

Love Loath

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I.

A long “e” and “ooh” run together tightly in the saying of her first name. The pronunciation of the last, translatable to *wolf border*: “susi-rah-yah.” The camera clicks on and she backs away from it, entertaining herself there in her own domicile, if not her parents’ place or a rented hotel room for some of her photographs.

She opens a ketchup bottle, squirts some out in a hand and proceeds to blush slickly the sides of her face with circles, before lifting a piece of hotdog on a fork to dress against each before taking some bites in her video *Red Cheeks*. In this way mimed action is mined. In *Clown Is Trying to Be Magician’s Bunny*, while she leans her weight over onto one foot and tilts off-center, her left is placed down into an overturned black top hat on the floor, and six of the red rubber nose bulb appendages we know are attached across her face, one pressing up under her bottom lip, creating a sense of a smile askew. That caricature nose gets put to more use over the mouth of a large fish, held suspended between her meeting upper thighs, Susiraja here wearing no pants. But, as Johanna Fateman, writing in *The New Yorker* on Iiu Susiraja’s photographs, perceives: “She is not a clown.”

In *Duo*, a balloon hangs down from a string tied tight around her nose pulling it thinner. This photograph has a compliment in a video found on her Instagram page; the artist takes up a length of cord to tighten a bundle of a hanging left breast, wrapping it around to then make a knot.

The videos Susiraja makes have only the most minimal sound. Thirteen, ranging from just thirty-four seconds to one minute and fifty-three, were part of the MoMA PS1 exhibition, *A Style Called a Dead Fish*. This was the Finnish artist’s first solo museum show in the United States. Last I looked in on it, another seventeen were up on her Instagram page, including the only one where, as far as I can tell, there is any talking. “I’m an artist,” she says repeatedly, pinching open one wooden clothespin after another to attach somewhere on her body: left earlobe after one has already

been clipped to the other, the one side of her upper lip, upper arm, another under her chin, other side of the upper lip, her bicep, other side of neck, the remaining bicep, nearly balancing out nine points.

2.

Forget Francesca Woodman with clothespins attached to her more “classical” breasts and stomach. Or Sarah Lucas with tough teenlike, leather jacket androgyny in *Eating a Banana*—Iiu Susiraja brings hands together in the video *Prayer* around one held vertically amidst that pose continuing a press to mash it out against split skin. Maggie Nelson writes, understanding “how forceful and disruptive [Lucas’s] gestures can be when placed into conversation with art history.” The gendered dynamic of *Self-Portrait with Fried Eggs*, two sunny side up atop dark T-shirt Lucas wears, while she slouches back in a chair, resounds as “funny” in a different way in Susiraja’s *Humble Omelet*: kitchen of the larger woman, walking slowly to refrigerator, opening, closing, selecting, and next proceeding by lowering chin to break with her neck egg wedged there. Cracked shell rolls down floral front of blouse to plop on floor.

When I had taken my first spin through the exhibition, so good I visited twice, what reached me too on later reflection were thoughts of an aunt: my mother’s older sister, ceasing to leave the bed, back racked with knees no longer holding her, and shortly after taken to rehab said to have died of a broken heart in a couple days.

3.

What makes the photographs gripping to me is the space they take, areas they clear around them for focus, a recalibration of what might be brought into balance, and Susiraja holds this, even when she is off more to one side or the other of the picture plane. In *Puruluu (Chewing Bone)* said dog toy wrapped up into the end of a long lavender tie loose around her neck rests on the center of her stomach. She is wearing one of her bright house dresses. Her face cuts against another festive frock in *Haista Nakki (Smell the Sausage)*. “She looks more determined,” a viewer says standing, admiring. She likes this one more than the rest, Susiraja having with red rubber band attached a raw hot dog to the raised middle finger of each hand.

4.

My absorption in these performances of identity began with learning that alongside her visual works, Iiu Susiraja also writes poetry. A small selection of her short pieces—running two to five lines, one six—taking up the muse of taste, love and decorum, and transformation of the air are included as part of the book published on the occasion of *A Style Called a Dead Fish*.

She has a *fat* body, the chosen term curator Jody Graf uses to describe “purposefully and with respect, as opposed to pathologizing words such as ‘obese’ or ‘overweight.’”¹ Self-described “fat queer joy writer” Emma Copley Eisenberg gives answer to her own rhetorical posing in a piece on fatphobia in literature; if you’re wondering why to care if you do not so already, potential self-interest aside (i.e., you too might one day be larger), nuancing representation: “Fatness is racialized, gendered, queered, and classed. Black and brown people are more likely to be fat than white people. Four out of five Black women are fat. Women are fatter than men. Queer and trans people are fatter than straight, cis people (except for gay men). And poor people are fatter than rich people.”²

Unicorn – chocolate (Yksisarvinen – suklaa): Iiu’s face tipped back covered in melting ice cream pouring down cheeks and upturned chin, neck, and dripping further down onto a white sleeveless cotton top, the cone stuck to protrude from the crown of forehead. “People have a lot of feelings about ice cream,” Emma writes also on her Substack, “and what it means if they eat it. Ice cream is emotional, social, cultural. In movies, it’s ice cream the sad woman is eating when her heart is broken and it’s ice cream the sexy woman is eating on the first date with the lover that will shape her life.”

5.

She is not a Playboy Bunny, but rather in the *Mad Bunny* photograph couples those recognizable ears on her head with a kitchen knife in hand. White swan forms are water birds at her feet, the decoys arranged to encircle her, photo studio background rich purple brocade fabric she has draped. She holds a last bit of pale sausage in the hand without weapon, length of the food’s other end pressed down between her knees. Feeding herself or feeding them, hard to say, swan a meaty bird but not one for eating, her face staring out at viewers like attention has been wrested from her work.

She is giving us one of her many stares, the look of gradations critics shorthand time and again as deadpan or blank, a gaze that goes from sad seeming to me to challenging before disengaged walking to turn the camera off when it is a video work.

About one from 2020 entitled *John Wayne*, a power tool in each hand with a wiener attached to pointed drill bits, spinning away until one falls off, she writes: “I think this is my best video.” The mouth mimic alone is perfect expression.

6.

Susiraja has also included more personal pictures on her ‘gram, from the *homealbum* as she renders, along with crowd shots and videos taken around some of her



Chromogenic print, *Duo*, 2017, © Iiu Susiraja. Photo: Iiu Susiraja. Courtesy the artist and Nino Mier Gallery.



Chromogenic print, *Puruluu (Chewing Bone)*, 2010, © Iiu Susiraja. Photo: Iiu Susiraja. Courtesy the artist and Nino Mier Gallery.



Chromogenic print: *Thick Emotions*, 2007, © liu Susiraja. Photo: liu Susiraja. Courtesy the artist and Nino Mier Gallery.



Chromogenic print: *Fountain*, 2021, © liu Susiraja. Photo: liu Susiraja. Courtesy the artist, Makasiini Contemporary, and Nino Mier Gallery.

openings: her progression through years of childhood, soft kiddie arms, holding a puppy, smiling, foraging. And then the bright blonde hair dyed goth black to match her tall slump in appropriate costume. Here a child with a boy taller than her, hair matching hers, arm around her shoulder, before she matures to smiling back at a former president of the Republic of Finland.

Then I find it harder to click forward, her affect more difficult to encapsulate in a 2003 picture: eyes each hold *what* while those almost fully closed lips still smile, slight peek through of top teeth. Younger, selecting music to listen to, laughing, a kid in an apron flouring something for frying. In one of the photos from the eighties, she could almost be me or my sister at that time around that age but then bodies change.

In another series of these types of domestic photographs, the hair has been dyed orange. In a last slide she thumbs a ride at the side of the road, a shopping bag in hand. She will say of the objects she puts to use in elaborating her self-portraits, "I get them from flea markets, cheap shops, recycling centers, or I may have one at home."³

7.

One of the characters she casts herself as is the presence in the kitchen, the woman with the broom, only hers is held up off the ground and extended horizontally by virtue of being tucked underneath her heavy hanging breasts, levitated by that pressure. In the photograph *Large-scale Cleaning*, the rug is a runner picked up and draped over her head to hang down over her form. Close to a decade later, her facial expression pulls as much attention as that rainbow design of plume of feather duster, positioned to protrude like a colorful tail from the vicinity of her mulberry panties in *Silvoupalvelu (Housekeeping Service)*. Though this is not a straightforward narrative, she is starting to wear fewer clothes around the house in some poses.

8.

By 1993, her nose pierced. 2007, self-portraiture begins. One from that year not in the MoMA PS1 show but included in its companion book: *Thick Emotions*, a head-shot where a covering is wrapped around an off-centered face, obscuring, features a slit in the lower half a tongue sticks out through. The video of her 2011 TEDx talk in Helsinki cuts away from her on stage to show reproductions of photographs of a comparatively slighter figure all in black, head hooded, face turned away. Seated at a table with a cloth over it that appears to be the same as featured in one of the artist's few more traditional—for being only objects—still lives, 2010's *Floury Cloth*. This same-looking all-black covered body lies on the couch and turned away from us, next. Then, another picture shows broadened back camera-facing and in a chair this form resting upon some flowers. If I did speak the language, I could discern

the accompanying commentary, subtitles currently unavailable with the YouTube upload.

When I Touch the Flowers, another 2010 still life, is a thin bouquet bent to the side with blooms obscured under a weighting cloth. I remember 1993 as the year I began writing as a discipline, the year my best friend with lights shining her dark skin perched atop a table, reciting as a character escalating details of some random date night, all the while methodically, rhythmically, turning a held carrot in her hand raking down along its length, turning peeler, turning, peeling. Might be just as easy at first glance for some to not overlook five of the same protruding out from under the mattress Susiraja lies supine upon in her 2010 *Carrots*. In *Al Dente*, she is on her back too and *Fork*.

9.

Most disturbing to me are the patches of bruises, splotches of purple from blood vessels broken somehow. Three such photographs from a series called *Dalmatian* are present in Jody Graf's curation. Twelve hung on one wall at the Ramiken gallery, where they were first shown for three days, slated for a month, before Covid shutdown. She is in her beige underclothes, set off by accents of yellow cleaning gloves, like the ones she employed in *Cow*, where milk flows down into waiting, receiving pail out from the rubber she snips ends off of before filling from a carton, bright compromised udder. Bra elastic suspends in *Gloves* one to hang down on each side of her chest, one hand up behind her head, like a pinup, the other holding on to coat rack featured before in the video *Stand*, supporting her differently this time. *Pinwheel* and *Horse*, two others from the bruised series, each show Susiraja lying in bed in a kind of recline. A small toy horse is between her legs like she could ride it, her dappled drumstick foreground. Colorful foil curls of the other child plaything extend on stilled stick midair out from her backside turned to us.

The props give the work another dimension, to her mind, and also provide some distance for her. Discussing the *Dalmatian* show with Alex Jovanovich in a recording to accompany his *Artforum* piece on her, she says how here she is very naked, in some of the photographs totally; though even in the most stripped, the above cited *Pinwheel*, she still has on T-shirt. The photographs arose from both her mother and the gallery owner's suggestion. "It's a great series. It's a significant series."⁴

10.

Buñuel and Dalí's attention grabbing razor across eye is for Susiraja a short, single-take video running forty-six seconds. You see her calmly, stoically, facing the camera and working a red stiletto heel she wedges into a dead fish's sight through to the other side, and now it hangs, hooked by the heel. Another video: she has written "BE MINE" on a herring resting on a plate of pale yellow before with a pair

of scissors separating those two words further, cutting off the tail, then head, not so cleanly at first, but accomplishing the task with further, shorter snip, straightening back up into a line now the newly perforated pieces, presenting. In another video, just her giant arms arranging methodically strips of uncooked bacon atop a red mirror, meat then nailed in place as such with six or more pins gripped by their yellow plastic heads.

A child asks her mother, repeating the question, "What is she doing?"

She lies on her back near mountainous in *Fountain*, one of the more recent instances of self-staged photography in the MoMA PS1 show. From this year also, 2021, in *Zoo*, supporting herself upright, same bed different sheets, posed beside a huge stuffed bear whose plush head has been removed to rest between her legs, staring out with still-stitched smile, she holds a lollipop in hand over breast.

A single photograph, from a series shown as part of her other show over the summer, *Hot Stuff* at Tribeca's Nino Mier Gallery featuring also Susiraja's expansion into installation and sculpture, does stand in some contrast, not only for being the sole instance of a 2022 work. *Happy Valentine's Day (Big Heart)* has the giant, reflective mylar entity included in the title held in front of her chest, dimensions enough to shade her genital region underneath: it's giving back the room while liu, obscuring nearly completely the comparatively small wooden chair supporting underneath her in the kitchen, a full nude. There was a laugh, somewhere behind me, male, making me feel more resolved even to stand there and not just stare.

NOTES

1. Jody Graf, "Heart-Shaped Box," *Iiu Susiraja: A Style Called a Dead Fish* (New York: MoMA PS1, 2023), 8.
2. Emma Copley Eisenberg, "Fatphobia Is the Literary World's Final Frontier," *Frumph Feelings*, July 30, 2023, <https://emmacopleyeisenberg.substack.com/p/fatphobia-is-the-literary-worlds>.
3. Museum of Contemporary Art, "Iiu Susiraja – Kuivakka ilo / Dry Joy," *YouTube*, uploaded Apr 2, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUINxI3uKhhQ>.
4. Artforum, "Iiu Susiraja on the Power of Humor," *YouTube*, uploaded Feb 15, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRY5M0LwVs0>.

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