

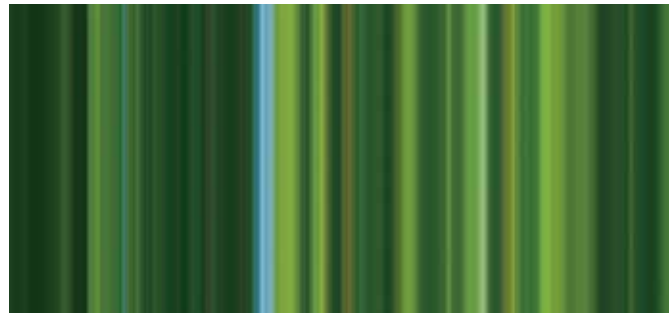
Susan E. Evans

KAIHO

Susan E. Evans | **KAIHO**

Oakland University Art Gallery | September 6 to October 5, 2014 | Curated by Dick Goody

Kaiho is a Finnish word that does not directly translate into English. Kaiho is a state of hopeless, melancholic and/or nostalgic longing for something that is missing or gone. Kaiho is a deep emptiness where profound feelings, both happiness and sadness, exist simultaneously.



on the front cover:
MAISEMA #7, 2014
42 x 90 inches, permanent ink jet mounted to Dibond.

On Beauty and Longing: Susan E. Evans in Finland

by John Corso, Ph.D.

Regarding travel, Marcel Proust said, “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.”¹ This is why artists travel. By submersing themselves in unfamiliar places, artists see freshly again. With her recent sabbatical to Finland – her third trip to that country – Susan E. Evans joins the venerable tradition of artists who take up travel to gain insights and inspiration for their artistic practice. Evans did not go to Finland just for the view – though indeed she did bring back photographs of Finland’s spectacular natural beauty. As a conceptual photographer, Evans’ artist’s residency offered her new theoretical strategies with which to frame the landscape to explore the aesthetic grounds of beauty. The artist returned with a body of work that not only engages the rekindled humanistic discussion on the role of beauty and art, but she adds to that discussion by introducing it to the native Finnish concept of *kaiho*, which insists that beauty functions in part by its reciprocal conjuring of nostalgia, loss, and longing.

Evans first traveled to Finland in 2010 as an artist in residence at the Arteles Creative Residency Program in Haukijärvi. She returned two times, most recently spending three months there. Between trips, Evans obtained research indicating that part of her genetic lineage hailed from Scandinavia. With renewed personal and artistic interest in the region, Evans approached her most recent return with the explicit goal of experimenting widely to explore concepts

relatively new to her practice. During this most recent residency, Evans produced a staggering amount of work in a variety of media, including photography, performance, video, and sculpture. One portfolio within the extensive oeuvre focuses in on the landscape as a trope for the exploration of the sublime. The overall artistic projects Evans undertook in Finland examine a wide variety of topics, but this essay will consider specifically those works that deal with beauty and longing.

Evans noticed immediately the particular light that yields from Finland’s northern latitude, and she exploits this diffuse glow to superb effect. Her digital contact sheets show the traces of her fascination with particulars unique to this forested area of Finland. For instance, one photograph shows the way local farmers shape their haystacks. Other photographs bring to their subjects what Zen students call “beginners mind,” or the ability to approach every object anew. Thus, a grocery store marquee, vernacular architecture, local road signs, and the way that Finnish kitchens are arranged differently than their American counterparts, all appear refreshingly novel. Seeing these unedited digital images is a privilege akin to reading an author’s private notebook. It presents evidence of what particular features catch the interest and imagination of the artist – features often overlooked but profoundly beautiful.

On matters of particular beauty, literary critic Elaine Scarry poses a provocative claim: “Beauty always takes place in the particular, and if there are no particulars, the chances of seeing it go down.”² She made this claim first in her 1998 Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Yale University and again in 1999 in *On Beauty and Being Just*, the published version of those lectures. By attending to the particular, Scarry deftly sidesteps the philosopher’s debates on the nature of beauty (“it is much more difficult to say what ‘Beauty’ unattached to any object is”)³ Evans makes use of the same strategy. She captures not generic scenes but precise vistas made even more specific owing to Finland’s unique light and atmospheric effects. Like an Akira Kurosawa film, Evans patiently waits for unusual weather conditions to particularize each landscape.

Scarry receives credit for reversing what she describes as the “banishing of beauty from the humanities and the last two decades” of the twentieth century.⁴ She defends the critical interest in beauty on the grounds that “beautiful things give rise to the notion of distribution, to a life-saving reciprocity, to fairness not just in the sense of loveliness of aspect but in the sense of ‘a symmetry of everyone’s relation to one another.’”⁵ Others have sufficiently critiqued the mechanics of Scarry’s argument (and I do not wish to rehearse those critiques here). Still, Scarry’s primary contention – that beauty inspires the pursuit of justice – poses such a tantalizing

possibility that scholars and artists will continue to return to her text for some time.

It is within this conversation that I wish to situate a subset of art works that Evans created in 2013. Though her images are breathtakingly beautiful, they also advance the theoretical discussion on beauty that Scarry proposed at the turn of the millennium. One inquiry common to both Evans and Scarry, concerns the act of staring, which Scarry insists is itself evidence of the desire to copy beauty: “Staring [...] is a version of the wish to create; it is directly connected to acts of drawing, describing, composing, lovemaking.”⁶ In a series of single-channel videos, Evans examines the stare. Collectively called *Ylevä* (2013), each twelve-minute, single-channel video presents a view of trees. (*Ylevä* is Finnish for sublime.) The camera fixes motionless on a group of trees shrouded in diffuse winter light. The trees may sway gently, but otherwise the scene does not change except for hesitations in the camera’s focus. Moving in and out of focus – much like when a camera’s autofocus is unable to hone in on its target – the videos offer us a chance to stare at vistas of exceptional beauty. But, importantly, Evans does not present beauty as self-evident, but as something evasive, just out of focus, something not offered fully to the spectator but partially withdrawn.

We stare to take in a scene greedily, and the act of staring suggests a desire to ingest beauty with the eyes. Evans and Scarry both

associate beauty with desire and longing. However, whereas Scarry posits longing as situated within the subject, Evans responds with a reciprocal relationship between subject and object. Scarry connects beauty with the longing for truth: “the beautiful person or thing incites enough the longing for truth [...] The beautiful, almost without any effort of our own, *acquaints us with the mental event of conviction*, and so pleasurable a mental state is this that ever afterwards one is willing to labor, struggle, wrestle with the world to locate enduring sources of conviction – to locate what is true.”⁷ As a mental event, the desire to locate conviction to re-experience pleasure occurs in the mind of the subject. Though not synonymous with truth, beauty affirms its existence and deepens our desire to pursue it.⁸ Scarry’s picture of longing is thus unidirectional and purely subjective.⁹

Evans, on the other hand, introduces the Finnish concept of *kaiho* to counter that the experience of beauty is two-way. We long for the beautiful object, but it returns to us its own image of longing. Finnish linguist Ante Aikio writes, “In standard Finnish, *kaiho* is mainly known in the meaning ‘longing, yearning, wistfulness,’ but in dialects the word also has meanings such as ‘sorrow,’ ‘need, lack,’ ‘worry, fear,’ ‘temper, anger,’ and ‘envy.’”¹⁰ Whereas Scarry characterizes the longing that accompanies beauty positively as a search for truth, Evans concludes the dialectic negatively – the *kaiho* that attaches to beauty combines pleasure with its own longing for completion.

Evans captures the interdependent longing of beauty and its admirer in each of her *Kaiho* photographs. In *Kaiho #23*, a keyhole-shaped opening in a tree-lined road opens onto a fog which engulfs still more trees in the distance. We look desirously down the road, yearning to know what lies ahead. Meanwhile, the empty road returns its gaze to us. In both cases, subject and object exchange stares of longing. In other photographs, Evans sets up foreground barriers to keep the spectator from entering the scene. *Kaiho #2*, for instance, institutes a reversal of the painterly practice of repoussoir, in which artists like Claude Lorraine would invite the spectator into the scene by positioning trees at the left and right edges, drawing the eye inward towards the center. Evans photographs a stand of young birch trees that – like slats of a fence – keep the spectator’s gaze from penetrating deep into the forest. Elsewhere, Evans photographs are veils that withhold the background image. *Kaiho #12* pictures a translucent lace curtain which obscures the view of trees outside of the window. In these cases, the subject studies the scene as if through prison glass, while the scene looks back at us, equally captivated, equally desirous.

The difference between Scarry’s subjective supposition and Evans’ interdependent subject-object exchange becomes clearest in their respective treatments of error and beauty. Scarry contends that we make errors about beauty. Either we fail to recognize the beauty in an object, or else we misattribute beauty to an object devoid of it. In fact, she qualifies the “experience of ‘being in error’ so inevitably

accompanies the perception of beauty that it begins to seem one of its abiding structural features.”¹¹ Cognizant of our susceptibility to error and to be, “momentarily stunned by beauty, the *mind* before long begins to create or to recall and, in doing so, soon discovers the limits of its own starting place. . .”¹² A change thus occurs in the *mind of the subject* that inspires one to pursue a fairer, more just assessment of beauty.

As I have demonstrated, Scarry envisions the potential for change to reside in the mind of the subject, where error might inspire the subsequent search for justice and truth. Though Scarry is wrong to place error solely in the mind of the subject, she is quite right to integrate error into the structure of beauty. Evans approaches error as structurally integral to beauty, as well, but she does so by locating error as the winding course *between* subject and object. Thus, she returns to error its primary but now only poetic sense, which traces error’s meaning as “the action of roaming or wandering; hence a devious or winding course, a roving, winding.”¹³ This sense most closely approaches philosopher Crispin Sartwell, who “attributes beauty neither exclusively to the subject nor to the object, but to the relation between them, and even more widely also to the situation or environment in which they are both embedded.”¹⁴

In her extended performance piece, *Luonnonkaunis Suomi*, which translates to “The Natural Beauty of Finland,” Evans literally embeds the relation between subject and object in the environment. For this project, Evans buried six rolls of film in different natural locations. At each burial site, she photographed the location, marked with a stick and ribbon. She left the chemically sensitive rolls in the ground for two months, then exhumed them. We might expect the resulting negatives – and their subsequent prints – to offer formally interesting “errors” resulting from the chemical degradation from the inhospitable environment. Evans, however, elected to leave the rolls undeveloped. We are left with a sense of *kaiho* – we long to know the contents of the film while the film longs for our contemplation. Beauty emerges, then, neither exclusively from the art object nor from the mind of the viewer. Rather, the beauty of Evans’ work develops from the relation of longing between them.

1. “Marcel Proust,” *The Guardian*, accessed August 10, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jun/11/marcelproust>.
2. Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999): 18.
3. *Ibid.*, 9. It also allows her to avoid a direct confrontation with Kant, who found particular beauty problematic.
4. *Ibid.*, 57. Several of Scarry’s reviewers have questioned whether beauty ever faced such a prohibition. See William Doeski’s book review in *Harvard Review* 18 (Spring, 2000): 179-181.
5. *Ibid.*, 94. N.B. Scarry here quotes John Rawls’ definition of fairness.
6. *Ibid.*, 72.
7. *Ibid.*, 31. Emphasis added.
8. The philosophical question of truth lies outside the scope of this essay.
9. Occasionally, Scarry indicates a more bidirectional “compact, or contract between the beautiful being [...] and the perceiver.” *Ibid.*, 90. It is her case for error, as I will soon show, that suggests that her model is strictly subjective rather than one which depends on the space *between* subject and object.
10. Ante Aikio, “Studies in Uralic Etymology II: Finnic Etymologies,” *Linguistica Uralica* (2014): 3.
11. Scarry, 28.
12. *Ibid.*, 48. Emphasis added.
13. “error, n.”. OED Online. June 2014. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com> (accessed August 14, 2014).
14. Crispin Sartwell, “Beauty,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/beauty/>, accessed August 13, 2014. See also Sartwell’s *Six Names of Beauty* (New York: Routledge, 2004).



KAIHO

I have always known I was adopted. My childhood was trauma-free and healthy; however, I never fit in nor lived anywhere long enough to feel grounded. My adoptive father, a wildlife biologist, moved our family from one U.S. national forest to the next. The forest became my constant, my home and my place. Surrounded by trees, there were no people to analyze, critique, categorize or judge. I felt safe there. Due to advancements in genetic science, I was able to learn about my origins. My natural mother’s ancient ancestors settled in Finland before wandering Northern Europe and landing in the United States. For the first time, I had a biological world context that personally anchored me to a history and place that was “of” me. The fact that more than seventy-five percent of Finland is covered in forest, seemed to make this discovery more symbolic.

I was not prepared for Finland — isolated landscapes, clear lakes, primordial forests, and exquisite light. However, the most transformative experience was the flood of overwhelming emotion — the sense of love, connectedness, relief, sadness, loss, grief and nostalgia. The Finnish have a word for this, ‘kaiho.’ Kaiho is an overwhelming state of nostalgic and melancholic longing for something, or someone, which has been lost. With kaiho there is often an unacknowledged or repressed understanding that whatever has been lost will never be found. What is it to long for something — a home, a place, a history — that you have never known, will never possess, and cannot fully understand?

Kaiho #23, 2013
34 x 54 inches
permanent inkjet print
mounted on Dibond



Kaiho #21, 2012
54 x 34 inches
permanent inkjet print
mounted on Dibond



Kaiho #6, 2013
54 x 34 inches
permanent inkjet print
mounted on Dibond

Kaiho #2, 2012
54 x 34 inches
permanent inkjet print
mounted on Dibond



Kaiho #16, 2013
54 x 34 inches
permanent inkjet print
mounted on Dibond





Kaiho #12, 2012
54 x 34 inches
permanent inkjet print
mounted on Dibond



Kaiho #26, 2013
44 x 44 inches
permanent inkjet print
mounted on Dibond

LUONNONKAUNIS SUOMI

After analyzing a cross-section of Finnish tourism materials, I identified multiple recurring photographic cues used to communicate the “image” of Finland. The consistent use of specific seasonal visual elements makes these images iconic, if not stereotypical. Incorporating these stereotypes, I created descriptive text images based on the Finnish landscape and photographed them onto medium format film. The exposed film was then transported to Finland.

As a means to evidence the ingrained symbiosis between the Finns and their environment, I cordoned off small “plots” of land within a variety of regional ecosystems and “planted” the unprotected exposed rolls of film into the ground. They were left in the earth for two months. During this time, the surrounding soil, vegetation, and weather directly interacted with the exposed photographic materials.

It is not necessary to show the final images because they incorporate the well-established photographic stereotypes of Finnish tourism and are quite familiar to its people and those who travel there. The tension of the work lies in the question of how to handle (or conserve) these final rolls of film. If they remain as they are, the viewer is forced to trust the constraint of the project and will always question the existence of the images. To process the film would take the work in another direction. Not only would I give up my copyright to the images, the final imagery would be evidence of the subjective observer as well as the unpredictable, uncontrollable environment.





Luonnonkaunis Suomi #1
Scenic Finland



Luonnonkaunis Suomi #2 Muotokuvia
Portraits



Luonnonkaunis Suomi #3 Mökki
The Summer Cottage



Luonnonkaunis Suomi #4 Metsä
The Forest



Luonnonkaunis Suomi #5 Sienet ja marjat
Nuts and Berries



Luonnonkaunis Suomi #6 Sauna
Sauna

YLEVÄ

While Pre-Romantic, Burkean and Kantian aesthetic theories of the sublime differ in philosophy, in their deconstruction I have identified several shared fundamentals. Sublimity exists on such a grand scale that it fills the mind completely. Thus, it is an experience and not simply an observation. The vast grandeur of sublimity is impossible to fully absorb, comprehend or articulate; leaving so much more for further reflection. Additionally, at the core of sublimity is a binary, one which overwhelms the senses — real/imagined, terror/ecstasy, pleasure/pain, or attraction/repulsion. A polarizing duality also exists within the Finnish sense of *kaiho*; one where hopeless melancholic/nostalgic longing produces profound simultaneous feelings of happiness and sadness. The deep emptiness of this emotional binary is not only vast and immobilizing, but it is also difficult to understand, reconcile and communicate.

The contradictions within sublimity and *kaiho* are the foundation of *Ylevä* where memory and history are constructed through technological limitations. As with memory over time, technology fails, leaving us without the full picture but longing for mere fragments — vignettes of connection, experience and feeling.





Still from *Ylevä #6*
Digital Video, 12 minutes, 2013

A word from the curator

Susan E. Evans | **KAIHO**

Images rendering a sense of identity are all the more evocative when they incorporate a sense of place. The places we hold dear help ground and grow our sense of self.

In *Kaiho*, a Finnish word evoking the melancholia for a lost paradise, Susan E. Evans explores her identity retrospectively and contemporaneously through photographs made in Finland after discovering that her maternal ancestors originated there.

These images reveal the Finnish landscape accumulatively and poetically. They also explore deeper memories using the very earth itself as a metaphor identity. In one body of work, *Luonnonkaunis Suomi*, she literally interred rolls of 120 Kodak film in rural sites around Finland, documenting their location and then later disinterring the moldering film rolls as evidence of the effects of earth of her origins on the material of her trade. These can be seen alongside her evocative *Kaiho* landscape photographs, which skillfully render

the countryside without seeming to enter into it, keeping us slightly at a distance from the intimacy of actually being there, making them all the more like lamentations for a place recently reclaimed from a tangled history.

Landscape and memory collide in her panoramic *Maisema* series, which evoke the amalgam of hues and tones that conceptually resonate in her formalistically hewn *Kaiho* series.

Rounding off the *Kaiho* oeuvre, the final body of work, *Ylevä*, comprises a series of videos, which focus (and un-focus) meditatively on singular vistas.

History, identity, memory and place are authentic catalysts, which in these new parallel bodies of work legitimize the conceptuality of Evans' emotionally wrought, reflexive vistas.

by Dick Goody

BIO | Susan E. Evans

Susan E. Evans, born in Yankton, South Dakota, is a multi-disciplinary conceptual artist living and working in the Detroit metro area. She received a BFA in photography and holography from Goddard College and an MFA from Cornell University. She has been the recipient of multiple awards and residencies, including a six-month artist residency in the canton of Berne Switzerland; a three-week expedition with The Arctic Circle organization; two three-month residencies at The Arteles Center, in Haukijärvi, Finland; a fellowship at the Center for Photography Woodstock; and an Oakland University faculty research grant.

Selected recent exhibitions include Luovuuden, vapauden ja itseilmaisun puolesta (Creativity, freedom and self-expression), Pispalan Nykytaiteen Keskus (Contemporary Art Center), Tampere, Finland; 'Landmark: the Fields of Photography' at the Somerset House, London, England; *The Unseen Eye:*

Photographs from the W.M. Hunt Collection, Blue Sky Gallery, Portland, Oregon; and *American Contemporary Photography*, Tbilisi History Museum, Karvasla, Georgia.

Susan E. Evans has work appearing in both public and private collections worldwide. Some of which include The George Eastman House Museum, New York; Los Angeles Contemporary Museum of Art, California; Museum of Fine Art, Houston, Texas; Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan; Musée de l'Élysée, Switzerland; Centro De La Imagen, Mexico; Southeast Museum of Photography, Florida; Cincinnati Art Museum, Ohio; Akron Museum of Art, Ohio; The Henry Museum, Oregon; Center for Photography, Woodstock, New York; Center for Creative Photography, Arizona; and Gallery Lichblick, Koln, Germany.

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I would also like to thank each of the following for their generosity, insight and trust, as well as their monumental tolerance and stoic patience. I have learned from each of you. My family (both biological and adopted), Dick Goody, John Corso, Rod Humiecki, Tamara Machmut-Jhashi, Robbie Stewart, Sally Schluter Tardella, Teemu Räsänen, Pekka Ruuska, Hélène Baril, Reetta Pekkanen, Laura Laukkanen, Elsa Trzaska, Jan Baker, Jacky Leow, Laura Phillips, David Lambert, Katie Greer, Bruce Myren, John Goldie, Matthew Mangold, and my new friends, as well as each and every artist resident I met along the way.



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