THIS IS FINLAND

2026–27

HOW DO YOU DESIGN HAPPINESS?

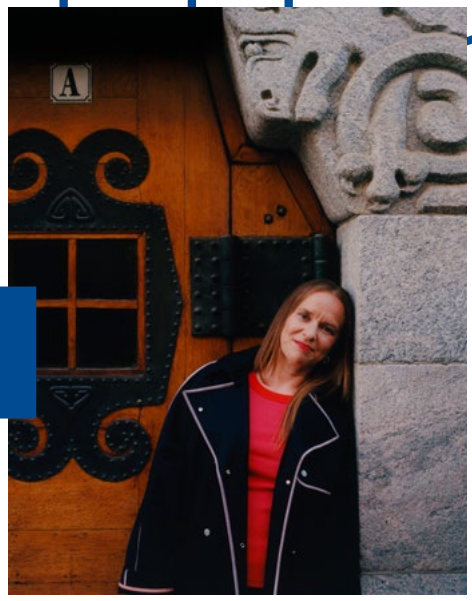
SATU RÄMÖ'S NORDIC NOIR REVOLUTION

"WE ALL CARRY A DEEP, DARK WELL WITHIN US"

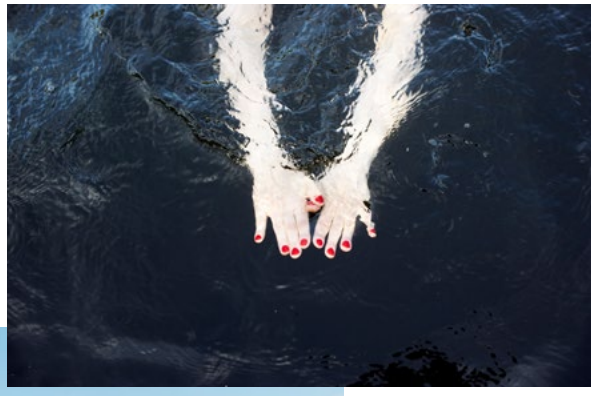
MASTERS OF SNOW-HOW
From icebreakers to snow storage

THE JOY OF SWIMMING
"People always come out of the lake smiling"

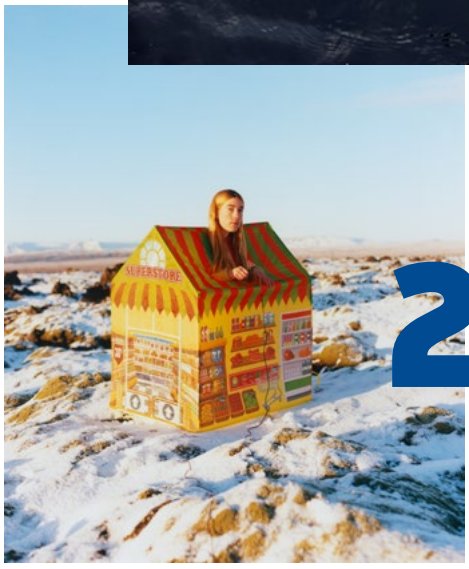
THIS IS



4



16



26

From our contributors

"The star of our cover story is the Nordic noir queen **Satu Rämö**. Stories of her genre usually take place in darkness, but our team wanted to play with the endless light of a Finnish summer evening. As a dramatic backdrop, we picked another intriguing element: art nouveau architecture, locally known as Jugend, popular in the 1900s. Architects in Finland took the movement in their own direction, drawing heavily from Finnish nature, mythology and medieval motifs. The photoshoot took place in Luotsikatu in Katajanokka – recently voted the most beautiful street in Helsinki." **PRODUCER EEVA KYLÉN**

3 FROM THE EDITOR

4 COVER STAR **Satu Rämö's Nordic noir hit – Why the world loves Hildur?**

10 SNOW-HOW **The cold science of global solutions**

16 PHOTO ESSAY **The joy of swimming**

24 DESIGN **Can happiness be designed?**

26 EMMA SARPANIEMI **"My self-portraits provide delight and comfort"**

32 KONSTA PUNKKA **Photographer and squirrel whisperer**

34 FOOD **Five reasons to love Finnish oats**

36 BEYOND BUZZWORDS **Four startups to watch**

40 TRAVEL **Oulu, the cultural capital of oddities**

ÄÄNIÄ soundscape is a journey through Finland in music composed by Lauri Porra. It lets you experience Finland or simply find your own, inner happy place. Listen to Ääniä soundscape:

Photos: Mikael Niemi, Emma Sarpaniemi, Heidi Piiroinen.

FINLAND

TEXT **MIKA HAMMARÉN** PHOTOGRAPHY **NINA KARLSSON**

THE ART OF FINNISH WINTER

People in Finland are no strangers to ice and snow. They are not just physical elements that arrive with each Nordic winter – they form a cultural foundation and a source of inspiration, too. Winter conditions affect our everyday life, be it traffic, housing, sports, music or art.

The wintry landscape may appear harsh, but for us, frozen lakes make convenient shortcuts and knee-deep snow in a forest is just an invitation to go on a ski trip. One of the world's oldest skis, dating back more than 5,000 years, was discovered in Salla, Finland – a fitting symbol of our long-standing relationship with snow and ice.

Today, that relationship continues, often in high-tech form.

Icebreakers keep the sea lanes open, and teams of ploughs clear airport runways, even in the harshest blizzards. At the first heavy snowfall, people get their cameras out, and soon social media is filled with magical, white-clad trees and shimmering ice crystals in snow-covered landscapes.

From the ancient Salla skis to modern engineering marvels, the connection is clear: Ice and snow are not just part of our environment. They are part of our identity.

This issue of *This is Finland Magazine* takes a very close look at ice, from a researcher's viewpoint. We also cover other winter and summer topics: Nordic noir books and films, swimming, artistic self-portraits and nature photography, to name a few. Happy reading!

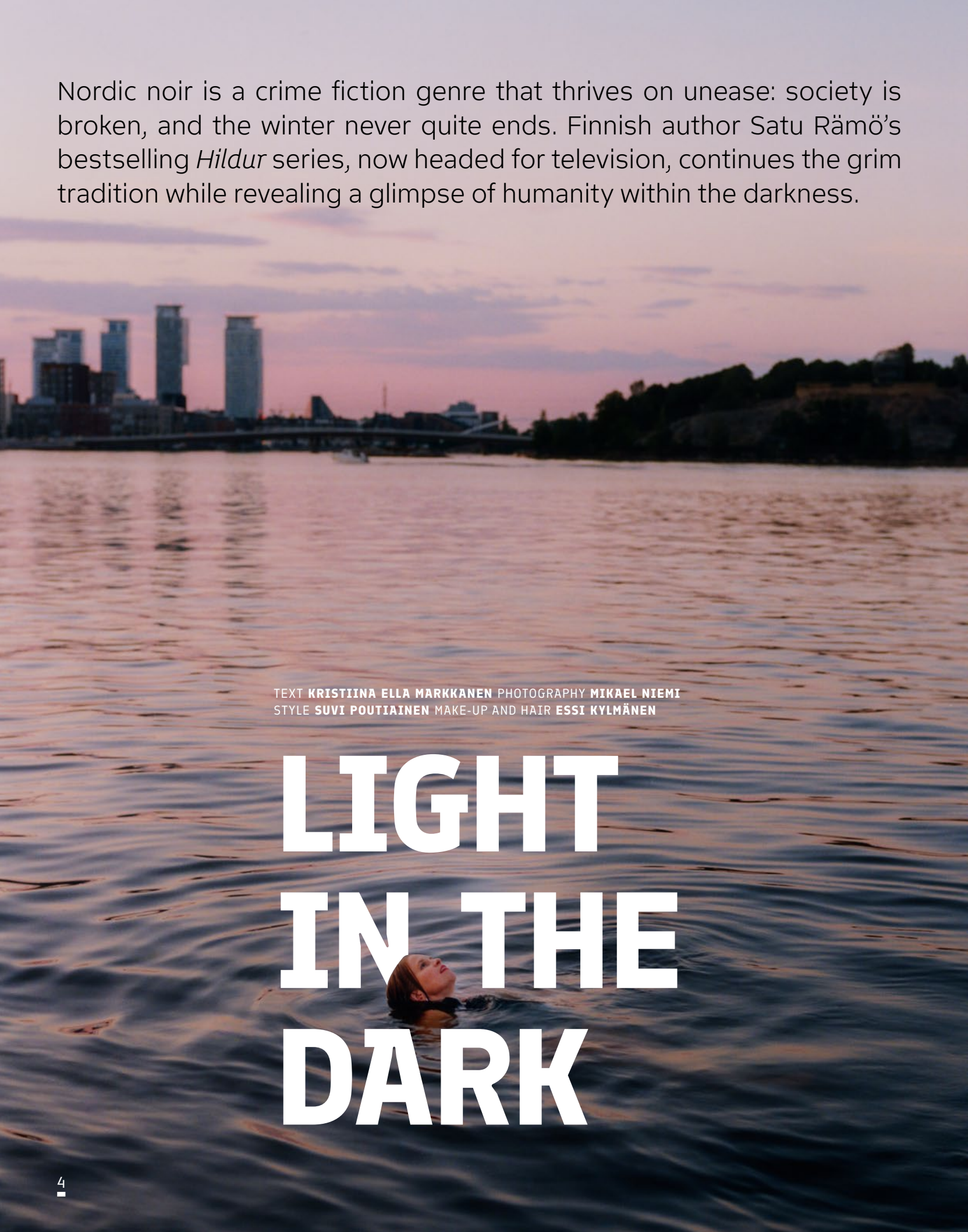
2026 — 27

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF **Mika Hammarén**
EDITORIAL BOARD **Mika Kukkonen, Emilia Kangasluoma, Samuli Laita, Peter Marten, Meira Pappi, Salla Salovaara, Tuula Sjöstedt**
EDITORIAL STAFF **Sanoma Content Studio**
COVER PHOTO **Mikael Niemi**
PRINTED BY **Grano Oy**
PUBLISHERS **Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland um.fi, Business Finland businessfinland.fi, Sitra sitra.fi**
ISSN **2343-2624**

This magazine is printed on Maxisilk – a woodfree, coated silk paper. Maxisilk has PEFC certificate and fulfils the Nordic Swan criteria.

this is FINLAND.fi

Nordic noir is a crime fiction genre that thrives on unease: society is broken, and the winter never quite ends. Finnish author Satu Rämö's bestselling *Hildur* series, now headed for television, continues the grim tradition while revealing a glimpse of humanity within the darkness.



TEXT **KRISTIINA ELLA MARKKANEN** PHOTOGRAPHY **MIKAEL NIEMI**
STYLE **SUVI POUTIAINEN** MAKE-UP AND HAIR **ESSI KYLMÄNEN**

LIGHT IN THE DARK

In Satu Rämö's work, Nordic noir's signature gloom is balanced by warmth and humanity.

IT'S AN UNUSUAL feat to bring lightness into a genre that is known for its literal and figurative darkness. Yet Nordic noir author **Satu Rämö** has managed to do just that. She treats her characters well and attempts to see the good in people, even when the devil on their shoulder wins.

"I bring a compassionate mindset to my work, especially when I'm creating characters who do harmful or morally questionable things," she says. "I try to approach them with some softness, to understand what drives their behaviour."

Rämö is best known for her international bestseller *Hildur* and its sequels *Rósa & Björk, Jakob, Rakel* and *Tinna*. Set in a remote Icelandic village, the series begins with police officer Hildur Rúnarsdóttir and her Finnish colleague, police trainee Jakob Johanson, attempting to solve a string of interconnected murders. While working as the chief of the missing children's unit, Hildur struggles with the trauma caused by her younger sisters' disappearance years earlier.

When Rämö talks about approaching all her characters through a lens of compassion, she means trying to understand the powerful emotions behind criminality. These are often rooted in shame, rejection and the feeling of being unseen or unheard.

"I'm not interested in glorifying violence," she says. "I want to understand what drives it. We all carry a deep, dark well within us, and it reflects different things in each of us. That's the space I'm drawn to explore."

A surprise success

Since the publication of *Hildur* in 2022, the book series has become a massive hit. It has broken Finnish sales records and gained success in international markets. Translation rights have been sold to dozens of countries, including the UK and Germany, where the book spent eight weeks on *Der Spiegel's* bestseller list. The first one of three volumes was recently adapted into a Finnish-language play, and an internationally produced television series of *Hildur* premieres in 2026.

Rämö is hesitant to guess why the world of *Hildur* has been so widely celebrated, but she suspects it might have something to do with her human approach to the characters.

The emotional depth comes across in interactions and small gestures, especially between Hildur and Jakob. These characters wish the best for each other, even when the surrounding world closes in on them. Whether it's Jakob's custody battle over his young son or Hildur's quiet resilience as she deals with one loss after another, readers have found emotional resonance.

"People tell me they don't usually read crime fiction, but have gotten into the genre through my characters," Rämö says. "For many, emotional relatability comes first, then the crimes and plot twists."

She's managed to capture the interest of the elusive "wide audience": at a book fair a group of teenage boys approached her for autographs, while at the other end of the spectrum, she's received handwritten letters from 90-year-old readers.

Creating a new friend

The character of Hildur was born out of seclusion during the Covid pandemic. Originally from Finland, Rämö first fell in love with Iceland (and an Icelandic man) in the early 2000s as an exchange student. That man is now her husband and the couple has two children. The family has been living in Iceland for more than a decade.

> "I'm not interested in glorifying violence. I want to understand what drives it."

Just as Covid restrictions were beginning, Rämö and her family left Reykjavík for Ísafjörður, a town of 3,000 people seven hours away from the capital. As newcomers, they didn't have a community network yet. Stuck at home and desperate for something to do, Rämö remembered having an imaginary friend as a child.

"We would have conversations and play hide-and-seek," she recalls fondly. Even though the friendship happened inside Rämö's head, it created a real sense of belonging.

She returned to her old ways and started imagining. She wanted to create someone she could relate to, but who would be different enough to be intriguing.

Little by little, Hildur came to life: a police officer who surfs in the unruly Atlantic Ocean, deadlifts twice her body weight, and enjoys pizza for lunch.

Through this character, Rämö took the opportunity to imagine the dark underbelly of the peaceful Icelandic community. In Ísafjörður, crime rates are low, and people feel safe enough to leave their doors unlocked at night.

But what if the sense of safety was false? What if child abuse, corruption and cronyism were secretly a part of this community, too?

With social critique mixed in with the plot, a modern Nordic noir classic was born.

> "People tell me they don't usually read crime fiction, but have gotten into the genre through my characters."

Fighting an endless November

Rämö's compassionate approach to her characters is not exactly common for Nordic noir and its screen adaptations. In fact, **Jaakko Seppälä**, lecturer in film and television studies at the University of Helsinki, summarises the genre this way:

"Nordic noir is crime fiction that dwells on negative emotions, set against the backdrop of an endless November. There's no snow on the ground yet; it's pitch black and rainy. People are disappointed and exhausted."

According to Seppälä, one thing makes the genre distinct, especially compared to American crime fiction.

"In the background, the Nordic welfare state is slowly unravelling," he says. "These countries are often held up as a global model of social order, free healthcare, functional social services – you get the gist. Finland was recently rated the happiest country in the world for the eighth time in a row. All of this makes the cracks in the system all the more compelling to explore."

Nordic noir does its best to expose cracks in a system that's supposed to take care of everyone. It highlights class divides by placing the wealthy in sleek, design-filled homes, while others live in cramped apartments or end up on the streets. International hits such as the Danish TV series *The Killing* or Swedish author **Stieg Larsson's** *Millennium* trilogy dig into the abuse of institutional power and the ways the system fails to protect women and children.

"The genre asks what happened to us and where we are going as a society," Seppälä says. "We feel like we've lost something that was once dear →

Top, Marimekko. Trousers, Borse e Cose / Stockmann. Shoes, Hagelstam. Jewelry, Keski-Pomppu.

Satu Rämö's Finnish roots and Icelandic home both shape the atmosphere of her bestselling crime series.

New to nordic noir? Start with these shows

The Bridge (*Bron/Broen*, Sweden and Denmark) Swedish detective Saga Norén works with her Danish counterpart Martin Rohde to solve the murders of two bodies discovered on the bridge linking their countries. The series carried on for four seasons and inspired a short-lived American TV adaptation.

Bordertown (*Sorjonen*, Finland) A Finnish noir classic, Bordertown is set in the sunny southeastern city of Lappeenranta, near the Russian border. Detective Kari Sorjonen investigates dark crimes that sharply contrast with the town's peaceful atmosphere.

The Killing (*Förbrydelsen*, Denmark) Detective Sarah Lund unravels complex murder cases and wears knitted sweaters that eventually became nearly as iconic as the series itself. Adapted into an American series, the show amassed millions of viewers and several awards, and helped define the Nordic noir genre internationally.

Arctic Circle (*Ivalo*, Finland and Germany) Set mainly in the far-northern Finnish town of Ivalo, this series features criminal investigator Nina Kautsalo crossing wintery landscapes to solve chilling cases that have far-reaching international connections.

> "There's something beautifully melancholic about Hildur and the story she tells herself. She's alone but not lonely."

to us – and that something is the welfare state." Even small structural changes can lead to significant fears, especially for people who are already at the mercy of the system or have been failed by it.

And that is usually when the crimes begin. Viewers are glued to their dimly lit screens as traumatised police officers chase psychopaths and evil geniuses, the only source of light being the main detective's moral compass.

Hildur comes alive

In the winter of 2025, Satu Rämö stood on a beach in her home city. It is a familiar place she often visits, but this time was different. In front of her, in the ice-cold waves of the ocean, actor **Ebba Katrín Finnsdóttir** was teaching co-actor **Lauri Tilkanen** to surf on camera. Hildur and Jakob came to life as *Hildur* was being adapted into a multilanguage television series in the exact location of its source material.

A sign of Nordic noir's evolution, according to Jaakko Seppälä, is its move away from major cities and into more remote, peripheral settings. Instead of Copenhagen, Helsinki and Malmö, criminals roam around Fjällbacka, Ivalo, and Ísafjörður.

These shifts introduce viewers to new and exotic locations where rural Nordic nature gets to play a role of its own.

Even though Rämö wasn't involved in the script or casting of the show, the books' wary rays of light bleed onto the screen.

"It is a Nordic noir series, but it won't be as dark and depressing as it could be," says Rämö. "Yes, everything is quite horrible in *Hildur's* universe, but there's a lot of good there, too. I'm glad they've chosen to show that."

Conventionally unconventional

Rämö likes to break genre conventions. There are no murdered women found naked on the beach, and no detectives flirting with alcoholism while desperately trying to balance work and family.

While traditional Nordic noir protagonists drown their stress in booze and all-nighters, Rämö's main character Hildur goes for a run and enjoys a plate of greasy sausages with her aunt. Jakob, the Finnish colleague, knits.

"I wanted to create characters who could just be," says Rämö. "Jakob is a little softer and a little calmer than a police officer traditionally is. Hildur enjoys casual sex and strength training simply because that's who she is. It's not a heroic tale of a strong woman or a gentle man, although we need both of those, too."

If there's one Nordic noir trope she relates to, it's isolation. As an expat Finn living in Iceland, Rämö is between two countries and two nationalities, always feeling a little bit like an outsider.

Hildur herself occupies a similar liminal space. She enjoys a solitary life without a large group of friends or a romantic partner. She doesn't want to build a family of her own, yet she longs for the one she lost.

Rämö identifies with that feeling of solitude. She says, "There's something beautifully melancholic about Hildur and the story she tells herself. She's alone but not lonely."

In 2025 Satu Rämö's *Hildur* was adapted into an international television drama series of the same name.

Top, Marimekko. Trench coat, Juslin Maunula.

CHILL SKILLS

Finnish ice and snow expertise was born out of necessity and transformed into cutting-edge innovations with global appeal. As winters get warmer with climate change, this snow-how is in more demand than ever.

TEXT **LOTTA HEIKKERI** ILLUSTRATION **TILDA ROSE** PHOTOGRAPHY **VESA LAITINEN**

THE HEAVY DOOR opens, and a rush of cool air greets us.

"This is my favourite place in our offices during summer," says **Mika Hovilainen** with a grin. He is CEO of Aker Arctic, an icebreaker design company.

Small red boats are neatly arranged across the large space, their hulls curving elegantly in and out. These are few-meters-long miniatures of existing and upcoming icebreakers and ice-going vessels that Aker Arctic designs.

Currently, the sea right next to the company's offices in Vuosaari Harbour in eastern Helsinki is free of ice. But in a couple of months, as the temperatures start to drop, icebreakers will again be called into action.

Finland is world-famous for its icebreaking expertise. The know-how was born out of necessity; all Finnish ports freeze during winter. (Estonia is the only other country that can make the same claim.) Shipping lanes need to be kept open. The challenge has driven technological innovation and fostered a deep understanding of how ice behaves.

Mika Hovilainen is the chief executive of Aker Arctic.

Hovilainen opens another door, and the air becomes even colder. This is Aker Arctic's pride and joy: a 75-metre-long ice tank where employees and visiting researchers can observe how miniature vessels manoeuvre in ice-covered waters.

Real-life testing – albeit at 1:40 scale for the largest vessels – is crucial to understanding how ice and vessels interact.

"People often think that an icebreaker simply rams through the ice, forcing the mass out of its way," Hovilainen says.

"In fact, the shape of the hull turns a forward force into a downward force that breaks the ice. The ice slides beneath the hull, breaks into smaller pieces, and is pushed to the back and to the side."

There's more to ice than meets the eye

"Ice is a difficult material," muses **Jukka Tuhkuri**, professor at Aalto University. His area of expertise is ice mechanics, a discipline studying how ice deforms and breaks.

Tuhkuri says there are a few common misconceptions about ice. The first and most persistent is that ice is cold. "As a material, ice is not cold, because it's so close to its melting point."

To illustrate, he compares ice to steel, which melts at around 1,500 degrees Celsius. At room

→

temperature, a steel beam is still far from its melting point. However, even at minus 10 degrees – a common winter temperature – ice is already very close to melting.

Another misconception is that ice is fragile.

"Yes, ice can be fragile when cold or under rapid loading, but if ice is under slow, steady stress, for example when it is pushed against something, it flows like liquid," Tuhkuri explains.

Operating a vessel in ice-covered seas is far more complex than in open water. To add to the challenge, sea ice is not always a single flat field but a maze of ice floes that move around and press together with currents and wind, putting immense stress on any obstacles in their way.

"When wind presses the ice slowly against a vessel or a structure, such as a bridge or an offshore windmill, it's anything but fragile."

Unparalleled snow-how keeps airports open

While ice is the raison d'être of Aker Arctic's expertise and Jukka Tuhkuri's research, at Helsinki Airport ice is an unwanted visitor.

Jukka Tuhkuri studies ice mechanics and arctic marine technology.

> "As a material, ice is not cold, because it's so close to its melting point."

Airplanes need friction to take off and land safely. When the temperature drops close to zero and ice starts to form on the runway, maintenance operations at Finland's busiest airport kick into high gear.

"Our objective is to provide summertime conditions on the runways year-round," says **Jani Elasmaa**, vice president at Finavia. The company maintains Finland's airport network and is world-famous for its "snow-how," expertise in keeping airports safe and operational in the harshest weather.

"The ideal winter weather would be long-lasting periods of sub-zero temperatures," he says. "Unpredictable weather and temperatures that oscillate above and below freezing – the conditions we nowadays often have – are the most challenging."

There are around 130 maintenance workers on the ground at the peak of winter. They clear the runways of snow in dramatic convoys of trucks and inspect the tarmac for frost damage, another problem caused by repeated freezing and melting.

Finavia's snow-how attracts visitors from other airports. Guests are particularly interested in the collaboration between air traffic control and the ground team.

"It's not about keeping the planes in the air at any cost," says Elasmaa. "The priority is to ensure that passengers and crew get home safely."

While the decision to shut

down air traffic is never taken lightly, sometimes it's the only option. A few years ago, a downpour of supercooled water covered the apron areas, the planes and all maintenance equipment in a four-centimetre-thick layer of ice. All air traffic had to be stopped.

"We were running again in two hours," Elasmaa says, with a touch of pride in his voice.

Snow storing saves skiing seasons

Just 20 kilometres west of Helsinki Airport along Ring Road 3 lies Oittaa, one of the most popular outdoor recreation centres in the capital region. It boasts one of the longest cross-country skiing seasons in the country, even when compared to the far north.

The capital region may get proper snowfall only a few times per year, but snow stored from the previous season means that Oittaa's skiing season often starts as early as late October, before any new snow has fallen.

Storing snow is not a new phenomenon. Before refrigerators, snow and ice were covered in sawdust or wood chips to help preserve food. Now, it's also a promising business venture.

"Storing existing snow is the most energy-efficient way to ensure there is snow in the early season," explains **Antti Lauslahti**, CEO of Snow Secure, a company that develops snow storage systems.

Snow storage is particularly appealing for ski centres in Europe and North America. The ability to open slopes early, when there's no natural snow or it's not cold enough to use snow guns that turn water into snow, makes a big financial difference.

> "Our objective is to provide summertime conditions on the runways year-round."

Storing snow doesn't replace snow guns, but it complements them, Lauslahti explains.

"Snow guns produce the best quality of snow when it's minus ten degrees. That's the optimal time to make good snow and store it for the upcoming season."

The snow is piled into hard-packed mounds and covered with insulating mats. Sensors monitor the temperature inside and outside the cover. Lauslahti says that even when the temperature outside rises above 40 degrees, it is barely above zero just a few centimetres below the mound's surface.

"I think this is a very Finnish solution. We take something very niche and turn it into a patented innovation with global appeal."

Warm ice behaves differently

Finnish ice and snow expertise must now adapt to a major challenge: climate change.

As winters become milder and temperature swings increase, ice changes as well. Lately, professor Jukka Tuhkuri has been studying what he calls "warm ice."

One key question Tuhkuri and his fellow researchers are rushing to answer is what kinds of loads warm ice places on icebreakers. This knowledge is crucial not only for icebreakers but also for other vessels operating in increasingly ice-free waters.

"We have discovered some surprising things about warm ice," he says. "For example, we have measured that ice loads on ships in a warm and soft ice can be just as high as ice loads on cold and hard ice."

Even incremental changes in ice temperature can make a big difference in its material qualities, Tuhkuri notes. These are not yet reflected on the calculations and vessel-building guidelines.

"When ice conditions are seemingly – and I underline the word seemingly – easy, unenforced vessels will operate longer into autumn and earlier in the spring, but warm ice may not be as innocent as it looks like," he says. →

Choppy waters ahead

In Aker Arctic's test tank, a miniature prototype of an icebreaker sits still in open water. A few translucent sheets of ice float nearby, the last remnants of today's test runs.

For the icebreaker industry, climate change is both an opportunity and a challenge. Traffic is expected to grow significantly as the waterway remains open for longer, increasing demand for ice-enforced vessels.

On the other hand, icebreakers have not been built for long voyages in open, choppy waters.

"A vessel that is ideal for breaking ice is not ideal for manoeuvring in open water and waves," Hovilainen explains. "An icebreaker's life cycle can be over 50 years, so we have to carefully assess what kind of needs the vessels will have in the future."

We descend a flight of stairs to a viewing area beneath the test tank. Here a window runs the entire length of the pool. Through it, we're looking directly up at the underside of the model vessel's hull. This, Hovilainen says, is where many big aha moments about ice happen.

Ice, in the end, is a difficult material – something computers or AI-powered weather prediction models cannot fully grasp. When the full-size version of this vessel powers through a jumble of ice floes in the future, it will continue to rely on a human's understanding of ice.

"Even with all the technology," says Hovilainen, "it still comes down to the captain's experience and ability to read the ice."

Know your vessels

Icebreaker A vessel designed to break ice and create paths for other ships. Features a reinforced and rounded hull and very powerful engines. Uses various manoeuvres to break free of ice.

Icegoing vessel A vessel that can operate in icy waters but cannot break thick ice. Often used for commercial shipping, research or military purposes and typically follows behind an icebreaker in difficult ice conditions.

Ice classes Countries have different classifications and requirements for icegoing vessels. In Finland, there are six classes with specific requirements for hull design, engine output and performance in ice.

Finnish icebreakers Around 80 percent of world's icebreakers are designed and around 60 percent built in Finland.

Finland has eight operational icebreakers: Otso, Kontio, Voima, Urho, Sisu, Fennica, Nordica, Ahto and Polaris, the world's first icebreaker to use liquefied natural gas as fuel. During summer, many of them can be seen moored in Katajanokka, close to downtown Helsinki. A new icebreaker, Aino, has been commissioned and will be operational in 2029.

Watch Jukka Tuhkuri's video interview:

Where snow-how meets wow

Try ice sculpting, join an icebreaker cruise or bathe in a snow sauna. These destinations combine snow-how with hospitality.

Kemi Snow Castle The castle has a year-round SnowExperience365 on the ground floor, with ice sculptures, ice slide and restaurant with ice tables. When Winter Park opens, visitors can wander in a snow maze and enjoy snow-fun at a tube hill and ***hoijakka***, a traditional sledge carousel. During the winter months the castle also serves as the final destination for three-hour icebreaker cruises departing from Tornio and Haparanda. *SnowExperience365 open year-round, SnowCastle Winter Park usually from mid-January to April.*

Lapland Hotels Snow Village, Lainio, Kittilä
The Snow Village gets built from scratch every winter, and delights with stunning ice art. The 2026 theme is the underwater world, which will also be reflected in the decor of their unique luxury ice suite. *Open December to April.*

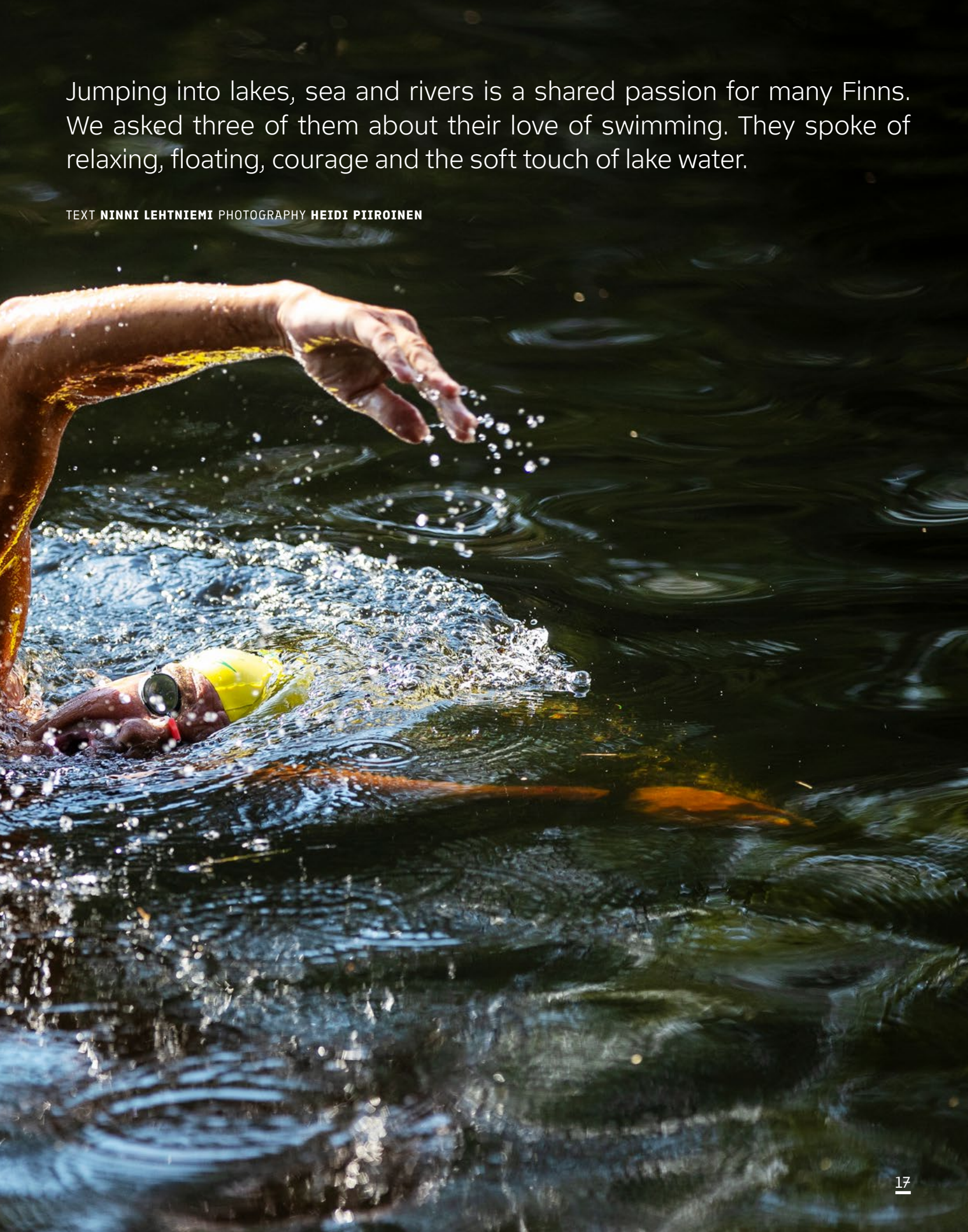
Arctic Snow Hotel, Rovaniemi
The hotel's ice sauna and snow restaurant welcome visitors during the winter season, but you can try your hand at ice sculpting or stay in a glass igloo any day of the year. *Hotel open year-round, ice hotel and snow restaurant December–March.*

Moomin Ice Cave, Leppävirta near Kuopio
Slide down the ice chute to meet ice sculpture versions of the beloved trolls created by Finnish author and artist Tove Jansson. If it gets too chilly, just return to ground level and warm up in pools and saunas at Vesileppis spa. *Open year-round.*


“PEOPLE ALWAYS COME OUT OF THE LAKE SMILING”

Jumping into lakes, sea and rivers is a shared passion for many Finns. We asked three of them about their love of swimming. They spoke of relaxing, floating, courage and the soft touch of lake water.

TEXT **NINNI LEHTNIEMI** PHOTOGRAPHY **HEIDI PIIROINEN**



Martti Laajus, founder of Kaitalampi Open Water swimming group in Espoo.

"Open water swimming suits all ages, especially elderly people as it's very joint-friendly. It's a great way to stay fit and have fun outdoors. It works as cardiovascular and respiratory training for the whole body.

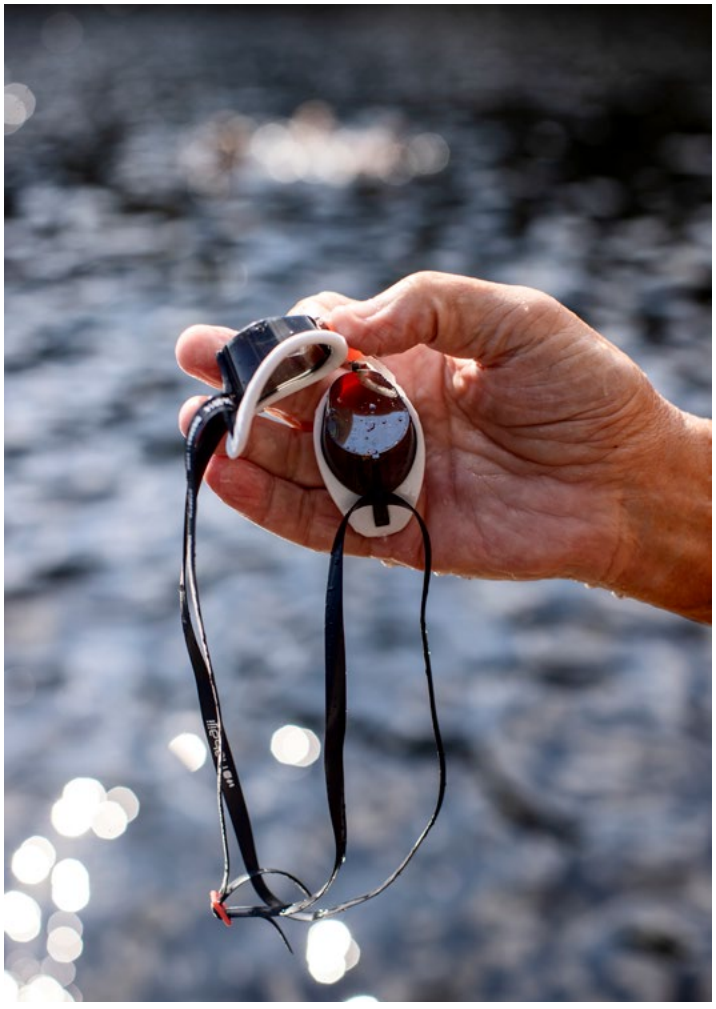
I used to compete in swimming at the national level, winning Finnish championships. In the 2010's I spent some winter seasons in Canary Islands, Spain and soon got into open water swimming, which is very popular there. We'd been swimming with some friends already in the 1980s in Kaitalampi, a pond in Espoo.

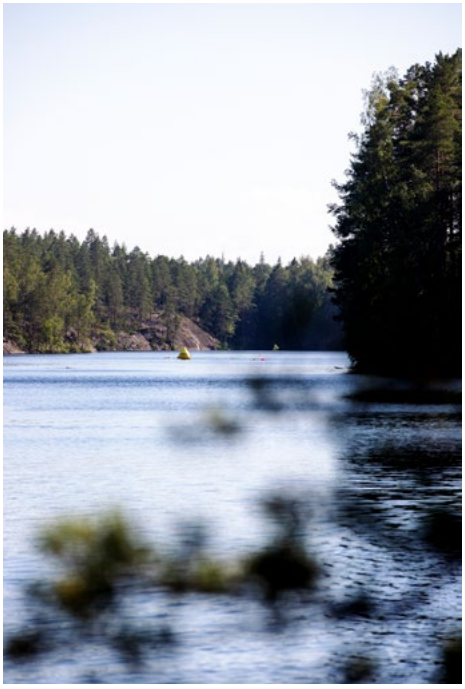
The idea came to mind that we could get something similar going, even if the season is much shorter here. I set up the Kaitalampi Open Water Facebook group for people to find swimming buddies. I can't take all the credit for myself, but since then we've seen a revival of open water swimming all over Finland.

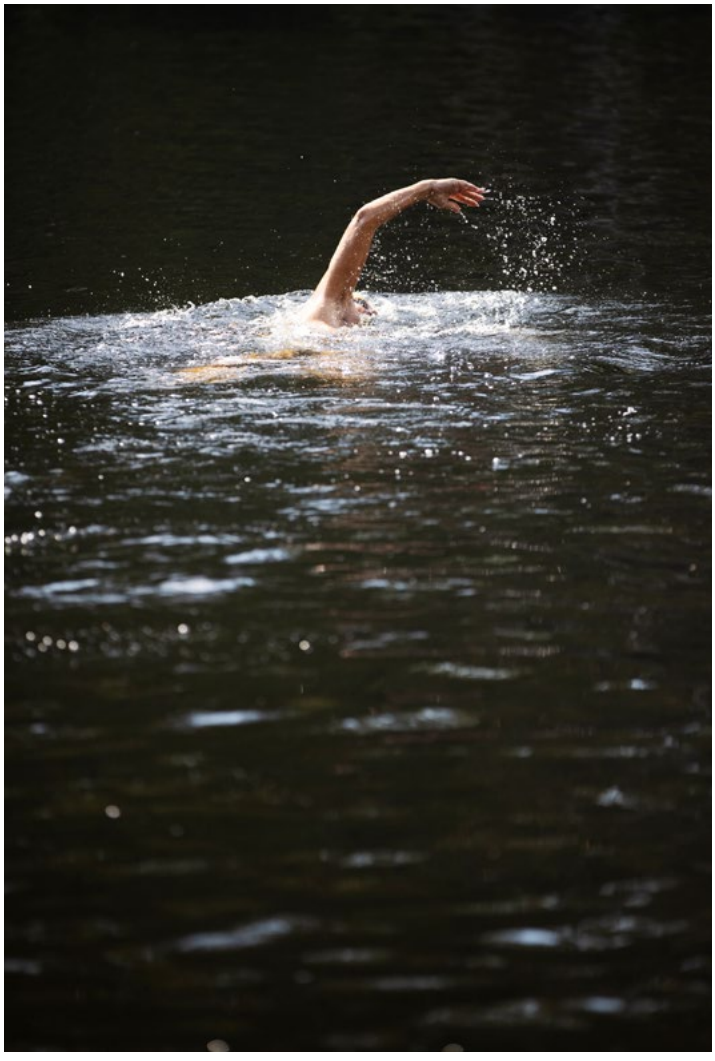
I swim in Kaitalampi around three times a week. Recently my seasons got shorter as I stopped wearing a wetsuit. Swimming is so much sweeter when I can feel the soft lake water on my skin. Wild swimming is not about rigorous training, but enjoying yourself.

Years ago, I realised that whenever I had a tough decision to make at work, I went for a swim and would immediately find a solution. There's some research behind why that might be: The brain's blood flow becomes better when you're in a horizontal position. In the water you're separated from the sensory overload that surrounds us all day. Spending time in the forest is good for your mental health, and open water works the same way. It's no wonder people always come out of the lake smiling."

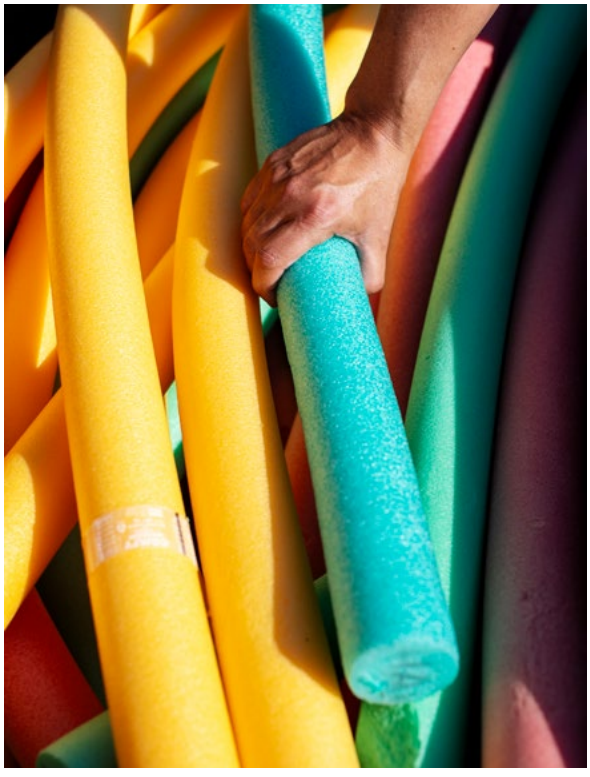
Watch a video about Kaitalampi open-water swimmers:







“Wild swimming is not about rigorous training, but enjoying yourself.”



Tero Savolainen, specialist at Finnish Swimming Teaching and Lifesaving Federation, has worked as a swimming instructor for 25 years.

“Water is a very different training environment from dry land, and learning to swim differs from learning any other sport. The learner needs to take the final step on their own, and that moment never fails to amaze me: They summon their courage, lift up their feet and start swimming.

At Finnish schools swimming is the only sport that is mandatory to learn. It is a life-saving skill.

Teaching swimming is about teaching self-confidence. Many people fear water or have insecurities related to it. We need to transfer those feelings into confidence and skills. With children all this happens naturally through play, but adults need the same amount of repetition and the same understanding. The process of building water-confidence is the same.

With swimming, failing might be very uncomfortable. For example, getting water in your nose feels unpleasant. This might make you nervous and scared of water, so when this happens, we need to build back the skills and confidence as soon as possible. Doubts, tension and setbacks tend to accumulate, so we strive to maintain a positive cycle. Sometimes you get water in your nose, but we’ll move on together.”

Aisha Siddiqi, recreational swimmer.
"About four years ago, when I was seven, I learned to swim. At first, being in the water felt scary, but I really wanted to learn. I started with safety floats, and my parents encouraged me. I practiced by holding on to the edge of the pool until I was brave enough to let go. My dad stood a little farther away, and I tried to swim to him without the floats. I kept trying again and again, and eventually I learned. I think my dad is the best swimming teacher.

I know different swimming styles, but I usually swim on my stomach. We go to the swimming hall once a week with my family, and sometimes a friend comes along. We often visit the Vuosaari swimming hall in Helsinki. For me, the water slide and jumping from the diving tower are the most fun things there.

Swimming is important for safety: if I fall into the water, I know how to swim back to safety, and if someone else falls in, I can help them. All children should learn to swim because it's really important and fun."

"At first, being in the water felt scary, but I really wanted to learn."

Saara Kotiranta, recreational swimmer.

“For me, swimming is not a sport, but something I do for enjoyment. I’m not very technical or fit, but I love spending time in clear lake water. I swim in Lake Ahvenisto near Hämeenlinna with my youngest child and his friends or by myself. In the winter, we usually book the sauna with a bunch of friends. I swim here a few times a week in the summer and perhaps two to four times per month during the winter.

Ahvenisto has clear water, and the beach is big enough so it never gets crowded. The springs at the bottom of the lake keep the water cool all summer. There are no big waves on a small lake like this, so I can just float around and relax.

I discovered winter swimming about three years ago. I can now stay in the ice hole for a few minutes, but usually just go in for a dip. The cold water helps me to unwind as it really is impossible to think about anything else in there.

I have three boys, 10, 15 and 17 years old. I wanted them to learn to swim from an early age. When they were about four, we took them to a swimming club once a week. We live near several lakes, so they’ve had a lot of practice since then. They are very confident now and love diving. Knowing my kids can swim makes me feel much more secure.”

“Knowing my kids can swim makes me feel much more secure.”

More than a sport

In Finland, swimming is considered a civic skill that supports safety, wellbeing and equality. Knowing how to swim is essential in a country with thousands of lakes and a long coastline. Swimming is taught in schools as a basic life skill, helping children gain confidence and stay safe around water. Municipalities offer swimming lessons and public pools to ensure everyone has the chance to learn.

Everyone’s rights (*jokaisen-oikeudet* in Finnish) allow both residents and visitors to enjoy nature freely and responsibly – and that includes swimming! You may swim in lakes, rivers and the sea, even on privately owned land, as long as you don’t disturb others or damage the environment. Avoid swimming near private docks, yards or cottages without permission. Everyone’s rights are about freedom, but also about responsibility. Always leave nature as you found it.

DESIGNING HAPPINESS

Rooted in functionality and accessibility, these creations do more than serve a purpose. They celebrate life's simple pleasures.

TEXT **TAINA AHTELA**

RAIN, CHECK!

What? Kidswear by Reima
How? Founded in 1944, Reima has built their reputation on clothing that supports children's mobility and outdoor play. The focus on functionality means waterproof fabrics, breathable materials and durable construction. This reflects a broader Nordic ethos: children should be free to explore, whatever the weather. In Finland, everyday wellbeing is often traced back to time spent outdoors, starting from early childhood.

Walk past any kindergarten in Finland on a rainy day, and you'll see small figures in waterproof clothing or splash gear jumping in puddles and playing in the mud.

CHILD'S PLAY

What? Sled and slider
How? A sled (*pulkka* in Finnish) or snow slider (*liukuri*) is more than just a plastic toy - it's a ticket to winter fun. Found in nearly every Finnish home, these simple items turn snowy days into opportunities for movement, play and shared happiness, transforming even the smallest hill into an amusement park. And not just that: On snowy winter days, a sled pulled by a guardian is the go-to mode of transport to kindergarten for anyone under six in Finland.

For generations Finnish winter play has been shaped by classic *pulkka*, a simple plastic sled. Its design is straightforward, durable and affordable - qualities that reflect the Finnish belief that good design should be accessible and enhance everyday life.

SOMEONE ORDERED A SMILE?

What? Delivery Robots designed by Aivan
How? Starship's grocery delivery robots are a prime example of design that spreads joy. Rolling along Finnish sidewalks, they bring groceries straight to people's doorsteps. Unlike some robots that can feel cold or intimidating, these ones spark delight: when they were first introduced, people snapped photos of the friendly-looking machines. To this day, pedestrians still stop to help if one gets stuck or hesitates at a busy crossing.

According to the Finnish design agency Aivan, social acceptance was a key driver in the design of the robots. They are intentionally made to look non-threatening. Their compact, rounded form and subtle expressions make them feel more like helpful companions than machines.

SHOWING TRUE COLOURS

What? Lifestyle Brand Marimekko
How? Since 1951, Finnish design powerhouse Marimekko has been on a mission to bring colour and cheer to everyday life with bold prints and vibrant palettes, in both clothing and homeware. Founder **Armi Ratia** envisioned a brand that would celebrate individuality, optimism and freedom.

In a time when the norm was tight, form-fitting clothing for women, Marimekko introduced loose-fitting, eye-catching dresses that offered freedom of movement and expression. This wasn't just fashion. It was a statement of liberation, especially for women stepping into new roles in society. Today, Marimekko's bold patterns and colours are combined with Nordic minimalism in everything from tableware to textiles.

JOY ON WHEELS

What? Jopo bicycle
How? Jopo, short for *jokaisen polkupyörä* (everyone's bicycle) was introduced in 1965 by Finnish company Helkama as a response to the growing need for a practical, everyday bicycle. It marked a radical departure from traditional bike design. With its adjustable frame, single-speed simplicity and cheerful colours, it was built to be shared, enjoyed and embraced by all ages.

Jopo bikes are manufactured in Hanko, Finland's southernmost city, known for its sunshine. Over the decades, Jopo has become a symbol of Finnish egalitarianism and urban cheerfulness – a true everyday design icon. It remains an all-time favourite among tweens and teens, with colorful bikes lining schoolyards across the country.

Can happiness be designed?

This is the question curator **Anniina Koivu** set out to explore in an exhibition that premiered at Helsinki Design Week, the largest design and architecture festival in the Nordic countries.

"Happiness is difficult to define. It's something between the deeply personal and the collective," says Koivu.

The exhibition examines how design can trigger key hormones behind the feeling of happiness: the so-called "happiness cocktail" of dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin and endorphins.

So, what makes Finns top the World Happiness Report year after year? Koivu, who was born in Finland, raised in Germany, and now lives in Switzerland and Italy, has some ideas:

"In Finland, there's a certain calmness, appreciation and acceptance of things as they are, rather than a constant drive to change them.

"I like to think it's connected to our relationship with nature – accepting that we don't need to dominate or master it. It's about understanding your place as part of something bigger, whether that's society, nature or the universe."

***Designing Happiness*, Salone del Mobile, Milan, Italy, April 2026.**

Photos: Reima / Sami Välikangas, Wiitta, Aivan, Marimekko, Helkama, Piercarlo Quecchia.

A MIRROR FOR OTHERS

In an age of endless selfies, artists' self-portraits ask us to pause and truly look. Visual artist Emma Sarpaniemi explores identity and femininity in playful yet profound images.

TEXT **LOTTA HEIKKERI** PHOTOGRAPHY **EMMA SARPANIEMI**

WE ALL COULD use a little playfulness and a splash of colour in these times, **Emma Sarpaniemi** thinks.

The Finnish photographer is in high demand. Her career took off after the prestigious Les Rencontres d'Arles photography festival in France in 2023. Since then, she has held multiple solo shows and group exhibitions across Europe, and the pace keeps accelerating.

When asked about what makes her work resonate right now, she smiles and pauses for thought.

"I believe my work provides the kind of delight and comfort that people need nowadays, among all the unrest, climate change and so on," she says. "People want to feel hope."

Her whimsical self-portraits get people's attention. She poses atop a playground slide in a clown costume, or in the studio with a giant stuffed bug strapped to her back. Beneath the colour, there's always a deeper meaning.

Sarpaniemi began making self-portraits as a way of exploring her identity while studying at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague.

> "It's important to me that I recognise myself in my work."

"I wanted to understand myself and the world around me better," she says. "Considering the themes I often work with – identity, femininity and gender roles – it felt very natural to use myself as a subject."

Between the real and the imagined

Sarpaniemi shoots on film, and she often leaves the shutter release cable visible in the photo as a reminder that she is in control of her own image.

"I've always been fascinated by the relationship between the photographer and her subject, about the positions of power," she says. "How do you photograph a person honestly and with authenticity, not just show what they represent?"

Even when she's dressed in costumes and exploring various roles, there is always a part of her true self present in her photographs.

"Part of it is real and part is imagined," she says. "I don't create an alter ego for my photographs. It's important to me that I recognise myself in my work. The gaze must always be honest."

Creating self-portraits requires a lot of emotional work and processing, says Sarpaniemi. She is a productive artist but highlights she needs time to reflect on her work.

"With self-portraits, you need some distance before you are really able to look at them, truly accept them," she says. "Sometimes it can take months before I can assess some photos with the necessary distance, with enough objectivity."

Deeper and rawer than selfies

The main elements of her work – the honesty, the gaze and the distance – also set self-portraits apart from the endless stream of selfies.

Sarpaniemi admits she has a "love-hate relationship" with social media. She values the connections and visibility it offers, but is wary of its performative nature. →

Emma Sarpaniemi: The Supermarket Is Open Regardless The Different Weather Conditions (2024)

Emma Sarpaniemi: The Crunch of an Apple Being Bitten Echoes Across the Blue Ocean (2024)

Watch Emma's video interview:

"In the selfie culture, you try to present yourself at your best," she says. "I don't choose my photos based on how gorgeous I look in them, that's not the point. I may even choose photos in which I don't like the way I look."

Scrolling through others' perfect selfies, she notes, can easily spark insecurity and pressure to look the same. Self-portraits, however, are not meant to trigger the same kind of comparison.

For Sarpaniemi, self-portraits are more about what's beneath the surface, the emotions and the underlying context.

"Self-portraits are much deeper and rawer," she says. "Compared to selfies, they require a lot more vulnerability. When I look at self-portraits, I don't think that I should look like that. I think, wow, what a courageous image, how brave it is to put yourself out there like this and how many layers it has and history."

Still, not everyone sees the difference. Some dismiss self-portraits as self-centred – or even an easy way out, since we all have cameras on our phones and take pictures of ourselves all the time.

"I don't believe that taking self-portraits is narcissistic," she says. "You can be the stage, the mirror for others to look into."

> "I don't believe that taking self-portraits is narcissistic."

The importance of just being Emma

Right now, Sarpaniemi is searching for balance between making time to create new work and handling the demands of her rising career. The art world can be rewarding, but it is also famously unpredictable.

"I'm incredibly grateful for all my achievements and the opportunities I've gotten," she says. "But at the same time, they bring an enormous pressure."

After Sarpaniemi's career took off, she said yes to everything, taking part in solo and group exhibitions across Europe, going to every festival where her work was shown. At the same time, she was creating new pieces at breakneck speed and managing the heavy administrative load of an artist.

She noticed the pace was getting too intense, and took a proper break to disconnect entirely from her work and regain her creativity.

"I've tried to let go of constantly being productive and learn healthier working habits," she says. "As an artist, you don't have set working hours, but I aim to set limits. If I start working at seven thirty in the morning, I can stop at five. I don't have to keep pushing through the night."

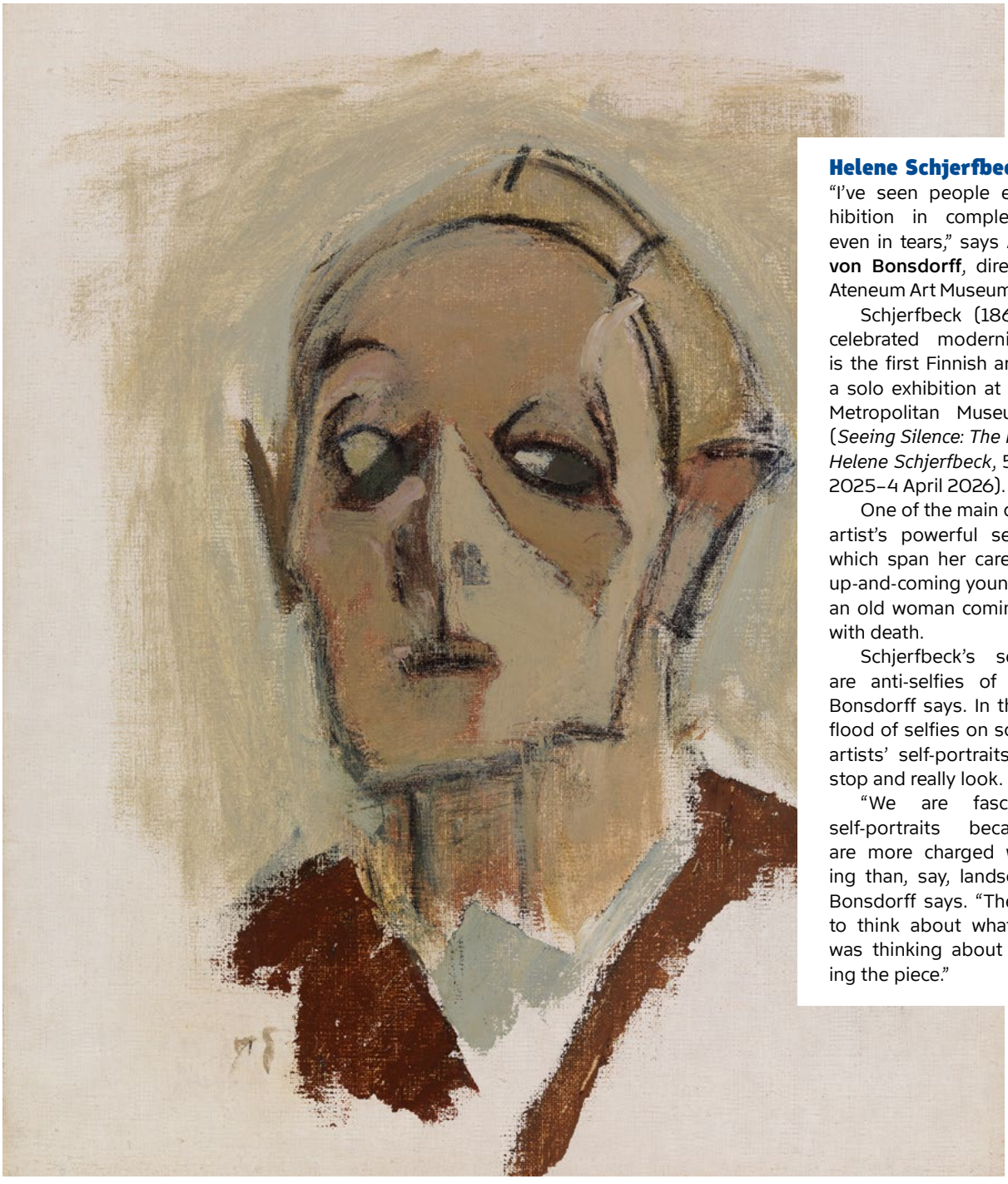
The busy years have taught her the importance of being "just Emma," not Emma the celebrated artist or the Emma the audience sees in the photographs, but just herself, without any roles or responsibilities.

"Because I make self-portraits, people often think that I enjoy being in the spotlight, but actually I'm a very private person," she says with a smile.

Receiving attention and praise is difficult for her, but sparking emotions in others is what makes creating art worthwhile.

"Some time ago, I was waiting at a traffic light on my bicycle, and a passer-by said they admired my work," she says. "It was a lovely moment, to discover what you do is meaningful for others as well."

Emma Sarpaniemi: Self-portrait as a Playground Pirate (2024)



Helene Schjerfbeck: Self-Portrait, en face I, 1945

Helene Schjerfbeck

"I've seen people exit her exhibition in complete silence, even in tears," says **Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff**, director of the Ateneum Art Museum in Helsinki.

Schjerfbeck (1862–1946), a celebrated modernist painter, is the first Finnish artist to land a solo exhibition at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art (*Seeing Silence: The Paintings of Helene Schjerfbeck*, 5 December 2025–4 April 2026).

One of the main draws is the artist's powerful self-portraits, which span her career from an up-and-coming young painter to an old woman coming to terms with death.

Schjerfbeck's self-portraits are anti-selfies of sorts, von Bonsdorff says. In the constant flood of selfies on social media, artists' self-portraits ask us to stop and really look.

"We are fascinated by self-portraits because they are more charged with meaning than, say, landscapes," von Bonsdorff says. "They invite us to think about what the artist was thinking about while making the piece."

TRUTHFUL ANTI-SELFIES

Throughout history artists have expressed themselves through self-portraits. These Finnish and Finland-based artists have made an international splash with theirs.

TEXT **NINNI LEHTNIEMI**

Minjee Hwang Kim: Baton, 2023

Minjee Hwang Kim (born in 1991) draws herself not to be seen, but to be understood. Based in Helsinki, the Korean-born artist uses coloured pencils to craft self-portraits that are both deeply personal and universally resonant. Kim's art invites viewers into a space where cultural heritage and emotional nuance intertwine.

"I plate up Minjee seasoned with a dash of violence," she writes, "leaving out any positive or affirming experiences that might come with my racial identity."

Elina Brotherus: Piscine (Transat), 2018

Elina Brotherus (born in 1972) is one of Finland's most recognised contemporary artists. Her honest, unassuming photographs explore the relationship between people and their surroundings. The history and practice of art often play a role in her work, such as in the *Artists at Work* -series, in which she is photographed while being painted by other artists.

"*Piscine (Transat)* was shot outside Paris in a house designed by **Alvar Aalto**, the Maison Louis Carré, which I consider one of Aalto's finest works."

WILD AND WONDERFUL

On a Finnish urban summer morning at around 4 am, "Squirrel Whisperer" Konsta Punkka is preparing to sit still for several hours. He's on a quest for another beautiful animal photo to share with more than a million people around the world.

TEXT **LAURA IISALO** PHOTOGRAPHY **SABRINA BQAIN, KONSTA PUNKKA**

KONSTA PUNKKA uploaded his first image to Instagram in 2012. The very first animal he featured was a cute red squirrel, and since then, many more have appeared on his feed. Unlike some nature photographers, Punkka rarely ventures into the wilderness for his shots. Instead, he prefers to seek out wildlife in the urban environment surrounding his home in Helsinki.

Punkka never planned to make money from his photographs, nor did he set out to gain a global following. Yet today, he is a full-time, self-taught photographer with a following of over one million people worldwide. He has taken pictures of different species of animals around the world, and his work has appeared in international media like *TIME* magazine and *National Geographic*.

"I was simply dedicated to improving my ability to capture wildlife images," he says. "In the beginning, I honed my camera skills by spending time at bird feeders, where I could photograph the squirrels and birds that came to eat."

From scissors to foxes

Punkka's journey into nature photography started in the afterhours of his summer job at the Museum of Technology in Helsinki, when he was 18. During the day, he photographed old Nokia phones and Fiskars scissors for the museum's archives. His employer allowed him to borrow the camera outside of work, and he made the most of it, pursuing a newfound passion for urban and street photography.

It was the early days of Instagram, and Punkka started seeing stunning nature images in his feed. They inspired him to try creating his own. He had everything he needed: a bike, a camera, and the surrounding urban nature.

"I began biking to the nearby forests with a camera in hand, especially early in the morning and late in the evening, in search of something worth capturing. Before long, I was spending all my free time there."

The real school of nature photography is the field, says Punkka.

> "The more you understand the species the more likely you are to capture great shots."

Ethics first

For Punkka, the most important aspect of taking photos of animals is doing it in a way that doesn't disturb or harm them. He never feeds or touches the animals and always strives to blend into his surroundings as seamlessly as possible.

Punkka remembers the thrill of photographing his first fox cubs, which gave him an overwhelming sense of accomplishment.

"You can learn a lot from YouTube or books, but the real school of nature photography is spending time in the field," he says. "The more you understand the species and individual animals - their rhythms and behaviours - the more likely you are to capture great shots. That said, you can't always rely on nature delivering what you want, and I've spent days without capturing a single shot."

Early summer is the busiest time for Punkka – that's when animal babies are born. He knows the locations of certain nests and habitats and gets up before the sunrise to get to his destination on time before the wildlife starts stirring.

To get perfect shots of these creatures, Punkka often sits still for hours, waiting for them to appear.

"Many of my most memorable moments happen listening to the sounds of the surrounding nature," he says. "It's almost a meditative experience – a welcome contrast to the fast-paced world we live in today."

Konsta Punkka's top spots for urban wildlife photography in Finland

SEURASAARI, HELSINKI

"I always find something when visiting Seurasaari, year-round. The island is home to a variety of wildlife, including squirrels, owls and foxes. On summer nights, I've heard owl chicks calling for their mother and witnessed squirrels playing on the forest floor."

HALTIALA FOREST, HELSINKI

"Located in the north of Helsinki, these woods are home to deer, foxes and other mammals, with plenty of open fields to explore. I've spent hours in ditches, waiting to photograph foxes hunting mice, or deer surviving in the fields during the harsh winter months."

LAUTTASAARI, HELSINKI

"Every time the temperature drops below -20°C and the sky is clear, I head to the shore of Lauttasaari. Normally, the sea doesn't freeze close to the shore, which allows wintering birds to bathe in the open water. The sea is also warmer than the air, creating stunning fog above the surface."

KATARIINANLAAKSO NATURE RESERVE, TURKU

"When I visit the Turku region, I make sure to stop here. It's a little walk through old-growth forests, offering stunning views of the sea, and a lovely spot to see mice and squirrels enjoying their breakfast near the bird feeder stations."

PUIJO, KUOPIO

"Puijo Peak offers stunning lakeside views, perfect for getting started with landscape photography. I've also captured some great shots of squirrels, deer and foxes while visiting the area."

5 REASONS TO LOVE FINNISH OATS

Today, oats are more popular in Finland than ever before. Behind the boom is a perfect combination of innovative new products, Finns' deep-rooted love affair with pure, high-quality traditional ingredients, and unshakeable belief in the perfect breakfast.

TEXT **VEERA KAUKONIEMI** ILLUSTRATION **HILLA RUUSKANEN**

They're sweet, savoury, and everything in between

The average Finn consumes nearly ten kilograms of oats each year. Oats' incredible versatility makes them the ultimate culinary chameleon, equally at home in sweet treats and savoury dishes. Classic Finnish oat foods include porridge, hearty breads, biscuits, flaky pies and pancakes.

Refined oat products also offer sweet and savoury options to satisfy every taste. Finnish shop shelves are stocked with oat crisps, liquorice, pasta and meat-like oat protein products, among others. There are also numerous oat-based dairy alternatives such as oat drinks, ice cream and yoghurts, as well as cheese substitutes.

They bring comfort

Eating oats is inherently nostalgic. Starting your morning with oat porridge is a tradition passed down through generations. Breakfast porridge is comfort food at its finest, bringing familiarity to daily life and evoking childhood memories. The numbers back this up: the National Porridge Survey commissioned by Raisio Group in 2019 showed that nearly every other Finn eats porridge on weekday mornings.

Finns enjoy their morning porridge in countless ways, but nearly every approach shares two things: simplicity and letting the oats shine. To enjoy your porridge like a Finn, just add a pat of butter, a drizzle of milk or a handful of berries. Finnish tradition doesn't believe in drowning porridge in sweetness – perfect balance comes from respecting the ingredient itself.

They're yummy

Every Finn learns to make these simple crispy oat cookies in secondary school home economics classes. You'll need:

- 4 dl (1.7 cups) **rolled oats**
- 2 dl (0.85 cups) **sugar**
- 1 tsp **vanilla sugar**
- 2 tbsp **wheat flour**
- 2 tsp **baking powder**
- 100 g (3.5 oz) **butter (melted and cooled)**
- 2 **eggs**

Preheat the oven to 200°C (392°F). Mix dry ingredients in a bowl. Add butter and stir. Add eggs and mix until combined.

Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Drop the dough onto it in small spoonfuls (about 2/3 tbsp each). Place 9 - 12 per sheet, leaving plenty of room for spreading. Bake for 6 - 7 minutes, or until golden brown. Cool completely, the cookies will crisp up as they cool.

They're healthy

In Finland, oats are usually eaten as wholegrain, meaning they contain all the nutrient-rich parts of the grain. Beta-glucan, the water-soluble dietary fibre found in oats, has been proven through research to lower cholesterol levels. Oats are high in fibre, which promotes intestinal health and supports beneficial gut bacteria.

Additionally, they are a good source of antioxidants and selenium, which plays a crucial role in maintaining a healthy immune system and helping the body fight off infections – in short, a true superfood.

They are a source of constant innovation

Finland ranks as the world's second-largest oat exporter (after Canada) and produces 13% of all European oats. The country is also a world leader in oat research and product development.

Meat substitutes and plant-based proteins are among the fastest-growing categories in the food industry, and Finnish companies like Raisio, Valio and Fazer have been at the forefront of this trend for several years.

In addition to creating entirely new products, Finnish oat innovators have also focused on developing gluten-free and allergen-friendly options, offering alternatives for people with various dietary restrictions and allergies.

Finland's startup scene is powered by purpose, resilience and a deep belief in doing things differently. And when entrepreneurs need support, they can rely on each other. TEXT **LAURA IISALO** PHOTOGRAPHY **OUTI TÖRMÄLÄ**

BEYOND BUZZWORDS

Lifting off **Born in a barn in Finland, Kelluu is redefining how humanity observes the planet. For Jiri Jormakka, Co-Founder & Head of Sales, their northern roots are a strength.**

"Our airships complement existing methods like drones, helicopters and satellites, but we bring something none of them can: precise, continuous and scalable coverage of vast areas. They don't just float, they move tirelessly across the skies, staying aloft for long durations and collecting the kind of high-resolution data the world needs. If we can fly in arctic conditions, we can fly anywhere.

Our customers include cities, public parties, mining companies and power providers, organisations that need precise, continuous insights about the world below. At the same time, we are among the select few in the NATO DIANA accelerator, applying our technology to defence and security. And looking ahead, we're building the capability to scan entire nations every year, creating a digital twin of the Earth. That kind of data will transform how we fight climate change, manage resources and secure our societies.

I focus on sales and strategy, driving the vision forward. We started in 2018 with nothing but an idea in a barn, and now we are 50 people strong, moving fast and scaling globally. The way I see it, this isn't just a company, it's a mission. And I'm in the game for as long as it takes."

Leading with empathy

Fadumo Ali, CEO of Hoiwa, is using automation to solve inefficiency – while building a legacy rooted in empathy.

"I am a problem solver and when I feel something is worth the leap, I go for it. You cannot achieve great things without taking risks.

Hoiwa started as a staffing agency to help fill the shortage of healthcare professionals. In 2024, we shifted our focus. Now, we tackle inefficiency in organisations by using our AI-powered software to automate everything that can be automated.

Achieving goals feels good, but the real lessons come from the journey. Shifting from the original business idea to plan B was challenging, but my family, especially my brothers and my close friends, stood by me and the company, helping us grow and pushing us forward.

My goal is to build multiple companies and leave a legacy in the business world. I want to be a role model for the next generation and show that you can lead with empathy and do things your own way."

Trust as strategy

As the co-founder of SelfHack, Lalin Keyvan wants to turn cybersecurity from a burden into a strategic advantage.

"I studied architecture, but I've always been drawn to invisible structures. Today, that means digital. In May 2024, we founded SelfHack to tackle a costly and recurring problem: cyber attacks.

We help businesses identify their vulnerabilities before hackers do. Regulations like GDPR require regular penetration testing, but it's often expensive and time-consuming. We use AI to automate the process, making it faster, more affordable and more effective. I translate complex security technology into a clear, user-friendly product.

I am originally from Türkiye, but I came to Finland inspired by its reputation for happiness and equality.

The country has strong gender equality and a growing startup community that supports people doing meaningful work, no matter where they come from.

Our goal is a mindset shift: cybersecurity shouldn't just be a legal burden. It should be a strategic advantage, an invisible layer of trust."

"Finland has strong gender equality and a growing startup community that supports people doing meaningful work, no matter where they come from."

The power of play

Ansu Lönnberg is co-founder of Mainframe Industries. Starting a game company in Finland gives the team confidence, she says.

"Mainframe Industries was founded in Finland in 2019 when Icelandic game veterans, **Reynir Harðarson**, **Thor Gunnarsson** and **Kjartan Emilsson** turned to their network here to find experienced game developers to make reality of their vision for a Social Sandbox MMO game. They also needed someone to start and run the company – I was introduced for this role and got the part.

That's how this industry works: people use their international networks to help new teams get started. This is my fourth startup, but the first where I'm a co-founder.

We launched the early access version of Pax Dei in June 2024. It is a beautiful landscape set in a medieval fantasy world where players gather resources, build, explore, defeat enemies and most importantly form meaningful relationships. Together players are able to defeat enemies and build cities. The social aspect is everything. You can quit a game, but you don't quit your friends.

Doing this in Finland gives us confidence. We have successful role models to look up to. Normally, games of this scale are built by hundreds of people. We're just around 50, so we work smart. The industry support is incredible, whether you fail or succeed. If you fail, you take a breather and then build something new. Hopefully, we'll be one of the great success stories others will look up to." ■

Frozen People is a winter festival of electronic music and northern art, held on the frozen sea. In 2026 the event will take over Nallikari in Oulu on February 28.

ALMOST MAGIC

As Oulu steps into the spotlight as the European Capital of Culture, the city is blending cutting-edge technology with its famously offbeat cultural spirit.

TEXT **KRISTIINA ELLA MARKKANEN**

Artist Jakob Kudsk Steensen is crafting an immersive installation set within an underground car park.

DOZENS OF METERS below the ground, in a combined parking space and a fallout shelter, something extraordinary will take place. In the northern city of Oulu, Danish artist **Jakob Kudsk Steensen** will create an underground world where real pieces of nature interact with digital environments. The simulated virtual world will focus on Oulu's subarctic setting – one of the fastest-changing environments in the world.

Underground Clash (working title) is one of many installations during Oulu's year as the European Capital of Culture in 2026. Mixing art and technology comes naturally in a city with strong underground cultures, a hub for 6G development and a home of global tech companies like smart ring company Oura.

According to programme manager **Henri Turunen**, bold and curious approaches to technology can make it visible in a new way.

"When you use the latest technology to create something deeply immersive, the experience can feel almost magical," he says. "There's a kind of mystique or enchantment that emerges when art and technology meet."

> "If you need a piece of equipment but it's 600 kilometres away, you have to figure things out together."

Embracing the peculiar

For past decades, Oulu has been known for cultural events and local quirks residents affectionately call oddities. These include the annual Air Guitar World Championships, the techno festival Frozen People (held on the frozen sea), mayonnaise pizza and Screaming Men's Choir Huutajat who scream and shout instead of singing. The musical subcultures range from harsh noise to electronic music.

Turunen recognises and appreciates these peculiarities. It's easy to bring together unexpected elements in a community with no fear of experimentation.

"When we work across silos, it becomes easier to try new things and cross different boundaries," Turunen says. "There's a certain DIY mindset here, too. If you need a piece of equipment but it's 600 kilometres away, you have to figure things out together."

An example of this spirit is *VILLIT – The Wild Ones*, an immersive dance performance that can be seen as part of the Oulu 2026 programme during the summer. Created by a large international team, local dancers and community members, the piece invites audiences on a journey across urban space with multiple entry points and a shared final celebration where all paths come together.

Photos: Vera Lakovaara, Malthe Ivarrson.

Antye Greie-Ripatti has founded the Hai Art organisation that focuses on artistic intervention.

"A PERSON WHO LISTENS IS WILLING TO CHANGE"

The final months of 2026 in Oulu will celebrate contrasts: light and dark, technology and art, local and global. It is in this very space where multidisciplinary artist Antye Greie-Ripatti, also known as AGF, has found her niche.

FROM ELECTRONIC music and composing to collaborative sound art in political spaces, **Antye Greie-Ripatti** is known for her unfiltered approach to technology as a medium for creative expression.

Together with her partner **Sasu Ripatti**, she curates the TAR Festival in November, part of the Capital of Culture programme – a three-day experience of genre-bending art, communality and the northern hospitality.

"We want to highlight the art that makes Oulu the city it is," Greie-Ripatti says. Oulu is not a large city, but "in a smaller city, offering another layer to the existing reality becomes more tangible, more concrete. You can actually see the impact."

Liberation through technology

Now based in the municipality Hailuoto, some 50 kilometres from Oulu, Greie-Ripatti balances quiet island life with artistic work. This is in stark contrast to her upbringing in East Germany, where she came of age in the late 1980s.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, she was exposed to personal technology for the first time in her life: computers, the internet and portable devices were music production tools never before available.

"I am a first-generation bedroom producer, meaning I got my start before commercial platforms and streaming services," she explains.

For the young Antye Greie, with unrestricted use of technology came artistic independence and liberation. The lack of commercialisation allowed her to explore and experiment, eventually finding her own creative nook.

She describes herself as a sound sculptor, turning sounds into pieces of abstract art. Her work considers technology as something inherent to humans – using one's voice, singing and listening are technologies just as digital software and production tools.

All of her work boils down to a fundamental question: When it comes to art, what do you use technology for? It is not simple or easy to determine but: "Do you want to use technology to create or destroy?"

Bouncing sound waves

Greie-Ripatti sees TAR as a chance to bring people together around the idea of creating hope through listening. Since 2020, she has been investigating listening in her work. For example, she has asked children to listen to field recordings of bats, wind and leaves, and re-make these sounds with their own voices. Then they examined and edited the audio waveforms.

"Listening requires openness," she says. "A person who listens is willing to change."

Through deep listening she can still find the freedom she felt when she first began making music. Listening opens you up to new, unexpected things. Greie-Ripatti compares this unpredictability to sound itself.

"Sound waves bounce off walls and make new waves; they have a mind of their own. You don't know what's going to happen. Isn't that like life itself?"

OULU CAPITAL OF CULTURE 2026
PROGRAMME PICKS YOU DON'T WANT TO MISS

Summer Night's Dinner In Summer Night's Dinner guests share local dishes at a kilometre-long table. The more adventurous foodie might try *rössypottu*, a dish made of pork and potatoes, recently rated the worst food in the world. *August 15, 2026.*

Untamed Office is an urban production agency that recruits teams of young adults to bring Oulu to life. They organise clubs, street festivals, design events and exhibitions on Pikisaari, an island inhabited by artists and the creative class. *Throughout the year.*

Ekho Collective: Layers in the Peace Machine The immersive installation is based on the literary work called *Peace Machine* by late researcher **Timo Honkela**. The artwork sheds light on the concept of building peace and will be influenced by audience members' peace-related memories, collected in 2025. *Throughout the year*.

Hydropower plant series Experimental opera series takes over the hydropower plants of rivers Oulu and Emä. Performances will spread to the vast area from Suomussalmi to Muhos. The series explores the harnessing of the rivers from the 19th century to this day. You can even experience shows at the bottom of the river! *Throughout the year*.

Olosauna is a modern village sauna.

The Art of Sauna The unique wonders of Finnish sauna culture will present themselves to guests at Tuira Beach, located by the Oulujoki river delta. Visitors can rent mobile saunas made of plywood, each fitting up to ten people at a time. *Throughout the year*.

Dalia Stasevska.

Beyond the Sky brings space within reach. The project blends art, science and technology, reflecting astrophotographer **Jukka-Pekka Metsävainio's** photos of distant nebulae on the ceiling of the Oulu Hall event centre. Oulu Symphony Orchestra brings **Lauri Porra's** evocative musical composition to life, conducted by **Dalia Stasevska**. *November 19–21, 2026*.

Photos: Lumi Ripatti, Kevin Kallombo.

Arno Rafael Minkkinen: Oulujärvi Afternoon (2009)

In this issue we introduce six artists renowned for self-portraits. Finnish-American **Arno Rafael Minkkinen** (1945) has spent five decades exploring a singular artistic vision: nude self-portraits that evoke harmony, tension and transformation between body and environment.

Minkkinen often places himself in remote or rugged settings like snow-covered forests, rocky coastlines or cityscapes. He uses his own body as a sculptural element, creating surreal compositions that challenge perception and celebrate vulnerability and resilience.