

as they travel frequently and impetuously decide to settle down in various parts of China. They feel the pressure of trying to seem happy for the world. They break-up and get back together again. They take assignments photographing for magazines and clothing companies. Then abruptly one day their website just vanishes. Exactly two years after they met, Madi and Patrick have broken up for good. The news reverberates across many blogs. Devastated fans offer up condolences punctuated with sad-faced emoticons. Meanwhile, Patrick has left for Japan. It is only in an article published in an online magazine a few weeks later that Madi even learns of the true reason for their break-up: Patrick is smitten with Japanese photographer Ume Kayo and has followed her to Tokyo. Instead of narrating the story Madi now finds herself watching the next chapters unfold online along with everyone else.

Ultimately Madi and Patrick's love dairy begins and ends with three things: a camera, a computer screen and an audience. Their romantic entanglement cannot be separated from the medium of photography or our networked digital age with its blurry boundaries between public and private. It is what propelled them to fall in love in the first place, helped them through the rough spots, and eventually ended it all.

But it's not hard to wonder: in an age when we're surrounded by social networking, reality TV, and instant publishing can anything at all be felt or experienced outside of our compulsion to narrate and broadcast it for the entire world to experience along with us? Or put even more simply: without their love diary would Madi and Patrick have ever been in love in the first place? +

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Originally published in: 'Patrick Tsai & Madi Ju - My Little Dead Dick', an interview for Unseen Magazine, April 2008, <http://unseenmagazine.com/photographers/mylittledaddick.html>

<sup>2</sup> From an interview with Patrick Tsai for Six.

## Sanna Kannisto Theatre of Nature



















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## Sanna Kannisto

# THEATRE OF NATURE

List of works (in order of appearance):

- 1 *Cymbopetalum brasiliense*, 2000
- 2 *Aristolochia gorgona*, 2003
- 3 *Passiflora vitifolia*, 2003
- 4 *Dictyophora indusiata*, 2003
- 5 *Leptophis ahaetulla*, 2006
- 6 *Saturniidae: Automeris postalbida*, 2004
- 7 *Tangara larvata*, 2006
- 8 *Bothriechis schlegelii*, 2004
- 9 *Musa paradisiaca*, 2000

All images © Sanna Kannisto, courtesy of Galerie Wilma Tolksdorf, Frankfurt am Main/Berlin; Galerie Georg Kargl, Vienna; Galerie La Ferrière, Paris

**Sanna Kannisto** was born in 1974 in Hämeenlinna, Finland. She currently lives and works in Helsinki. She studied photography both at the Turku School of Art and Communication and at the University of Art and Design in Helsinki.

She has exhibited her works in many solo and group shows widely since 2002, including the *Masters of Arts* at The Finnish Museum of Photography in Helsinki, *Personally* at Kulturhuset in Stockholm, *Self Timer* at Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel and *The Faraway Nearby* at the White Box in New York, *Repeat All* at the Centro Cultural Matucana 100 in Santiago de Chile, *Research and Invention* at Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland and *Arctic Hysteria Onscreen* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

In her work, Sanna Kannisto explores the relationship between nature and culture and the theories and concepts which are used to approach nature within the arts and sciences. Her methods, field studies and the objective scientific way of presenting the objects, refers not only to anthropological and archaeological ways of working, but also to studio portraiture and staged photography.

**Harri Laakso**, is a Professor of Visual Culture at the University of Art and Design Helsinki, Pori School of Art and Media. He has previously worked as a photographer, curator and researcher and published many articles on art and photography in Finland and abroad. He is the author of *Valokuvan Tapahtuma* (The Event of Photography published by Tutkijaliitto, Helsinki 2003).



## Lucidities of the image ~ On the Photography of Sanna Kannisto

by Harri Laakso

Photographer Sanna Kannisto has focused on plants and animals in tropical rain forests for years. She has gradually accumulated an impressive body of work that examines, in a style both rigorous and delicate, not just the wondrous species of the tropics but the metaphors of seeing, science, photography and art. Her work presents us with a collection and a theatre; it focuses attention on plants and animals that one could rarely hope to see in their natural habitat, and even more miraculously reveals and unleashes the mechanisms of this theatrical presentation wherein lie its two wonders.

### TWO WAYS TO WONDER

It could generally be said that we wonder in two ways: our negative sense of wonder is principally based on disbelief or surprise (I wonder if this is true?). This wonder is in essence related to a quest for knowledge and the need to know. It is the insistent wonder of negation upon which science is founded, wonder based on verification of facts. Then there is the wonder of pure affirmation, the wonder of admiration and awe, something that speaks with all that is uncontrollable and that runs free in this world.

Throughout its history photography has flirted and toyed with these two different forms of wonder. Many a debate has arisen about the particular feeling of veracity that photographs seem to evoke, owing to their umbilical attachment to the world by rays of light. We have become accustomed to thinking that what is in the picture was once in front of the camera, and that photography is true to the vision in front of the lens, that there exists a visual correspondence. Then we have photography's ability to disclose the unseen and the useable by its temporal commitment to fractions of a second, its ability to freeze the movement of galloping hooves or wings rapidly beating, something the human eye cannot accomplish. It appears that photographs are marked simultaneously by an idea of equivalence and, for lack of a better word, a mundane form of clairvoyance.

Undoubtedly both cases are something to remark upon, something remarkable. The photography of Sanna Kannisto inhabits this nexus of the two wonders, echoing the duplicity and division of the image, the ways in which images are images. For photographs can be both illustrative and illustrious. They can be informative instruments of vision just as well as sites of powerless fascination, where seeing is no longer an active force but the impossibility of not seeing – where that which is seen takes hold, a touch from a distance taking seeing hostage.

Already these two insights place Sanna Kannisto's work at a remove from purely formalist work, even if the strange life forms she depicts are usually pleasurable to look at. Sometimes the forms appear so alien to us that we might imagine the creatures to be extraterrestrial, from beyond the horizon of our world. This is particularly evident in some of Kannisto's video works depicting insect behaviour. The feeling of unworldliness is intensified by the separation of the creatures from their environment and their placement on the lustrous white background – a consecration of a sort. Perhaps it is precisely this amalgam of strangeness and pleasure that brings 'the beyond' up close and opens the stage to another way of seeing.



Flight Tent, 2006 © Sanna Kannisto

### TWO THEATRES

The images in this portfolio have a pronounced relation to the theatrical. The lighting, the black curtain, the placement of the figures all attest to this. One quickly gets the feeling, however, that the theatrical elements are more than just a setting or props, that they are themselves characters of the as yet undisclosed play and its choreography.

A photographic sense of arrested motion or pose is hinted at: one can imagine the metal support performing a clumsy dance with the plant's graceful stem and tender petals in *Passiflora vitifolia* (2003). It is an uneven and humorous coupling, one that serves to underline further the insufficiency of rational and systematic science in seeking to encompass the lure of a flower. In another image the rigidity of the metal stand is contrasted with the flexibility of a snake and in yet another with the delicateness of a small bird.

One gets caught up in these metaphorical (and metaphysical) gestures and chains of thought. The images evoke a sense of experimentation, of scientific research and of theatrical operations – the viewer is invited into the operating theatre of the image.

But in what sense are the images really theatrical? We are accustomed to thinking of the theatre as a place of speech and performance, a place where word becomes flesh. Yet it would seem as if the opposite happens here, an inverse phenomenon, a negation of theatre, a kind of backstage, where wordless unspeaking bodies are placed in full view, to dumbfound us.

With respect to theatricality there are two questions to consider in Kannisto's images: What is the difference between bodies in an image and on a theatrical stage and what is the nature of displacement and *ex-position* in these images? Both are obviously very much photographic themes. We know that photography translates the three-dimensional,

moving world into flat and motionless surfaces and that photography is the instrument of separation par excellence, the disrupter of contexts. It would be easy to conclude that we are far from the theatre of live bodies once we are within the realm of the photograph.

Yet somehow Kannisto's images seem to contest this and manage to salvage some distinct theatricality, or maybe it is more appropriate to say that the images acknowledge this reduction to the point that it no longer matters but becomes the image's innate trait, and hence invisible. Her photographs are images (and theatre) in another sense too, and the way in which the photographed bodies (plants and animals) exist within them is equally curious, both matter-of-fact and magical.

The theatricality in Kannisto's images is that of the resurrected flesh, of something that was lost but has been conjured up again. This is of course true of any photograph, but Kannisto's photographs have something more pressing about them, they mount the stage of resurrection and demonstrate the ways in which a photograph is never simply an image. As Giorgio Agamben writes, photographs present 'a demand for redemption. The photograph is always more than an image: it is the site of a gap, a sublime breach between the sensible and the intelligible, between copy and reality, between a memory and a hope.'<sup>1</sup>

For Agamben the photographs he loves have a sense of exigency about them. He writes that photographs require something from us, and that this demand should not be confused with factual necessity.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this exigency is another aspect of the wonder and the pure affirmation I mentioned in the beginning of the text, a sort of promise, a prophecy.

What about the bodies in Kannisto's images? One might think that these photographed beings are rather like bodies in mirror image, pressing but without substance. The vivid colours and the shapes that invite touch underline this separation from the sensuous material world. We immediately recognize that there are many different kinds of plant and animal species in these images. Just as present but less obvious is the fact that the images themselves are *species*. As Agamben reminds us,



Taste of Nectar (1), 2008 © Sanna Kannisto



the more archaic Latin sense of *species* does not refer to a thing, but to a 'kind of thing', an appearance. Agamben: 'The image is a being whose essence is to be a *species*, a visibility or an appearance.'<sup>3</sup> Kannisto's images show us how the things photographed are connected to (and separated from) their own visibilities, their becoming image.

This relates to the second question of displacement and time. If we think of an image as a stage on which selected items are isolated from some previous context and then displayed, we may think of their temporality in two ways. Thierry de Duve has characterized this division as one between image as event and image as picture. When considered a *picture* a photograph is a live witness to an already vanished past. As in a funerary portrait, in which a life that has already ended offstage is protracted onstage. On the other hand, when seen as an *event*, as in the case of a press image, the photograph freezes onstage something that continues its life outside.<sup>4</sup>

De Duve finds these two temporalities to be mutually exclusive and nevertheless to exist in every photograph. In the work of Kannisto this paradoxical hide-and-seek of temporalities becomes particularly noticeable. We can no longer be certain whether we are attending to the historical time of judgment and gesture (the incident that selected and isolated the flower to be photographed) or to the singular time of the flower that continues to emit its brilliance from within the image.

TWO LUCIDITIES

The duplicities of wonder and of staging could perhaps be called the lucidities of the image, the coexistence of clarity and clairvoyance in them. For one sees them with a biologist's empirical clarity of vision, and also by joining with them to look beyond, alongside their luminosity.

Sanna Kannisto's photographs demonstrate photography's nature in a tempting manner. But surely these photographs tell us not just about the way in which photographs exist but, plainly put, about the diversity of life in the world, thereby facilitating every valid concern, assisting anyone willing to act so that the environment around us – everything that we are responsible for – can be preserved in its full variety. +

Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, (Zone Books, New York, 2007), p. 26.
- <sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p. 25. This concern for the needs and demands of the image has interested many of late, including for example W.J.T. Mitchell in his book *What do Pictures Want?* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004)
- <sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p. 56-57.
- <sup>4</sup> Thierry de Duve, 'Time Exposure and Snapshot. The Photograph as Paradox' in James Elkins (ed.), *Photography Theory*, (Routledge, New York, 2007), p. 110.

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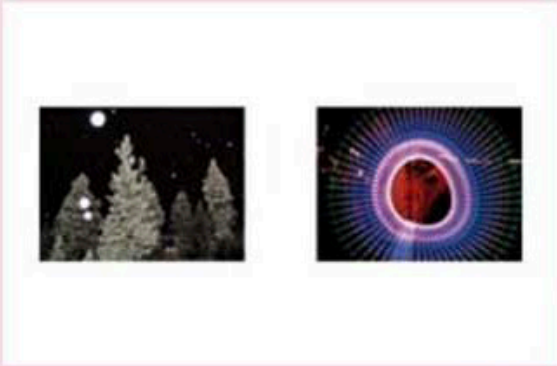


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