

Touchdown by Venus

Iiu Susiraja

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Difference and Repetition: Self-Representation in the Work of Iiu Susijara

The great Finnish artist Helene Schjerfbeck (1862–1946) created over forty self-portraits during her lifetime. From early images of herself as a young woman, earnestly gazing out from the canvas, to the increasingly existential works that chart her descent into old age and her confrontation with mortality, this body of work haunts us with a singular artist's assertion of her complex humanity. Sardonic, intense, deadpan—the fury with which she painted herself toward the end of her life suggests a profound interior struggle. Yet the smudges of paint conceal her true feelings behind a mask of pigment formed by her distinctive brushwork. The differences from picture to picture, enacted through a repetitive act of self-representation, confront us, forcing us to look and contemplate the intricacies of this singular woman's life.

Schjerfbeck is not alone in this compulsive repetition of the self. Many women artists have taken themselves as their primary subject, transcending the genre of self-portraiture to develop practices rooted in a multitude of self-directed gestures: inward exploration, outward performance, bodily emancipation, and at times acts of confrontation or repossession. Frida Kahlo. Claude Cahun. Pan Yuliang. Anita Rée. Maria Lassnig. Celia Paul. Catherine Opie. Laura Aguilar. In each of these artists' returns to the self, they continually transform, asserting difference even as the subject remains the same.

Since 2007, Iiu Susiraja has created more than a thousand self-portraits. Staging herself alone in front of a camera—whether still or moving—Susiraja's images are almost always situated in domestic interiors and most often depict her full body rather than a cropped headshot. She deploys prosaic objects as props—food, toys, furniture, balloons, tape, pantyhose, lingerie—using them to activate her remarkable body. Each image compels the viewer to scrutinize that body: its departure from canonical female “norms,” its folds of skin, its massive presence in relation to the modest scale of the middle-class, homey interiors in which these *mise-en-scènes* unfold. At first glance, the soft corporeal transgressions in these images disarm through humor; ultimately, however, they release something much darker that lurks beneath the surface. “If a fat person behaves badly in an artistic context, then they are doubly misbehaving,” Susiraja explains. “Being fat is a transgression in itself... An obese person's simple existence constitutes misbehaving.”

Hemmed in by the claustrophobia of kitchen cabinets and domestic appliances, Susiraja glances outward with her signature blank stare—never mind the red balloons gaffer-taped to her face with industrial-grade tape. Anyone familiar with the films of Finnish auteur Aki Kaurismäki will recognize this deeply Finnish mien. Deadpan and dry, this expression dissimulates emotion rather than reveals it. Known as *tonnin seteli*—literally “a thousand mark bill”—the term originates in a famous comedy sketch about this national “expressionless expression.” Even Schjerfbeck's mysterious self-portraits, particularly the final eighteen made in the last two years of her life, exude a similar disquieting look, the same closely guarded silence. Deployed within Susiraja's masterful stagecraft, the *tonnin seteli* becomes both armor and weapon. It shields her inner life from external judgment while simultaneously challenging the viewer to confront her presence and her difference. We cannot look away.