

Private collection text by Harri Laakso

Sanna Kannisto's photographic series *Private collection* seeks a place for visual research. But can research ever be truly private and exist detached from a community? And what is a private collection?

Private is something personal; that which is set apart, which has been separated, which belongs to oneself. Private is that which has been removed from its public existence, severed from its community functions. It implies a framing and leaving a trace – a most photographic gesture, which at times can be very small. It is odd, for example, how the almost imperceptible flags in the image *Marked forest 1* can transform the wild and dense vegetation into something already seen, and perhaps already belonging to someone else.

A collection is the assembly of many individual things. A gathering not yet burdened by the obligation of comparison, only by its possibility. Natural sciences collect to inspect more closely, to compare and then to return the collected items as examples and illustrations to the service of public knowledge. Science finds meaning in things. A private collection, on the other hand, means being fascinated by the capacity for possession.

Collecting takes many forms in Kannisto's photographs. It is not only the removing of plants, animals and leaf litter from the environment, but making diverse measurements and recording multisensory data. The flight patterns of bees, the sounds of the forest floor, the scent of nectar – also the unseen, fragrant and rustling elements of nature are expressed in Kannisto's photographs. Simultaneously it also becomes more evident, how the domain of images extends beyond the visible.

Collecting implies taming and containment. In the photograph *Field studies 1* the experimental net selected for analysis rests suspended in midair by ropes tightened from all sides to nearby trees. The passive object of study becomes charged with surprising force; as if the ropes were restraining a real and potent threat. A collection – the incidence of gathering – requires a stage for its freeplay. In Kannisto's images the rain forest itself is a giant stage. This is most evident in the landscape images. The vegetation forms the forest's protective and obscuring curtain, through which rays of light penetrate and expose the individual living things. Where the canopy gapes – there one also finds what is erotic in the forest, past its moist abundance of species and its fertility.

The *Cloud forest* and *Dark forest* photographs show two sides of the same stage. From above, the camera overlooks the cloudy trees from an almost mythological perspective. From below, its gaze is pointed up towards the sky, from a position of hiding, from the shadows, and yet to be revealed.

The images play incessantly with this analogy of knowledge and light. Viewed from a distance the rain forest remains obscure, soft and unfocused. It is not yet found and exposed. The detailed structure of the canopy yields on its edges to unexplored gray. In most of the other images of the series the forest and its inhabitants are in crisp focus. In them the unidimensionality of scientific measurement is coupled with the harshness of the flash and the control of studio lighting. One may detect the most direct reference to the metaphoric use of clarity and visibility in the photograph *Private collection*. In this image the head light beam visually connects the researcher's attention and focus with her hand as she picks moths from the surface of a lit rectangular cloth. The white sheet is itself a kind of screen; a spectacular and inverse screen, one that does not present projected images, but instead collects them. On the surface the moths adhere themselves, their own image, as if on a film's emulsion.

This white screen, in front of which the researcher collector performs her nocturnal play, also reminds of the limits of the area of registration and its vast outside. Light does not escape far from the cloth: unexplored darkness begins only a few feet away. In the image there are hints of three types of visibility, three available but limited views: the narrow and oblique sector of the researcher's head lamp gaze, the flatness of the white sheet's adhesive surface and the withdrawn and anonymous perspective of the photograph itself.

The *Cloud forest* photographs – unpredictable, unexplored – meet their match in the photograph titled *Papilionaceae*. The image differs slightly from the frontal view of the other still life studies. One can recognize the same white stage, delimited on both sides by black velvet. In this image, however, the leaves and yellow blossoms of the plant rest on both sides of the translucent backdrop. Similarly as in the *Cloud forest* photograph, the visual knowledge offered is not just distinct and clear, but opens into an obscure depth. The white background is no longer neutral and void but becomes a promising and yielding membrane. It is a screen, similar to the suspended cloth in the photograph *Private collection*, but one that is less opaque and more inviting to the eye. It tells the story of the eye looking out from a position of darkness – similarly to the *Dark forest* photograph – an inquisitive gaze rushing forth, an analysis of depth. The diversity of species and forms might never cease to amaze: the paradisiacal serpents, the colorful flowers, even the arid costume of the stick insect all seduce by their novelty and form. But Kannisto's image *Papilionaceae* encourages one to go beyond that, to where the boundaries of knowledge and amazement waver.

Sanna Kannisto combines a critique of scientific methods – her photographs show the limits and the absurdities of their perspectives – with a calm acceptance of the fact that photography is itself implicated in the ocularcentricity of their history. The images display a full awareness of the restrictions of photographic exposure and framing, the limitations of the discipline. This in turn makes sure that the series – as bricolage – remains a nostalgic, even romantic dream of a totality. In the end, it is not a question of opposing scientific thought, nor even of criticizing it in any negative manner. The artist's (and visual researcher's) curiosity is not opposed to the logic of scientific inquiry. Rather, the artist wishes to build alongside it, in the shadow of its presumed reductionism, another stage. It is a stage for a novel kind of expression, one that might selectively apply scientific tools, but which aims, above all, at creating a private community of visual study.

Sometimes Sanna Kannisto's images reveal how the mythical exactitude of science bends, how its instruments and machinery are able to transform. In the photograph *Bee studies* a lego robot controls an experiment where a video camera records the response of bees to the hues and fragrances of an artificial flower. A child's toy has become an instrument for serious science. The camera on its tripod legs, bowing like an exotic insect, has replaced the functions of the human observer. In the background, behind a curtain, as if witnessing the inanimate players, there is nature.

Private collection is also a melancholic work. This is not because it yearns for some ideal lost condition, but because the visual joy of the images is often paired with a distant feeling of powerlessness. This manifests itself in the apparent inadequacy of the portrayed researcher's attempts at recording, measuring and containing the abundance of the forest. It is also visible as a discord between the sensuality, color and texture of the species photographed and the visual poverty of the materials used for setting the stage. The rain forest, nature itself, is far too diverse. It mocks and leads astray whoever approaches it with all the might of what cannot be known, cannot be measured, cannot even be seen. The photograph *Hello Kitty umbrella* aptly combines this powerlessness with a fascinated and private amazement.

Distance itself has become visible for the photographer. It has made ungraspable even the things immediately close and near. Distance has become near, and closeness is for the private things collected in the heart.

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