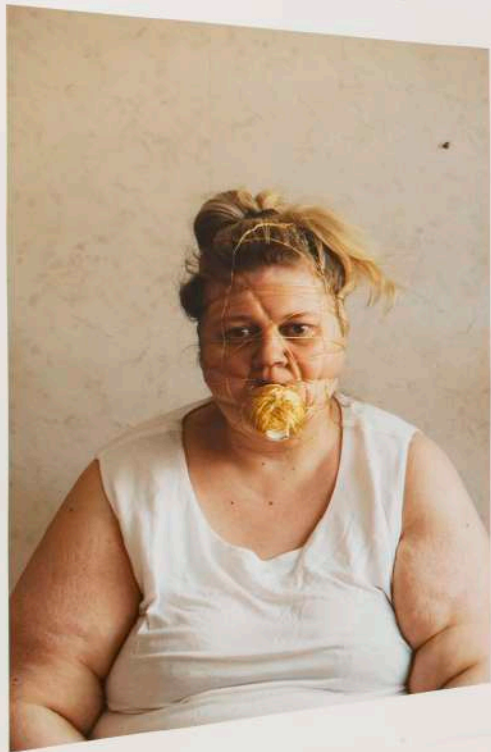
In each photograph and video, Susiraja stares blankly at the viewer. As curator Jody Graf has noted, the deadpan quality of Susiraja's works "emerges in tandem with an unnerving elegance that recalls the exacting attention to material particularities displayed in Northern Renaissance paintings [...] Geographical distance and more than five hundred years separate these portraits, but they share what art historian Svetlana Alpers calls a 'descriptive' impulse that, as distinguished from the narrative temperament of the Italian Renaissance, relishes detail and carefully charts the act of looking itself."

Susiraja will also bring the world of her videos and photographs into the exhibition space, presenting a series of sculptures 3D printed in plastic. Sculptures represent hybrid forms such as a lipstick in a hot dog bun, a sausage on a revolver, and a globe on an ice cream cone. The commodities featured in her videos would, in her plastic sculptures, be rendered "things" that suggest utility but are ultimately unusable. A new centerpiece of the artist's practice, the sculptures are a manifestation of her unique perspective on the surrealism of commodity culture and consumption.













A STYLE CALLED A DEAD FISH

**2023
MOMA PS1
NEW YORK, NY, US**

MoMA PS1 presents the first solo museum exhibition in the United States of photographer Iiu Susiraja. The presentation brings together over fifty photographs and videos that highlight the trajectory of Susiraja's practice since 2008, when she was beginning to photograph and film herself in interior spaces. Most often, her images are shot in her apartment in Turku, Finland—the city where she has lived nearly her entire life. Susiraja selects and stages objects to accompany her that are both familiar and farcical, including tablecloths, umbrellas, hotdogs, bananas, treadmills, rubber duckies, and dead fish, amongst many others. Iiu Susiraja: A style called a dead fish highlights Susiraja's unique manner of navigating between the slapstick and the deadpan, as she explores self-representation amidst physical and psychological interiors.

Installation views of Iiu Susiraja: A style called a dead fish on view at MoMA PS1 from April 20 to September 4, 2023. All images courtesy MoMA PS1. Photography by Steven Panecasio







Small informational label on the right wall.







Small informational text label on the back wall.

Small informational text label on the right wall.



WOMEN'S WORK

2022

NINO MIER GALLERY
LOS ANGELES, CA, US

Women's Work is an exhibition of photographs and videos by Finnish artist Iiu Susiraja. Susiraja is known for her still and moving image portraits, which capture the artist in her own home or her parents' home, interacting with items such as housekeeping tools and pantry staples with prurient, deadpan humor. In Women's Work, which will be on view from February 18 - March 19, 2022 in Los Angeles, Susiraja brings a sense of irreverent, macabre irony to the type of labor which extracts value from the display of women's bodies.

The photographs and videos in Women's Work share what Hal Foster calls an anti-aesthetic, or the denial of an essentialist understanding of classical beauty and its delectation. Composition and light are not so precious to Susiraja, who favors photographs that surprise and disturb, rather than those that placate with their meticulous tableaux. Her work seeks to capture something felt, but is as yet inarticulate, about feminine performance and self-presentation. In an interview with Paula Korte, Susiraja noted "I don't actually do much consciously at all, other than list objects on paper and go and fetch them. The end result is a momentary dash that ends up on the camera screen. I don't deliberately think that I want to achieve a specific mood in any given picture: if the mood doesn't come, then it doesn't. Taking a picture is spontaneous, trusting in the moment." This aesthetic of the haphazard—of the unrehearsed and unrestrained—saturates her images with an energetic impudence, amplified by Susiraja's captured gestures.

Within her works, Susiraja dirties herself with food, lets her bare skin bulge and fold, and leaves her hair unkempt. She places some objects in and around her genitals—a turkey in front of her groin in Snooker, a buttered baguette sticking out from between her legs in Baguette—and others pressed against her breasts—plungers in Road Trip, a lollipop in Zoo. By approaching the habits and wears of domestic life so lewdly, she renders the actions and materials that make up daily rituals perverse. Amidst these gestures, Susiraja maintains a flat affect, as though bored by the demands placed upon her body, her habits, and her surroundings by the many cultural forces that push us to self-optimize. "I try to reach as blank a state as possible. I try to not have any facial expression [...] For me, being blank is the same as being real," Susiraja has disclosed. Her claim to the truth-value of her expressionless face, coupled with her typical front-facing composition, recalls the visual mode of 19th and 20th century ethnographic photography, which sought to display the "strange" and "exotic" appearances of colonized peoples to European subjects. Susiraja follows in a long tradition of modern and contemporary art photographers, from Rineke Dijkstra to Diane Arbus, that take on the lexicon of such photography, only to scramble its significance. In Susiraja's self-portraiture, the binary of self and other, beholder and viewed object is troubled. As critic Alex

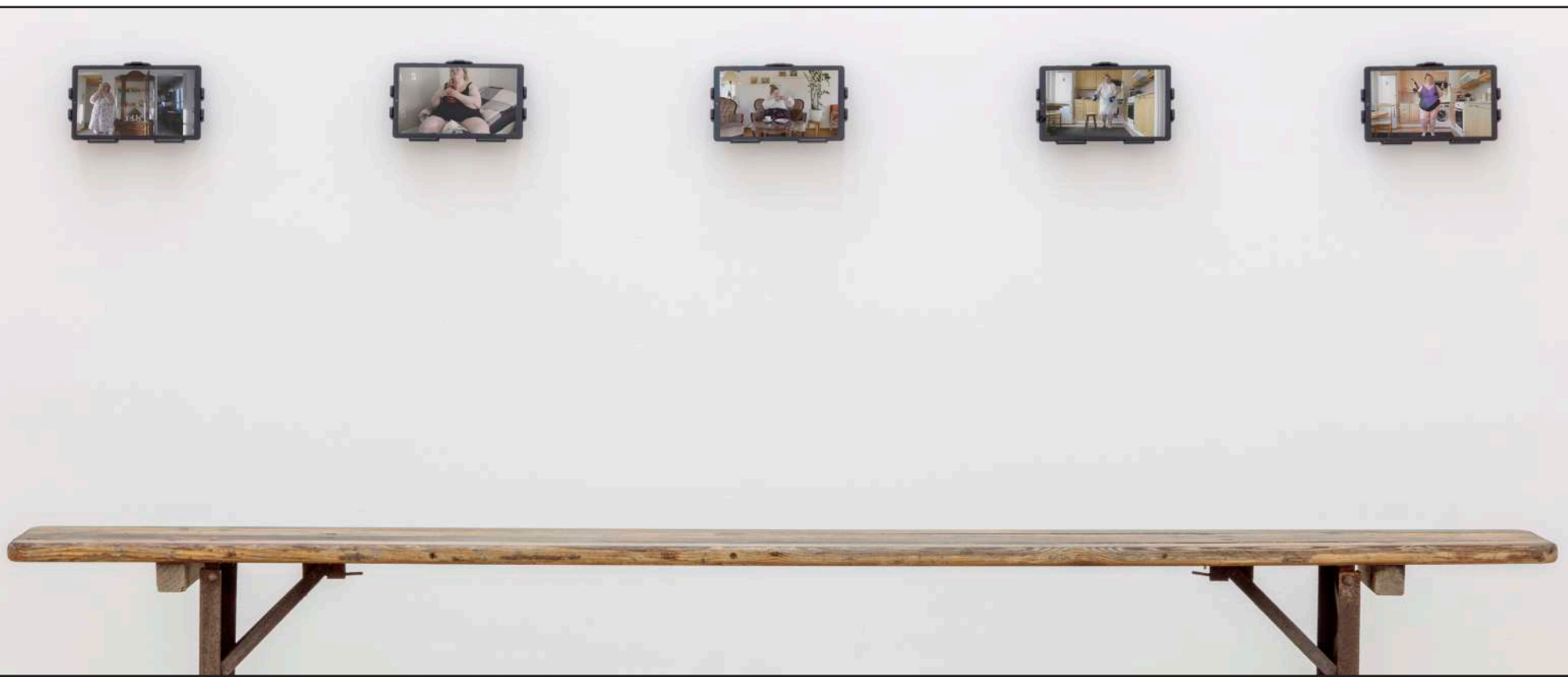
Jovanavich put it in Artforum's February 2022 issue, "by seeming to humiliate herself, she pointedly calls out those who cling to cruel misperceptions about the obese—that they're stupid, lethargic, gluttonous, etc.—by exaggerating such notions to preposterous degrees."

But blankness, propriety, and humor are not the only themes tackled by Susiraja. In *Women's Work*, Susiraja's stationary camera captures the artist as she fixates upon objects such as baguettes, toy race cars, vases, and hot dogs affixed to drills, deploying the items as props in her tongue-in-cheek charades. In *Play with me 2 (Red Car)*, for instance, she sits on the edge of a bed in a black dress, her legs spread towards the camera to reveal her underwear. Throughout the video, she holds a red toy race car, running its wheels across her body as though it were a prosthetic for an imagined other's hand, taunting viewers to "play with" her. Perhaps a version of this video, made by another, exists in a dimly lit corner of the internet, meant to seduce young men into paying money to spend a few minutes with a girl on a livestream. But in Susiraja's iteration, no such ambience of desire is cultivated. Instead, she looks at the camera with a haggard, alienated expression, and moves mechanically through the motions of a negated seduction.

In photographs such as *Blue lagoon* and *Zoo*, Susiraja splays out, partially naked on a bed, covered by items like a decapitated, oversized teddy bear and Santa

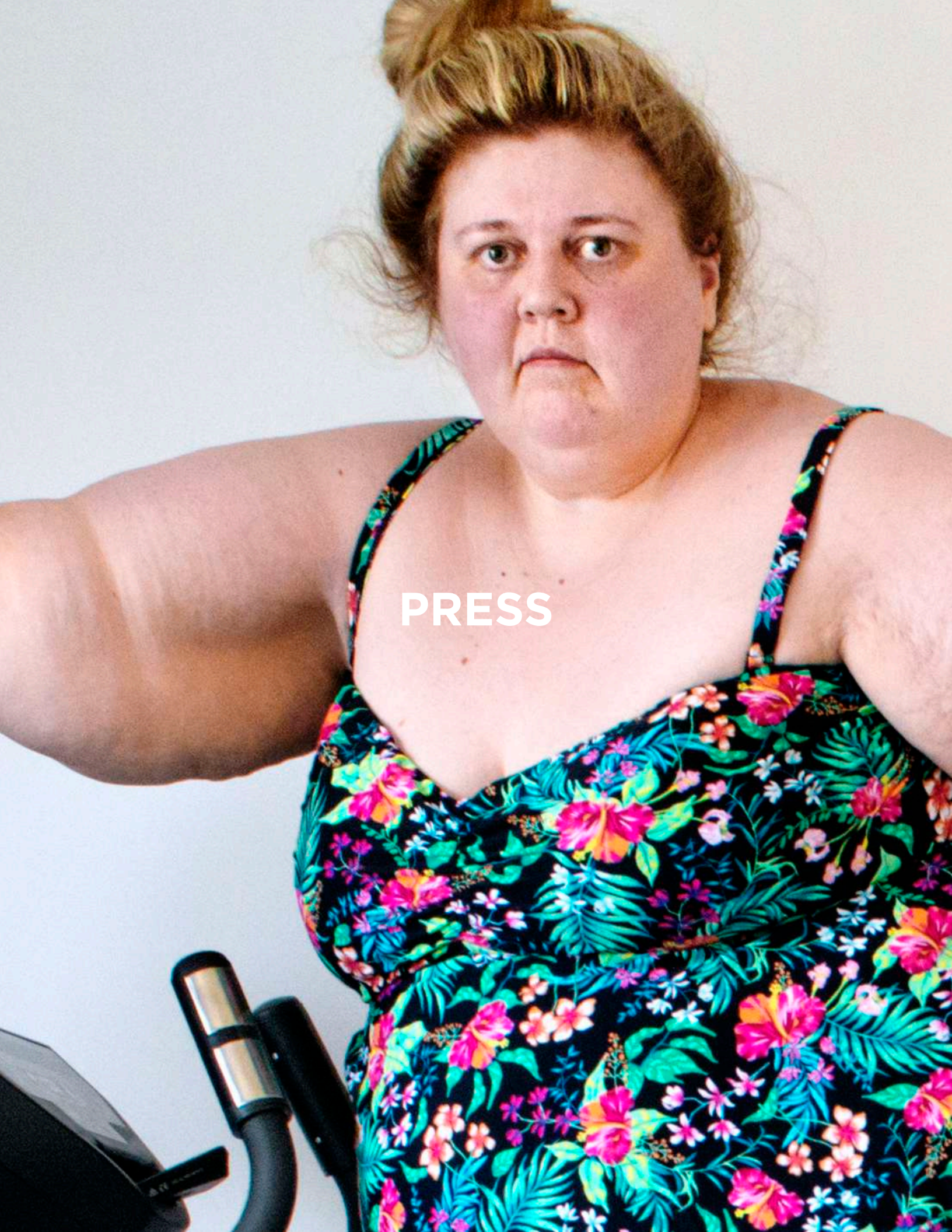
masks including beards and hats. These photographs are representative of the artist's signature double-trick: first, she unlocks the power of lecherous innuendo in these otherwise innocuous objects, and second, she brings the seduction into the realm of ordinary doldrums — that is, of work — as though she were playing a Jeanne Dielman directed by John Waters.

The phrase "women's work" refers to the pink-collar jobs employing the soft skills of emotion, communication, and care articulated by critic Louise Kappe Howe in the 1970s. Another product of the '70s was Martha Rosler's video *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, which critiqued the notion that a woman's role is in the kitchen, and that, moreover, one should find personal fulfillment there. In the video, Rosler maintains a straight face as she assigns a kitchen utensil to each letter of the alphabet, growing more violent in her gestures as she makes her way to Z. Susiraja's videos and photographs update Rosler's project to incorporate the texture of an era oversaturated with bodies on display. Susiraja is dealing not just with the constrictions of housewifery, but with the constrictions of having a body, overdetermined at all times by various cultural forces: how a body should look, and for whom; how a body should behave, and for whom; what—ultimately— a body is for, and for whom.









PRESS

PRESS

LARB

AUGUST 2023
BY NINA HERZOG

VULTURE

JUNE 2023
BY JERRY SALTZ

THE NEW YORK TIMES

MAY 2023
BY ROBERTA SMITH

VOGUE SCANDANAVIA

APRIL 2023
BY SANNA POSTI SJOMAN

ANOTHER MAGAZINE

APRIL 2023
BY OSMAN CAN YEREBAKAN

THE NEW YORKER

MAY 2022
BY JOHANNA FATEMAN

ARTFORUM

FEBRUARY 2022
BY ALEX JOVANOVICH

LOS ANGELES TIMES

JUNE 2018
BY DAVID PAGEL

AUGUST 2023

On the Preposterousness of Centering a Fat Body Liberation and Exile in Iiu Susiraja's Self-Portraits at MoMA PS1

By Nina Herzog



Photo: Moma PS1/Iiu Susiraja

THE FINNISH PHOTOGRAPHER and video artist Iiu Susiraja's first US solo museum exhibition, *Iiu Susiraja: A style called a dead fish*, is up at MoMA PS1 in Queens, New York. When you enter, you're both greeted by and confronted with a single work, facing you on the wall, entitled *Woman* (2010). An early, iconic work by the artist, it seems at first a straightforward photo of a fat woman dressed in a black dress with a wool cap on her head and big blue work gloves. There is almost no dead space outside of her body, which fills the width of the frame. Her eyes are looking off, perhaps dolefully, perhaps in boredom. Tucked into her cap, perfectly covering each ear like a warming flap, is a fish. Tucked into each glove is also a fish. The woman in the photo is Iiu Susiraja.

Susiraja began taking photographs at the age of 32, just 15 years ago. Upon getting a camera, she turned it on herself. She works primarily in photography and video, though a simultaneous solo show at Nino Mier Gallery in Tribeca, New York, called *Hot Stuff* (May 19 to June 17), added sculptural 3D-printed plastic representations of the objects in her photographs and videos for the first time.

Susiraja is, as art historian and curator Kati Kivinen has observed, in many ways a classic milieu portraitist, relying in almost every work on the simple framework of her own image and a familiar background or setting, adding one or more objects. In her videos, she completes single projects, shot in uninterrupted takes that are usually around one minute long. In *Humble Omelette* (2020), Susiraja, standing in her kitchen, removes an egg from the refrigerator, holds it carefully between her chin and breastbone, then brings her chin down to crush it,

yolk and white dribbling down her muted-gray floral dress. The shell cracks against the floor and she walks out of the frame. In *Raining 1* (2017), she spits onto the inside of an umbrella, then turns it above her so the spit rains down inside, plopping onto the ground. The effect lies in the paradox of these disquieting gestures. Every gesture, every image, is defiant and undermining. In the simplest terms, she is always doing something wrong

Susiraja herself serves as the center of gravity around which all her objects orbit. And because her body is large, and because a body of this size is itself perceived as an aberration and transgression (as she has named it: “If a fat person behaves badly [...] then they are doubly misbehaving. Being fat is a transgression in itself”), it becomes the one repeating subject of every work of self-portraiture, by default. This content becomes a socially prescribed and inescapable value of her work, and she both embraces and dismisses its meaning while expertly mining its power. To center and display her body so matter-of-factly, devoid of shame, devoid of pride, is to immediately disorient and confound. This is an act of profound confidence. Within this confidence, there is freedom. This freedom is preposterous.

The only near-constant in the works, other than Susiraja herself, is the face she wears—her ever-present blank gaze, her expressionless eyes, unmoving and fixed on the camera (“I try to reach as blank a state as possible. [...] For me, being blank is the same as being real”). Before we’ve even begun to stare at her and the predicament she’s concocted, she’s staring at us. Being stared at is a familiar and unnerving stance for those of us who, like Susiraja, navigate the world in superfat bodies. She works to be “empty,” and this blankness is perhaps her trademark. It provides her with distance, an impassivity that seems to disconnect her from the impact of the work. Almost like, I am doing this, but I’m not here. This effort to vacate the circumstance she has created, this willful exiling of the self within the work, is not just the foundation of her art but also an intentional and organic result of her simple task-oriented process, which distances itself from traditional notions of inspiration or intention or storytelling. This exiling of the self is also a necessary by-product of her content: Susiraja herself, meeting an unreliable and unsafe world. I asked her in an email how she felt while making her art, in a futile effort to uncover what was under that blank stare. “I do not feel anything,” she said. “I am empty. I just focus on doing.”

In a 2019 interview for her *Dry Joy* show, she spoke of her relationship with objects:

In my pictures I speak through objects. The object strives for symbiosis with me. I see the action as being contained in the object, which is just waiting for someone to blow some life into it. The object is a tool for experiencing partnerships. The act of photographing it brings it from the background into the limelight.

She creates lists of objects while listening to music and then goes to “fetch” them: “It all starts with the object. [...] My starting point is purely the object and how it relates to me.” Household items are favorites—broom, frying pan, mirror, clothes dryer, electric saw, drill—and sometimes get sexualized via their position next to her, like an umbrella resting at her crotch, an oversized stuffed teddy bear positioned with its head between her legs, or a baguette secured in place by her breasts.



liu Susiraja, *Ankle Weights*, 2017.

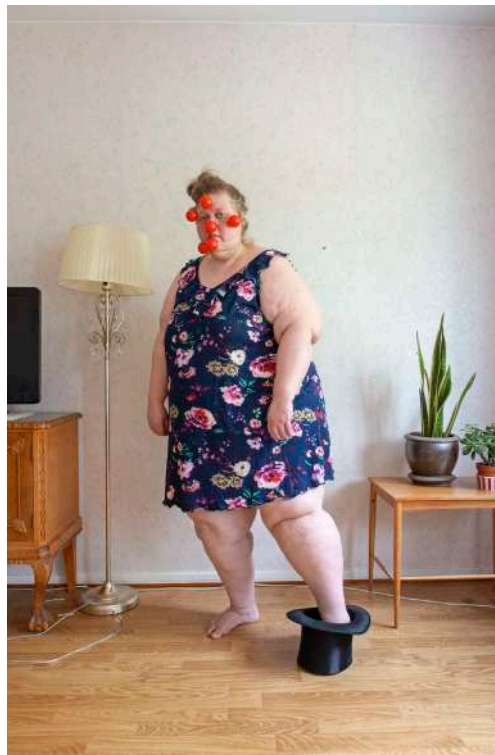
In her lead essay, “Heart-Shaped Box,” featured in MoMA PS1’s A style called a dead fish exhibition book, Jody Graf, the show’s curator, notes that food serves as both object and medium in the artist’s work: “Susiraja has a particularly materialistic attitude towards food, because for her it is an artistic medium, like paint or clay are for other artists.” She favors food iconic of laziness or indiscretion (bacon, cupcakes, hot dogs, cake), though fish, perhaps the most redolent food signal, with its accompanying cheap cultural overtones of female sex, makes frequent appearances. Slabs of meat, still in their supermarket cheap packaging, stand in as romantic objects, as in *Husband* (2021), where she is wearing a white embroidered dress and holding a supermarket meat slab with a men’s tie around it at her chest. She borrows the meaning we’ve attached to these items, knowing it gets magnified in relation to a fat person.

Conversely, Susiraja’s figure also seems to take on the meaning of its surrounding objects, and is tainted by them, as they influence how we see it. She becomes one of the objects. In titling a photo of herself and a balloon tied by a string wrapped around the tip of her nose *Duo* (2017), she seems to suggest they are the same. In *Self-Service* (2009), she has tucked a tray under her belly as if it is ready to serve, like a warm loaf of bread straight out of the oven. At times, her head remains outside the frame, as in *Ankle Weights* (2017), a photo taken from the belly down with sausages wrapped around her ankles. She is capitalizing on the inherent, easily recognizable, and universal meaning, also “charged,” of her fat body and the idea of serving it up.

As Johanna Fateman wrote in *The New Yorker* in May 2022,

Susiraja practices a perilous form of physical comedy. A fat woman is by cultural default already an object of ridicule; inviting laughter by clenching a baguette between her legs, or ironing a pizza to her chest, could easily spin out of her control. Perhaps Susiraja’s blank affect is the key to her peculiar power to retain the upper hand. Indifference is one of the purest forms of defiance, but her disciplined impassivity, her refusal to cue the viewers’ reaction, is more than that. Her unwillingness to feed us meaning is more provocative, and disquieting, than an obvious dare, and it leaves a more lasting impression.

Susiraja’s comedy is most often satirical or ironic. And sometimes the meaning is clear and the comedy tragic. In *Clown is trying to be magician’s bunny* (2018), Susiraja is wearing a floral-patterned dress, her face spotted with six bright red clown noses, one foot resting gingerly inside a magician’s hat on the floor. She doesn’t fit. She doesn’t fit in. “I’m not able to always describe what the photos are about. But I want to make you feel the same feelings I have felt,” the artist has said.



Liu Susiraja, *Clown is trying to be magician’s bunny*, 2018.

Although Susiraja consistently denies any overt political intention in her work, Alex Jovanovich, the reviews editor at Artforum, has pressed her on the topic. He interviewed her to coincide with his February 2022 cover story on the opening of her solo show *Women's Work* at Nino Mier Los Angeles:

Jovanovich: One of the reasons I'm so drawn to your work is because of the way you present your [...] fat body. I have a fat body, too, and it's something that we don't see, in contemporary art, too much of. [...] It's weirdly taboo. [...] So, I wonder, is there any kind of political intention behind this sort of fat representation?

Susiraja: Well [...] when it comes to politics or taking a stand, [...] they are not starting points for me. [...] I do like that politics and opinions appear there. I do like that, as it again adds another layer, but I don't deliberately put it there. It's the same thing with fatness: that isn't the starting point for my art either. [...] [T]he starting point in my art is the object, and then these other things appear in the mix very organically, like different beauty standards, feminism, or these kinds of things. It's a good thing, because I think if I was to put it all there deliberately, [...] my art wouldn't work so well.

In curating the MoMA PS1 show, Jody Graf is faithful to Susiraja's intentional distancing from meaning, retaining her stance of "ambiguity." The show is noticeably devoid of the usual supporting text intended to provide historical context or deeper insight about the works, except for a few brief sentences at the entrance to the exhibition. Graf told me:

liu has underscored the fact that her work is not prescriptive; she doesn't consciously approach her work with a particular message to convey, and invites multiple interpretations. She shies away from explanation, and language rarely enters the equation for her (though when it does, as in her titles and poetry practice, it is telling). This puts more of an onus on the viewer to explore the images without a concrete narrative being handed to them. It was important to me to retain this space of ambiguity, which is where I believe a lot of the political work of the images occurs. [...] By refraining from prescribing a single narrative or interpretation, liu offers space and induces the viewer to consider the stories and baggage that they carry and map onto the images.

By insisting she has no stance, that her work is apolitical, and by betraying nothing in her face, Susiraja effectively vacates the premises and leaves us to stew in our own emerging responses, whether they are disbelief, exhilaration, disgust, or confusion. She has done the work of setting up the experiment, but its results become our problem, our responsibility. Perhaps this rather karmic approach to disruptive art—simply showing us what we came with, or making the internal external—is treating us like adults. But are we, in this case? "My photography gives freedom to the viewer," Susiraja has said. Perhaps we're still immature in our social construction of fatness, not quite ready to be trusted.

I usually find museum text annoying, mostly because I have trouble understanding it and it makes me feel stupid. (Clearly, I'm not an adult.) But Graf's introductory essay was clear, smart, interesting, and written with sensitivity, handling the issue of fatness with unexpected expertise and grace. She earned my trust. I found myself wishing that she had taken on the unenviable task of guiding legions of unsuspecting and uninitiated viewers through the basics of critical fat studies that are on display in her essay. Suddenly, I felt they had been deprived of the experience of managing this difficult and unfamiliar terrain with a worthy and trusted adult.

Despite Susiraja's insistence that she is not intentionally sending a message with her art, her work nonetheless speaks. And what it says is political, radical, and disruptive. Moreover, it uses a megaphone.

There is something unsettling in this reluctance to name the subject and political nature of her work. It is an everyday exhaustion to maintain your self-worth in a social, cultural, and political context where media representations of fat people often present them headless, decapitated, a spectacle of failure (cue the news clipping on "obesity" with a body sitting on a bench holding a packet of French fries, head outside the frame), the near-universal messaging that something is very wrong with you, that your body epitomizes ugliness. The only viable antidote to this daily onslaught is community. And community arises from naming as an act of opposition. I am fat. I have always been fat. liu Susiraja, an astounding artist whose medium is self-portraits, is fat.

Indeed, when I asked Artforum's Jovanovich what Susiraja's work meant to him, he said:

The thing I love most about liu's work is how uncomfortable it makes thin people. Fat folks typically do what's necessary to disappear themselves, even though they are frequently the most visible entities in virtually every situation. liu does the exact opposite—she places her big body front and center in all of her pictures, searing her image into people's brains [...] with crazy props and garish sets to boot! She is not "subtle" or "minimal" or insipidly "tasteful" in her approach—terms that are intellectually synonymous with thinness. The

art world is notoriously lookist, and her work fucks with all of that in smart, blunt, and beautiful ways.

It is important to appreciate how measured and steady Susiraja's public comments are. She talks about objects, process, blankness, completing simple "tasks." She also talks about protection and distance, how to keep herself safe. While she concedes that her work comes from her own experiences—one reason she gives for using herself as both subject and object—she does not reveal the backstory, saying, "I also want to protect myself a bit." And I can't help but appreciate the enormity of this burden.



Liu Susiraja, *Gloves*, 2019.

In the *Dalmatian* (2019) series, where she uncharacteristically poses in a "flirty" manner (an approach suggested to her by her mother), she has bruises all over her body and face. She took these photographs working daily over the course of two weeks while taking painkillers. Jovanovich has noted the "violence or darkness" in her work, "right beneath the surface." Here the violence is on the surface, on her skin, on display. Again, she keeps the background story private. We don't know the origin of the bruises or if they involved violence. But the dark marks of pain on her skin are wrenching.

Objects, her recurrent and worthy foils, are also a form of protection. "That's part of the reason why I include objects, because they provide some distancing," she has said. "Without the object, the picture might be too revealing." It feels important to connect Susiraja's content and process and to explore the nature of their relationship. Her procedural need to be empty may be more than an artistic choice; it may also be protective. ("Empty stare is my shield." And of her images, she has said, "I am empty but alive.") There is a survival here. The content is personal, difficult, and repetitious, and therefore involves a level of sustained vulnerability that must be both taxing and dangerous. Susiraja has given the "safe environment" of the home as one reason she relied on the familiar, private setting of her own home or her parents' home in her work through 2018, after which she expanded to a hotel room and then a private studio, experimenting with colorful backdrops. Again, from her interview with Jovanovich: "[I]t was very hard in the beginning to look at the self-portraits, but the more and more I looked at them and took new self-portraits, you become numb and you accept it and yourself." Graf understands this and named it when I asked her what the response to her show has been:

[The] complexity [of her work] appears to be more easily disregarded when images of Susiraja's works are posted online, leading to knee-jerk and often fatphobic reactions. Susiraja's work can make people uncomfortable. Certain forums are better suited to reflecting on that discomfort, rather than redirecting it back as aggression. If anything, this show has given me renewed faith in the exhibition as a fruitful format and space for collectively dealing with complicated ideas.

I was curious, in a rather frightened way, about the public response in other recent settings, having followed Susiraja's work on Nino Mier's Instagram account and read the vile comments that emerge from people behind the internet's cloak of anonymity. So I asked Jovanovich about her Artforum cover. He said that the response was "weirdly, overwhelmingly positive. There are always trolls, of course. But I was astonished by how many people were behind it!" I asked Maya Code-Williams, artist liaison for Nino Mier Gallery in Tribeca, about their concurrent solo show: "The response to the show has been overwhelmingly positive. Specific reactions have ranged from finding the work to be funny, charming, clever, confronting, bold, honest, poignant, powerful." And from Jody Graf, "The reception [...] has been overwhelmingly positive, most gratifyingly amongst those who have admitted to being somewhat skeptical about the work in the past."

The reviews are in. The public reception of Iu Susiraja in New York City has been uniformly “overwhelmingly positive.” What’s going on?

For some of us, this is a political struggle. On May 26, about a month after the show’s opening, New York City became the largest municipality to pass a law against discrimination based on weight and height in housing, employment, and public accommodation. Activists and a coalition of organizations had come together to create the Campaign for Size Freedom. Binghamton (in New York) and San Francisco are other cities that have anti-fat bias laws, and Urbana, Illinois; Madison, Wisconsin; and Santa Cruz, California, have bans against discrimination relating to personal or physical appearance or attributes. Only one state, Michigan, and one district, Washington, DC, have outlawed fat discrimination, though New York, New Jersey, Vermont, and Massachusetts are considering similar laws.



Iu Susiraja, *Airplane*, 2020.

As a society, we are not yet comfortable with the notion that a stigma against fat people is uncalled for or wrong. The New York City law is setting a new bar, naming fat people as a newly protected class. Still, society remains caught in the erroneous belief that fat can and should be fixed—that it is a reversible condition that results from laziness, self-indulgence, lack of discipline or self-control, or unnamed other character flaws. We believe that we shame fat people for their own good.

It is the preposterousness of these views that undergirds Susiraja’s work. She goads and picks at these norms, challenging them with every sausage tied around her ankle and every cake tucked into her underwear. Through her satire and irony, her skillful use of her own fat image, she is in fact protesting—with “quiet arrogance,” as she has called it—these vapid and tired tropes. In *Airplane* (2020), she sports a one-piece floral bathing suit, feet planted resolutely on a large aerobic exercise contraption, arms extended like wings. In each extended arm she holds, almost triumphantly, two clear plastic bags filled with air, with emptiness.

VULTURE

JUNE 2023

‘Being Blank Is the Same as Being Real’ The subversive self-portraits of liu Susiraja.

By Jerry Saltz



Photo: Moma PS1/liu Susiraja

liu Susiraja comes from a long tradition of photographers who stay at home, dress up, and take pictures of themselves. Claude Cahun, Catherine Opie, Patty Chang, Cindy Sherman — they are there and not there in their images, playing cat and mouse with that elusive animal called identity, enacting dreams and surfacing subconscious anxieties. Susiraja is different: nearly six feet tall, heavy, inescapable. No matter what costume she puts on, no matter what pose she strikes, something bursts through that’s undeniably her. “Being fat is a transgression in itself,” she has said. “I try to be empty and boring, but the camera is more cunning than me.”

She is always alone in her photos at home or in her parents’ house in Turku, Finland. She often uses patterned backdrops — bright plaids, flowery wallpaper, trippy fabrics — that have the feel of nicely designed prisons, their artifice exposed by rigging and a large LED panel that softly backlights her. She deploys normal household items, like sausages and ironing boards and Christmas trees, as props, though in her hands they become absurd, the accoutrements of a tragicomic antisocial heroine masquerading as a housewife. In her current show at MoMA PS1, “A style called a dead fish,” we see her with her leg caught in a top hat, a toilet plunger over her mouth, an ice-cream cone on her face. She subverts our notions about domesticity and sexuality, health and beauty, becoming an object of her own debasement and glorification, a vision you cannot look away from.

“I don’t try to take any role,” Susiraja has said. “I want to be as real as possible. As blank as possible. For me, being blank is the same as being real.” Her work echoes that of British artists Sarah Lucas and Richard

Billingham. Lucas turns the camera on herself and stares us down, daring us to respond. Bingham exposes his drunken family at home in government housing, the realness here being that of class. Susiraja gives us very little idea of her class, other than that she belongs to the broad, social-democratic middle. There is no one else in this world but her, this visual predicament. "I feel I was a controversial person as a child and also now as an adult," she told *Autre* magazine.

The light in these photographs, to which our attention is so overtly drawn, is a co-star. Clear and vivid, it gives a spacious monumentalism to the work. The objects are used in ways that tumble in the mind, never really settling, which keeps the work alive — stops it from being a gimmick. No action is taking place, such that the compositions resemble Dutch still lifes. "My starting point is purely the object and how it relates to me," she says. "The object is a tool for experiencing partnerships." And what strange partnerships these are: a clothespin affixed to her nose, a baguette caught in her crotch, as if to say a person like her just doesn't make sense in this world. This awful isolation is pronounced in the pictures of her in bed: her naked rear, a horsey doll stuck in her underpants.

The main event, though, is that body, which is so relentlessly exposed, complicating the messages of body positivity that have dominated the recent discourse around obesity. Susiraja seems intent on revealing every fold, every craggy dimple, as if her body were a map in raised relief of her happiness and her pain. At times, the echoes of art history are difficult to escape: small feet, big belly, big chest, a combination of attributes that was once considered ideal, a Venus figurine. Yet she is also just herself, "empty but alive," as she says. Her face is inscrutable. She has passed through all these metamorphoses only to remain what she is: a plain fact.

In *Siivouspalvelu* (Housekeeping service), she is framed by a doorway with a rainbow feather in her ass. *Sausage Cupid* features Susiraja in a one-piece bathing suit, holding a blue umbrella with garlands of raw sausage attached next to furniture that looks like a desk lamp but on closer inspection is a bunch of dead fish, the whole assemblage a cross between clean, minimal Scandinavian design and the dark fantasies of the id. *Broom* finds her in a dining nook wearing a broom beneath her breasts, one of the many lurid jokes in her work that feel like challenges or indictments. In *Airplane*, she stands on a *StairMaster* holding plastic bags, both an ad for fitness and an insurrectionary statement against all ads for fitness.

The New York Times

MAY 2023

Critics Pick

Iiu Susiraja: She Has Issues? No, You Have Issues

In her first museum show in the United States, this Finnish artist uses her own XL body to bring a new emotional depth to the genre of setup photography.

By Roberta Smith



Iiu Susiraja's "Woman" (2010), one of the powerful works that take aim at contemporary body image issues, obsessions and taboos in a show at MoMA PS1. Credit...via Iiu Susiraja, Makasiini Contemporary, and Nino Mier Gallery

The strange, discomfiting photographs and videos of the Finnish artist Iiu Susiraja push so many buttons that her provocative exhibition at MoMA PS1 should have been staged in an elevator — to paraphrase the theater critic Peter Marks. These powerful works take aim at a dizzying array of contemporary body image issues, obsessions and taboos, and from different angles, including fat shaming, fitness, obesity, standards of beauty, dysmorphia, self-loathing, self-love and of course sex.

Ambiguously titled "Iiu Susiraja: A Style Called a Dead Fish," the show features 49 photographs and 13 short videos dating from 2008 to 2022. Most are self-portraits that show her wryly using as props a variety of domestic items — stuffed animals, kitchen utensils and especially food. But the main character is Susiraja, a blond woman nearly six feet tall, who is extremely large, if not morbidly obese, and usually stares out at us with lofty indifference. Like most artists whose work matters, Susiraja has no shame. She also presents something of an emotional blank, knowing that her viewers will fill it in.

Born in 1975 in Turku, Finland, where she still lives, Susiraja (pronounced ee-you susi-rah-yah) started out as a textile designer. In 2007, she took up photography and, turning the camera on herself, began to make starkly direct, somewhat humorous, painfully vulnerable self-portraits. They are complex yet widely appealing, even magnetic. Easy resolution of their meanings is impossible, which creates a rich internal narrative in the viewer, often starting with one's feelings about one's own body.

This richness may account for the extensive writing on Susiraja's art, both inside and outside the art world, despite her relatively brief career. Her first solo gallery shows occurred in 2016 in Finland and the United States — the latter at Ramiken Crucible on the Lower East Side. (A show of new work and small sculptural objects is at Nino Mier

Gallery in TriBeCa, through June 17.)

Susiraja's pictures and videos riff on pornography, fashion photography and art history, while bringing a new emotional rawness to postmodern photography. The precedents for her D.I.Y setups include the French modernist Claude Cahun, and Americans like Hannah Wilke, Cindy Sherman, Jimmy DeSana, Laurie Simmons and James Casebere. In Susiraja's performative use of her own body she seems most closely related to Wilke, whose final works fearlessly chronicled her unsuccessful fight with cancer, and to DeSana, whose visualization of gay beauty and fantasy, delineate, like hers, a region of otherness.

The show opens with several photographs from 2010, when Susiraja seems to have found her footing. Opposite the entrance, the declarative "Woman" confronts us directly. Seated, wearing all black, she is a monumental, forceful presence.

Crucial to this power is the helmet-like headgear she devised from a white knit cap with herrings stuck in the band, which resemble ear flaps. More herrings peek out of the purple knit gloves she wears, further enhancing the ritualistic stillness of the image. Nothing settles down here: man, woman, athlete, warrior, monarch, deity — all fomented by the artist's size and her ingenious use of negligible materials.

A Valkyrie awaits in "Training" (also 2021), this time as a headdress embellished with braids (of bread) that turn Susiraja into a Wagnerian heroine. This is not to ignore the treadmill or the work's title, but to suggest that the cudgel of exercise will be met with resistance.

It may be that Susiraja's art divides into two halves: proud and heroic, and abject and heroic. As "Training" demonstrates, parts of both can often be found in the same artwork.

Nearby "Bad Legs," also from 2010, goes mostly abject, although with undeniable belligerence. Evoking an early 1970s William Wegman video, it takes aim at the widespread obsession with legs as a measure of attractiveness and value. Here only the artist's thick feet and calves are shown. Duct-taped to each leg is a clear plastic bag containing a dainty, slim-heeled pump, which doesn't seem likely to fit the artist — a painful recognition that is stated with brutal honesty.

In "Gloves" (2019), Susiraja exaggerates the already extreme female ideal endemic to old masters painting. She appears in form-fitting underwear and strikes a Three Graces pose, touching a wood coat tree — like Eve proposing some apple tasting. A pair of yellow rubber gloves tucked into the bottom edge of her bra, and startling bruises that the artist has declined to explain, complete her outfit.

Susiraja displays a marked indifference to aesthetics, which may explain the "dead fish style" of the show's title. Most of her photographs have an ersatz blandness; they are often inspired by whatever she finds around her apartment or her parents' home where most of them are also taken. Their life stems from her mountainous body, and what she does to it.

But she juices up several images here by using brightly patterned fabrics as backdrops. For example, the expanses of exuberant plaid in "Sausage Cupid" (2019) are so overwhelming that you almost lose sight of the artist. She rises



Installation view of "Iliu Susiraja: A Style Called a Dead Fish," MoMa PS1. Steven Paneccasio



"Bad Legs" (2010), which shows only the artist's feet and calves. Duct-taped to each leg is a clear plastic bag containing a slim-heeled pump. via Iiu Susiraja, Makasiini Contemporary, and Nino Mier Gallery

to the occasion, in a dark blue bathing suit, holding a blue umbrella festooned with strings of sausages, perhaps for Cupid to bestow on deserving couples.

Susiraja's videos extend her images into short resonant actions, usually around a minute in length, and provide a kind of comic relief. In "Cow" she evokes an udder with a yellow rubber glove, a quart of milk and a shiny milk bucket. In "Stand," possibly the most humiliating piece in the show, Susiraja fits a wire hanger around her head and hangs it on a coat tree, which requires her to stoop awkwardly. And in "Mirror," she stands in the kitchen, laying curled pieces of bacon on the glass of a small hand mirror. Fastening the pieces together with some dozen yellow-headed hat pins, she creates a charming little thing: a temporary, miniature Post-Minimal sculpture that was probably soon eaten.

In her essay for the show's catalog, Jody Graf, assistant curator and organizer of the show, writes of Susiraja, "Her photographs may be funny, but they are never a joke." It's slightly gnomic, this distinction, but it suggests that while Susiraja's works can be amusing, unexpected and shocking, they are never at anyone's expense. Funny in Susiraja's case pulls us in, makes us sympathetic and possesses a depth whose bottom we may never reach.



In "Gloves," a chromogenic print in "Iiu Susiraja: A Style Called a Dead Fish," the artist exaggerates the already extreme female ideal endemic to old masters painting. She appears in form-fitting underwear. via Iiu Susiraja, Makasiini Contemporary, and Nino Mier Gallery

VOGUE

SCANDINAVIA

APRIL 2023

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

By Sanna Posti Sjöman



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 Reukula’s work, Hyperventilation, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma in Helsinki. Reukula’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 Reukula’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.”

AnOther

APRIL 2023

Iiu Susiraja's Self-Portraits Turn the Mundane Into Magic

By Osman Can Yerebakan



Iiu Susiraja, *Functional communication*, 2012. Courtesy the artist, Makasiini Contemporary, and Nino Mier Gallery

Finnish photographer Iiu Susiraja has always sought out the extraordinary, whether photographing nature as part of her curriculum at school or later in her career – which has recently led to her first solo museum exhibition in the US, at MoMA PS1. In this show, which is titled *A style called a dead fish*, over 50 photographs trace the artist's self-portraits in which she poses alone at her apartment in Turku, surrounded or covered by mundane objects in different rooms. "I get bored with a clean landscape picture. My interest is immediately aroused if I see, for example, garbage in there," she tells AnOther. "The same thing happens with humans. I'm immediately interested if a person has a scar on their face."

Susiraja's approach to her lens is both liberated and regimented: she is always the only person in her compositions, situated in unassuming domestic settings with an aloof expression under crisp lighting. On the other hand, she commits to a daringly deadpan humour in which Susiraja dons accessible daily objects in tongue-in-cheek fashions that ridicule their purposes while satirising her own way of associating with them. "Humour is part of me," she explains. "Everything that is done too consciously in art is not necessarily reflected in the work in a good way."

In the show, the images feature an umbrella full of rubber ducks covering up Susiraja's otherwise bare crotch like a fruit bowl, or some fruit peel perched on her foot made up like a smiley face. The key to orchestrating an image with a punchline is her selection of objects with no particular character. "Consider a bath duck – it has to be a basic bath duck. It must not be too far-fetched in design," the artist who has a background in textile design admits. "Quite often, I choose an object based on how much I feel drawn towards it; then the end is something magical that I can't explain, like art's inexplicable process."

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.

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Liu Susiraja, Happy Valentines Day (Big Heart), 2022. Courtesy the artist, Makasiini Contemporary, and Nino Mier Gallery

THE NEW YORKER

MAY 2022

Iiu Susiraja's Self-Portraits Are More Than A Dare

By Johanna Fateman



The Finnish artist Iiu Susiraja makes photographs using herself as a model, but her images are less self-portraits than still-lives. A deadpan protagonist—or a jarring centerpiece—she appears amid carefully staged arrangements of household objects, gazing into the camera with rich dispassion.

Take the image “Fountain,” from 2021. The shot’s vantage foreshortens Susiraja’s reclining figure, exaggerating its proportions, rendering her bare legs and midsection mountainous while shrinking her head, which almost aligns with the composition’s vanishing point. The look on Susiraja’s face—a vacant regard—is, strangely, more forceful for its shadowed, distant presence at the far corner of a bed. The viewer’s eye dwells there rather than on the surrealist hullabaloo in the picture’s foreground, where a transparent plastic umbrella, upside down and full of rubber duckies, covers Susiraja’s crotch. In “Blue Lagoon,” also from 2021, she sits up in the same twin bed, nude but for three strategically placed Santa masks. A slack, hollow-eyed disguise covers each breast, like the triangles of a bikini top; another flaccid Father Christmas is particularly perverse, his white beard acting as Susiraja’s proverbial fig leaf. He appears downcast between her spread legs; she remains expressionless.

Susiraja, who is forty-six, is unashamed of her nudity, just as she is unapologetic of her failure to obey contemporary edicts of the body—to be thin, or to, at the very least, mitigate her fatness by covering up. Despite the camp absurdity of her scenes, she is not a clown, and despite her nakedness, her work doesn’t straightforwardly concern either masochism or self-love. Instead, fat stigma is toyed with, embodied, and satirized, sometimes through sexualized caricatures of gluttony. “Good Morning” shows her—with her underpants pulled down and stuffed with a loaf (or more) of sliced white bread—holding a knife and a jar of Nutella.

The use of food items as fraught props is not new for Susiraja. “Ankle Weights,” from 2017, shows a view of her legs and abdomen, with her arms hanging at her sides. What look like links of sausages are coiled around each ankle, to resemble grotesque fitness accessories or shackles. “Unicorn (chocolate),” from the same year, shows her before an orderly wardrobe with an ice-cream cone smashed into her forehead. Dark rivulets of the melted cream cover her face and fleck a white tank top: she’s both mythic creature and archetypal slob.

To the extent that such vignettes are funny—they are and they aren’t—Susiraja practices a perilous form of physical comedy. A fat woman is by cultural default already an object of ridicule; inviting laughter by clenching a baguette between her legs, or ironing a pizza to her chest, could easily spin out of her control. Perhaps Susiraja’s blank affect is the key to her peculiar power to retain the upper hand. Indifference is one of the purest forms of defiance, but her disciplined impassivity, her refusal to cue the viewers’ reaction, is more than that. Her unwillingness to feed us meaning is more provocative, and disquieting, than an obvious dare, and it leaves a more lasting impression.

ARTFORUM

FEBRUARY 2022

Cover Story: Alex Jovanovich on Iiu Susiraja

By Alex Jovanovich



Being roughly 320 pounds and a little less than six feet tall, with a fifty-inch waist, I am usually the fattest person in any room. With those stats, how could I not be? In fact, because of my size, much of my existence is a numbers game: I have type 2 diabetes, so I need to take two thousand milligrams of Metformin every day, in addition to ten milligrams of Jardiance, in order to try to keep my A1C levels hovering around 7 percent or less. My other daily medications include ten milligrams of Rosuvastatin for high cholesterol and 150 milligrams of the antidepressant Sertraline; the dosage was recently increased because my “morbid obesity,” as my doctor calls it, has negatively affected my mental health. I live on the fifth floor of a walk-up and need to climb ninety-five steps to get to my apartment. I used to be pretty winded by the time I got to seventy, but after thirteen years of living in the same place, I now stop to catch my breath when I hit eighty-five or ninety. One might think that all this quantifying would give me some sense of control over my life, my physicality, but it doesn’t. The incessant counting has only deepened my estrangement from and disgust for my ungainly, enormous body, as though it were a malevolent alien entity like the Blob that, if not closely monitored, will wreak terrible havoc upon the world.

Since 2007, the Finnish photographer and video artist Iiu Susiraja has made her own massive physique the centerpiece of her work. I vividly remember the first time I saw one of her early self-portraits, *Broom*, 2010, from her series “Good Behavior,” 2008–10. In this picture, the artist stands in the middle of what might be a kitchen or dining room, wearing a plain navy skirt and a drab, peasant-style blouse. Wedged beneath her breasts, unencumbered by a brassiere, is the long wooden handle of the namesake object. Her short, choppy haircut—“soft prison butch” seems an appropriate

way of characterizing it—exacerbates an unsettling gaze, which is equal parts bemusement, frustration, and quiet fury. It is Susiraja’s trademark expression.

Behind her are a number of modest household furnishings, including a brown-and-gold wall hanging with a vaguely modernist pattern, a kitschy little landscape painting, a pale-green end table, and a potted plant. Susiraja’s appearance inside this unremarkable domestic space underlines its abnormality, its suffocating “normalcy.” The setting cannot accommodate her larger-than-life-size presence, at once so achingly self-aware, self-possessed, and ruefully droll. She is immense and immensely strange—she overwhelms, unnerves, enlivens. She chews the scenery (fat joke intended) and wields her physique as though it were a weapon. Her body, like mine, is definitely an alien creature: something that many probably gawk at, or try their best to ignore, or ruthlessly pathologize. Yet she presents it to us without a trace of inhibition, shame, or gratuitous prettification.

No matter how comical or surreal her scenarios, a latent animosity simmers.

“If a fat person behaves badly in an artistic context, then they are doubly misbehaving. Being fat is a transgression in itself. . . . An obese person’s simple existence constitutes misbehaving,” Susiraja once remarked in an interview. The impropriety she mentions runs rampant throughout her self-portraiture. Part of this is fueled by her talent for turning commonplace items—food, toys, women’s shoes, boring underwear—into uncanny and even oddly visceral props. Take *Happy Meal*, 2011, in which various lengths of apple peel delicately grace the top of the artist’s plump bare foot, calling to mind old scabs, skin ulcers; or *Let’s Call*, 2016, a picture of Susiraja hunched over, an orange rotary telephone shoved between her legs and trapped in the crotch of a hideous pair of pantyhose that have been pulled down around her knees. The phone makes me think of a miscarried infant—the long, coiled cord of the handset, which is draped over the artist’s neck, feels more than a little umbilical.

Her short videos bring her strange tableaux to life. In *Vitrine*, 2017, Susiraja stands next to an antique display cabinet full of ceramic tchotchkes. After a beat, she opens its door, pulls out a small vase, and proceeds to frantically lick it all over while staring, deadpan, into the camera. When she finishes, she carefully puts the vessel back in place, closes the cabinet door, and walks out of frame. The work reminds me of a scene from John Waters’s infamous *Pink Flamingos* (1972), in which Divine (the late drag superstar, whose flagrant, fat-ass spirit wends its way through a lot of Susiraja’s work) and her son break into their archenemies’ home to enact a twisted hillbilly curse that involves licking all of the furniture. (During the ritual, Divine drops a huge mouthful of saliva onto a couch cushion, mutters the word *juicy*, and then, to fully cement the dark deed, gives her kid a blow job. *Classic*.)

No matter how comical or surreal her scenarios, a latent animosity simmers. In a 2018 interview with *Autre* magazine, the artist said that she could never make anyone else the subject of her work: “I can bully myself with the camera, but I cannot bully another person.” Yet by seeming to humiliate herself, she pointedly calls out those who cling to cruel misperceptions about the obese—that they’re stupid, lethargic, gluttonous, etc.—by exaggerating such notions to preposterous degrees (or, perhaps more appropriately, fattening them up until they explode). *Zoo*, 2021, is a photograph that will be featured in Susiraja’s solo debut at Nino Mier Gallery in Los Angeles, which opens this month. (Ironically, the space is located in West Hollywood, a “gayborhood” rife with male-body fascism.) In this work, the artist wears a crimson sweater and sits on a bed in a room flooded with the cold light of day. Her collar is stretched to expose her right breast, but she holds a rainbow-swirl lollipop to conceal her nipple. Susiraja’s bare legs are spread wide; between them rests the decapitated head of a Brobdingnagian teddy bear, whose body is propped up next to her. The artist’s cheeks appear flushed, though not from embarrassment. The image seems to me a spoof of vintage cheesecake photography, *Bunny Yeager* meets *Blue Velvet*—something to fuck up a hostile, judgmental gaze. (It would make a great dating-profile picture, pairing quite well with the deceptively cloying “bio” that appears on Susiraja’s website, part of which reads, “I like poems, music, flea markets, mornings, rain, and spring. Close to my heart are animals and flowers. . . . Everyday life is my muse.”)

Last year, Susiraja received an award for midcareer artists from the Finnish Art Society. In a post on her Instagram account, she said that the organization referred to her work as “weird,” “absurd,” and “adorable.” While the first two adjectives certainly apply, the last one rubs me the wrong way. It’s an infantilizing descriptor that often gets used to make fat people seem innocuous, approachable, soft. The abrasiveness of Susiraja’s aesthetic is a tonic, especially in light of all the smarmy, feel-good discourse that suffuses the body-positivity movement within which her art is frequently positioned. Having a giant body can be a terrible burden on one’s social, physical, and psychic health, and trying to love oneself must involve embracing the darker, more complicated emotions that arise. Fat people are intimately familiar with anger, whether it’s directed at themselves or at a world that can barely stand to look at them. But when properly harnessed, the feeling can be a luminous, transformative force—both humanizing and galvanizing.

This subtle yet incandescent rage shimmers everywhere in Susiraja’s output. It’s just one of the many reasons why her art—so mesmerizing, terrorizing, gnarly, monstrous—is incredibly beautiful.

Los Angeles Times

JUNE 2018

Is this trying too hard, or maybe not hard enough? A Finnish artist asks: 'What Am I?'

By David Pagel



liu Susiraja, "Duo," 2017. Chromogenic print, 13-11/16 inches by 10-7/16 inches,(liu Susiraja / Ghebaly Gallery)

The art in some exhibitions makes you feel as if the artist who made it is just going through the motions — phoning it in. More common but just as unsatisfying is the feeling that the artist is trying too hard — forcing efforts that mesh with expectations about what art is supposed to do, how it's supposed to look and what it's supposed to mean.

It's rare for an exhibition to seem as if it does both simultaneously. But that is what happens at liu Susiraja's first solo show in Los Angeles, titled "What Am I?" The Finland-based artist's 11 small photographs and 14 short videos at Ghebaly Gallery create the impression that Susiraja is working real hard to look as if she couldn't care less about the single-gesture performances she has staged for the camera.

In each of the still photographs, all from 2017, Susiraja treats her body as a pedestal, a base on which she has placed a pair of baguettes, a melting ice cream cone, a green balloon, a feather duster, a lily, two folded shirts or a bunch of sausages, among other things. In the videos (one from 2016, two from 2018 and the rest from 2017), the story lines are more elaborate. In the shortest, at 35 seconds, she deposits a freshly baked cake in the front of her elastic-hemmed underpants. In the longest, at 1 minute, 53 seconds, she snips the fingertips off a rubber glove and pours a carton of milk through it.

In others, Susiraja dumps potting soil into a pair of shoes and then squeezes her feet in; stomps on a pair of pork chops; spits on a plate and rubs it on her face; ties a red string around her left breast; and urinates on a toy drum in order to play it.

From start to finish, in every video and picture, Susiraja looks as if she is bored beyond tears — like an employee stuck in a dull job and unable to escape it. Kierkegaard comes to mind, as do Sartre and Dostoevsky. If those heavyweights of existentialism had access to Instagram, they might have made works with the same emotional timbre as Susiraja's.

If those heavyweights of existentialism had access to Instagram, they might have made works with the same emotional timbre as Susiraja's.

CURRICULUM VITAE



IIU SUSIRAJA

Born 1975 in Turku, Finland
Lives and works in Turku, Finland

EDUCATION

2018 MFA, Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki, FI
2012 BA, Turku University of Applied Sciences Art Academy, Turku, FI
2005 BA, EVTEK University of Applied Sciences, Espoo, FI

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2023 *Hot Stuff*, Nino Mier Gallery, New York, NY, US
A style called dead fish, MoMA PS1, Queens, NY, US

2022 *Object*, Makasiini Contemporary Gallery, Turku, FI
Women's Work, Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US

2020 *Dalmation*, Ramiken Gallery, Brooklyn, NY, US
Dry Joy, SKMU Museum, Tallinn, EE

2019 *Dry Joy*, KIASMA, Helsinki, FI
Iiu Susiraja: Next Door, Kadel Willborn Gallery, Düsseldorf, DE

2018 *What am I?*, François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US

2017 *of Object and Me*, PS² Gallery, Belfast, UK
Happy hour, VB Photographic Centre, Kuppio, FI

2016 *What am I?* Ramiken Crucible, New York, NY, US
Be Boring Be Happy, Fotogalleriet Format, Malmö, SE
Voin Hyvin, kiitos, Photographic Centre Peri, Turku, FI
Tunteiden niksi-pirkka, Hå Gamle Prestegard, Nærbø, NO

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2023 *Beach*, Nino Mier Gallery, New York, NY, US
About Art 2023, organized by Makasiini Contemporary, Logomo, Turku, FI
WAM Turku City Art Museum, Turku, FI (*forthcoming*)

2022 *Why Can't We Live Together*, Marburger Kunstverein, Marburg, DE

2021 *The Cake Show*, Curated by Thea Smolinski, The Pit, Palm Springs, CA, US
On The Level Or The Man Who Fell Out Of Bed, Krinzinger Schottenfeld,
Vienna, AT

2020 *Paranoid Crucible*, Ramiken Gallery, Brooklyn, NY, US
Touch, EMMA Museum, Espoo, FI

2019 *From the shadows of night to the brightness of day*, Makasiini Gallery, Turku, FI
She stares back, Kendall College of Arts and Design, Grand Rapids, MI, US
Considering Finland, Port25 Mannheim, Mannheim, DE

2018 *Portraits at Home*, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto, ON, CA
Hardcore Erotic Art, Ramiken Gallery, Brooklyn, NY, US
STILL HUMAN, Rubell Family Collection, Miami, FL, US
10 From the north, Flow Festival of Photography, Helsinki, FI
Circulation(s), Centquatre-paris, Paris, FR
Martin Kippenberger and Iiu Susiraja, Ramiken Gallery, Brooklyn, NY, US
EAT ME, Trapholt Museum, Kolding, DK
Bodybuilding, Wäinö Aaltonen Museum of Art, Turku, FI

GRANTS

National Council for the Visual Arts, Artist Working Grant
Alfred Kordelin Foundation, Residence Grant
National Council for the Audiovisual Arts, Artist Grant

SELECTED PUBLIC & PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

Adam Lindemann Collection
University of Chicago
The Finnish Museum of Photography
Kiasma, Museum of Contemporary Art
Wäinö Aaltonen Museum
Finnish National Gallery
Helsinki City Art Museum
Stavanger Museum
Gothenburgh Museum of Art
Päivi and Paavo Lipponen Collection
Heino Art Foundation
Saastamoinen Foundation
Timo Miettinen Collection



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