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ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY SANNA KANNISTO

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## Through an Artist's Lens, Field Biology Takes the Stage

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**A**lways fascinated by how science and nature can explain the world to us, Finnish photographer Sanna Kannisto has been spending time in the woods her entire life. As a child she collected insects, frogs, mushrooms, and berries during summers and weekends spent in the countryside with her family. In the late 1990s she began exploring forests further from home—the rainforests of South America—with her camera and a small portable field studio. Since then Kannisto has been developing a style of image making that lives at the intersection of fine art and science and explores the complicated relationship between humans and nature.





*Carduelis flammea*, 2015



Over the years, Kannisto has photographed various species of snakes, bats, birds, frogs, mushrooms, and enigmatic tropical plants like the *Aristolochia gorgona* that produces 14 to 16 inch blossoms—all against the backdrop of human intervention.



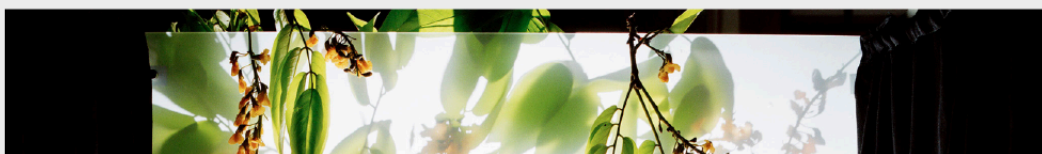
65 Bats, 2008



“Each cotton bag contains a bat,” Kannisto says of the cloth collection bags hanging in a research station in French Guiana.

The visual harmony of the scene appealed to her, as did the bottle of red nail polish on the table which the scientists use to make markings on the bats’ nails. “When you see it in the picture you really wonder about it,” she says.

By isolating and carefully arranging and lighting her subjects inside a plexiglass studio, Kannisto’s sharp and detailed images acknowledge the impossibility of humans to imitate, control, or fully understand the overwhelming diversity of the forest. The white background many of the images share intensifies the subjects’ presence and refers to a long history of scientific examination as well as natural history drawings.







*Papilionaceae, 2003*



Many of the images are framed by a black curtain, adding an element of theatricality and calling attention to the studio as both a laboratory and stage. The duct tape, wires, screws, and clamps used to shape and secure the branches and plants the animals perch upon are left visible, negating any notion that Kannisto is attempting to create habitat dioramas. In a number of images Kannisto herself is visible. She becomes a subject and her presence highlights her work as a meditation of her position as an artist working in the world of scientific research.



*Leptophis, 2004-2006*



"I want to underline rather than hide the fact that the images are constructed," says Kannisto, linking her images to a tradition of still life and staged fine art photography. Visual properties like the colors, shapes, and sizes of the flora and fauna used in each image are meticulously planned in advance, yet the unpredictability of the animals' movements and the leaf or branch they choose to

rest on brings a notion of chance to the pictures and hints at a documentary approach.



*Chlorophanes*, 2010



While photographing in the field, Kannisto lives in scientific stations for up to two months at a time and works alongside scientists and naturalists. Some scientists help by bringing plants and animals to Kannisto's studio, but Kannisto finds the majority of the plants and animals while walking in the forest. When collecting plants, she only takes a small part, leaving the rest intact. She's become adept at using nets to catch small animals and, once she has them, Kannisto works swiftly and then returns them to the exact place they were found. She's learned that in the spring she must photograph migratory birds as quickly as possible because after traveling a long way they are hungry and need to look for food. Spring is also a good time to photograph birds because the leaves are smaller and complement the animals' petite bodies.





When working with bird ringers, Kannisto observes their rule of a 10 to 15 minute “safe time,” the total time a bird can be handled and photographed. Kannisto first watches the behavior of the bird in the studio, hoping for a brave and curious soul that will move around and offer her the chance to make a variety of photographic compositions. To capture the images she envisioned with nectar-feeding bats, she directed them with strips of plastic so they would fly to the arrangements in her studio from a particular direction.



Self-portrait, 2000

In recent years Kannisto has left behind the tropics and has been photographing birds living on Finland's Hanko Peninsula. “It's been marvelous and inspiring to work in Finland,” she says. Having the chance to work up close with Finnish birds after observing them in trees and bushes for so many years, Kannisto has been surprised by the minute differences in the shades of browns and grays in their feathers and their splendid everyday beauty.



*Poecile montanus*, 2015



Kannisto believes every animal is magical in its own way and her emotions have been touched by many. “They have incredible details and colors. You can feel a bird’s heart beat when you hold them, for example, and birds and bats are so intelligent. You can feel this from the way they look at you,” she says.

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