



SUSANNA PETTERSSON

Sanna Kannisto: The gaze of a bird

Sanna Kannisto works on the verge of experiences in nature. Sometimes that means windy weather on a rugged peninsula in Hanko, Finland, and at other times spending weeks in the rain forest on the other side of the Pacific. The force that urges her on is found in nature: birds, plants and landscapes.

Sanna Kannisto (born in 1974) has photographed animal, plant and landscape subjects over a couple of decades. She has developed her own methods of creating images, which are often titled taxonomically. Her works convey a sense of concentration and peace, which is a basic requirement for working with nature.

Kannisto is interested in humankind's desire to control nature and to study and gather information. She also sees herself as a kind of collector, who adds one species after another to her own collection. "In the past, scientists and artists were sometimes the same person. I'm interested in working from both roles," says Kannisto.

As an artist, she has the freedom to embrace many species and many kinds of subjects.

"The subject doesn't even have to be particularly fine or colourful. The everyday and the ordinary are interesting. What's essential is how you manage to take the picture," Kannisto says.

White background

Kannisto's works often resemble still lifes. Nature is presented against a white background. The subject may be a branch, a frog, a butterfly, a hummingbird in flight or

SANNA KANNISTO
Bombycilla garrulus
(*Bohemian Waxwing*), 2017

Print, 120 × 170 cm
Private collection

a nectar bat feeding. Flying before us are also birds that frequent Finnish latitudes such as a blue tit (*Cyanistes caeruleus*), a European robin (*Erithacus rubecula*), a red-backed shrike (*Lanius collurio*) and a goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*).

Detaching a plant or animal from its environment shows it in a new light: even a grey bird is revealed as quite a star when the image size increases and the subject is bathed in light in a field studio.

“My own photography is capturing nature. Nature is total, uncontrolled and on the other hand perfect, affecting all the senses,” Kannisto says.

Her photography involves precise advance planning. A semi-translucent white opal acrylic sheet serves as the image background. The lighting and photographic arrangement are ready and waiting, as are a selection of branches, chosen with the birds in mind. Kannisto explains that in a photography situation she has to operate quickly as the birds must be released rapidly. Some birds perch on a branch immediately while others are more cautious. Often a connection and momentary trust are created though, as birds are curious and intelligent. Although the images are constructed and planned, the situations can change in a moment. They often involve happenstance and surprises, as the animals behave according to their own thoughts. For instance the waxwings, siskins and bullfinches began to eat in the studio.

“Being with a bird is utterly unique. It is moving. The gaze of a bird is mysterious. I look at the bird and it looks at me. For a moment we have some kind of shared thought. It’s a kind of mutual examination,” Kannisto says.

A desire to handle and show

Ever since she was a child, Kannisto has had a desire to examine nature at close hand. For her, holidays and weekends spent at a cottage in rural Kanta-Häme meant adventures in the wild. Kannisto collected insects and frogs. “I’ve always had a desire to take things into my hands and study them up close, to look at the details,” she says.

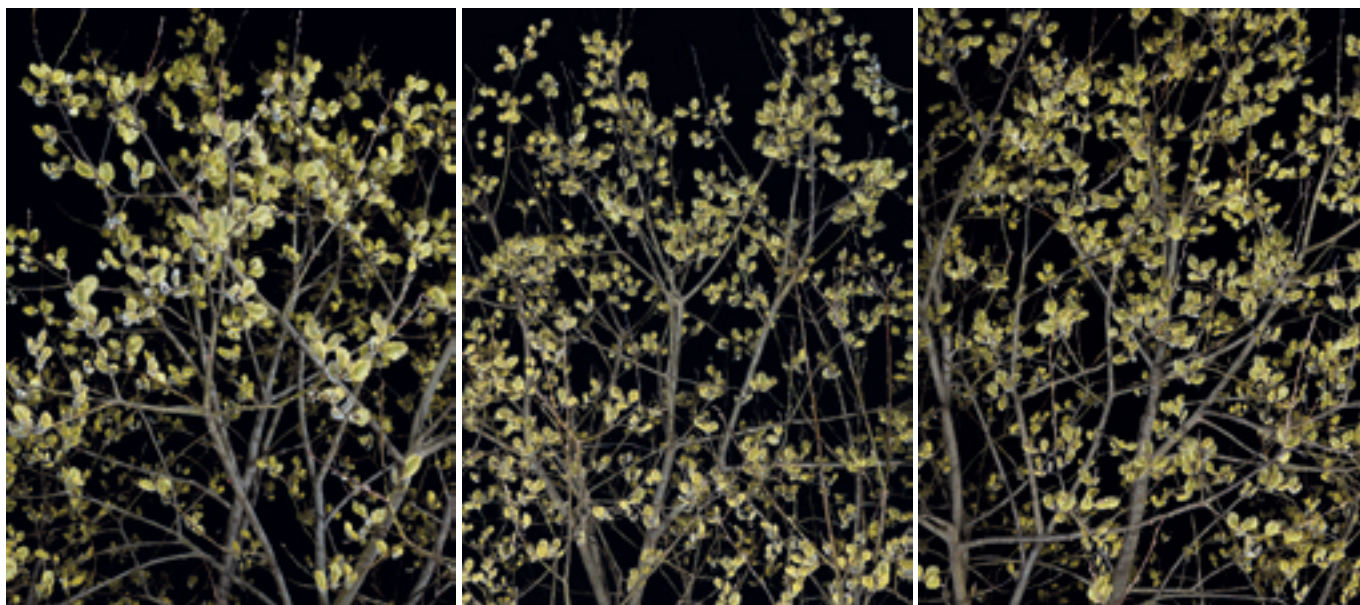
Her own desire for close examination has grown into a need to show others. Subjects that fascinate and affect the artist are turned into works of art. Photography is thinking, sharing a view of the world. Sometimes it is also concrete co-existence with one’s subject. For instance, when Kannisto was photographing butterflies, she bred them as well. The curtains of her studio were covered with elephant hawk-moth eggs, and she even took larvae along with her on summer holiday trips.

There is a strong history of depicting nature in many artists’ output. Looking at Kannisto’s work takes one’s thoughts in many directions at once. On one hand, there is English artist Marianne North (1830–90), who travelled around the world from Brazil to Australia and New Zealand and painted plants in their natural environments. Unusually for her time, she journeyed deep into the rainforest and worked *in situ* ckw. At the other extreme there is Karl Blossfeldt (1865–1932), systematic collector of plants who photographed thousands of plants and their details against grey or black backgrounds. His works are reduced, still-lifelike and ornamental, like a version of art nouveau architecture. Both of these had distinct and unique expressive languages of their own. While working from quite different starting points, they created settings for nature to shine.

Kannisto, too, directs lights, picks out and shows us flora and fauna from different perspectives. Our era is however completely different from that of North or Blossfeldt.



SANNA KANNISTO
Papilio machaon (Swallowtail Butterfly), 2016
Print, 65 × 92 cm
Private collection



SANNA KANNISTO

Landscape 28th of April, 2017

Diasec, 140 × 105 cm, 3 parts

Private collection

In their day, the wildernesses were still unexplored. Now there are hardly any such areas remaining. Kannisto talks about how nowadays humans decide where nature may exist and where it is removed.

“It should be possible to protect nature from us,” Kannisto says.

Landscapes

Sanna Kannisto is a wanderer, an observer and a conveyor. On one hand, she shows nature through its details, and on the other hand through its entirety. The scale ranges from a bird’s eye to an entire forest. A landscape may just as well be found in South America as in Hanko. What is essential is presence. Kannisto speaks of routines related to embracing a landscape, of walking, seeking ideas and tiring oneself out physically.

Experiencing a landscape involves time – the change of seasons, the constant transformation and cycles of nature. For Kannisto, seasons mean surrender, melancholy and waiting, but also excited amazement. It is all interesting.

“I’d like to spend more time in the forest. For instance in winter the Helsinki districts of Myllypuro and Viikki have a fine greyness, asceticism and austerity. When everything else is expressionless, the fog, the drops of water and the snow on the ground are emphasised. When the sun appears amid the greyness, it’s a wonderful moment,” Kannisto says.

She considers the windblown pine trees on the Hanko peninsula, comparing them to a Japanese garden. Here in southernmost Finland, you have to wait for the snowy days – and then act quickly, she says. A bit like with the birds and branches.

Cross-draught

Kannisto's pictures are connected to many genres of art and photography. We can look at them in relation to the history of photography, but also in light of other traditions such as the scientific approach to presenting nature and its genres. For instance, Kannisto is interested in still lifes and museum dioramas, in other words staged nature, plants and animals. This manner of presentation has as long a tradition as the Darwinian method of presenting the origin of species. After all, scientific collections were specifically educational collections, for which one created illustrative presentations to enlighten the mass public as well.

Her method of photography has parallels with fashion photographs, advertisements and portraits, for instance. Kannisto is well aware of this and refers herself to the American photography masters Richard Avedon (1923–2004) and Irving Penn (1917–2009). They both did ground-breaking work in renewing the language of photography. They both showed the human being as exposed, but at the same time protected by their role and the moment of photography.

“There is a cross-draught in my works. They are at once documentary and dream-like,” she says. After a moment she ponders further and then asks whether a “picture can be shot in a studio and yet also be surprising, planned and intuitive?”

Yes, it can.

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