

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

ArtSeen

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## SANNA KANNISTO *Fieldwork*

by Alexis Clements

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The work of Finnish photographer Sanna Kannisto explores the complex space that exists between the natural world and those humans who desire to isolate, possess, and understand it in some way. In the exhibition of her work, *Fieldwork*, on view at the Aperture Gallery through June 23, we see, in particular, her fascination with the ways that scientists and artists alike create artificial realities in order to demonstrate specific natural phenomena.

As you enter the creaky-floored space, the first photograph you encounter depicts the artist surrounded by insects clinging to an illuminated white sheet, which hangs upright in a dense forest at night (“Private Collection,” 2003). Accompanying this teeming image is the steady sound of bees buzzing and insects chirping along with inarticulate forest noises coming from somewhere at the back of the gallery.

Even as you’re aware of the fact that you’re in an art gallery on the outskirts of Chelsea, the temptation to feel like you’re entering an edited version of a dense forest is strong. It’s something like observing the dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History—you are cognizant of their falseness, but enticed by their static, managed beauty. This seems to be precisely the in-between state in which the artist wants you to be—wondering if the photographs you are viewing are beautiful artworks or interpretive images from the science world, meant to help you understand a specific natural phenomenon.



Sanna Kannisto, 65 Bats, 2000/2008

In the 30-plus photographs and one video hung in the gallery, you see flora and fauna set against the backdrop of human intervention: blue and green iridescent bees swarm around a baited cotton pad in a petri dish, resting on a large green leaf; a carefully lit, tiny brown bat feeds on nectar held inside a test tube set against a black backdrop; a shockingly colorful live frog looks out at the viewer from the hand of a scientist jotting notes into a lab notebook; a bird that was meant to be perched on a meticulously positioned twig, instead hops on the floor of a miniature photography studio constructed by the artist in the field

Nothing is so consistently striking in this exhibition as the jarring sense of scale in Kannisto's photographs. In "Close Observer" (2010), Kannisto, dressed in a childish green rain slicker, stands shin-deep in a swamped forest, holding a clear plastic container up to the light. Huge elephantine leaves tower above her. The image seems to reference, simultaneously, the puzzling world of *Alice in Wonderland* and the ridiculous humor of *Honey, I Shrunk The Kids*. In "Bothriechis schlegelii" (2004), the large photographic print depicts what appears to be an enormous yellow plant with great triangular troughs as petals that alternate up the central stalk. On the very top rests a yellow snake, of a hue so similar to that of the plant that you may not notice it at first glance. The scale of the print and the minute details captured, along with the monumental feeling of the image's construction, make you feel as if the plant could easily be 10 feet tall, and the snake the size of a boa constrictor. While the duct tape and wood contraption that Kannisto includes at the bottom of the composition suggests a more limited size, the fact that scale is so clearly being toyed with throughout the exhibition makes it difficult to gauge reality.

In the world of science, scale is everything. Measurement and quantification are leading objectives in research, helping scientists to gain vast pools of data so that they can analyze and hypothesize about nature. By playing with scale, the artist draws attention to the arbitrariness of these measurements and the tricks they can play on those unable to interpret them properly.

One of the most striking and funny photographs in the exhibition is "Diversity" (2000). The photograph depicts an empty classroom that has been converted into a field station of sorts. Inside the linoleum-floored space, an array of 50 or 60 leaf samples lay on the floor and atop two desks. A handful of other objects are littered throughout the space—a bottle of soda water, a cheap plastic chair, a plastic bag, an aging air conditioner hanging below a small calendar depicting Jesus. Two large windows against the back wall reveal the dark, dense forest waiting outside. The title begs the question: which diversity is she referencing? Is it the array of leaves, which to a non-scientist all appear very similar, or the random assortment of things, some man-made, some taken from nature? For each observer, a different diversity arises—whether scientists, artists, or gallery visitors. The title seems also to be a tongue-in-cheek jab at the whole notion of diversity, so often used in contemporary cultural dialogue in settings that clearly lack any real diversity.



Sanna Kannisto, Private Collection, 2003

In *Fieldwork*, Kannisto uses the frame of her photographs to confront both scientific objectivity and the manufactured and selective nature of artistic beauty. This smart and well-executed exhibition raises important questions about what knowledge we are actually deriving both from science and from art, whether in the field, the lab, or the gallery.

#### CONTRIBUTOR

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