

SANNA KANNISTO
SENSE OF WONDER
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Sylvia curruca, 2019
Lesser whitethroat

A cubicle with glowing white light, deep in a forest or on some distant cliff site, is the photographic studio of Sanna Kannisto. This portable studio is constructed of light-reflecting and translucent, opaque acrylic panels and is easy and quick to assemble. A large number of her work has been photographed in this little field studio and she has found this method to be best suited for her working methods.

In the early years of the 21st century, Sanna Kannisto became known for her work depicting rainforest flora and fauna. More recently, her interest in photographing birds has taken her to the island of Ponza in Italy and to the Baikal region in Russia. Kannisto collaborates with scientists and bird ringers in order to capture the birds on film. In recent years, she has mainly photographed in Hanko, Finland.

Kannisto is a romantic traveler who selects subjects relating to the research of natural sciences that interest her, and uses these to create images.



Emberiza leucocephalos, 2019
Pine bunting

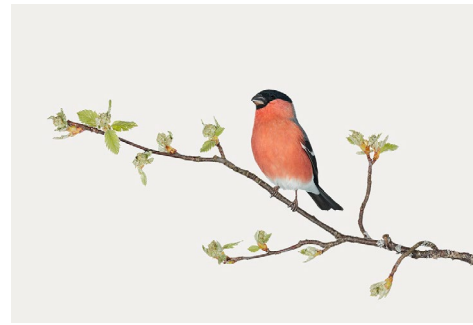
Sanna Kannisto plans the setting and lighting of her photographs as carefully as possible in advance. In a way, she sets up the stage for her models. She has a collection of branches from which she chooses the most suitable for each species. The lab stands holding the branches are also an essential part of the composition. The animals acting as models sometimes behave in an unpredictable manner in these settings, but the surroundings are the result of careful consideration and detailing. "It is exciting to work with live birds because you cannot predict everything. Sometimes, something accidental is exactly what makes the photoshoot a success."

The control of lighting and background elements have always been the foundation of portrait photography, a tradition that professional photographers have been keen to master for over 200 years. Kannisto follows this tradition with the exception that she takes her studio out to her models, into their natural habitat.



Freezing rain (European robin), 2017

Since prehistoric times, the two-dimensional image has been a means with which to explore nature. For the purposes of categorizing and identifying flora and fauna, methods of imaging have been developed in natural sciences that show the special characteristics of different species. In Sanna Kannisto's photographs, the minute details of the animals are etched against the white background with a precision that reflects these scientific imaging traditions. At the same time, however, Kannisto creates her own individual expression, which deviates from natural science. Alongside the scientists' work, she creates a stage that also connects with artistic traditions: still lifes and staged photographs.



Pyrrhula pyrrhula, 2019

Eurasian bullfinch

Eurasian bullfinch, sedge warbler, European serin – Birds inhabiting and visiting Finland form a diverse group, which Sanna Kannisto has been observing and photographing since 2014 at a Hanko Bird Observatory. Birds have character, they are expressive and the way in which they appear in photographs is appealing to the artist.

Kannisto aims to make the photoshoot as peaceful as possible for the birds. Only healthy birds are selected, together with the scientists, because animal welfare is a top priority. At the beginning of the photo shoot, the artist merely observes the bird and its movements. The photographer is also being observed by the birds. In order to get a good picture of a particular bird species, Kannisto usually photographs several individuals.

Nearly all the birds Kannisto has photographed are ringed. The researchers and ringers capture and ring the birds as part of birdlife research and monitoring. Kannisto photographs the birds alongside this research process. After a quick check, the ringed bird is a free creature once again. The ring serves as a reminder of the bird having been the subject of research. It is, in a way, registered, numbered, and brought within the boundaries of culture.

Birds are intelligent and adapt quickly to their new temporary surroundings. Kannisto places branches and other perches for the birds in the field studio. The photoshoot itself lasts approximately 20 minutes. Sometimes a flock of birds flutters around the branches of the nearby trees, waiting for the ones being photographed in the studio. This is particularly true of the long-tailed tit. Once the birds are set free again, they fly to their fellow creatures and the migration continues.

Journals from 2000 to 2010

Journals have always been important practical and memory aids for Sanna Kannisto, ever since her first photographic expedition in 1997. She was using the Mamiya RZ film camera and the tangible results, the contacts and prints, were not ready for several weeks after the photos were taken. The Mamiya was Kannisto's primary photographic device from 2000 to 2018. Kannisto used the camera's Polaroid back to take Polaroid pictures of the photographic sessions, and she included these in her journal entries. On later expeditions, she also carried a digital camera, which she needed to photograph flying hummingbirds and bats, for example.

The artist's journal entries record her own activities as well as the planning and concept of the pieces. These journals, which Kannisto never intended anyone else to see, also record the difficulties of approaching the subjects and the frustration brought on by the challenging conditions. The entries were often written at the end of an exhausting day. The journal entries also reveal the artist's excitement and enchantment at her encounters with nature.

September 13, 2000 Les Eaux Claire, French Guiana

"I think I may have fallen completely in love with bats. They are such incredibly jolly-looking creatures. And beautiful and so cute too. The small ones have shiny black eyes, and leaf-nosed bats look really sophisticated. I give them sugar syrup with a pipette after we've finished our research! I can't help but be enchanted by the little furry things!

"Today I used two hairpins to hang some fruit from a rack and the bat flew off with it. It munched happily on the fruit for an hour, perfectly content with its meal, and wasn't bothered by the flash or anything. Once it had eaten half of the fruit, the bat held the rest with its wings and I took the pin off. Then it peed and pooped. I collected the droppings for Heather, who searches them for seeds. And when it had finished eating the fruit, the Artibeus looked at me as if to say: "Help me out here. It's a bit difficult to set off when I can't spread my wings and my feet are in an uncomfortable position." So I grabbed it with the gloves and tossed it up into the air from the side of the house, and it took off. Such a gentle bat, it didn't even try to bite me. It felt completely safe. I'm glad it didn't pee on the camera."



Diversity, 2000

The ceiling is crumpled from the humidity and the window opens onto the darkening rainforest. Plants of a particular height, collected during the day, are waiting on the floor. It is evening at the Reserva Ducke research station in Brazil, where Sanna Kannisto traveled as part of a group from the University of Helsinki.

Following a long day spent in the forest, the enormous number of plants waiting to be identified frustrates the Finnish biology students. According to Kannisto, the same abundance of species makes photographing the rainforest difficult and she has had to figure out how to portray it visually: “The diverse rainforest with its numerous species interactions seems to mock the human trying to approach it.”

In a student workshop in 1995, Kannisto had taken black-and-white photographs of toads at a summer cottage in Häme. That kindled the idea and desire to do the same in tropical rainforests, where the species diversity is the highest in the world. Kannisto made ten photographic journeys to rainforests between 1997 and 2018. The first two expeditions were in Peru, and in 2000 and 2005 she worked in Brazil and French Guiana. She has traveled to Costa Rica for work on six different occasions.



Densiometer, 2012 / 2020

Sanna Kannisto still vividly remembers stepping out of the dry air of an airplane into the humidity of a rainforest for the first time. “Compared to Finnish forests, the rainforest is lush and layered. It is as if the plants are competing for space without any rules. The soundscape is powerful. The high and humid forest encloses you. Night and day are vastly different, also in terms of species activity. The weather can change rapidly, and the daily rain hits with full force and volume.”

Densiometer is a piece that depicts the conflict between sensory experience and the measuring and categorizing of science, which strives for objectivity. The pieces *Private Collection* and *Close Observer* have similar origins. In the image, Kannisto is holding a densiometer. A densiometer is a device used to determine forest canopy density. The international definition of a forest is based on canopy density: how large a portion of the sky is covered by the canopy when observed from the ground.

“In this piece, I wanted to take an ironic and gently humorous look at the type of person who has an enormous thirst for knowledge and a passionate relationship with nature. The desire to explore, collect and record drives this type of person to extreme locations and conditions.” In the limitless abundance of a rainforest, the researcher-artist is faced with the impossibility of their task. “A certain kind of melancholy and feeling of inadequacy are present here.”



Forest fire 1 and 2, 1998

Slash-and-burn is a traditional form of agriculture in the Amazon region. The fertile layer of the ground is thin in the rainforest because the nutrients are in the decomposing organic matter rather than the soil. In just a few years, the burnt fields are depleted and the farmers are forced to clear new ones. When the work was done manually, the burnt area remained relatively small. With today's large-scale clearing technique, the timber is first taken away and then the ground is mechanically tilled to make it burn more easily.

Tree death / Photosynthesis shutdown 1, 2010

A dead tree has fallen and brought down lianas and other epiphytes as well as a number of smaller trees with it. A resulting opening in the rainforest looks like it was caused by a storm. The piece is part of a series based on research conducted at La Selva research station in Costa Rica since the 1980s, charting the effects of carbon dioxide concentration and warming on trees and the forest.

The annual fluctuation of the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere affects tree growth. When there is a good balance, the trees grow and bind the carbon dioxide. In the hottest years, the level of photosynthesis decreases, and trees release carbon. A disruption in photosynthesis may even cause the tree to die. Kannisto has been observing the practical work of the scientists and has become familiar with their research. "Photosynthesis is like breathing for the tree," Kannisto draws a comparison. "When it is disrupted, the tree dies. It seems this sort of collapse cannot be predicted. It is scary that the hottest years on record have all been in recent years."



Close Observer, 2010

November 7, 2008

"What is happening in the photograph? The blurring of scale and the large plants are important. What is the person doing? Looking at a compass? Measuring something? Should they be photographed while they are turned away too? A green raincoat and a grey backpack? Collecting tadpoles? Jar! I may have to take the digital camera as well as the Mamiya to see some positions better? Perhaps video footage too? Problem: more stuff to carry.

Thinking about tomorrow's photoshoot. It's pouring down. I'm trying to decide how the person should be in the photograph. Should the person in the photograph be **Vita** after all, and not me? What if I'm not happy with how I look? After carrying the stuff to the location, which is a 1–1.5-hour hike away with at least two creeks to cross, it would be nice to actually get a photograph! I also have to take Elinchrome flashes and their stands. They are really heavy. Their battery has to go in the backpack. The Elinchrome hard case does not work as a backpack. They should have designed it that way. Although no one is probably crazy enough to carry them long distances in conditions like these.

The rain is unbelievable. I'm sitting in the middle of a large covered dining area with at least five meters of roof either side, and still the humidity and the rain-drops reach me. I went to the sleeping hut at first, but it's so dreary in there that I came back. It's pitch black, humid and stuffy, and the rain rattles. The terrace is full of our dirty clothes. The oil lamps didn't light up.

Besides, they seem to have something other than lamp oil in them. They smell like kerosene. Our beds are like two birds' nests. The old mattresses are lumpy, the sheets crumpled, and there is a huge pile of blankets. I bet they smell the same too. I'm tired. I should go to bed. I've stayed up too late the last couple of nights."

November 8, 2008

"We did a photoshoot with the big aquatic plants. It turned out brilliantly – or so I think at least! We set off at 7 a.m. after breakfast. The distance evaluation based on yesterday's hike was a huge underestimate. It took us twice as long to walk with the Elinchroms, the camera stuff and the stands. The Planilla trail is pretty rough, like all the trails here. It felt like it was all uphill and then downhill again. Lots of roots and mud on the ground. Slippery rocks too. Whenever we stopped for a rest, we steamed like we'd just stepped out of the sauna, because the temperature is only about 20 C. We also crossed two wide rivers by jumping over rocks, and a couple of smaller creeks too. We made it to the spot in about 2.5 hours, at around 9.30 a.m. First we had to rest. Then we changed into dry shirts. Then we started to set up the flash equipment on the slope, tying it to plants with rope to prevent it from falling. I only had the 90-mm lens with me. There were some moments of terror when I was trying to fit the lens in the Mamiya while balanced on the steep slope. The camera almost fell, along with the tripod. The slope is good in that I can get a higher view and crop out the sky. I had to break off some branches and bend and tie some trees that were in the way.

We had to wait for over an hour because it was too sunny. Then we found a combination of ambient light and flash that seemed to work. The entire situation, with the large aquatic plants, the bottom of the creek, and us collecting the fingerlings and tadpoles, seemed very nice and natural. Pretty much like collecting bugs in a jar as a kid."



Preserved specimen of the extinct golden toad, 2006 / 2020

The golden toad is a species of true toad that became extinct in 1989. The species only inhabited a small area in Monteverde in Costa Rica where warm air condenses into misty clouds as it rises. The dry season, spurred on by the El Niño effect in 1986 and 1987, led to the demise of the golden toads.

Collages

In her collages, Kannisto raises ecological questions and considers the impact that humans have on nature, for example regarding the diminishing number of birds and insects. By juxtaposing photographs, narratives and diagrams, the pieces tackle themes related to natural research, observatories, and various threats. The pieces also reveal the work that happens behind the scenes; the artist photographs in order to remember and also collects photographic material, newspaper clippings and old negatives.

Tracking bees, 2019

The gradual extinction of pollinators is a pressing concern. These creatures are subjected to large quantities of chemicals used in agriculture. 80–98 percent of pesticides and herbicides escape into the environment and into the food chain.

Hollow oak, insect trap, research article, 2019

The ecosystem will suffer significantly as a result of the loss of insects. The dead standing oak photographed in Germany remains an important habitat for hundreds of species.

Forest hide-out, negative, spotted nutcracker being ringed, 201

The forest hide-out meant for wildlife observation was photographed in Tavastia Proper. The flock of birds recorded on a single-sheet negative that is at least 70 years old was left behind by an anonymous bird watcher. The purpose of bird ringing is to give each bird a unique tag and to provide background data for the purposes of conservation.

Duckling on eutrophicated lake, 2019

The photograph of a eutrophicated lake is from Germany. Kannisto photographed it for a feature story in GEO magazine on the UN's International Day for Biological Diversity, which is celebrated on May 22.

Mountains and wetland at Baikal, yellow-breasted bunting, red-list conservation status, 2019

This yellow-breasted bunting photographed in the Baikal region in Russia is on the brink of extinction.



Tangle, 1997

Tangle is the earliest work in the exhibition. Kannisto took the photograph on her first trip to the Peruvian Amazon when she was 22 years old. "It was photographed at a moment when the water was high, and the fish swam into the forest to eat fruit. I remember being amazed and impressed by how the forest floor transformed into a mirror reflecting the landscape."

Chloroceryle americana, 2019 Green kingfisher

Sanna Kannisto purposely highlights fauna that is small and considered inconsequential, such as small birds, insects, snakes, bats, and frogs. According to her, their role in the ecosystem is more significant and multifaceted than that of the large mammals that are often seen as figureheads of nature photography and conservation. In terms of rainforest diversity, she is particularly fascinated by inter-species relationships and networks. Kannisto says she has always been an observer who places great importance on sharing observations with others through photography.

The green kingfisher was photographed in Costa Rica. An assistant photographed the bird that Sanna Kannisto was holding in her hand. "I held the bird myself because I have a lot of experience handling birds," says Kannisto.