

Bradley Ertaskiran

Suzy Lake
Distilling Resistance
September 11 to November 1, 2025

For over five decades, American-Canadian artist Suzy Lake has channelled the contradictions of the world around her into bold self-portraiture and performance. Lake's political and artistic consciousness was formed through her social justice work in the civil rights movement in her hometown of Detroit, then sustained by the artist-led cultural boom of 1970s Montreal, where she played a pivotal role in contributing to Conceptualism in Canada and beyond. *Distilling Resistance*, Lake's first major solo exhibition in Montreal in decades, comprises key works made over the artist's prolific career, which map her persistent and rigorous commitment to upending gender, age, and identity constructs, and her forging of a visual and conceptual language of feminist critique still used today.

Lake's seminal artwork, *On Stage* (1972-75)—made in different iterations over several years, here shown in a grid of 84 silver gelatin prints—used herself as a subject for the first time, which would remain a constant in her work. Borrowing from commercial photography modes of the moment that saw women poised but passive, without agency over the making or viewing of their own image, Lake flaunted close-up portraits of herself in exaggerated make-up and fashion poses, interspersed with didactic text that underscored the hypocrisies behind portrayals of women in media (the work was initially dismissed as narcissistic). Staging, mimicry, and masquerade became critical strategies in Lake's repertoire of experimentation and self-expression, used to refute a single and reductive reading of herself as subject.

Decades later, Lake would continue to probe the gender and identity concerns that began her career through candid and intentional performance. Through her alter ego Suzy Spice, an unabashed 55-year old entertainer clad in a leopard leotard, Lake engaged in a hyper-performance akin to the spectacle of internet virality and reality television. In a world disinterested, even repelled, by menopausal bodies, *Forever Young* (2000) resists the representations (or lack of) of aging women in mass media, in full-gloss, lifesized, and sensational fashion. In *Peonies and the Lido* (2000-06), a Dandy-like Lake lounges on an empty beach at season's end, here personifying *Death in Venice's* protagonist, a wilted artist passed his prime, set against images of overripe peonies. Lake unpacks beauty, value, and aging with subtle humour and potent sensitivity.

Through durational performance and photographic techniques, Lake has long engaged with the inevitable passing of time, rooted in the body. Lake's long-exposure series *Extended Breathing* (2008-14) captures the artist in near-perfect stillness in various surroundings, in order to record the act of breathing and, in turn, mortality. Over a one-hour pose, extended shutter speeds convert Lake's minuscule movements into blurs, turning her stillness into a physical feat; to move would be to disappear. Yet, the artist's feet remain in sharp focus, anchored to the earth. It is a work of restraint and quiet persistence, not unlike Lake's earlier *Re-Reading Recovery* series (1994-97) centred on the repeated act of sweeping, that underscores the stamina and fortitude ingrained in women's lives, their bodies, and their labour.

Wherein *On Stage* marks the beginning of Lake's career-long interrogation into perception, image, and gender constructs, *Performing Haute Couture #1* (2014) is its resolved antithesis; composed and commanding, Lake performs the tailored structure of her styled garments with a direct self-assurance typically attributed to the stoic, albeit arrogant, self-portraits of 20th-century male painters. Since stepping in front of the camera in the 1970s, Lake crafted her image with remarkable acuity and prescience, forecasting the pervasiveness of selfhood and self-image in our everyday lives, as bodies (and agency) remain a continued site of contention.

Suzy Lake (b. 1947) is an American Canadian artist based in Toronto, Canada. Her work has been presented extensively at major institutions including the Centre Pompidou-Metz, Museum of Modern Art (New York), Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa), Brandhorst Museum (Munich), Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Vancouver Art Gallery, Santa Monica Museum of Art, Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, and a full-career retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2014. Lake's works have also been featured in several landmark feminist exhibitions, among them *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (curated by Connie Butler, toured 2007-08) and *WOMAN: The Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s, Works from the Sammlung Verbund, Vienna* (toured 2013-18), and are held in private and public collections worldwide.