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# Domesticity and Female Self-Portraiture in Contemporary Finnish Photography: Elina Brotherus, Aino Kannisto and Iiu Susiraja on the Footsteps of Cindy Sherman

Lindfors, Jenita

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University of Plymouth

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# UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH

**DOMESTICITY AND FEMALE SELF-PORTRAITURE IN CONTEMPORARY FINNISH**

**PHOTOGRAPHY: ELINA BROTHERUS, AINO KANNISTO AND IJU SUSIRAJA ON THE  
FOOTSTEPS OF CINDY SHERMAN**

by

**JENITA LINDFORS**

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth  
in partial fulfilment for the degree of

**RESEARCH MASTERS**

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## Author's Declaration

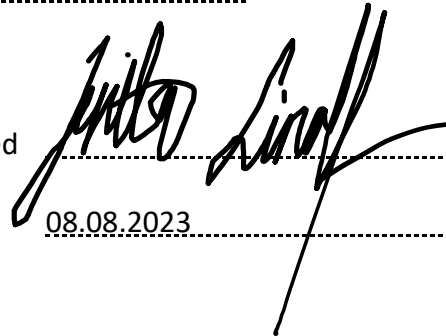
At no time during the registration for the degree of Research Masters has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee.

Work submitted for this research degree at the University of Plymouth has not formed part of any other degree either at the University of Plymouth or at another establishment.

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Signed

Date 08.08.2023

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Julia Lindall', is written over a horizontal dashed line. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long vertical stroke extending downwards from the end of the signature.

**Domesticity and Female Self-Portraiture in Contemporary Finnish Photography: Elina Brotherus, Aino Kannisto and Iiu Susiraja on the Footsteps of Cindy Sherman**

Jenita Lindfors

**Abstract**

Domestic themes, environments and objects can be seen in many female photographers' works, including self-portraits. While domesticity and the private sphere of home have been associated with femininity, feminists have been working to challenge these stereotypes. In contemporary art it makes domesticity an interesting concept, a sphere in which femininity and feminism collide. Cindy Sherman has observed different stereotypes in society through many of her series, the most remarkable body of work being the *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980).

Sherman's works create a baseline from which to examine female self-portraiture in Finland, focusing on three Finnish female artists: Aino Kannisto, Elina Brotherus and Iiu Susiraja. While they all have the 'Sherman-esque' elements in their work and domestic settings, spaces and objects are in an important role in their works, they all have different ways of using them. Kannisto's style is cinematic, drawing inspiration from films, Brotherus has executed both autobiographical and non-autobiographical series, her inspiration being art history. Susiraja uses domestic objects in provocative, often absurd performances. As their works can be read from a feminist viewpoint, they are sharing the same position of combining feminine and feminist as Sherman in her work. Being based on visual analysis, this thesis is aiming to research how female artists are representing domesticity in various forms in their photographs and examine Sherman's paradigm's effects on them.

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## Introduction

A self-portrait is often considered as a representation of the artist, something truthful and objective, communicating something about artist's personality to the viewer.<sup>1</sup> In traditional portraiture a popular way to do that was to include different objects in the artwork, for example, an easel or a camera, which indicated the artist's profession.<sup>2</sup> However, in contemporary art this has appeared to be more complex, as a self-portrait does not always mean a literal portrayal of the artist: in her series *Album*, Gillian Wearing transforms into her family members to recreate some of the pictures from her family album.<sup>3</sup> Francesca Woodman has cropped or covered her face in many of her pictures, while representing her naked body with different symbolic objects.<sup>4</sup> Sam Taylor-Johansson names her landscape image *A Selfportrait as a Tree*.<sup>5</sup> Susan Bright divides different self-portraits into five different chapters in her book *Auto Focus: The Self-Portraiture in Contemporary Photography*; autobiography, body, masquerade, studio/album and performance, pointing out the diversity of self-portraits,<sup>6</sup> although one image can belong to several categories simultaneously. While Dorothea Lange has stated that every portrait is also the photographer's "self-portrait", Minor White considers photographs of landscapes as the photographers "inner landscapes".<sup>7</sup> According to these examples, one would argue that categorising an artwork as a self-portrait is dependent upon its context.

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<sup>1</sup> Lingwood, J. *Staging the Self*. Plymouth: Plymouth Arts Centre, 1986, p. 9

<sup>2</sup> Bright, S. *Art Photography Now*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2005, p. 21

<sup>3</sup> Bright, 2005, p. 43

<sup>4</sup> Armstrong, C. Zegher, C. *Women artists at the Millennium*, October Books, 2006, p. 359-361

<sup>5</sup> Joost de Bloois, *On Autohagiography: Sam Taylor-Wood's Self Portrait as a Tree*, Image & Narrative, [Online] <http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/autofiction2/debloois.html>

<sup>6</sup> Bright, S. *Auto Focus: The Self-Portraiture in Contemporary Photography*, The Monacelli Press, 2010

<sup>7</sup> Sontag, S. *On Photography*, Penguin Books, 1977, p. 116

When moving forward to the present time, the visual media people are exposed to includes social media: millions of people are using different social media platforms to either upload content, to look other people's posts, or both – every single day.<sup>8</sup> The 'like', 'share' and 'comment' options on social media platforms make it possible to react, get immediate feedback and even discuss about the images, and uploading them on those platforms can be seen as social interaction.<sup>9</sup> Nowadays, the lines between public and private and professional versus amateurism are difficult to draw.<sup>10</sup> According to social media, the debate whether 'selfie' is a self-portrait proves that the genre is constantly evolving and makes self-portraiture a relevant and interesting genre to research.<sup>11</sup>

In his book *The Self-Aware Image - An Insight into Early Modern Metapainting*, Viktor Stoichita analyses forms of self-representation in art, nominating some of them as self-projections. Dividing the contextual self-projections into four different groups, "the textualized author, the disguised author, the author-visitor, and the author in the embedded selfportrait"<sup>12</sup>, Stoichita has taken into account the significance of the context and authorship. Considering the visual examples of this thesis, the most interesting one would be the 'disguised author', as the 'textualized author' refers to a very precise category, and in the two others, an artist is representing themselves either

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<sup>8</sup> Hedberg, H. Knape, G. Martinsson, T. Wolthers, L. *Auto: Self-Presentation and Digital Photography*, Photography at Valand Academy, University of Gothenburg, 2014 p. 7

<sup>9</sup> Hedberg, Knape, Martinsson, Wolthers, 2014, p. 87

<sup>10</sup> Hedberg, Knape, Martinsson, Wolthers, 2014, p. 17

<sup>11</sup> Hedberg, Knape, Martinsson, Wolthers, 2014, p. 8 / San Jose Museum of Art, *This Is Not a Selfie* [Online] <https://sjmusart.org/exhibition/not-selfie-photographic-self-portraits-audrey-and-sydney-irmas-collection>

<sup>12</sup> Stoichita, V. *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Metapainting*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 231-232

more accurately and obviously in the scene – thus, visiting in it – or representing oneself as a representation, a painting within the painting.<sup>13</sup>

‘The disguised author’ can be seen ‘role-playing’ in a painting. These kinds of self-projections share some common features, for example, the person looking straight at the spectator and the features of the face being identifiable. According to Stoichita, this role-playing has mainly taken place in the Early Middle Ages and the Renaissance.<sup>14</sup> Despite that, it could be argued that the similar method is used in contemporary photographic art with some alterations, in the form of masquerade. Stoichita also importantly points out that representing oneself like this in a painting does not make it autobiographical<sup>15</sup>, although it requires self-awareness<sup>16</sup>, which is also the case with contemporary art.

In the book *Staging the Self: Self-Portrait Photography 1840s-1980s*, Lingwood addresses the other significant point: while a self-portrait is often considered as a truthful, somewhat objective representation of the artist,<sup>17</sup> it is questionable if an artist really captures oneself in a picture. Jean-Francois Chevrier argues that “every self-portrait is inevitably, by its very own nature, a doubling, an image of the other”, and supports his argument by suggesting that every person is doubled because of their two needs; to recognize oneself and to be recognised by others.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Stoichita, 1997, p. 233–234

<sup>14</sup> Stoichita, 1997, p. 233

<sup>15</sup> Stoichita, 1997, p. 233

<sup>16</sup> Stoichita, 1997, p. 236

<sup>17</sup> Lingwood, 1986, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Lingwood, 1986, p. 11. *The image of the other*, essay by Chevrier

Although not straight-forward, the concepts of self-projection and splitting the self for a picture, can be considered when interpreting photographic art works. Susan Butler compares a camera to “an instrument of self-projection” in her essay *So How Do I Look? Women Before and Behind the Camera*. According to her, the concept of ‘otherness’ changes, when a female photographer executes her own self-portrait. As women have been considered to be objects of the male gaze, “the implications of this relation through the camera of self to self and to the outside world are redoubled” when considering female self-portraiture.<sup>19</sup> Butler uses Cindy Sherman’s work as an example of purposely constructing multiple identities in photographs, claiming that Sherman is being all the characters she has created while being none of them.<sup>20</sup>

During her long career, Sherman has executed multiple series and modelled for herself in all of them, transforming into different characters by masquerade. Her works have been exhibited internationally, including Finland, and they have been mentioned and analysed in many publications and articles, often in relation to self-portraiture.<sup>21</sup>

Despite this, her status as a self-portraitist is controversial, as Sherman herself has stated that her works are not self-portraits. According to her, they cannot be, as she is not representing herself, but characters that are completely fictional.<sup>22</sup> However, as Sherman is representing those characters, the topic has been an interesting debate that has stimulated discussion throughout Sherman’s career. Based on the importance of masquerade in Sherman’s works, and the writings of Stoichita, her works could be

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<sup>19</sup> Lingwood, 1986, p.51, *So How Do I Look? Women Before and Behind the Camera* essay by Butler

<sup>20</sup> Lingwood, 1986, p. 55

<sup>21</sup> For example: Bright, S, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Morris, C. *Cindy Sherman - the Essential*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. New York, 1999, p. 12

considered to represent a form of self-projections, more specifically classified into the category of 'the disguised author'.

Sherman's largest and best-known body of work is *Untitled Film Stills*, in which she represents herself as different fictional characters<sup>23</sup>, all familiar from the films of 1950s and 1960s.<sup>24</sup> Often captured in different domestic environments, Sherman is surrounded by household objects and/or furniture, sometimes in the middle of a - assumed – domestic chore. As if being interrupted from doing something, she is looking out of the picture, creating a feeling of someone else's presence; someone who is in the same room, looking at her.<sup>25</sup>

While creating characters that are representing traditional associations of femininity, the photographs can also be read from a feminist viewpoint, interpreting the way characters are posing – as of being an object of someone's gaze. By creating her own, paradigm within self-portraiture, while questioning the definition of a self-portrait, Sherman is an interesting artist on the contemporary art field, offering many perspectives from which to observe her works. In this thesis I will focus on Sherman's effect on female contemporary photography in Finland, arguing that despite the geographical aspects, Sherman's genre of self-portraiture within self-portraiture can be seen in female self-portraits in Finland.

Sherman's famous film stills were executed in the end of 1970s, less than ten years after Linda Nochlin asked her famous question: 'Why Have There Been No Great

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<sup>23</sup> Frigeri, F. *Women Artists*, Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2019, p. 146–149.

<sup>24</sup> Cruz, A. Smith, E. Jones, A. *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective*, Thames & Hudson, 1997, p. 6

<sup>25</sup> Cruz, Smith, Jones, 1997, p. 3



Women Artists?’ in her article of 1971. In her provocatively titled text Nochlin states that trying to list successful female artists from the past is not the answer to this question, nor is suggesting that art made by females differs as ‘feminine’ from art made by men<sup>26</sup>, but the reason is institutional: women did not have the same possibilities than men did, thus achieving the same ‘greatness’ in the field of art was not possible to females.<sup>27</sup> In art history this article has been seen as the first essential feminist intervention.<sup>28</sup> Although the starting point of feminism was inequality that women were experiencing, it is a rather new and constantly developing approach, and feminists have and have had different goals within it.<sup>29</sup>

As it is known in art history today, feminism has its roots in the Women’s Movement that took place in the 1960s and 1970s, although women had been demanding equality long before that. In Finland, the first big feminist achievement was equal right to vote, which was achieved in 1906. Naisasialiitto Unioni ry (The Feminist Association Union) was established in 1892, and still exists today, publishing a feminist magazine and aspiring to help women with, for example, legal matters.<sup>30</sup> The Women’s Movement and its radical ideas came to Finland from the USA, affecting the organisations focusing on women’s rights and ending up encouraging women to form new feminist groups and organisations.<sup>31</sup> Despite the earlier mention of feminists having different goals within feminism, finding, revealing, and analysing patriarchal

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<sup>26</sup> Reilly, M. Linda Nochlin: *Why There Have Been No Great Women Artist from the book Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader*, Thames & Hudson, 2015, p. 43–44

<sup>27</sup> Reilly, Nochlin, 2015, p. 67

<sup>28</sup> Hatt, M. Klöck, C. *Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods*, Manchester University Press, 2006p. 150

<sup>29</sup> Hatt, Klöck, 2006, p.152–153

<sup>30</sup> The Feminist Association Union websites: About Us in English [Online] <https://naisunioni.fi/the-feminist-association-unioni/>

<sup>31</sup> Hagner, M. Försti, T. *Suffragettien sisaret*, Naisasialiitto Suomessa RY, Satakunnan painotuote, Kokemäki, 2006 p. 138, 150.

and sexist models of society that oppress women can be seen as a common aim and it extends to both, public and private spheres,<sup>32</sup> in Finland as well as in the USA.

According to Griselda Pollock, femininity is defining the features that woman as a term implies.<sup>33</sup> In her book *Vision and Difference*, Pollock repeatedly points out how associations of femininity and masculinity have created boundaries between two genders. Firstly, metaphorically, as the terms 'feminine and 'masculine' already defined opposite things. Men and women have had different expectations of how they should behave, and men dominated the public sphere when private, domestic places were seen as spaces for females.<sup>34</sup> In her book, Pollock claims that one of feminism's aims is to challenge dominating boundaries between masculinity and femininity, thus public and private.<sup>35</sup>

While men and women have traditionally been seen differently in society, Sherry B. Ortner suggests in her essay, *Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture*, that it could be based on an idea that women have been seen as beings closer to nature, while men are representing culture.<sup>36</sup> Ortner claims that, for example, menstruation and pregnancy make women "more enslaved to the species" compared to men<sup>37</sup> and the private, domestic sphere seen as a place for women highlights the associations of women being closer to nature than men.<sup>38</sup> This could be supported by Susan Tallman's article, *On Domesticity*, in which she writes that artworks related to domesticity are

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<sup>32</sup> Hatt, Klouk, 2006, p. 146

<sup>33</sup> Pollock, G. *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art*, Routledge, 1988, p. xvii

<sup>34</sup> Pollock, 1988, p. 98

<sup>35</sup> Pollock, 1988, p. 120, 243

<sup>36</sup> Ortner, S.B. *Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture*, *Feminist Studies*, Inc. Vol. 1, No. 2, 1972, p. 12

<sup>37</sup> Ortner, 1972, p. 13

<sup>38</sup> Ortner, 1972, p. 17–18

usually seen “small and tame” compared to others and states that the word domesticity is in itself “condescending”.<sup>39</sup>

As pointed out earlier, domestic themes, environments and objects can be seen in many female photographers’ works, including self-portraits. When domesticity and the private sphere of home have been associated with femininity, feminists have been working to challenge these stereotypes. In contemporary art it makes domesticity an interesting concept, a sphere in which femininity and feminism collide. When researching the popularity of domestic themes in self-portraiture, there are several theories why many female artists are picturing themselves in spaces or with items considered to be domestic.

*Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, is scrutinising how girls and women were represented in the mass media in 1940-1990. The book focusses on the magazines, television shows and films produced and published in America, but many of them have been shown and sold in other countries as well, including in Finland. Susan J. Douglas points to how the mass media reacted to different real-life events and tried to control people’s – especially womens’ – behaviour through represented characters. She gives multiple examples throughout the book, starting from the campaign which purpose was to encourage women to work outside of home during the war in 1943<sup>40</sup> and the backlash that occurred just a few years later, in 1946.<sup>41</sup> From representing ‘glamorous’ when working in previously considered as

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<sup>39</sup> Tallman, S. *On Domesticity*, Art in Print, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2014, p. 2

<sup>40</sup> Douglas, S. *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, Times Books, 1998, p. 46

<sup>41</sup> Douglas. 1998, p. 47

'men's jobs'<sup>42</sup>, women went to being stigmatised as 'not healthy' if they wanted to work outside of home.<sup>43</sup>

The messages the mass media offered to females were mixed, not just when it came to working, but also how girls should behave. Douglas writes that "the mass media reinforced the importance of both individualism and conformity, of being more like boys yet still very much a girl [...]"<sup>44</sup> and lists good features of a girl: "[...] passive and active, outspoken and quiet, selfish and selfless, thrifty and profligate, daring and scared [...]"<sup>45</sup>, thus being a girl meant adopting different roles and learning when to play them. Based on this, Douglas argues that "femininity is a masquerade".<sup>46</sup> This incoherence in the mass media's messages to girls and women which led to females adopting and playing multiple roles in their lives can be seen, for example, in Sherman's work.

According to Marsha Meskimmon in her book *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century*, self-portraiture makes the artist its subject and object. That has given a significant opportunity to female artists, as women have been traditionally seen just as objects in art.<sup>47</sup> As Pollock pointed out, masculinity represents the features of the norm, and therefore females were automatically seen as an opposite<sup>48</sup> and femininity included negative connotations. Self-portraiture can be stated to give women power to affect the way they have been represented and the

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<sup>42</sup> Douglas. 1998, p. 46

<sup>43</sup> Douglas. 1998, p. 48

<sup>44</sup> Douglas. 1998, p. 121

<sup>45</sup> Douglas. 1998, p. 18

<sup>46</sup> Douglas. 1998, p. 111

<sup>47</sup> Meskimmon, M. *Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century*, Scarlet Press, 1996, p. 14

<sup>48</sup> Meskimmon, 1996, p. 102

freedom to represent themselves in different roles, and address themes that are important to them.

Meskimmon states, that one reason for females using domestic themes and environments in their self-portraits is home, which represents a familiar place, something they are engaged with.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, she suggests, that drawing attention to the traditional, oppressing stereotypes might be the reason for popularity of domestic themes.<sup>50</sup> Domesticity can be considered as a political question as domestic chores women were expected to do, did give them hardly any acknowledgement, although being responsible for most of the chores at home made it hard to get a career outside of the domestic sphere either.<sup>51</sup> While Pollock also claims, that the reason for representing domesticity in contemporary art could be an attempt to emphasise these aspects, she also points out, that often, however mistakenly, a woman's artwork is considered to represent women as whole<sup>52</sup>, which is important to keep in mind when analysing art produced by women.

*Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media* includes several essays, focusing on definitions of femininity in visual art and how these traditional patterns can be challenged or changed.<sup>53</sup> The book is bringing the previous suggestions together, forming an idea about artists needing to use 'familiar visual language' in their works to draw attention to and question traditional structures.<sup>54</sup> If simplified, that

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<sup>49</sup> Meskimmon, 1996, p. 74

<sup>50</sup> Meskimmon, 1996, p. 162

<sup>51</sup> Meskimmon, 1996, p. 161

<sup>52</sup> Pollock, 1988, p. 40

<sup>53</sup> Betterton, R. *Looking on: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media*, Pandora Press, 1987, p.1

<sup>54</sup> Betterton, 1987, p.209

would mean that female contemporary artists are highlighting, and thereby challenging stereotypes and expectations directed towards and associated with females and femininity. According to Rosemary Betterton, questioning of traditional structures should be destroyed to make composing new identities possible for women, has guided female artists trying to form a new language through which express themselves.<sup>55</sup> Thus, it could be argued that by using domestic aspects in their works, artists are aspiring to create a new language through it.

Three Finnish female artists, Aino Kannisto, Elina Brotherus and Iiu Susiraja are all working with contemporary photography and focusing on self-portraiture. While domestic settings, spaces and objects are in an important role in their works, they all have different ways of using them. Kannisto, similarly to Sherman, is creating fictional scenes and representing characters within them, creating a cinematic impression in her self-portraits. Brotherus has executed several autobiographical series, picturing different events happened in her life, and has also made multiple series in which she is using her body as a 'sign' in its surroundings.<sup>56</sup> While domesticity in Kannisto's and Brotherus' images is focused on the spaces, home-like settings and familiar rooms of every house, the main thing in Susiraja's works are the objects used. By using mundane items, found in every home in her weird performances,<sup>57</sup> Susiraja offers a new perspective from which to observe domesticity. As their works can also be read from a feminist viewpoint, they are sharing the same position of combining feminine and feminist as Sherman in her work.

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<sup>55</sup> Betterton, 1987, p.209

<sup>56</sup> Brotherus' websites – *Artist and her Model* [Online]  
<http://www.elinabrotherus.com/photography#/artist-and-her-model/>

<sup>57</sup> Susiraja, I. *Kuivakka Ilo / Dry Joy*, Kustannusosakeyhtiö Parvs & Nykyaiteen museo Kiasma – Kansallisgalleria – Exhibition catalogue, 2019, p. 12, 51

As Sherman's works, especially *Untitled Film Stills*, are forming the baseline for the visual analysis, I will first discuss about the development of her paradigm, aiming to point out how she possibly has affected the genre of self-portraiture. Theoretical research of her images will focus on the question of the definition of a self-portrait, while visual research focuses on domesticity. I will then analyse Kannisto's, Brotherus' and Susiraja's works and compare them to Sherman's, focusing on the domestic aspects in the images. To be able to point out various ways of using self-portraiture and domesticity in a contemporary art frame, I have chosen artists and works that visually and ideally differs from each other, while still having common links, most important of which is domesticity in its various forms and their openness to feminist readings.

While Sherman's photographs have often been considered as self-portraits, she has stated that they are not ones, making categorising her works challenging. As mentioned before, Stoichita's idea of self-projections, and especially the idea of the disguised author, could offer a possible way to classify Sherman's art and make clear that her works do not represent the tradition of self-portraits, but their own paradigm. As my main argument is that this paradigm has significantly affected and inspired other contemporary artists, I will discuss about similarities and differences between Sherman's and the Finnish artists' works in detail. The case studies of Kannisto's, Brotherus' and Susiraja's are forming the main body of the thesis, expressing elements of Sherman's self-reflexive paradigm, and thus, what could be considered as the modern idea of Stoichita's self-projections. Domesticity being a common link between all the artists and their works, I am also interested in how domesticity is addressed in

Finnish contemporary art from a female perspective and what kind of visual discourse these images are creating about women and female artists in Finland.



## Chapter 1: Cindy Sherman

Cindy Sherman is an American contemporary artist, known for her photographs in which she is representing different fictional characters that she has created herself.<sup>58</sup> During her long career, she has produced multiple photographic series that all have elements of self-portraiture, role-playing and / or masquerade. Interestingly she has claimed not to be a photographer, but an artist using photography as a medium, and stated that her work is not about her, nor to be categorised as self-portraits.<sup>59</sup> In the centre of her works are different stereotypes in the society, especially the ones the mass media has made familiar and recognisable. Being part of the first generation growing up with televisions, the mass media has affected her from the childhood.<sup>60</sup>

Sherman has explored cinema, television, magazines, and fashion, and especially focused on the image these different mass media formats have created of women. To keep her work fresh and interesting, she continues to develop and change the themes, such as fairy tales, horror, and disaster, which have giving her an opportunity to work in a more surreal way. In later work, she has returned to present the stereotypes, broaden the type of characters to, *inter alia*, history paintings. To transform into each role, Sherman dresses up in different clothes, wigs, and props, and alters her figures to match the character with make-up and masks.<sup>61</sup> One thing always recurs: being simultaneously an artist and her own model.

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<sup>58</sup> Cruz, Jones, Smith, 1997, p.1

<sup>59</sup> Morris, 1999, p. 12

<sup>60</sup> Respini, E. *Cindy Sherman*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2012, p. 14

<sup>61</sup> Moorhouse, P. *Cindy Sherman*, Phaidon Press Limited, London, 2014, p.8

## Development of Sherman's practice

*Untitled Film Stills* is both best known and largest series Sherman has produced during her career, and it consists of 69 black-and-white photographs executed between 1977 and 1980. In every picture Sherman represents herself as stereotypical fictional female characters of 1950s and 1960s B-movies, but precisely using stereotypes from films of this era, not copying any scenes of existing films nor characters.<sup>62</sup> Most of the images are picturing a different actress each time, but a few of them are forming a small group of images of the same actress, representing her at different points in her career.<sup>63</sup> As the title of the series proposes, all the photographs have been titled untitled.<sup>64</sup> That is, according to Sherman, to give the viewer the possibility of creating their own story for each of the represented characters, and not have to explain them too much. Thus, every viewer constructs a unique narrative based on their own ideologies and experiences.<sup>65</sup>

Creating characters and modelling for herself were not new things for Sherman when she started her world-famous series. Before creating the *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman explored masquerade and self-portraiture, constructing several smaller series in which different characters were representing types of people that were familiar from her everyday life. *Untitled #479* (1975) is a series of 23 photographs in which Sherman has represented her alternation to a character step by step, adding more make-up and props in each of the images.<sup>66</sup> *Untitled A-E* (1975) consists of five black-an-white

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<sup>62</sup> Morris, 1999, p. 38.

<sup>63</sup> Morris, 1999, p. 40

<sup>64</sup> Morris, 1999, p. 54.

<sup>65</sup> Morris, 1999, p. 38

<sup>66</sup> Moorhouse, 2014, p. 12.

headshots, picturing a different character in each of them.<sup>67</sup> Sherman has altered her own features by using make-up and props, such as hats, but overdoing it, making the result look obviously fake.

*The bus riders* (1976) represented fictional passengers, travelling on the bus, which in the images is just a chair placed in front of a wall. Wearing different costumes and make-ups, and picturing herself with different props, mimicking positions, and manners she has seen in real life when observing people on the bus<sup>68</sup>, Sherman created a perceptive selection of figures of the society. The idea of creating characters around the specific narrative continued with *Murder mystery* images, which were photographed in front of the same wall, representing the same idea - playing with stereotypes. The composed narrative, a murder, creates a more dramatic situation around the characters, and thus, allowed Sherman to create more dramatic characters.

Compared to the bus rider images, in which the characters were rather passively sitting on the imaginary bus, this time most of the characters are standing, which has given Sherman more possibilities when representing the characters' body language. Also, the sizes and types of props vary, for example, one of the women characters is lying on a deck chair (*Untitled #385*, 1976).<sup>69</sup> The characters are not portrayed in the same space or time story-wise, and some of the characters are even communicating with each other<sup>70</sup>. Typically to Sherman, she is not revealing the denouement, but leaves that to the viewer to decide. Murder mysteries being a famous topic of films

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<sup>67</sup> Moorhouse, 2014, p. 16.

<sup>68</sup> Moorhouse, 2014, p. 17.

<sup>69</sup> Moorhouse, 2014, p. 26

<sup>70</sup> Moorhouse, 2014, p. 17.

and books, it could be argued that Sherman was drawing her inspiration from the popular culture and mass media before *Untitled Film Stills*, the murder mystery series being an early attempt to explore these fields.

In these images the settings are simple, and the main point is the characters, when in *Untitled Film Stills* the surroundings of the characters are much more considered. The shutter release cable is visible in the images, revealing that the artist and the model are the same person, breaking the illusion and the fourth wall. These images are also titled untitled, and the names such as 'bus riders' and 'murder mystery' are being given to them later on, and are the ones public knows them of, *Untitled Film Stills* being the first and only series Sherman herself officially titled.<sup>71</sup> However, the murder mystery images have short description of the characters in the brackets, giving hints to the viewer about their identity, such as "the actress daydreaming", "the son at funeral" and "the dashing leading man in character".<sup>72</sup> It is also noticeable that Sherman has pictured several male characters in both bus riders and murder mystery images, and one in *Untitled A-E*. In the following series she is focusing mainly on female characters or leaving their gender unknown by using androgynous features and accessories. Later in her career, for example, in *History Portraits*, she has represented herself again in different male roles.

After working with *Untitled Film Stills* for three years, Sherman completed the series, feeling that she had run out of clichés and therefore started to repeat herself.<sup>73</sup> After, she has worked with, *inter alia*, *Rear Screen Projections*, *Centerfolds*, *Fashion*, *Horror*

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<sup>71</sup> Morris, 1999, p. 54

<sup>72</sup> Moorhouse, 2014, p. 26-27.

<sup>73</sup> Cruz, Jones, Smith, 1997, p. 4.

*Stories, Porn and History Portraits*. While *Untitled Film Stills* was mimicking the atmosphere of old movies, *Rear Screen Projections* focused on tv-series. The biggest change between the two series was probably Sherman's decision to switch black-and-white to colour, and that way giving a more modern look to the photographs.<sup>74</sup> When some of the *Untitled Film Stills* were taken in location and with the help of Sherman's friends and family,<sup>75</sup> *Rear Screen Projections* were all photographed in a studio, where Sherman was able to work alone and create the locations herself by projecting them onto a wall with a projector. When the style got more modern so did the characters - they are pictured outside of domestic sphere, spending time in the city and looking more independent.<sup>76</sup>

Next Sherman abandoned television as a source of inspiration and started to explore the styles typical for magazines. Especially she was interested in centerfolds, that are familiar from erotic magazines. In this series the voyeuristic nature of Sherman's works is highlighted, as the changed picture format brought different challenges. To be able to fit the whole character within the frame, she often needed to lie down, and the character was pictured above.<sup>77</sup> That led to more close-up shots, in which the background wasn't playing that important role anymore. When the narrative of the images was more dependent on the appearance of the characters, Sherman created more dramatic atmospheres with strong colours and contrasts. While some of the women in *Untitled Films Stills* seemed to be interacting with an unknown and -seen character, in *Centerfolds* the women are being more passive, like lost in thought. Their

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<sup>74</sup> Cruz, Jones, Smith, 1997, p. 5.

<sup>75</sup> Moorhouse, 2014, p. 40.

<sup>76</sup> Cruz, Jones, Smith, 1997, p. 5.

<sup>77</sup> Moorhouse, 2014, p. 41.

positions lying on the floor or bed below the viewer make them appear vulnerable, especially when comparing to the independent-looking women pictured in the previous series, *Rear Screen Projections*.

The following series was focusing on fashion photography and appeared as an attempt to mock marketing and the fashion industry.<sup>78</sup> Glamour that is usually associated with fashion world cannot be seen in Sherman's images that represent models as "goofy, hysterical, angry, and slightly mad".<sup>79</sup> After this, she abandoned reality for a while and focused on fairy tales and horror, which gave her an opportunity to work in a more surreal way.<sup>80</sup> While the certain type of darkness can be seen in the fashion photographs of Sherman, her *Fairy Tales* were not innocent and sweet in a sense that the title would suggest. Dimensions of the features of the characters seem distorted, as in *Untitled #150* (1985) a huge, androgynous-looking character appears in the foreground of the image, a giant tongue protruding from their mouth as they are licking their fingers. The tiny people pictured in the background are highlighting the character's unrealistic size. When working with the series, Sherman explored different types of props that could be used to alter the features of the characters and thus develop the ways the characters are pictured. She did not represent herself naked but due to the new props she has discovered, for example, body parts of dolls, she was able to picture naked characters. In later series Sherman took the idea of using dolls further, and created a series that focused on different masks, capturing them from so close that the background – and sometimes even the mask as a whole – is not seen.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Moorhouse, 2014, p. 44.

<sup>79</sup> Respini, 2012, p. 32

<sup>80</sup> Cruz, Jones, Smith, 1997, p. 9.

<sup>81</sup> Moorhouse, 2014, p. 124.

Sherman's exploration developed to the point in which her characters are not represented in the central position in the image and the viewer is not necessarily spotting them immediately. In *Untitled #175* (1987), the human figure is just a reflection on the lens of sunglasses, lying on the ground in the middle of a mess, consisting of mainly food waste. The appalling setting is resembling of a disturbed still life. In *Untitled #168* (1987), the artist presence in the scene has been represented by her clothes that are lying on the floor, in a way that suggest the artist's sudden disappearance.<sup>82</sup>

*History Portraits* resembled the *Untitled Films Stills* as they also drew the inspiration from the specific source but mainly represented stereotypes instead of copying already existing works. However, Sherman made a few exceptions, one being *Untitled #224* (1990) in which she has made an exact re-creation of Caravaggio's famous painting, *Sick Bacchus*. Like in the original painting, Sherman's character is wearing a white toga, holding a bunch of grapes in their hand, leaning their elbow in the table while looking towards the viewer. She has even drawn the lines of the muscles in her character's arms and back to achieve the similar appearance to Caravaggio. According to a curatorial assistant Lucy Gallun of the Modern Art Museum of New York, the image is significant as "it's a female artist in the role of a male artist in the role of the Roman god of wine".<sup>83</sup> Considering the traditions in the society and the art world, this kind of representation is notable, as it is juxtaposing not only a woman and a man, but also a woman and god.

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<sup>82</sup> Moorhouse, 2014, p. 90.

<sup>83</sup> Gallun, L. Cindy Sherman. *Untitled #244*. 1990. The Museum of Modern Art, New York [Online] <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/261/3365>

## Domesticity and Stereotypical Female Roles

Domesticity within female contemporary photography being one of the main themes of this thesis, *Untitled Film Stills* is Sherman's most suitable series to observe. It is but iconic body of work of hers, the fictional characters of the series are always women<sup>84</sup> and often pictured in locations that are mostly indoors and related to domesticity. These locations are familiar spaces from every home, such as kitchen, bathroom, bedroom. Some objects in the pictures are also pointing out to stereotypic domestic chores, like washing dishes or grocery shopping. Interestingly, in the most images the characters are not actually *doing* anything but merely posing beside these objects in the specific rooms. Another interesting aspect is the question whether Sherman's works are self-portraits or not, and the public's need to find 'the real Cindy' amongst of all the represented characters.<sup>85</sup> As Sherman physically appears in front of the camera, it could be argued that her works are self-portraits in some sense. These debates about self and identity, and different interpretations about Sherman's work are offering many levels from which to observe and analyse her art works.

In *Untitled Film Still #3* (1977) [Fig. 1.], a woman is standing in front of a kitchen sink, leaning on it with her other hand, while the other is located on her stomach. Her head is turned to her left to look at something or someone outside of the image. The lively look on her face could be a hint of an interactive situation between the woman and someone else. She is not smiling, and her facial expression appears to be quite neutral, although serious. Thus, it is not revealing much about the nature of the possible

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<sup>84</sup> Bronfen, E. *Cindy Sherman: Photographic Work, 1975-1995*, Schirmer/Mosel, 2002, p.7

<sup>85</sup> Cruz, Jones, Smith, 1997, p. 7



interaction to the viewer. While the atmosphere of the image is expectant – there is a sense of drama - the composition of the image and the placement of the camera appear to be atypical; it looks like the camera would have been placed on the kitchen side amongst with the other objects on it, causing a tight cropping. The part of the woman's tilted head has been cropped out of the image, same than her other eyebrow. The random placements of the objects on the side are making the photograph look convincing, like picturing an actual everyday life situation. The viewer is able to recognise some of the objects, despite the tight cropping and the shallow depth of field: a bottle of dishwashing liquid, a drying rack, a mug, a handle of a pot or a pan. All these objects can be seen as domestic and are related to washing dishes, which the woman posing beside the sink in front of the mentioned objects is emphasising. In addition, the apron the woman is wearing, could be associated with domestic chores, and especially the ones related to kitchen. The impression of washing dishes creates a contrary with the character's body language and passivity – she is not doing anything but merely standing by the sink. The passive way the character has been pictured could be seen to represent the traditional way of seeing and looking at women, as objects of men's gaze, and the look on the woman's face reveals her being aware that she is being looked at.

In the other photograph, *Untitled Film Still #10*, (1978) [Fig. 2.], the female character has crouched to get the groceries that are lying on the floor along with a ruptured paper bag. A jacket on her shoulders suggests that she has been outside and just returned home. She is holding a packet of eggs in her hand, and again, stopped in the middle of the movement and turned her head to look at something or someone outside of the image, this time above her. The angle from which the photograph has

been taken is highlighting the composition: the image has been taken from above, thus the viewer is looking at her from that angle as well. This can be seen as a representation of the power relations between the woman and the assumed other person in the space. As in the previous example, the photograph has been cropped tightly, and not showing a lot of the character's surroundings to the viewer. However, the stove behind her together with the groceries would suggest that the characters has been represented in the kitchen. There is also a feeling of drama present in the photograph, a sense that something is about to happen, making the viewer look for possible clues.

Film stills' idea in the movie industry is to get the viewer's attention and make them interested in the film without revealing too much about the plot.<sup>86</sup> The same idea can be seen in Sherman's film stills as well: they are creating a sense of drama, suggesting that something is about to happen. This could be based on the idea, that there must be something worth of stopping the time and capturing the moment, thus the characters or situations are not looking that dramatic: it is the carefully chosen glimpse that the audience is able to see and what interests them. It has left to the viewer to construct the narrative based on the things they see in the film still – or any of Sherman's images as they are all untitled and represented without explanations. Another interesting aspect about film stills is that they were quite cheap and not considered as art, which was an element Sherman also wanted to copy – she 'did not want them to look like art.'<sup>87</sup> That might be one reason why Sherman purposely made

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<sup>86</sup> Cruz, Jones, Smith, 1997, p. 4.

<sup>87</sup> Respini, 2012, p. 21-22

some of the images look technically poor<sup>88</sup>, some of them are grainy, some out of focus.

The message behind her images has been widely discussed by theorists, whether her works are about exploring one's identity or a statement about women's role in the society. Some have been trying to identify which photograph is representing the 'real Cindy'.<sup>89</sup> Sherman herself has stated that her photographs are not exploring her own identity as she is not representing herself, thus they are not self-portraits.<sup>90</sup> Despite many feminist interpretations of her photographs, she has also denied that her works would be feminist.<sup>91</sup> However, it has also been brought up that even though Sherman as an artist does not think that her works connected to feminism, analysers cannot ignore the time during which the works were made, and how that potentially affected them<sup>92</sup> and the fact that most of the represented characters are women – all of them in many of the series - making the gender a notable element.<sup>93</sup>

Rather than exploring the identity and self of Cindy Sherman, Amada Cruz, the director and CEO of Seattle Art Museum, states that the photographs are representing 'Everywoman', recognisable from the mass media and familiar from the society.<sup>94</sup> In her essay *Will the Real Cindy Sherman Please Stand Up?* Eva Respini states that 'there is no *real* Cindy Sherman, only infinite characters who reflect the countless mediated

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<sup>88</sup> Respini, 2012, p. 20

<sup>89</sup> Cruz, Jones, Smith, 1997, p. 7

<sup>90</sup> Morris, 1999, p. 12

<sup>91</sup> Moorhouse, 2014, p. 10.

<sup>92</sup> Cruz, Jones, Smith, 1997, p. 48.

<sup>93</sup> Respini, 2012, p. 29.

<sup>94</sup> Cruz, Jones, Smith, 1997, p. 7.

images that bombard us daily.<sup>95</sup> This turns the discussion towards the spectator of the images and their experience as Respini adds:

“Her pictures remind us about our own complicated relationship to identity and representation, and how the archive of images we carry in our collective imagination informs our vision of the world, and ultimately our view of ourselves.”<sup>96</sup>

In a series of three tightly cropped images, *Untitled #97, #98 and #99* (1980) [Fig. 3-5], also known as the pink robe images, a woman wearing just a pink bathrobe is sat down and looking towards the camera. She is looking very natural compared to Sherman’s earlier works, she has no make-up, thus her features have not been exaggerated in any way. The lighting is dramatic, creating a notable contrast with the character’s natural look. The background appears to be almost pitch-black, just some shapes are visible, raising questions about the location. The lighting, the model’s positions and gaze slightly vary between the three images, changing the atmosphere and possible interpretations each time.

In the first one the lighting is quite soft and even, leaving just the woman’s right side in the shadow, and giving her skin a reddish tone. She is looking towards the camera but fixed her eyes slightly above the lens, leaning her cheek on the back of her hand, looking bored, almost like pouting. The bathrobe is placed over her like a blanket, and she is holding it with her other hand, like preventing it from falling off. Her bare legs are both showing from under the robe, which flows between her legs and out of the frame. Due to the tight cropping, a part of her head, her left arm and elbow, most of her left leg and her right foot have all been cropped out of the image. Technically the

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<sup>95</sup> Respini, 2012, p. 50

<sup>96</sup> Respini, 2012, p. 50

photograph seems to be focused on her upper body; her elbow that is pointing straight towards the viewer, her hand holding the bathrobe and the fabric covering her upper chest. Consequently, the woman's face appears to be slightly unfocused, although, not blurry. The atmosphere is expectant, questioning what she might be waiting for. There is also a sexual overtone present due to her position her legs apart and only the bathrobe covering her body.

In the second one the light seems to be harsher, turned towards the model, but like through something, creating a pattern of shadows on her. The light is much more uneven, compared to the previous image, and the warm, red tone is visible just on the side of her face and neck. Hitting properly just the upper part of her face and her right shoulder, the lighting leaves most of the image dim and shadowy. This makes her eyes stand out and they are immediately drawing the viewer's attention to them. She is looking directly at the viewer, meeting their gaze. Her short, blond hair appears to be messy, strands pointing to different directions, while she is having a serious, tired look on her face. The image is not as soft as the other two, but completely in focus. Again, a part of her head has been cropped out, same than part of her legs. This time her position is more neutral, her legs are both bend and together, while all her limbs are under the bathrobe. Due to this position her body language seems to be more relaxed. However, her eyes look rather suspicious, like would be observing the viewer. This makes the atmosphere appear to be reserved. The sexual overtone is not as obvious than in the first image; just her bare shoulder and ankle are suggesting that she might be naked underneath the bathrobe.

The last image seems to be combining elements from the first two. The lighting is creating even a greater contrast between the highlights and shadows: the side of the woman's head, her other shoulder and part of her arm are not visible at all but merging into the black background. While her hair looked neat in the first image, and messy in the second one, this time the darkness has swallowed it as well. Similar to the first image, the woman is looking towards the camera but avoiding the lens. Her facial expression appears to be serious, almost stern. The image is not completely in focus, the impression looks like the camera would have moved slightly just at the moment of taking the picture. The woman's features, especially eyes look hazy, unfocused. She is covering herself with the bathrobe excluding her arms, the other one holds the robe against her chest like in the first image, and the other is on her lap. The atmosphere is more mysterious due to the lighting and the background; there is just a flash of green colour and a thin metal bar visible in the complete darkness. The situation appears to be more dramatic. However, the sexual overtone is gone, nothing in the image suggests that the woman could be naked under the bathrobe. Also, the bathrobe is getting harder to identify in the lack of light, and without a context, it could be mistaken with a blanket.

Some theorists have suggested that we see the 'real Cindy' in these images, arguing that the natural look represents her own self after removing all the make-up and props used to create other identities. However, Sherman herself responded that she had a porn model having a break between photoshoots in mind when she executed the images in question.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Morris, 1999, p. 64.

Another image that has widely believed to reveal something about Sherman's own identity is from *Clowns* series (2003-2004). During this project, Sherman explored a character whose whole being is based on performing<sup>98</sup> by creating multiple different clown characters with different personalities. While she represented several different clown characters, and in some of the images even duplicated the number of clowns by photoshop, in *Untitled #413* (2003) [Fig. 6.], an anxious looking clown is wearing a black suit with a pink text 'Cindy' on its front. The clown characters are not indisputably male or female in the images of the series, even though they sometimes have some features, clothes or positions that might be considered feminine or masculine. Apart from the text 'Cindy' in their shirt, the clown in *Untitled #413* appears to be rather androgyne.

The features of the clown have been exaggerated with a mask that covers Sherman's nose and cheeks, making them look bigger and waxy. Being different shade than her skin colour, the mask stands out as fake immediately. On the mask and the clown's face have been painted the typical clown make-up, white circles around the eyes and mouth with black outlines, red lips, and red spot on the nose. Behind the make-up the clown's eyes look watery, making their look more miserable. The corners of their mouth have turned downwards. The eyebrows are just two thin lines high on their forehead, drawn to present sadness as well. The clown's hair is short and black, messily framing their face.

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<sup>98</sup> Moorhouse, 2014, p. 134

The different clown characters have been pictured in different ways, which brings up their different personalities. For example, Sherman has taken different types of portraits, head shots, half body shots and full body shots. *Untitled #413* being a head shot, the attention of the viewer quickly draws to the clown's eyes. Their head slightly tilted, the clown is not meeting the viewer's eyes, but looking past the camera. However, the intensity of their gaze would suggest that they are not daydreaming but looking at someone else. Interestingly, some of the clown characters in the series are looking back at the viewer like posing, while some are looking towards the camera but avoiding the straight eye contact.

Like in the most images of the series, the background is psychedelic, different shades of blue, green, and purple are creating zigzagging strips behind the clown, forming a whirl-looking shape behind their head. The atmosphere of the image is sorrowful and distressing, representing the other side of clowns as joyful performers. The intensive, bright colours that are typical for clowns, and venues that are associated with them, such as circuses, parties, and festivals, are creating a great contrast when comparing to the clown's black hair and suit. It is like the clown would have relinquished part of their performance and left it behind them, revealing their true self underneath – melancholic, anxious, tired to pretend. Due to the text 'Cindy', the picture has been considered to represent a glimpse of 'real Cindy' and address some of her feelings through the character.



When exhibiting the *Untitled Film Stills* series the first time, Sherman was still quite unknown as an artist, although the reception was positive<sup>99</sup>. Later during her career, she has been addressed as one of 'The 20<sup>th</sup> Century's 25 Most Influential Artists', received a MacArthur Foundation 'genius' grant and managed to sell *Untitled Film Stills* to The Museum of Modern Art in New York for over one million dollars.<sup>100</sup> Nowadays *Untitled Films Stills* are considered as classics of contemporary art<sup>101</sup>, and her works have been widely exhibited internationally. In Finland, Sherman's works have been exhibited in at least three group exhibitions, which are *Varrella virran 3 – Kansainvälinen taidevalokuva tänään / By the River – International Photography Today* at Pori Art Museum in 1985,<sup>102</sup> *Yöjuna – Surrealistisia reittejä Kiasman kokoelmiin / Night Train – Surrealist Routes to Kiasma's collections* at Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma in 2003<sup>103</sup> and *Kuvia sisimmästä / After Image* at Helsinki Art Museum in 2004.<sup>104</sup> The two exhibitions in Helsinki were arranged quite close to each other timewise, but they were focusing on completely different themes. The first one dealt with surrealist dimensions in contemporary art<sup>105</sup>, which in the exhibition catalogue was described as an art form that raises questions rather than answers to them. According to the catalogue, in surrealist art, likewise in contemporary art, the piece of art is not the end result, but can be seen as a start for the viewer's unique

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<sup>99</sup> Morris, 1999p. 8.

<sup>100</sup> Morris, 1999, p. 9.

<sup>101</sup> Morris, 1999, p. 40.

<sup>102</sup> Pori Art Museum, *By the River 3*, Exhibition Catalogue, 1985

<sup>103</sup> Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, *Night Train – Surrealist Routes to Kiasma's collections*, exhibition catalogue, 2003

<sup>104</sup> Helsinki Art Museum, *After Image*, exhibition catalogue, 2004

<sup>105</sup> Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma website, exhibition archive, *Yöjuna – Surrealistisia reittejä Kiasman kokoelmiin* [Online] <https://kiasma.fi/nayttelyt/yojuna-surrealistisia-reitteja-kiasman-kokoelmiin/>

experience.<sup>106</sup> This supports the views that Sherman's work is not about the artist's own identity but about the viewer's and their experiences.

The latter exhibition focuses more on female self-portraiture as such<sup>107</sup>. *After Image* observes photographic art made by women from 1970s to 2000s. Four artists' works has been selected for the exhibition, two from America and two from other parts of the world. As all the artists were women, had turned the camera towards themselves and addressed issues related to womanhood in their work, the viewer had an interesting opportunity to observe and compare different ways the women artists had approached roles of women.<sup>108</sup> Many different exhibitions, alongside with many different theories related to Sherman's works, many solo and group exhibitions internationally, many publications and so on, prove how multidimensional her photographs are and how they can be observed and interpret from several different points of views.

When Sherman was working with *Untitled Film Stills*, she was part of an important group of Avant-garde artists, which later on have considered to change the art world.<sup>109</sup> This change meant consideration about the definition of art and led art collectors and gallerists getting interested in photography. When photography started to be seen as an art form and photographs as artworks, collectors wanted to buy them to their collections. Art museums were also willing to start exhibiting and collecting photographs, when earlier they had been focusing on mainly paintings and

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<sup>106</sup> Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, *Night Train*, 2003, p. 16

<sup>107</sup> Kurki, S. *After Image / Kuvia sisimmästä, Mustekala* -online culture magazine, 2004, [Online] <http://mustekala.info/kritiikit/after-image-kuvia-sisimmasta/>

<sup>108</sup> Helsinki Art Museum, *After Image*, 2004

<sup>109</sup> Moorhouse, 2014, p. 5.

sculptures.<sup>110</sup> Nowadays, the art market, and the art field itself have changed dramatically. Also, the way art is consumed has changed over time; now social media channels are playing an important part of making the audience aware of one's art works and the viewer can see art online, without the need of physically going into a gallery or a museum. Sherman does not have her own website, but she has an Instagram page.<sup>111</sup> Also, some other directions, such as the Museum of Modern Art New York, are presenting Sherman and her works on their own websites.<sup>112</sup>

During her long – and still on-going career – Sherman has created a broad body of work, which could be argued to form a new genre that is separate from traditional ideals of self-portraiture within the genre of female contemporary self-portraiture. Sherman has questioned the whole term 'self-portrait' and what it means by stating that her works are not to be categorised as ones. She has inspired many other artists with her versatile and always developing series, in which the basic elements of her way of working – role-play, masquerade and being simultaneously an artist and a model, thus a (disguised) author rather than simply the subject of the art works - have remained the same throughout her career. Many female artists after Sherman are having the same elements in their works, including the chosen Finnish artists of this thesis, making the self-reflexive mode, and thus, what could be considered as the modern idea of Stoichita's self-projections applicable to their case studies as well.

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<sup>110</sup> Morris, 1999, p. 108.

<sup>111</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/cindysherman/>

<sup>112</sup> The Museum of Modern Art, New York – Cindy Sherman [Online]  
<https://www.moma.org/artists/5392>

## Chapter 2: Aino Kannisto

Aino Kannisto is a Finnish contemporary photographer who has mostly focused on self-portraits, but during the last years broaden her scale to portraits as well. She has created a series of images of children, *Children Pictures*, and participated a collaborative project *Domestic Demons*, which consists of portraits of women in different domestic spaces, purposing to show the side of womanhood that is usually considered private.<sup>113</sup> According to The Helsinki School, an art collective Kannisto is part in, “she uses her camera to address the cultural fears and vulnerabilities women have always faced in society”<sup>114</sup>, thus linking her work to women and feminism. Her works have been exhibited in different solo and group exhibitions in Finland and abroad, and her images have been presented in various books about contemporary art.<sup>115</sup>

When observing the three chosen Finnish artists, Kannisto has most in common with Sherman what comes to their way of working and the visual elements of their images, especially if comparing Sherman’s earlier series, *Untitled Film Stills*, *Rear Screen Projections* and *Centerfolds* to Kannisto’s photographs. Cinema being one of the sources of inspiration for Kannisto,<sup>116</sup> her working process, similarly to Sherman’s, resembles making a film: she writes a script, finds the location, chooses her costume,

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<sup>113</sup> Lensculture, *Delicate Demons: Picturing Womanhood* [Online]

<https://www.lensculture.com/articles/satu-haavisto-delicate-demons-picturing-womanhood>

<sup>114</sup> Aino Kannisto, The Helsinki School [Online] <https://www.personsprojects.com/artists/aino-kannisto?x=bio>

<sup>115</sup> Aino Kannisto – CV, The Helsinki School [Online] <https://www.personsprojects.com/artists/aino-kannisto?x=cv>

<sup>116</sup> Aino Kannisto, The Helsinki School [Online] <https://www.personsprojects.com/artists/aino-kannisto?x=bio>

and does her make-up to match the written scene.<sup>117</sup> Kannisto's style of executing her photographs is also giving them a cinematic impression: the images have large depth of field, and there is one or several elements that are creating the sense of drama: lighting, colours, acts of the characters'. Everything in the images is carefully considered. However, while representing different narratives, many of the photographs are simultaneously very convincing, picturing situations that are familiar from everyday life.

The certain melancholic atmosphere is combining Kannisto's images, the represented characters are not smiling, they appear as serious, rather lonely, sometimes lost in thought. They are often pictured passively standing or sitting in different rooms, suggested to be in the middle of something but not actually doing anything. Due to the beautiful colours and lighting, even mundane and sad-looking scenes look pleasing and have glamour that is typical to films and cinema. That is creating a contradiction between the elements of cinematic and everyday.

In Sherman's film stills most of the women are looking like posing – for the viewer or assumed other person in the room, that the viewer is unable to see. Kannisto's characters are differing from them as majority is not interacting with anyone.

Sometimes the characters have turned their backs towards the viewer: looking out of windows or in mirrors, reading, lying on a sofa, in a bed, writing on a chalkboard. Some of them are even hiding from the viewer behind a curtain or covered their faces with cigarette smoke. In addition to indoor spaces, Kannisto has photographed several

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<sup>117</sup> Aino Kannisto – *Artist's Statement*, The Helsinki School [Online]  
<https://www.personsprojects.com/artists/aino-kannisto?x=texts&article=254>

images outside, either capturing the character inside the house through a window, or actually locating them outside. However, the characters have usually pictured near the house: standing in the doorway or against the wall, sitting in the garden, suggesting that the setting would still be related to domesticity.

Like Sherman's works, Kannisto's images are all titled untitled, as she does not want to affect viewer's experience when observing the images.<sup>118</sup> In brackets after the actual title, Kannisto has added a description, for example "*Black Bathtub*" or "*Woman on Sofa*". Her self-portraits have not been divided into different series despite of *Hotel Bogota*, which form its own group of photographs, all taken in a closed hotel in Berlin-Charlottenburg, Germany.<sup>119</sup> The spaces pictured in this series are more dramatic, due to the hotel's interiors, and thus, moved away from the feeling of familiarity and mundane, although still presenting domestic-like environments, such as the hotel's kitchen, bathrooms and bedrooms.

But having elements of both cinema and everyday life, Kannisto's work is mixing tones of old and new. Due to the settings and clothes Kannisto has chosen for her photographs, it is difficult to estimate the time where the scenes are taking place. The milieus are often looking old, there is no technology to be seen and the clothes of the characters' have the same timeless style. The women are reading and writing, pictured lingering in different spaces and rooms, smoking inside, and when they are talking on the telephone, it is not a mobile one. While resembling old films or past days, the good

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<sup>118</sup> Aino Kannisto – *Artist's Statement*, The Helsinki School [Online]

<http://www.helsinkischool.fi/artists/aino-kannisto?x=texts&article=254>

<sup>119</sup> Aino Kannisto – *Hotel Bogota*, The Helsinki School [Online] <http://www.helsinkischool.fi/artists/aino-kannisto?x=works/hotel-bogota>

quality and flawlessness of the created settings of the images are giving them a modern touch. As there are recognisable roles in Sherman's films stills ("career girl, bombshell, girl on the run, vamp, housewife [...]"<sup>120</sup>) some of the character 'types' in Kannisto's photographs are also easy to recognise from similar visual imagery, such as a rebellious young girl and an independent woman.

The same questions of the definition of a self-portrait are present when observing Kannisto's works, as she is not picturing herself as herself. However, while Sherman and Kannisto are both performing for the camera, representing fictional characters, Sherman has stated that her works are not self-portraits. Kannisto, on the opposite, would categorise her images as ones and describes her work in her artistic statement:

"I build fictional scenes that I record with the camera. I set up the scene, costume and make-up myself for the pictures. Building a complete visual world for a photograph is essential for me. I play the protagonist in the pictures; however, they do not represent reconstructed situations of my life. They are projections of my internal emotional landscape. In the deepest sense, they could be defined as self-portraits."<sup>121</sup>

Kannisto is not very active on social media, her Facebook page is private, and she is not posting her self-portraits on her Instagram account.<sup>122</sup> While not focusing only on self-portraiture anymore, it could be argued that the style and certain themes of her works – womanhood, domesticity, motherhood - have remain the same in the portraits she has executed more recently. She has no websites, but The Helsinki School, and some galleries, for example, Galerie m<sup>123</sup> are showing her work on theirs.

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<sup>120</sup> Respini, 2012, p. 18

<sup>121</sup> Aino Kannisto – *Artist's Statement*, The Helsinki School [Online] <http://www.helsinkischool.fi/artists/aino-kannisto?x=texts&article=254>

<sup>122</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/iknowainokannisto/>

<sup>123</sup> Galerie m: [https://www.galerie-m.com/artist\\_image.php?&aid=66&aname=AinoKannisto](https://www.galerie-m.com/artist_image.php?&aid=66&aname=AinoKannisto)

## Case Studies

Narratively and visually Kannisto's work resembles Sherman's *Untitled Film Still* most. The first image, *Untitled (Girl on Bed)*, 2003 [Fig. 7.], pictures a young woman sitting on a bed in an ascetic room. There are three plain beds in a row, from which the woman sits on the middle one. She has wrapped a floral duvet around herself, under which just her bare leg is showing. The lighting is natural, and the colours are pale, almost painting-like. The mattresses are all different coloured, blue, green, and pink. The beige, worn wallpaper looks old, as do the furniture. Between two beds there is a yellow bedside table and a small glass of water on it. Above the woman's bed there are several, small, religious pictures on the wall in a disorderly shape. One of them – an angel guiding two kids over a bridge - a little bit separated from the other ten.

The woman is looking downwards, probably at something that the spectator cannot see – or then she is just lost in thought. Her facial expression is not telling much to the spectator, it appears to be serious, almost empty. Her long brown hair is hanging down, hardly revealing her whole face, while the duvet is covering her body. The atmosphere is wistful, somehow tensed, it is almost like time has stopped. The woman's age is difficult to estimate, just like the time that is represented in the image.

On the other bed, a folded bedsheet and a pillow are suggesting that someone else has been or has been expected to be present in the same room. Maybe someone slept there and left before the woman woke up. It is also possible that the person never came, and that explains why the bed has not been made. However, it could be argued that it is an important aspect as the pile of bedclothes has been located on the bed



nearest to the spectator, right in front of them. The character is also facing the bed while her leg is pointing towards it, her toes disappearing behind the blue mattress. This could be seen as a proof of the bedclothes' relevance.

The title is not giving any more context to the image; thus, the spectator has been left to create their own narrative for the photograph. The represented woman could be feeling tired, sad, cold, or thoughtful. The lack of furniture and personal belongings are bringing up questions: is the woman living in this house or is she just visiting? What is the meaning of the religious pictures? The image is interesting because it is not telling much but there is the sense of drama: something has happened, or something is about to happen. Melancholic atmosphere even adds the viewer's interest.

Sherman's and Kannisto's artworks have many similarities, starting with titling their images 'untitled', and picturing dramatic, cinematic narratives in their photographs. Neither of them is representing themselves in the images as themselves, conversely, they have created fictional characters to picture in the settings they have constructed. Having very similar starting points, the narrative and visual elements of the images appear to have resemblances as well. A good example is just analysed *Untitled (Girl on Bed)* and Sherman's *Untitled Film Still #33* (1979) [Fig. 8.].

The milieu of both images is bedroom, and both characters are sitting on the beds. Sherman's character appears on the edge of the bed, her legs crossed. Just a couple artificial light sources are bringing light into the room, which appears to be rather dim. This would indicate that the picture has been taken late in the evening or even at night, conversely to Kannisto's image, which could be associated with early morning

when considering the lighting. The framing is quite tight and the vantage point low, making the bed cover most of the image from the foreground to the background. For the same reason, the viewer is unable to see the whole room, and a part of the woman's head has been cropped out of the image.

A folded letter has been set on the bed, in the foreground of the image and the focus is on it, while the background appears softer. The woman is looking at the letter and her facial expression is serious. On the other side of the bed is a bedside table and a framed picture on it. The letter and the framed picture are creating a sense of someone else's presence. Kannisto and Sherman are both constructing the narrative with these traces, making the viewer question what has or will happen. The way items have been located and represented indicates their importance: the letter is in the foreground of the photograph, just like the folded sheets have been put on the bed, right in front of the viewer, in Kannisto's image. The candlelight is also drawing viewer's attention to itself, and to the framed picture beside it.

However, the appearance of the women is differing from each other dramatically.

Kannisto's character looks like she would just have woken up, she has wrapped the duvet around herself. Her hair is unbrushed and she has no make-up. Sherman, on the other hand, is representing her character in a top and trousers, her hair and make-up carefully done. Comparing to Kannisto's position, Sherman's character looks like she would be posing to the viewer.

In *Untitled (Bogota Kitchen)*, 2013 [Fig. 9.], Kannisto's character is pictured in a big kitchen, standing in front of a kitchen counter. The bowl on the counter between her

and the viewer, is suggesting that she is in the middle of cooking or baking, and the spoon in her hand is affirming it. Like in the previous photograph, the represented character is looking downwards and seems to be lost in thought. Her facial expression is neutral and her both hands are passively set on the kitchen counter. Comparing to the previous image, the passiveness stands out more in this case, as the woman is in the middle of doing something but stays motionless.

The lighting looks natural, it is quite flat and not creating dramatic shadows. The depth of field is large; hence the whole image appears to be in focus and the colours look intense. The setting is very beautiful, yet it looks very staged. Despite the two bowls and a pot on the counter, there is no other cooking or baking equipment anywhere to be seen but in their own places: everything in this kitchen is very well-organised and the kitchen counter is spotless, the viewer can see reflections on it. The woman's red, floral shirt and white apron are perfectly standing out from the dim doorway and the dark kitchen counter which are surrounding her.

The title is revealing that the image is part of Kannisto's *Bogota Hotel* series, which explains the size, style, and some of the equipment in the kitchen – it is not a home but a kitchen of a hotel. Just like in the previous image, it is difficult to tell the time captured in the photograph, but the same sense that time has suddenly stopped is present – leaving the woman in the kitchen clutching the spoon and staring into nothingness. The atmosphere is not particularly sad, but there is a touch of melancholy, which is typical to Kannisto's photographs. That creates the feeling of drama that makes – together with the colours and carefully considered settings - her photographs resemble cinema and film stills.

Kitchen is an iconic domestic space, while baking and cooking are both traditionally considered as women's chores and something they are naturally good at. Thus, Kannisto is representing a scene that could be considered normal or a norm. While men have traditionally been having the active roles in the society, women have been seen as passive objects of one's gaze<sup>124</sup>, something men can look at. It could be argued that with the passiveness of her characters, Kannisto is actually overdoing, and that way highlighting that position. When appearing to be completely in her own world, her character is creating distance between herself and the viewer: she does not seem to notice the viewer's gaze nor is she trying to please them. Instead of just appearing passive, she is completely petrified and not offering satisfaction to anyone. Leaving the image untitled, Kannisto continues teasing the viewer, and leaves them to observe the image, trying to find possible narratives for the mysterious character.

In *Untitled Film Still #3* [Fig. 1.], a woman is standing by the kitchen side and turned her head towards the viewer, although looking outside of the frame. The setting is similar to *Untitled (Bogota Kitchen)*, but due to the tight cropping of Sherman's image, the room is not as clearly recognised as a kitchen than in Kannisto's. Sherman's character is pictured from the side and against a blank wall. Some items – a handle of a pot and a mug – are located right in front of the camera to highlight the depth of field and together with some other items on the side in front of the woman – a bottle of dish washing liquid, for example – are suggesting that there would also be a sink, leading the viewer to an assumption that the room would be a kitchen. Comparing to

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<sup>124</sup> Berger, J. *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin Books Ltd, 1972, p. 47 / Meskimmon, 1996, p. 14

Kannisto's image, the mundane situation represented is more convincing as the places of domestic objects seem to be randomly chosen rather than carefully considered.

Pictured in front of the kitchen sides in the middle of an assumed domestic chore, Sherman washing dishes and Kannisto baking, they are both stopped what they have been doing and merely standing on the spot. Even though their positions are similar, Sherman's position looks more like she would be posing for someone, clearly leaning on to the side, her other hand straight and her shoulder lifted by her chin, while her other hand is placed on her stomach. Kannisto's position is more passive, she has located her hands on the side, but her elbows are bent which suggests that she has not put any weight on them. When comparing Kannisto's and Sherman's characters' facial expression, Kannisto seems to be looking into nothingness, while Sherman is looking something over her shoulder, out of the frame, like interacting with someone.

Appearances of the characters have similarities and differences: they are wearing shirts and aprons, both clean and neat, and their hair are nicely done as well. While Sherman's character is clearly wearing make-up, Kannisto's character is not. What comes to the lighting and colours, in Kannisto's image the lighting looks natural and the colours vivid, in Sherman's however, the lighting seems to be flatter, and is probably artificial. There are no dramatic shadows in neither of the images, the narrative is created through the positions of the characters and the expectant atmosphere.

The third image, *Untitled (Green Window)*, 2005 [Fig. 10.], is quite different compared to the previous two. This time Kannisto's character is represented inside a house, while

the spectator is looking at the scene outside of it, through the window. The spectator can hardly see her inside, the natural light exposes her arms and a yellow dress, but her face appears to be blurry. She seems to be looking out of the window, maybe waiting for someone. Due to the lighting, it is hard to say anything about the interior of the house; the natural light creates reflections and shadows, thus the room behind the window appears quite dim. The focus is on the foreground of the image and just like the woman's face, the objects inside are blurry.

The house is a quite old-looking, the colours are idyllic, and the setting can be associated with Finnish summerhouses. There are flowerpots outside of the house and the sunshine is creating a beautiful pattern onto the wall and green window frames. Similar to the previous images, the setting looks timeless. It is difficult to say when and where the picture has been taken, also the character is a complete mystery. The viewer cannot tell her age, or anything about her physical features.

The sense of a mystery makes the image look interesting and worth looking for longer, hoping to find some hints. Despite the beautiful setting and the harmonic colours that are resembling a painting, the atmosphere feels oppressive. In both upper corners of the image are leaves of a tree framing the setting. That perspective could refer that the spectator is but looking at the scene from outside of the house, also from afar, maybe from a hiding place. The skilful framing makes the spectator feel like a part of the setting.

The perspective makes the photograph an interesting mix-up of the public and private spheres of the society. Unlike the other works of Kannisto, focus here is not on any

particular room, or even the character: it represents the whole house and the woman inside it. The image is constructed based on Kannisto's film script and she is not willing to reveal the story behind the photograph. However, it can be interpreted through traditional gender roles, how a woman stays at home, inside a house. As there is a feeling of someone looking at her, observing her, it highlights the stereotypic roles, connotating how a woman can be considered as a sight in the society and art field.<sup>125</sup>

While Kannisto's character is represented inside the house, in *Untitled Film Still #38* (1979) [Fig. 11.], a blonde woman is pictured outside. There is no house to be seen, but the character's surroundings resemble a garden. Black-and-white image appears to be very blurry and not properly focused on anything, but the texture of the surroundings looks like branches of trees and bushes. Despite of being outside, gardens can also be classified as domestic spaces, especially the sheltered and enclosed ones. Other case studies representing indoor spaces, these two images are forming an interesting pair.

Like in *Untitled (Green Window)*, the woman's facial expression cannot be seen, she is more like a human figure in the middle of the image, wearing a long white dress or shirt, so loose that it could be a night dress. She is holding the hem of it with her other hand while the other one is stretched out like she would be trying to stay balanced. The atmosphere is mysterious, and the familiar voyeuristic sense is present; there is something between the woman and the camera, a black branch or a bar of the garden gate perhaps, creating a feeling of someone looking at the woman from a distance,

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<sup>125</sup> Berger, 1972, p. 47

maybe – again - from a hiding place. Due to her position, it looks like she would be walking towards the camera - and the possible observer beside it.

As the setting of a scene in Sherman's and Kannisto's photographs is similar, – a woman character pictured from a distance in an environment that is both domestic and outside, the viewer unable to see her face - the atmosphere is alike as well. However, Sherman's image appears to be darker, bringing a horror film to one's mind. Maybe it is due to the dark tones of it, or perhaps the blurriness. The colours are creating the biggest difference between the two images; in Kannisto's scene the colours are beautiful and subtle, the sun is shining and making the surroundings look less threatening. While her character could be argued to look anxious and trapped inside the house, there is a comforting thought of her being safe in there. The distressing addition to Sherman's image is the fact that the woman is pictured outside alone, perhaps not knowing about the possible observer. As always, the strong sense of drama is present in both images, giving the viewer a promise that something will happen soon.

In the image, *Untitled (Mirror II)*, 2002 [Fig. 12.], a young girl is pictured in a bathroom, looking herself in a mirror. Wearing just purple underpants, she has turned her bare back to the viewer and leaned forward to examine herself. From their vantage point, the viewer is able to observe her from two different angles: her face appears in the mirror in front of her. She is looking serious, and there is a familiar hunch of emptiness in her gaze. However, the image differs from the previous ones as this time the viewer can see the object of her stare – herself. The atmosphere in the photograph is quite neutral, although intimate as the girl is half-naked. Bathroom being a space that is



considered as private, there is also a voyeuristic sense in the image, which the girl's appearance highlights.

The lighting is natural, and the tones are cold, almost everything in the image is white or blue. The girl is standing out from her surroundings with her red hair and purple underwear, representing warmer tones that contradict with the clinical space. The framing is quite tight, which is creating a feeling of the viewer being close to the character, standing right behind her. However, she is not seeming to notice the spectator's presence, but being completely focused on herself.

As in the previous images, the room looks quite old, and the furnishing is ascetic. There are no personal belongings despite of a couple exceptions: a few medicine packets on the shelf under the mirror and a blue towel hanging from a hook behind the girl.

Otherwise, the room is quite impersonal, and could be located anywhere – in an old house, hospital, or hostel. There is no information offered about the girl either, but her story has been left for the viewer to decide.

Looking oneself in a mirror is an act that has traditionally been associated as a feminine thing to do. That has been seen as a sign of vanity, thus females have been seen as vain, only interested in how they look.<sup>126</sup> In art world and society, that has been considered but a part of women's nature, also their responsibility as objects of the male gaze.<sup>127</sup> Thus, Kannisto is representing a stereotype and the domestic space is highlighting it as a sphere that has traditionally been seen for the space for women.

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<sup>126</sup> Berger, 1972, p. 51

<sup>127</sup> Berger, 1972, p. 46-47

However, her character's appearance is breaking the stereotype, as instead of being in the process of dressing up or presenting herself at her best, her hair is tied back into a messy do, from which one strand has escaped and lies on her bare back. She is also not wearing any or much make-up. This could be seen as an example of using the familiar visual language – stereotypes, domestic spaces – to represent something else, in this case a female that is not trying to look beautiful in front of a mirror or a viewer.

*Untitled Film Still #14* (1978) [Fig. 13.] is also representing a woman in a bathroom, looking herself in the mirror. Like in Kannisto's photograph, she has turned her back to the viewer, but the reflection of her face allows them to look at her from two different angles at the same time. The camera – and thus, the viewer – have been left outside of the bathroom and the woman is being looked at through a narrow gap between the bathroom door and the doorway, giving the image a voyeuristic sense. Kannisto's image appears to be intimate as well, but she has let the viewer closer, into the same space.

The locus and perspective of both images are very similar, Kannisto's resembles of a recreation of Sherman's image, brought to present. While Sherman seems to be representing traditional idea of femininity, as in a woman character as they were represented in the mass media in 1950s and 1960s, Kannisto's point of view is more modern. This can be seen in the women characters' clothing and style; Sherman's character is wearing a white dress and her hair and make-up are carefully done. She is stroking her hair while posing in front of the mirror. Kannisto's character, however, has just underpants on her and a messy hairdo, while she is leaning on the sink. She is not posing or trying to look beautiful, unlike Sherman's character.

The intimacy of the images is based on different aspects. In Sherman's setting it is created through the viewpoint. The location of the camera is forming a narrative of someone peeping through the gap between the door and the doorway without the woman knowing. Kannisto, on the other hand, is making her image appear intimate and private by representing her character almost naked. Her character's appearance is also more mundane, being perhaps more relatable, and that way, intimate.

The bathroom door is blocking the view to the rest of the bathroom, the space is not appearing to be important in Sherman's photograph. The viewer is not able to see anything else but the woman and the mirror. Kannisto's image is tightly framed, her legs have been cropped out almost completely. Sherman's legs are not completely visible either due to the same reason. Even though the space is visible for the viewer to observe in Kannisto's image, there are not many objects to look at, thus suggesting that the space is not affecting dramatically the narrative either. The atmosphere in both images is neutral and peaceful, giving an impression of an everyday-life situation in different decades.

Different from the other examples of Kannisto's works, *Untitled (Flower Pattern)*, 2013 [Fig. 14.], represents a female character that is not being passive or staring into nothingness. Instead, she is looking outside of the frame like interacting with someone that the viewer is not able to see. Wearing a floral dress which she is either putting on or taking off, hands bended behind her back to reach the zipper, she has turned her head to the left to look at something or someone. Her facial expression remains neutral, so the spectator cannot be sure about her feelings towards what or whoever

she is looking at. Consequently, the atmosphere of the picture remains quite neutral as well, although, there is a sense of drama, as always in Kannisto's works.

Due to the tight cropping, the viewer cannot be sure in what room the character appears in. She stands in front of a window, although floral, heavy-looking curtains have been drawn in front of it, leaving just a narrow gap between them. Kannisto's character stands in front of that gap, breaking the floral pattern of the curtains with another. She might have been looking out of the window before turning around. The lighting is rather dim, and the bright daylight coming through the window between the floral curtains is creating contrast to the more shadowy indoor space and creating a backlight for the woman, making the outlines of her features look slightly hazy.

There is also notably contrast between the beige curtains and black dress of Kannisto's. The flower patterns in both comport, having red and green in them. Flowers can be associated associated with femininity and females and according to the title, flowers are playing an important part in the image, or perhaps functioned as the source of inspiration. Typically to Kannisto's artworks, the time and place represented in the photograph are difficult to estimate, although, the fabrics of the dress and curtains are looking quite new and thus, giving an impression of modernity compared to the previous images.

However, having an active role instead of passively sitting or standing, lets the viewer closer to the character, and kind of creates a situation that feels interactive also between them. The act of possibly removing her dress makes the image appear intimate and it could even be argued having a sexual overtone. The feeling of other

person's presence outside of the frame, unseeable to the viewer, but looking at the woman, is highlighting the voyeuristic sense of the image, as changing clothes can be considered as something people do in private. Analysing the image from this point of view is, again, leading to the interpretations of objectifying women but in art, also in society.

In *Untitled #14*, 1978, [Fig. 15.] a woman is standing in the middle of a room, her other hand beside her neck while holding something -perhaps an umbrella or a purse - in her other hand. Typically to Sherman's images, the tight cropping leaves most of the room out of the image and makes it harder to identify the room in question. There is a low but wide dresser behind the woman, some candles and framed pictures on it, and a mirror above it. A corner of a dining room table protrudes into the image from the front, covering the woman's feet. The outfit of the woman suggests that she has gotten ready for something particular – maybe going out or waiting for guests. She is looking outside of the frame, her mouth slightly open, like she would be listening to someone or about to say something. Her facial expression is quite neutral, so the nature of the possible interaction with someone is left for the viewer to decide. Due to the mirror behind her, the viewer is able to see the woman and the room from another angle. The opposite corner of the dining room table is shown, there is a drink on it, and an empty chair by it. A big black coat has been placed on the back of the chair, creating a strong feeling of someone else's presence.

In both images, the positions of the characters are similar: they are standing in the middle of the rooms, the focus being on the characters, and the assumed interaction between them and someone the viewer is unable to see. Sherman's image seems to be

more cluttered because of all the furniture and items around her, although that is making the setting look more like home. Kannisto's setting is simpler, there is no furniture apart from a corner of the desk and a back of a chair. Like in some previous examples, the careful and exact way Kannisto has constructed her images, makes them look more staged, while Sherman's style to crop them very tightly, place objects in front of the camera, and represent some of the characters unfocused, resembles sometimes snapshots, associating them with real everyday situations. The atmosphere feels similar in both images: neutral and mundane, while also dramatic. The narrative has not been built through visual elements, such as dramatic shadows, or the surroundings of the women, but the way characters have been presented.

### Chapter 3: Elina Brotherus

Elina Brotherus is one of the best-known Finnish female contemporary photographers and video artists both in Finland and internationally. During her long career she has executed several different projects which all have focused on self-portraiture. The themes have varied and can be roughly divided into two categories: autobiographical and non-autobiographical. In her autobiographical work, Brotherus has addressed the difficulties she has faced in her own life, such as divorce and infertility treatments.<sup>128</sup> Aesthetic elements of an image and the relationship between the artist and the model have been in the central part of her non-autobiographical work.<sup>129</sup>

*Das Mädchen sprach von Liebe* (1997–1999) portrays emotions and feelings young Brotherus' experienced during her twenties, before and during the process of the divorce. The series starts with the wedding photographs, following with 'Divorce Portrait', loneliness, sadness and eventually joy<sup>130</sup>. In the images, Brotherus is honestly showing her tears to the viewer, as well as the mattress she is sleeping on in – assumably – her new apartment. Her own private and personal experiences could be seen as universal, relatable themes.

In 1999, Brotherus continued working with autobiographical work and documented her experience of moving to another country – France – and learning a new language. These images formed the series *Suites française 2 (French Suites)*, which twelve years

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<sup>128</sup> Brotherus, E. *Decisive Days*, Pohjoinen kustannus, 2002

<sup>129</sup> Brotherus' websites: *Artist and her Model* [Online]  
<http://www.elinabrotherus.com/photography#/artist-and-her-model/>

<sup>130</sup> Brotherus, 2002

later functioned as the baseline for her new autobiographical series *12 ans après* (*12 years later*), 2011-2013. Returning to the places she created *Suites française*, she pictured herself again, observing her ageing. Thus, selected images of *Suites française* became a part of the new series. *12 ans après* is not appearing as a nostalgic journey to the familiar places, but rather the artist's realisation of her own mortality. Brotherus has written about her work:

"Today I'm at a new turning point. I'm halfway through my life if I'm lucky, even if in all my photographs I see my future death. Life has not been what I hoped for. Soon it will be time to accept it and mourn for the dreams that will never come true. Mourn for the lost time, my young self, who no longer exist."<sup>131</sup>

At the same time, Brotherus was working with another autobiographical project.

*Annonciation* (2009-2013) is a documentative piece of work, in which she has pictured a five-year period of her life, going through infertility treatments that end up being unsuccessful<sup>132</sup>. The subject matter being very private, most of the images have been taken in her home. There is a hunch of a voyeurism in the photographs, perhaps due to the intimacy of them. The viewer is able to follow Brotherus' sad and painful journey through the treatments and watch her to take a pregnancy test after another, her hopes slowly fading away and changing into despair. The woman who first spent time waiting, staring wistfully out of the window (*Annonciation 8*), and sitting alone at the dinner table (*Annonciation 3*) crouches in the corner (*Annonciation 17*). The calendar pages are dividing the photographs, demonstrating the passage of time. This series

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<sup>131</sup> Brotherus, E. *12 ans après / 12 vuotta myöhemmin / 12 years later*, Sémiosquare, Helsinki, 2015, p. 7.

<sup>132</sup> Brotherus' website: *Annonciation* [Online]  
<http://www.elinabrotherus.com/photography#/annonciation/>



could be assumed to explain Brotherus' inconsolable text about broken dreams in the book *12 ans après*.<sup>133</sup>

*Model Studies* (2002-2008) is not a story about Brotherus' life, but a collection of various pictures, in which the model has often turned her back towards the viewer, or she is looking at herself in a mirror or in a surface of the lake.<sup>134</sup> Some of these aspects can also be found from the series called *The New Painting* (2000-2004). Like the title suggests, its initial idea is photography being 'a new form of painting'.<sup>135</sup> Picturing beautiful landscapes, Brotherus is often looking at the view together with the viewer. She has commented on turning her back to the camera:

"The back is calm, discrete, polite, and distant. It doesn't challenge the spectator as the direct gaze would. The spectator is watching the same landscape as the model, but they don't disturb each other. The situation invites to contemplation, not to confrontation."<sup>136</sup>

However, the series is also consisting of some photographs that have been taken inside, in different domestic spaces. In the sense of traditional painting, some images have been titled after actual paintings, for example *Femme à sa toilette* (2001).<sup>137</sup>

Being interested in art and art history, they function as a source of inspiration to Brotherus and she uses many quotes and references in her work. For example, the idea of turning her back to the viewer she got from Caspar David Friedrich's

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<sup>133</sup> Brotherus, 2015, p.7

<sup>134</sup> Brotherus' websites: *Model Studies* [Online] <http://www.elinabrotherus.com/photography#/model-studies/>

<sup>135</sup> Brotherus, E. *The New Painting*, essay by Holzherr, A. Next Level & Creative Scape, 2005, p. 11.

<sup>136</sup> Brotherus, 2005, p. 71

<sup>137</sup> Brotherus, 2005, p. 7

painting.<sup>138</sup> She is focusing on aesthetics in many of her works, such as compositions, lighting, and colours, all familiar from paintings. *Artists at Work* (2009) is an examination of the relationship between the artist and the model, picturing two male painters painting Brotherus, while she is photographing them doing so. Interestingly, they are all being artists and models at the same time.<sup>139</sup> Brotherus has chosen to represent herself naked, which is not a radical statement, but according to her “a familiar sign, like a word in my vocabulary”.<sup>140</sup>

Brotherus herself has not made a statement whether her works are feminist or not. An art historian Susan Bright, makes the connection, writing that Brotherus’ works are “about women in general”, although noting that the feminism in her work is “implicit rather than explicit”.<sup>141</sup> It could be argued that addressing taboos, such as involuntary childlessness, is a feminist act, as is observing the gaze between artists and models. In *Artiste avec danseur en Apollon* (2007), Brotherus has captured herself sitting on a chair, her back towards the viewer, looking at a male dancer modelling for her. While Brotherus is fully dressed, the model has just underwear on him. The setting, altering the traditions and traditional power relations, is an interesting way to observe who is looking at who. *Scène domestique* (2001) pictures also an interesting setting, in which Brotherus is sitting on a chair in a nightgown, while a man, assumably her husband, is blow-drying her hair.

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<sup>138</sup> Brotherus, 2005, p. 71

<sup>139</sup> Brotherus’ website: *Artists at Work* [Online] <http://www.elinabrotherus.com/photography#/artists-at-work/>

<sup>140</sup> Brotherus’ website: *Artist and Her Model* [Online] <http://www.elinabrotherus.com/photography#/artist-and-her-model/>

<sup>141</sup> Brotherus, E. *Artist and Her Model*, essay by Bright, S. *Now and Then*, Le Caillou, 2012, p. 15.

In her broad selection of photographic series, many images have been executed in spaces that could argue or expect to be domestic. There is a link between domestic sphere and Brotherus' autobiographical work, which could be explained by the intimacy of the topics. When compared to Sherman's film stills, the domestic settings in the images are often very similar. Women in both images have similar postures and mannerisms, although it is important to acknowledge, that Sherman is representing completely fictional characters in imagined situations, while Brotherus real events from her life. Even in her non-autobiographical works, Brotherus sees herself as a sign, not as a character. Another similar aspect between the two artists' works is the themes related to womanhood. However, Sherman and Brotherus are approaching the topics from different angles, Sherman focusing on stereotypes of society and existing imagery of women, Brotherus taboos and topics that are rarely represented in the mass media.

Brotherus has her own websites, a public Facebook page<sup>142</sup> and an Instagram page.<sup>143</sup> She is posting rather actively about on-coming exhibitions and other events, and also sharing some things happening in her life. Despite of having over fifteen thousand followers on Instagram, she is not receiving many comments to her posts. Nature of the comments is, however, very positive, and includes usually just emojis. Like Kannisto, Brotherus is part of The Helsinki School,<sup>144</sup> and her works are represented on their websites as well, as also on a Finnish gallery, Galleria Heino's.<sup>145</sup> Her photographs

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<sup>142</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/elina.brotherus.7>

<sup>143</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/elinabrotherus/>

<sup>144</sup> <https://www.personsprojects.com/artists/elina-brotherus?x=works>

<sup>145</sup> <https://www.galleriaheino.fi/en.php?k=120742>

have been exhibited widely in Finland and abroad, and her self-portraits have been in multiple publications about self-portraiture and contemporary art.<sup>146</sup>

### Case Studies

In *Annonciation 5* (2010) [Fig. 16.], Elina Brotherus has pictured herself in a bathroom, sitting on the edge of a bathtub. Picturesquely, she appears in the middle of the image, the door and a toilet on the right side, a window above her and the corners of a table or a sink on the left side all framing her. Wearing just a shirt, she has turned her head away from the viewer, creating a melancholic, distressing, even desperate atmosphere by her facial expression and body language: avoiding the viewer's gaze, her hands are in her lap, clenched in fists, but more in a hopeless than angry way. Her knees are pressed together, and she has curled her toes against the towel under her feet. Looking like holding back tears, neck muscles tensed, her whole posture looks uneasy.

The lighting is natural and beautiful, there is no dramatic shadows anywhere to be seen, and the colours are plain and pale, only different shades of white and beige, including Brotherus' shirt and bare legs. The only thing that does stand out, is the green towel, folded on the floor under Brotherus' feet. The door on the right side of the image is suggesting that the viewer is looking at her from another space, maybe a hallway, creating some distance between the artist and the spectator. The bathroom is usually considered to be a private place, so the door being ajar and the viewer being

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<sup>146</sup> Brotherus' websites – Exhibitions: <https://www.personsprojects.com/exhibitions?year=2022>  
Publications: <https://www.personsprojects.com/publications>

able to look into the room hints that the pictured moment is intimate, giving to the image a voyeuristic sense.

Brotherus has located two objects in the picture, both so small that they don't draw attention to themselves immediately. The first one is a cell phone on the corner of the table or sink that pokes into the picture from the left side. Brotherus has turned towards it, and simultaneously away from a litter that lays on the floor beside her feet. Without any context it could be impossible to identify the object or analyse its purpose, but together with the background story and other images of the series, it could be expected to be a wrapper from a pregnancy test. The way Brotherus has located the objects on the either side of her connotes the pressure she could be feeling, forming associations of them surrounding her and trapping them between them, in the endless cycle of testing and waiting. The plain colours can also be considered to symbolise the uneventful, mundane time of waiting.

While been surrounded by everyday objects, she has also pictured herself isolated and alone, which could be associated with the stereotypic idea that part of women's natural identity and purpose is to become mothers, and not having children have been considered unnatural based on traditional gender roles<sup>147</sup>. Thus, the composition could symbolise the lonely feelings Brotherus has experienced during the infertility treatments, and possibly the lack of peer support. The beautifulness of the composition and all the aspects in the image are creating a contradiction against the serious, tabooed issue, which could be seen as an attempt to normalise inability to

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<sup>147</sup> Meskimmon, 1996, p. 138, 146

have children, showing it sad but mundane instead of something appalling or abnormal.

Like mentioned before, there is a big contrast between Sherman's *Untitled Films Stills* and Brotherus' *Annonciation* series narratively, as Brotherus is documenting her own life and Sherman's many characters are not representing her. While Brotherus is explaining the story behind her images to the viewer, narration of Sherman's characters stays unrevealed. However, there are also similarities between their photographs, for example, the elements in composition and atmosphere.

In *Untitled Film Still #82* (1980) [Fig. 17.], a young woman is represented through two doorways, sitting in a chair in one room, while the camera has been located in another, perhaps on the other side of the hallway. From this viewpoint, the viewer cannot identify either of the rooms. While the room in which Brotherus is represented in *Annonciation 5*, is easy to recognise as a bathroom, the same idea of creating distance between the character and the viewer by capturing them from other room, is present in both images.

Due to this composition, Sherman's character is appearing in the background of the photograph, looking quite small. The doorway is framing her like a painting. The lighting looks natural, creating a big contrast in the image and when comparing it with Brotherus' image: the light coming through the window is so bright that it is forming an overexposed square in the photograph, while the shadows in the hallway are very dark, some even pitch black. Brotherus' lighting is also natural but appears to be very

even and not dramatic at all. The atmosphere in both images is quite melancholic, there is a sense of isolation and loneliness in both of them.

Sherman's and Brotherus' body language and clothes appear to be almost identical: Sherman's character has also squeezed her knees together and just her toes are touching the floor. Her hands are on her lap, and she has turned a little bit to the left, while Brotherus to the right. She is wearing a big white shirt or a dress, maybe even a nightgown, but her legs are bare. Her facial expression is serious, and she is looking at something or someone in the same room with her – the doorway is blocking the spectator's view, leaving the object of her gaze a secret. Brotherus, however, is not suggesting anyone else's presence in the same space, she appears to be alone in her setting.

In the next image, *Annonciation 8* (2011) [Fig. 18.], Brotherus has represented herself sitting on a bench in front of a window. This time she has turned away from the viewer, not allowing them to observe her facial expression. Instead, she is looking out of the window, her hands clasped around her bare, bent legs. Due to the tight framing, the viewer cannot identify the space, it could be a hallway as much as it could be a living room or a bedroom. However, the sense of the domestic space is there as Brotherus is wearing just a shirt, which creates a connotation of a private situation. The colour of her shirt blends in with the other colours of the image, which are – like in the previous image - muted, different shades of beige and brown. The beautiful, natural-looking light makes the whole composition look harmonic.

While her posture was very uneasy in the previous photograph, her body language is more difficult to interpret in this image: it appears very neutral. The cell phone is again located in the setting, this time together with a pregnancy test. They are on the bench, just by Brotherus' feet - not drawing the viewer's attention to themselves immediately, but to be noticed after observing, breaking the harmonic first impression. While the viewer and Brotherus seem to be in the same room, the elements of isolation are still present: the way she has turned towards the window, choosing not to show her face, but looking the view together with the viewer – beautiful, although blurry scenery of blossoming trees.

The fact that Brotherus is giving the viewer a background story, affects the way the image is interpreted. Without any context the story could be anything, the viewer could assume her to be pregnant and shocked by the news, lost in thought when waiting for her partner to come home. The atmosphere is slightly melancholic and wistful, but the context of the image changes it to sorrowful: she is waiting and hoping. There is also a hopeless tone: the viewer already knows that the miracle is not going to happen. Just like the atmosphere, the other elements in the photograph are also analysed according to the context, and the associations are based on it.

Brotherus' location in the middle of the image, between the viewer and the window, framed by the different coloured walls of the window embrasure are creating a feeling of a closed space. She is being observed by the viewer, but she is also an observer of the view – not part of it but trapped behind the glass. Her physical isolation in the photograph could symbolise her feelings of isolation and alienation, while the blossoms can be associated with springtime, new life and femininity, something that



has been taken away from her and she can observe from the distance. The recurring aspects in the images can be seen to highlight the process of waiting: the passive postures, apathetic facial expressions, domestic spaces in which Brotherus seems to be trapped in, familiar signs, such as the cell phone and yet another pregnancy test appearing repeatedly in the captured scenes.

*In Untitled Film Still #15 (1978)* [Fig. 19.], a young woman is sitting on a windowsill, looking out of the window. She is wearing shorts and a top with high heels, having her hair in a ponytail. Her facial expression appears to be very neutral, but her body language is suggesting that she might be waiting for someone: she is intently observing the scene in front of her, her other leg lifted on the windowsill, the other one still on the floor, like she would be ready to get up at any moment. At the same time, she seems to be very aware of how she is looking: the way she has bent her leg, put her left hand on her shin, and the right by her hip gives an impression of posing.

When comparing with *Annonciation 8*, visual elements are very similar, tight framing, neutral-looking, soft, and even lighting, both women appearing as waiting for something and looking out of the window. Both photographs can be associated with domesticity, as they have been taken indoors, locations that resemble home. The lamp and the bench in Brotherus' photograph and the chair in Sherman's are the only objects in their settings, all typical furniture to appear in any room of a house. Brotherus has located herself between the camera and the window, Sherman has taken hers diagonally across the room.

The biggest difference between the two images is the appearance of the women. While Sherman's character looks stylish with her heels and jewellery, Brotherus appears to look mundane in her beige shirt. That also affects the atmosphere as Sherman's character could be expected to wait for someone, while the viewer already know that Brotherus is waiting *something* to happen. The different viewpoint of the images matters as well, Sherman's character has been captured from the angle that lets the viewer examine her facial expression, Brotherus has turned away from the camera.

The narrative of the photographs is constructed differently, Brotherus' choice not to show her face separates herself from the viewer, but she has – again – located small objects – the cell phone and pregnancy test – in the image as clues. Compared to Sherman's character she appears to be rather passive. The sense of drama is more strongly present in Sherman's photograph, in which the atmosphere suggests something to happen within a moment.

In another image of the same series, *Annonciation 18* (2012) [Fig. 20.], Brotherus is lying on the sofa, probably in a living room. Her eyes are open, but she is not meeting the viewer's gaze. Instead, she is staring passively at something outside of the frame. The atmosphere is more desperate and depressed compared to the previous images due to her body language and facial expression. While she previously was sitting up, now she is lying on her side, holding her hand with the other, like trying to comfort herself. The sofa is so small that it has forced her to bend her knees to fit completely on it, while her head is uncomfortably tilted - she has no pillow under it.

The look on her face is hard to read, it is quite neutral, although serious. Due to the context, it could be expected to be even anguished or hopeless. Brotherus is wearing either a long black-and-white shirt or a dress, and like in the previous photographs, her legs are bare. The sofa is located in the middle of the image and the other furniture – drawers, a lamp and a picture on the wall – are surrounding it. The lighting and the colours are natural and beautiful, and typically to Brotherus' work, the composition is carefully considered. She is framed by the sofa and the sofa is framed by other furniture in the room.

The picture on the wall is of a space in which the viewer is able to see a reflection of Brotherus and her partner in the mirror on the back wall. The photograph is from the series *Artist and her Model* (2005-2011) and titled *Portrait of a Couple* (2007). Thus, Brotherus has represented herself twice in one self-portrait. It is an interesting choice as she has not picked an ordinary self-portrait but a photograph of a space in which the reflection of her appears: she is representing but two self-portraits from different times, also two domestic spaces in one image.

There are elements that resemble the feeling of isolation that is present in the previous photographs. While the sofa looks like a little nest for Brotherus, her own comfort zone, there is now more floor space between the artist and the viewer, like symbolising the growing distance between them. Her stiff but passive body language and decision to look away can also be seen as signs of disconnecting and alienating herself. Here the domestic place can be read as the safe space, in which Brotherus is blending in - perhaps coming a part of it. While in the other images her shirts are matching the surrounding walls, this time her chosen outfit is similar to the canvas of

the sofa. On the other hand, the space can be seen as oppressing, something she is getting trapped in. The picture is above her and while Brotherus herself looks away, her younger self in the picture stares right back at the spectator, like protecting her older self.

In *Untitled Film Still #11* (1978) [Fig. 21.] a woman is lying on a bed, diagonally and upside-down: having her legs on the pillow. She is wearing a beautiful, long, white dress with jewellery and high heels, and her make-up and hair are both carefully done. In her other hand, she is holding a piece of paper, perhaps a letter, while her other hand is clutching the covers of the bed. Her position alone is creating a sense of drama, her outfit, facial expression, and the piece of paper she is holding in her hand, are all details that emphasise it.

The image has been taken from above, highlighting the woman's upside-down position. The lighting looks artificial and quite even, giving an impression of evening- or night-time. The bed is dominating the space, being in the middle of the image, covering it from the background to the foreground, like a stage for the woman. There are two bedside tables on the either side of the bed, and some small items on them, such as lamps and an alarm clock, creating a contrast between the dramatic appearance of the woman and everyday likeness of the objects.

In *Annonciation 18*, the contrast between Brotherus and her surroundings is not that notable, on the contrary, she seems to be blending in with her background. There are no personal belongings, just furniture around her. The camera has been located further away, leaving space between Brotherus and the viewer. The distance is

creating the sense of isolation and loneliness, while the atmosphere in Sherman's image appears to be sadder and more desperate. Brotherus' setting and position are suggesting that the situation is private, thus intimate. Sherman's position is revealing rather than protecting the character, the viewer has been let very close to observe her possible sorrow. However, body languages of both women are addressing pain. The milieus are also both typical domestic spaces, a living room and bedroom.

Again, there is a huge difference between the appearance of the women. Sherman's character is neatly dressed, which constructs the drama: her outfit is not a typical one to wear at home. Brotherus, on the other hand, is wearing clothes that could be associated with spending time home alone, people do not usually see each other in that way. While Sherman's narrative seems to be partly built on glamour, and thus, drama, Brotherus' mundane scene is capturing a private moment.

*This is the first day of the rest of your life III* (1998) [Fig. 22.] is from the series *Das Mädchen Sprach von Liebe (A Girl Talks about Love)*, which portrays Brotherus' life after her divorce. Like in *Annonciation*, she has documented her own life but represented themes that can also be seen as universal and to which many people can relate to. In the image, Brotherus is sitting on a mattress that has been located on the floor in an empty-looking room. Besides the mattress a few items are suggesting that she is currently staying there: an empty plate and a cigarette pack beside her feet, a radio in the corner, shopping bags under the open window. Brotherus is looking straight at the viewer, smoking. Her facial expression is serious but also sad, it looks like she would have been crying.

She has drawn her bent legs close to her body and slightly leaning her cheek on her other hand. There's a shutter release cable under her other foot, connecting Brotherus and the viewer. But proving that she is the artist and taken the image, she is also highlighting that she is in charge of the situation: she decides what she is showing to the viewer and how. The way she is represented in the middle of the setting, and is looking right at the spectator, are both emphasising it. Brotherus' black clothes are standing out from the background and the light, white, stripy bedclothes. The lighting is artificial, it is dark outside. That would suggest that the photograph has been taken late in the evening or even at night.

The colours and tones are warm, and the hardest light hits the spot beside Brotherus, creating a spotlight on the wall behind her. It lights up just a half of her face, leaving the other side of her, and the room, appear rather dim. The empty floor and wall space around Brotherus along with the estimated time of the day and the gloomy lighting are creating the sense of loneliness and separation. The mattress in the image is forming a stage for Brotherus, and it has been represented in the central part in several photographs of the series: a place where to be, eat and smoke. Here it probably forms the idea of domesticity, as it presents a primitive version of a bed, in otherwise almost empty room.

What comes to the symbolism of the image, the colour of Brotherus' clothing could be considered as a colour of sadness, and it could also be associated with darkness and depression. Due to Brotherus' facial expression and, *inter alia*, lighting of the photograph, the atmosphere is melancholic, as is the title of the image. The composition, together with lacking furniture and personal belongings are suggesting

the pictured arrangement to be temporary. The window might be open because of the practical reasons - she is smoking inside - but it could also be associated as a symbol of a new start or opportunity.

In *Untitled Film Still #16*, 1978 [Fig. 23.], a woman is sitting on a big armchair, smoking. A cigarette in her other hand, and an ashtray in the other, she is looking outside of the image. The photograph has been cropped very tightly, the chair and the woman are in the middle of it, and behind them there is just a white wall with one picture on it.

There is no other furniture or items on the either side of the chair. Because of that, it is hard to guess the space the woman is in. Due to the angle from which the photograph has been taken, it could be assumed, that the camera has been placed on the floor or on a low platform.

While Brotherus is staring straight at the viewer in her image, Sherman's character is looking away. She might be daydreaming; her facial expression is not revealing much. Her posture, however, is upright and elegant, she has lifted her chin like posing for the camera, and the way she holds out her arms and hands looks as a carefully considered pose. Her outfit is neat and elegant as well, a black dress or a shirt with a skirt with high heels. Her bare legs are right in front of the camera, making the dimensions of the woman's body distort slightly. Brotherus' posture is the exact opposite; she has crawled her legs near her chest and holding both her hands near her face. Her outfit is also black, but assumable just trousers and a shirt. Sherman's character could be at a party or having guests at her house, Brotherus is clearly represented alone, at her flat.

The atmosphere in the images differ quite radically; Sherman's character appear to be quite distant, the atmosphere is neutral and there are no clues for the viewer to construct the narrative. The interaction in the image is not happening between the viewer and the character. The angle of the camera is highlighting the distance, representing the woman above the viewer. Brotherus' has explained part of the story with the title of the image already, although the atmosphere is quite melancholic and lonely without it as well. She appears to be differently present in the image, interacting with the viewer, and the shutter release cable is breaking the fourth wall, also connecting her and the observer. Brotherus is representing her personal sorrow in her image, but as a universal topic, making it easy to relate for the viewer.

*Femme à sa toilette* (2001) [Fig. 24.] is from another series called *The New Painting*. It differs from the others by focusing on the aesthetics, they are not based on Brotherus' life in the same sense than the other four. While she is examining photography as a medium and comparing it to painting, she is still using herself as her own model. In the image, Brotherus is crouched in the small bathtub, representing herself naked, her chin pressed to her chest and hair covering her face. Like in *This is the first day of the rest of your life III*, the shutter release cable is visible and slithering to the bathtub from the right. Her position and nakedness make her look vulnerable and there is a sense of voyeurism in the image, as the viewer is looking at the intimate situation.

The bathroom tiles are pink and decorated with magenta flowers, surrounding Brotherus from both sides. The whole background, also the wall above the tiles, has a pale and soft pastel hue in it. But the colours, also the flowers can be seen feminine and associated with femininity. Typically to Brotherus' works, all the elements – the



composition, colours and lighting, look carefully considered, making the photograph resemble a painting. The image is beautiful, and the atmosphere is quite neutral and peaceful. However, the appearance of Brotherus is breaking the impression of a placid moment in the bath. The viewer is unable to see her facial expression, and she has turned her side to the camera. Brotherus position could be explained by the size of the bathtub; she needs to keep her legs bended to be able to fit in. However, her body appears to be tense, and the way she has put her arm around her legs can be seen as a protective gesture.

In the previous images, it has been typical to Brotherus to represent herself in the middle of the image, and in the middle of the chosen room. In those images she leaves space between her and the spectator. While still appearing in the middle of the photograph, the bathtub is located in the corner. Due to the tight framing, there is not much space between the edges of the image and corners of the bathtub. This viewpoint is also letting the viewer closer to Brotherus, almost like enclosing her in the small space. Even though the images of the series have been taken because of artistic reasons and meant to address elements in art – such as shapes, colours and light, it does not stop the viewer trying to find something that constructs the narrative.

Brotherus is interested in art history and nude female body has long roots in tradition of art.<sup>148</sup> The title of the image is referring to Bonnard's paintings of women in bathrooms.<sup>149</sup> Like Sherman with her film stills, Brotherus is not copying one specific painting, but adopting the style and representing her version of it. Even though her

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<sup>148</sup> Berger, 1972, p. 47

<sup>149</sup> Brotherus, 2005, p. 7

nakedness could be interpreted as a statement, it needs to be acknowledged that she has represented herself naked in multiple different images and series.

Sherman has not represented herself naked, not in the film stills, nor in her other works. Her characters have been represented swimming and being in the various bathrooms, but there is no very similar image to *Femme à sa toilette*, when looking at the visual elements. Being naked is natural to Brotherus and it is a familiar part of her photographs. The most interesting difference between *Femme à sa toilette* and other case studies of Brotherus, is how Brotherus is not representing herself as herself anymore. However, she is not representing herself as different characters like Sherman does. Instead, she is focusing on aesthetics and using herself as her own model, or as a familiar sign within her work, as she has stated<sup>150</sup>.

While straightforwardly comparing *Femme à sa toilette* to one of Sherman's images is difficult, it would be easier to examine Brotherus' changed working method to Sherman's way of working; their ideas in a more general level. Sherman has stated that she draws her inspiration from stereotypes and during her early career, her source of inspiration was the mass media. Brotherus' equal source of inspiration would be art history, and while Sherman has stated that her film stills are not representing any specific films or scenes in them, but rather picturing the stereotypes of films of certain genres, Brotherus has also drawn her inspiration from various art works instead of one specific painting<sup>151</sup>.

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<sup>150</sup> Brotherus' websites – *Artist and her Model* [Online]  
<http://www.elinabrotherus.com/photography#/artist-and-her-model/>

<sup>151</sup> Brotherus, 2005, p. 7.

Styles of *Untitled Film Stills* and *The New Painting* are differing quite much, although they have drawn their inspiration from completely different eras and mediums.

Sherman has not tried to achieve technically good photographs, on the contrary, she has purposely made the quality look worse than it first was with some of the images.<sup>152</sup>

Brotherus considers carefully how to compose her images, and she prefers natural light over artificial. The main idea of the series being aesthetics, the lighting and the colours are always pleasing. In that sense, Sherman is probably focusing more on the narrative and the character, while Brotherus sees the image as a whole – she is just one part of it, a familiar sign.

With *The New Painting*, domestic environments have not been playing that big of a part in Brotherus' work anymore, although some images, like *Femme à sa toilette*, have been captured in domestic spaces. A notable amount of these images has been taken in different bathroom settings. Intimacy of the bathroom images is combining Sherman's and Brotherus' work, although it should be acknowledged, that it is addressed in different ways. While Brotherus has usually captured herself naked – in the bathtub or drying up after a bath -, Sherman's characters are wrapped in towels or wearing their night dresses – which are usually considered as intimate, private situations. A part of the reason might be their sources of inspirations; women in paintings are often nude, women in the mass media around 50s and 60s were not.

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<sup>152</sup> Respini, 2012, p. 20

## Chapter 4: Iiu Susiraja

Iiu Susiraja, another Finnish contemporary artist, is working with self-portraits, still lifes and video, in which different domestic objects are playing an important role. She has executed most of her pictures at her or her parents' home, in different domestic settings. Despite of the traditional starting point of the images, home, the provocative way she uses domestic items in this environment leaves the spectator abashed. Susiraja has folded shirts stuck under her breasts in one picture and a colourful duster between her legs in the other, she has put a toilet seat around her neck, posing for the camera a fake flower in her mouth and she has stuck an ice cream cone on her forehead, letting the ice cream melt and run down on her face. In the middle of these odd performances Susiraja is staring at the viewer looking serious, like challenging them.<sup>153</sup>

Later, Susiraja has expanded the variety of spaces in her photographs, and she has made a series of images in a hotel room and a studio-like setting. Different objects are still playing an important part in her work, and her latest body of work could be seen as a hybrid of self-portraiture and still life, due to the way she uses household objects to create a setting.<sup>154</sup> Different strips of canvas have been attached to a backdrop frame in front of which Susiraja has located different objects; an old armchair and strips of bacon on it in one image, pile of old televisions and different vases on them in the other. Despite of changing her working environment, Susiraja still represents

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<sup>153</sup> Susiraja, 2019

<sup>154</sup> Susiraja's website – Photos [Online] <https://www.iiususiraja.com/photos/>

herself in the familiar way, in the middle of a weird performance, meeting the viewer's gaze with a serious stare.

Some of Susiraja's images belong to certain series, such as *Kaunis tuhmuus / Beautiful Naughtiness*, *Hyvä käytös / Good Behaviour* and *Syömään, pöytä on katettu / Dinner Is Served*<sup>155</sup>, but most of them are not a part of any particular group of images. However, her latest photographs have been taken in different locations which divides them into categories: the images taken in the green hotel room, in the home studio, on the gym machine. Every image has been titled, usually in a witty, sometimes even provocative way - *Flirting with the Toilet Seat Cover* (2018) and *Goodbye Playboy Cover* (2018) - leading the viewer's thinking process while observing the images. On the contrary, some images have been titled just after the certain item used in the performance, for example, *Broom* (2010) and *Rolling Pin* (2010). Susiraja herself has commented her works by saying: "I want to make you viewers feel the same things that I've felt"<sup>156</sup>

While Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* and Susiraja's works are differing from each other quite much what comes to their style and visual elements, they are sharing the aspects of domesticity and women's roles in society. Sherman's settings have been built around the fictional character, and the domestic environment is making the scene look convincing. Susiraja builds her images around chosen object(s) and locates herself in the scene. Sherman's characters are representing stereotypes, the pictures the mass media has created of women. Most of the items in Susiraja's works are associated with women or domestic chores that traditionally are seen as women's responsibility. She

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<sup>155</sup> Susiraja, 2019

<sup>156</sup> Susiraja, 2019, p.15

has stated that it is important that the object(s) in her images are easy for everyone to recognise<sup>157</sup>, thus they are objects familiar from every home. However, she is not using them in the stereotypical, expected way, but creating a contradiction between traditional and expected and the absurdity of her performances. Another contradiction in Susiraja's works is the humorous acts together with the artist's serious facial expression, while she looks back at the observer of her images. Is it allowed to laugh?

Quite Similar to Sherman's statements of not making particularly feminist art, Susiraja states that she is not criticising traditional standards for women in the society, but her working process purely starts with the object(s) she has chosen to work with.<sup>158</sup>

However, instead of representing stereotypes, Susiraja tends to surprise the viewer by the ways she is using different domestic items in her performances, thus representing domesticity in completely different light: parodying it. Many of the acts and titles of the images refer to sex, as the artist places objects near her groin, to be associated with sex organs – a duster, a rolling pin, a pie – or sexual act – a teddy bear's head pushed between her legs with the title *Leikkihetki / Time to Play* (2018). She is also emphasising her other body parts that are traditionally considered to be sexual<sup>159</sup>, for example, putting different objects around or under her breasts, such as folded shirts, a broom, or a pair of tights.

According to Susiraja, people tend to think that art should be beautiful. She has a different idea about art, thinking it should be truthful instead of focusing on beauty. To be able to produce truthful art she sees using herself as her own model an important

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<sup>157</sup> Susiraja, 2019, p. 61

<sup>158</sup> Susiraja, 2019, p. 61

<sup>159</sup> Susiraja, 2019, p. 51

aspect, as she does not believe that the end result would be the same if she used someone else as a model in her settings<sup>160</sup>. Her trademark, the serious stare, is also an attempt to be as truthful and real as possible, not to pose for the camera, as well as a consciously created contradiction, as describes her works as “humorous and serious”.<sup>161</sup> Aside of being truthful, she has also stated that there are practical reasons for decision to her work alone: it is easier to focus, she is always present and ready, and it would feel difficult to ‘humiliate’ other people.<sup>162</sup>

Iiu Susiraja has her own websites,<sup>163</sup> and her works are also represented by Nino Mier Gallery<sup>164</sup> and Makasiini Contemporary Gallery online.<sup>165</sup> She has an Instagram account,<sup>166</sup> which she is updating quite regularly. Despite of having 17 000 followers, her images are not getting that many comments and the nature of them is almost totally positive. Rather than analysing Susiraja’s works, her followers are usually complimenting them, and majority is reacting just by emojis, such as hearts. Her works have been shown in solo and group exhibitions in Finland and internationally<sup>167</sup>, and her works have been published in a catalogue *Dry Joy*.

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<sup>160</sup> Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma – Iiu Susiraja [Online] <https://kiasma.fi/en/exhibitions/iiu-susiraja/>

<sup>161</sup> The Finnish Museum of Photography – Iiu Susiraja [Online] <https://www.valokuvataiteenmuseo.fi/fi/kokoelmat/epamukavuutta-ja-kehtaamista>

<sup>162</sup> The Finnish Museum of Photography – Iiu Susiraja [Online] <https://www.valokuvataiteenmuseo.fi/fi/nayttelyt/arjen-tyylipuhdas-suoritus>

<sup>163</sup> <https://www.iiususiraja.com>

<sup>164</sup> Nino Mier Gallery: <https://www.miergallery.com/artists/iiu-susiraja>

<sup>165</sup> Makasiini Contemporary Gallery: <https://makasiinicontemporary.com/artists/80-iiu-susiraja/works/>

<sup>166</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/iiu.susiraja/>

<sup>167</sup> Susiraja’s websites – CV [Online] <https://www.iiususiraja.com/cv/>

## Case Studies

While Brotherus' and Kannisto's works are easier to compare with Sherman's, especially when looking at the earlier series such as *Untitled Film Stills*, Susiraja's images are quite different visually, and not as straightforwardly comparable with Sherman's. Due to this reason, Susiraja's chosen works will be visually analysed and then compared with already introduced examples by Sherman and Brotherus, based on the domestic links – the environments – represented in photographs.

First image is probably one of Susiraja's most well-known works, *Broom* (2010) [Fig. 25] from the series *Good Behaviour*, which she executed when she was still studying photography at Turku University of Applied Sciences Art Academy. In the image, Susiraja is standing in the middle of a mundane, home-like setting, a broom tucked under her breasts and seriously staring at the viewer. Both lighting and the colours of the image are neutral, and the composition looks carefully considered, although due to the horizontal photograph, Susiraja's feet have been cropped out of the image. The harmonic colours and the neat setting make Susiraja's performance stand out of its surroundings, leaving the viewer confused. The title is not offering any explanations but pointing out the important role of the broom.

The room Susiraja has chosen as her stage, is from a very normal and Nordic-looking home, a combination of a kitchen and a dining room. All the other items and furniture in the photograph seem to be in their customary places, everything looking normal. The milieu of the image is domestic, and the broom is a domestic item, associated with cleaning and house chores. However, Susiraja is not using it for sweeping floors but, in



a way, wears it instead. The nature of the image is definitely provocative, and the artist's stare highlights it. As the broom is tucked under her breasts, it could be argued that there is also a sexual undertone.

Nevertheless, Susiraja is not representing herself as a passive object of anyone's gaze but being in an active role in her own performance: she is deciding what happens in her artwork and what the viewer can see. By looking straight back at the viewer, she also makes the situation more equal – she is not just been looked at, the artist and the viewer are looking at each other. The setting is unusual and due to the contradicting nature of the image, the viewer needs to consider how to react to it. Is it acceptable to laugh as Susiraja is using the broom in such a weird way? Should the viewer remain serious according to the artist own facial expression? The playful performance collides with the seriousness and direct stare of the artist.

Even though the title of the image is not leading to any associations, the name of the series, *Good Behaviour*, might give the viewer better insight to the photograph.

Susiraja is not really behaving badly but against the norms in her image. Even though her performance with the broom is in the main role, she has also done other choices that are breaking the customary gender roles – she is not smiling or wearing make-up, thus she is not trying to appear as beautiful as possible. She is representing a marginalised body type, but she is not trying to hide it, she is not even looking ashamed. With the title of the series, she questions the definition of good behaviour, suggesting that performing against the norms and traditions in our society, her behaviour would be considered as bad. By questioning these traditions and norms she

is turning the bad behaviour into good behaviour – like the title suggests - something that women should aspire to achieve.

*Broom* is not taken in any specific room, but in between of spaces of the kitchen and dining room. According to that, the image could be compared with *Untitled Film Still #14*, [Fig. 15.] in which Sherman has pictured her character also in the middle of the domestic space. There is a drawer behind the woman and a dining room table in front of her, but it is not clear what the room in question actually is – probably a dining room or living room. Both spaces look tidy and neatly arranged, all the items are in their places. Lighting and shadows are not dramatic in either of the photographs, drawing the attention of the viewer to the women in them.

The biggest contrast between the photographs is the woman figure in them. While they are both having active roles, Sherman's character is captured in the middle of – assumably - doing or saying something, looking out of the frame like interacting with someone. On the contrary, Susiraja is standing still, and interacting with the viewer, staring right back at them a serious expression on her face, while executing her performance with the broom. Sherman's image is convincing, representing a normal situation from everyday life, thus, making it easy to relate to. Susiraja, however, is picturing something absurd, a weird way to use a familiar cleaning equipment – also from everyday life.

In *Housekeeping Service* (2017) [Fig. 26] Susiraja is standing sideways to the camera, wearing just white top and underpants, holding a colourful duster between her legs. The natural light is not creating dramatic shadows anywhere, and all the colours in the

image are very neutral and pale. For this reason, the multicoloured duster draws the spectator's attention to it immediately. Next the spectator's attention is drawn to Susiraja herself, who is placed herself in the middle of the image. After observing the person and the performance with the domestic object, the spectator's focus moves on to the space around the person.

The composition in the picture is interesting as Susiraja is representing herself in another room, while the spectator had been left outside of it. The doorway is forming a frame around her, through which the spectator is peeping in. Susiraja has turned her head towards the spectator and seriously looks back at them. The composition and Susiraja's clothing together with the performance are creating an intimate atmosphere, giving an idea of looking something very private, something that is not meant to be seen by others.

The setting is simple and mundane. Apart from the wardrobes on Susiraja's right side, there is no furniture to be seen. Despite of that, the spectator can recognise it as a house, likely the artist's home. Even though the situation seems private and intimate, the artist comes across as a distant person. She has chosen to be in a different room than a spectator and controls their view: Susiraja is seeing a completely different room, and that room is invisible to the spectator apart from that glimpse they can get through the doorway.

A duster is a domestic object, used for cleaning and can be associated with house chores. The title of the image, *Housekeeping Service*, refers to cleaning as well. As actual housekeeping service that cleans other people's houses and hotel rooms seems

like an unlikely option, the name is probably a witty allusion of house chores that traditionally have been associated with women. The word 'service' has also a sexual tone in it, especially when considering the way, the duster is placed between Susiraja's legs. When thinking about it further, the duster can also be associated with, for example, tail of a bird. Although, contradicting, male birds have brighter colours so they would attract mates, while females' plumage is more difficult to spot from its surroundings.

But being intimate, the atmosphere in the picture is also very provocative. Susiraja is not ashamed of showing her body or representing herself in the middle of a performance. It could also be seen playful and humoristic, but the artist's facial expression creates a contradiction between the absurd situation and Susiraja's serious stare. The image might contain several messages, for example, protest traditional gender roles and chores related to them as the duster is not used like it is expected to be used. It can also be seen as a statement against prevalent beauty standards in society, and when analysing in a larger scale, a statement against of how women have been seen in art and society.

What comes to the setting, the image has same visual elements than Brotherus' *Annonciation 5*, [Fig. 16.] and Sherman's *Untitled Film Still #82* [Fig. 17.]. The distance between the women and the viewer in all the images is executed by taking the photographs from different rooms, thus, indicating that the viewer and the women are in different spaces. This setting is suggesting that there is not just physical but also emotional distance between the woman figures and the viewer and creating the same

sense of voyeurism to all the images - making the viewer feel that they are watching something private, maybe seeing something they are not meant to be seen.

While Brotherus' photograph is autobiographical, thus capturing a real situation, and Sherman's representing a convincing scene from a made-up film, Susiraja's image is not making sense in a similar way. There is no reason or explanation to use a duster in the way she does, and when the atmosphere is melancholic in Brotherus' image, and almost scary in Sherman's, Susiraja's image is making the viewer confused. The performance could be seen as comical, but Susiraja's facial expression is creating a contradiction between the act and her appearance. Sherman and Brotherus have also turned their faces away, not looking towards the camera, unlike Susiraja, who has turned her head to meet the spectator's gaze.

*Happy Bride* (2017) [Fig. 27.] represents Susiraja in a romantically decorated bedroom, sat on the edge of the bed, in the foreground of the image. She has located herself so close to the camera, that her feet have been cropped out of the photograph. Wearing just black top and underpants, she has pulled a white, decorative, and transparent fabric over her head and face, like a veil. In her mouth she has a sausage, in a way that it resembles a smile. Behind the props Susiraja has the familiar, serious expression on her face, and she meets the viewer's gaze through the transparent fabric.

The first two photographs were taken in natural light, during daytime. Here the lighting is artificial, appearing softer and there is a yellow tone in it. It is easy to associate it with evening or even night, but the viewer cannot be sure as there are no windows to be seen. There are bedside tables on the either side of the bed which appears in the

middle of the image. Small lamps on the tables are so bright that they are overexposing the wallpaper around them. Everything in the room – pictures on the walls, the bed, the floral wallpaper, the bedspread – is very decorative, and looking quite old. Despite the dark picture frames and the bed, everything is sedate and pastel coloured.

Typically to Susiraja's works, the harmonic atmosphere is broken by her performance, which is creating a contradictory between the interior design and the subject of the image. Also, the contrast between the title and the actual image is notable: Susiraja is not looking happy, nor is she a bride. The witty way of using objects and food to create a humoristic impression of being 'a happy bride' contradicts with Susiraja's facial expression, which is the opposite to happy. Her body language and position on the edge of the bed are looking uncomfortable as well: she is not appearing to be relaxed. Like in many Susiraja's photographs, there is also the familiar sexual overtone in it: she is executing the performance in her underwear and the sausage in her mouth could be associated with a phallus.

As Susiraja is representing herself as a bride and a phallus can be associated with fertility or potency, it could refer to the wedding night. The image could refer to traditional gender roles and expectations, the old-looking furniture and decoration of the room can be associated with the age of the issues. The contradiction between the title of the image and her facial expression could reflect her feelings about it. Like in the previous image, Susiraja is not trying to cover her body but represents it as it is. It can be interpreted as an aspiration to represent marginalised bodies and protesting repressive beauty standards along with other issues.

Sherman's *Untitled Film Still #33* [Fig. 8.] is also captured in a bedroom, representing a woman character sitting on a bed. Unlike Sherman, who appears in the foreground of the image, Sherman's character is located in the background, creating more distance between the viewer and the character. Different objects, a letter on the bed in the foreground of Sherman's image, and a framed picture of someone on a bedside table in the background of it, are creating a narrative and hinting of someone's – assumably previous – presence. Sherman's way to represent her character and Susiraja's performance for the camera are, again, the biggest contrast between the two images. In Susiraja's photograph the main object is a sausage that Susiraja is holding in her mouth, so it resembles a smile. Together with the title *Happy Bride*, it is also leading the narrative, suggesting that Susiraja is not being happy at all, although in a witty way, while Sherman's approach is serious. However, the title is also leading to an assumption of someone else's previous or upcoming presence, as bride is usually expected to be with her husband.

*Goodbye playboy cover* (2018) [Fig. 28.] differs from all the previous images with its location and style. The artist's home has changed to a hotel room. When the colours have previously been neutral, here the walls and the bed are different shades of green, while the carpet and curtains are red. The lighting still looks natural, but this time it is not flat. Instead, it creates dark shadows into the room. The perspective has also changed: the spectator is able to see almost the whole room. Susiraja has positioned herself on the right side of the image, the bed being in the middle of the room.

Wearing a magenta t-shirt, underpants, and a headband from which a pair of bunny ears have been cut off, she stands facing the spectator, holding a pair of scissors in her other hand and the cut bunny ears in the other. Despite all the differences, Susiraja has still a familiar, serious facial expression when she looks back towards the spectator. However, the atmosphere seems slightly changed, alongside with provocative stare and radical, rebellious act of cutting off the bunny ears, it gives a melancholic impression. The strong colours and shadows are highlighting it, and making the setting look more dramatic than in the previous images.

The dynamic of domesticity is different in this picture, as it can be questioned if a hotel room is a domestic space, although hotel rooms can be seen as copies of bedrooms or small flats and there are many home-related furniture and objects. Compared to *Broom*, the performance is less dramatic. Previously, Susiraja has used domestic objects in extraordinary ways in her images, but this time the object's intended use plays a bigger role: scissors are meant to be used for cutting and that is what Susiraja has done with them. It is also important aspect that the actual performance has already been done when the photograph has been made, Susiraja is just showing the bunny ears and scissors to the spectator, explaining the viewer what has happened before.

Like in the previous images, there are some sex-related associations in the photograph and its title, for example the bunny ears, *Playboy*-magazine, and a hotel room. The literal usage of scissors, the violent act of cutting of the bunny ears from the headband and the title of the image can be seen as a statement about and against objectifying and sexualising women in society. It can also be seen as a provocative statement



against bodies that are represented in the mass media and beauty standards we have in our society, as Susiraja represents body type that is rarely seen in, for example, magazines like *Playboy*. However, even if the photograph seems to be more straightforward than the previous ones, the spectator cannot be sure what the artist's initial idea was. This straightforwardness has also affected the atmosphere of the image: there is no humour involved anymore.

*Goodbye Playboy Cover* could also be compared with *Untitled Film Still #33*, as the bed dominating the space is easy to be associated with a bedroom. The character in *Untitled Film Still #11*[Fig. 21.] is also represented in a bedroom, although lying on the bed, while Susiraja is standing beside it. As in other examples of Susiraja's work before, her representations are differing from Sherman's as she is looking at the viewer. In these two film stills, Sherman's characters are not seeming to be interacting with anyone outside of the frame, they seem to be more focused on themselves and their feelings, as both images have rather melancholic atmosphere. While Susiraja's works usually have comedic elements in them, this image is not playing with humour and seriousness, but the atmosphere seems to be quite sad as well.

As objects in both Sherman's photographs are important elements to create the drama around the situations and the characters – the letter in the other image, the tissue, or a piece of paper in the other – the same can be seen in Susiraja's photograph. While her performances could usually be described as absurd, this time there is a different kind of narrative.

*Quality Time* (2018) [Fig. 29.] also differs from the first three photographs. This time the performance piece has been made in a studio-like setting. The composition, however, leaves the spectator confused. Instead of a proper backdrop, there are two strips of blue velvet fabric attached to the backdrop frame. They are also attached to each other with clips, so the wall behind would not be visible. However, the picture has been taken so far from the setting that the viewer is able to see its surroundings. The grey concrete walls and the pipelines near the ceiling connote a cellar or a garage.

Combination of the setting and its surroundings is chaotic, the backdrop frame is not in the middle of the image, it is wonky, and a big studio light is protruding above it. Partly in front of the blue backdrop, Susiraja is standing in a stripy swimsuit, holding an old, portable television by its handle and staring at the viewer with the familiar serious expression on her face. In the foreground of the image is a pile of old televisions and different ornamental vases located on top of them. One plain vase with yellow flowers is put on the floor by the televisions and a dog leash has been strung around it. The other end of the leash is attached to a red collar Susiraja is wearing around her neck.

Comparing to the previous images, the setting is not that simple and mundane anymore, even though the objects are familiar from everyday life. The environment is not looking domestic either, the links to domesticity are the objects, recognisable from any home. Although, comparing to the previous images, the chosen objects here are considerable old. In the previous pictures, the lighting used to be natural, which is not the case this time. Also, neutral colours have changed to different colours, patterns, and materials. While the furniture and objects were in their customary places in the

other images, now the setting resembles an installation. In a whole, the setting looks complicated, and it is not clear where the spectator's attention is supposed to be drawn first.

The blue velvet backdrop resembles water and the swim costume Susiraja is wearing validates that. The title might refer to the televisions, as the time spent in front of a television at home is usually called 'quality time'. Here the televisions are facing the viewer and Susiraja is standing behind them. As the televisions are not on, the viewer's focus moves on to Susiraja, who is in an active role in the image. Her position in the photograph, together with the portable television she is holding, are separating her from the rest of the setting. As mentioned before, Susiraja's body is representing a marginalised body type in society, thus not fitting in the set beauty standards. This might mean that she rarely sees relatable bodies on television. The pile of different televisions might refer to society and as some of the televisions are older than others, it could symbolise the age of the issue.

The leash could be addressing Susiraja's feelings, as she is literally tied up and to the setting while standing apart from it. The decorated vases are all empty, while the one she is tied up to is ascetic but has flowers in it. This can be seen as a contrast between inner and outer beauty and considered as a symbol of how the focus in society is often on people's looks. The image might be a statement about and against established beauty standards and address the mass media's effects on them. Although the self-reflexive mode is visible in all five case studies of Susiraja's, it is strongest in this one, as Susiraja so clearly has constructed the setting around herself and aspiring to create

a narrative through it, thus being undoubtedly an author of the image rather than just representing the self.

This particular image is difficult to pair up with any earlier case studies, as the domesticity in it is not tied in a specific room or a space but linked to the objects. While the backdrop frame and the setting look home-made instead of professional, suggesting that there is a link to home and thus, domesticity, *Quality Time* refers more to Sherman's work on idea-level than visually. When observing the ideas of Sherman's and Susiraja's photographs in general, there are many similarities. Domestic environments and objects within them are obvious resemblances, but for example, the mass media in its different forms has been a huge source of inspiration for Sherman, especially with her earlier works, in which she has explored movies, television and centerfolds of magazines. In *Quality Time*, the televisions could be seen to represent similar elements, referring to the mass media, although not representing a stereotype, which is one of the biggest differences between Sherman's and Susiraja's works. While they are both potentially used the mass media as one of their sources of inspiration, Sherman's characters from *Untitled Film Stills* and *Rear Screen Projections* are representations of the stereotypical image the mass media has shown to public. On the contrary, Susiraja is representing the opposite type of woman, type that has been marginalised by the mass media and society.

The same initial setting can be seen in *Goodbye Playboy Cover*, that refers to men's magazine, known for representing pictures of nude women, and Sherman's Centerfolds that stressed the same issue – women represented in the centerfolds of magazines. The types of their representations differ, Sherman focusing more on

stereotypes, and this way highlighting the objectification of women, Susiraja picturing her body that is not normally seen in the kind of magazines of question.

Sherman's and Susiraja's working methods could be argued to be reminiscent: they are both using different props to create the setting – Sherman is constructing it around the character, Susiraja around the object(s) and the performative nature is also present in their works. However, Susiraja is picturing herself as herself unlike Sherman whose characters are all fictive. Apart from being just hybrids of self-portraits and still lifes, Susiraja's works can also be considered as self-reflexive and to represent a mode of self-projections through using iconography, as if the chosen objects in the images are used to tell a story to the viewer. Self-projections being a possible way to classify Sherman's art works rather than simply categorising them self-portraits, creates another connection between Sherman's and Susiraja's works.

## Conclusion

As noted in this thesis, Sherman's body of work differs from the traditional idea of self-portraiture, and she herself has tried to separate her work from the genre by stating that her works are not self-portraits. While Sherman's art works have significantly affected and altered the idea of self-portraiture in the field of contemporary photography, and thus, inspired many contemporary artists, I would argue that Sherman's works form their own paradigm, which could be considered as self-reflexive and representing self-projections rather than self-portraits. This is shown through the identification of iconographical schemes in the case studies of Sherman's work, and furthermore in Finnish artists'; all pointing out that visual methods are more to the fore than a portrayal of self, meaning that the photographs are showing awareness of their making by an author rather than simply representing the author as self. While elements of Sherman's works can be seen in all Finnish artists, Kannisto's, Brotherus' and Susiraja's works, they have all created their own variations of them. Domesticity is also playing an important part in all their works, but it is shown in different ways – as forms of spaces and objects, and different usage of them.

The introduced, possible reasons for using domesticity in female self-portraiture were, *inter alia*, practicality, familiarity, and engagement of the spaces, drawing attention to aspects that the artists are hoping to be changed or abandoned, and creating a new language by using an old, familiar one. Sherman can be seen representing all of these during her long career, while she has both observed stereotypes – *Untitled Film Stills*, *History Portraits* - and tried to see behind them, for example, when representing other sides of the fashion world and fairy tales.

Kannisto's images and working process are most related to Sherman's, her working method of focusing on stereotypes and mundane to affect the image of women, together with the visual styles of her images, are making them feel and look like modern versions of Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* and *Rear Screen Projections*.

Kannisto's works could also be seen as an example of domestic self-portraits that are picturing womanhood to draw attention to it – and things the artist is hoping to change.

Sherman and Brotherus have most in common when observing the initial ideas – womanhood, everyday, universal themes, taboos - of their photographs, and the visual elements in them. While Sherman is aspiring to construct the narrative through her settings and characters, highlighting that they are all fictional, Brotherus represents either her own life, or her body as a 'sign'. Stereotypes – the mass media and art history - are interesting both of them, although they are approaching the issues from different perspectives. What comes to domesticity, Brotherus is approaching it with autobiographical angle, aspiring to affect society's expectations related to gender. For example, having children and being a mother have been strongly associated with femininity and womanhood,<sup>168</sup> probably related to the belief of women naturally feeling need to nurture.<sup>169</sup> In her series *Annonciation*, Brotherus has represented herself failing to fulfil something that is considered natural part of being a woman, challenging the term 'feminine' and its associations and expectations.

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<sup>168</sup> Meskimmon, 1996, p. 138

<sup>169</sup> Meskimmon, 1996, p. 146

Sherman and Susiraja are both performing for the camera, Sherman through masquerade and Susiraja by using domestic objects. While their working process is similar – constructing the narrative around a character or an object – their relationship to the self-portraiture differs: Sherman is claiming that her photographs are not being self-portraits, Susiraja pictures herself as herself. However, the same themes Sherman has focused on her works – domesticity, the mass media, womanhood, sex – recurs in Susiraja's images, while she has moved away from stereotypes. Iu Susiraja's work can be seen as an example of the usage of 'familiar visual language' and a 'new language' in her images, in which she is representing herself in familiar, domestic settings with recognisable domestic items. The familiar backgrounds and objects used in extraordinary ways could be seen as an example of using 'new visual language' to express one's feelings.

Finally, one of the aims of the research was to observe what kind of discourse these three Finnish artists are creating of self-portraiture and female artists in Finland. While it needs to be acknowledged that women – nor Finnish women, or even Finnish female artists - are not forming just one group that can be observed as a whole, I would argue that in these images domestic spaces are not appearing just as oppressive places, but spaces female artists are controlling and creatively using to address their chosen issues. Kannisto's, Brotherus' and Susiraja's works are proving, that the genre can and will continue evolving and that the domestic aspects are essential sources of inspiration for female artists. Observing them is but interesting, also still relevant in contemporary art, as domesticity has such strong associations and traditional relations to femininity and art produced by female artists bound to it.



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## Appendices



Fig. 1. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #3*, 1977, The Museum of Modern Art New York, Gelatin silver print, 18 x 24 cm



Fig. 2. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #10*, 1978, The Museum of Modern Art New York, Gelatin silver print, 18.6 x 24 cm



Fig. 3. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #97*, 1982, Chromogenic colour print, 114.3 x 76.2 cm





Fig. 4. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #98*, 1982, Chromogenic colour print, 114.3 x 76.2 cm





Fig. 5. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #99*, 1982, Chromogenic colour print, 114.3 x 76.2 cm



Fig. 6. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #413*, 2003, Chromogenic colour print, 116.8 x 79.1 cm



Fig. 7. Aino Kannisto, *Untitled (Girl on Bed)*, 2003, C-Print, Diasec, 90 x 118 cm



Fig. 8. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #33*, 1979, The Museum of Modern Art New York, Gelatin silver print, 18.4 x 24 cm





Fig. 9. Aino Kannisto, *Untitled (Bogota Kitchen)*, 2013, Archival pigment print, Diasec, 90 x 140 cm



Fig. 10. Aino Kannisto, *Untitled (Green Window)*, 2005, C-Print, Diasec, 90 x 116 cm



Fig. 11. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #38*, 1979, The Museum of Modern Art New York, Gelatin silver print, 24 x 18.3 cm

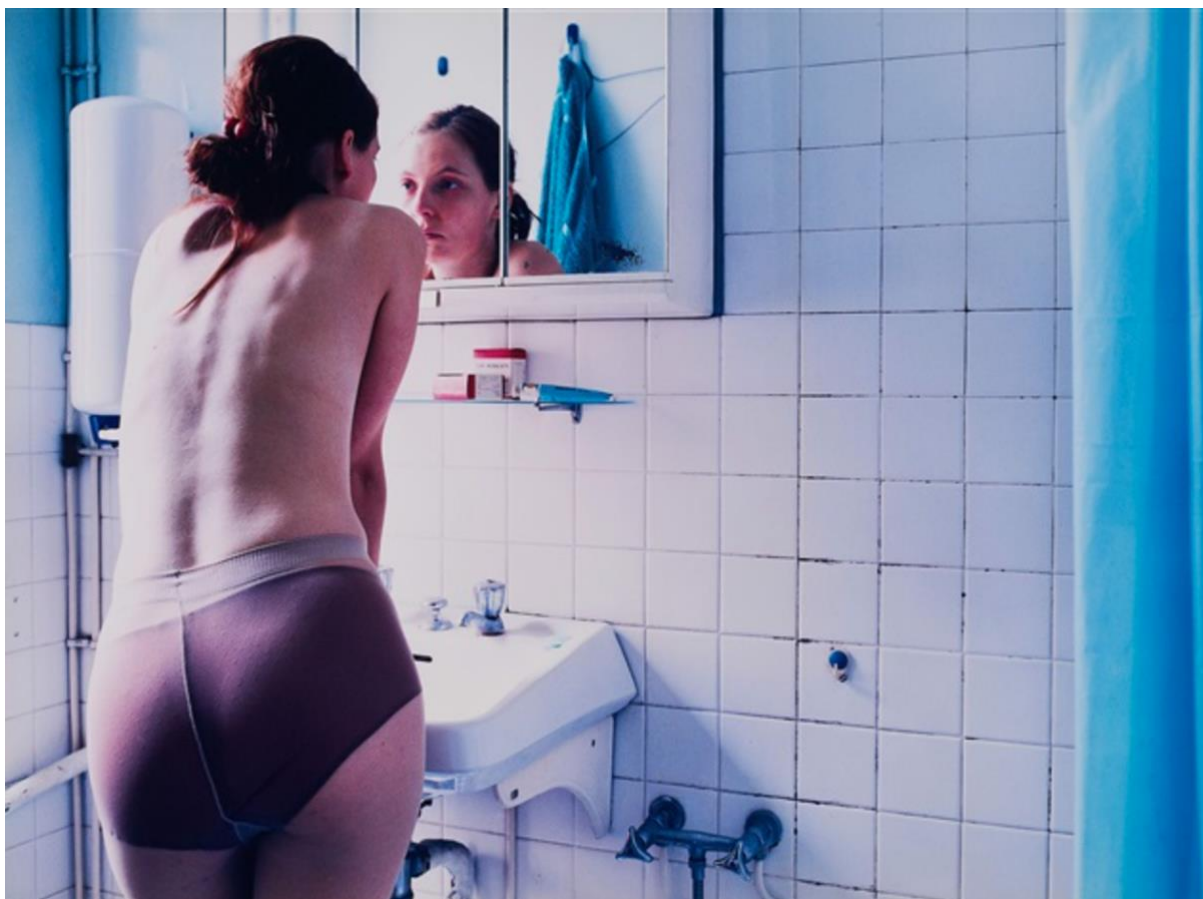


Fig. 12. Aino Kannisto, *Untitled (Mirror II)*, 2002, C-Print, 90 x 121 cm





Fig. 13. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #81*, 1980, The Museum of Modern Art New York, Gelatin silver print, 24 x 16.7 cm



Fig. 14. Aino Kannisto, *Untitled (Flower Pattern)*, 2013, Archival pigment print, Diasec, 90 x 132 cm





Fig. 15. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #14*, 1978, The Museum of Modern Art New York, Gelatin silver print, 24 x 19.1 cm



Fig. 16. Elina Brotherus, *Annonciation 5*, Avallon 19.12.2010, Pigment ink print, 30 x 19 cm



Fig. 17. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #82*, 1980, The Museum of Modern Art New York, Gelatin silver print, 24 x 16.7 cm



Fig. 18. Elina Brotherus, *Annonciation 8*, Avallon 12.04.2011, Pigment ink print, 30 x 39 cm





Fig. 19. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #15*, 1978, The Museum of Modern Art New York, Gelatin silver print, 24 x 19.1 cm



Fig. 20. Elina Brotherus, *Annonciation 18*, 2012, Pigment ink print, 30 x 35 cm



Fig. 21. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #11*, 1978, The Museum of Modern Art New York, Gelatin silver print, 17.9 x 24 cm



Fig. 22. Elina Brotherus, *This is the first day of the rest of your life III*, 1998, 70 x 88 cm  
(edition: 10)





Fig. 23. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #16*, 1978, The Museum of Modern Art New York, Gelatin silver print, 24 x 19.2 cm





Fig. 24. Elina Brotherus, *Femme à sa toilette*, 2001, 80 x 66 cm, (edition: 6)



Fig. 25. Iiu Susiraja, *Luuta / Broom*, 2010, Colour print, 27 x 31.5 cm



Fig. 26. Iiu Susiraja, *Siivouspalvelu / Housekeeping Service*, 2017, Colour print, 32,4 x 23,4 cm





Fig. 27. Iiu Susiraja, *Iloinen morsian / Happy Bride*, 2017, Colour print, 32,4 x 23,4 cm



Fig. 28. Iiu Susiraja, *Hyvästi Playboy'n kansi / Goodbye Playboy Cover*, 2018, Colour print, 35 x 51 cm





Fig. 29. Iiu Susiraja, *Laatuaikaa / Quality Time*, 2018, Colour print, 67 x 67 cm