

Artist Interview: Sanna Kannisto

GESTURES

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Katja Räisänen: Your working process is unique. How did you find your method and how has it evolved over the years? How would you describe your image-making process?

Sanna Kannisto: In my image-making process, I separate the object from its original environment and move it to my field studio for examination, where it is given a new context in front of the studio backdrop. In the studio, the focus is on the birds. I personally have much more freedom to plan the image and lighting in advance, and I particularly enjoy this phase of planning and construction. Of course, the coincidences and unexpected moments with living birds are some of the best things in the process; you must give these moments room to happen. My way of working has evolved over the years, especially during my time working in rainforests and research stations in South America. One typical aspect of my work has been always to work alongside and in collaboration with researchers while doing my own independent artistic work.

KR: How did birds become your main subject?

SK: I have continued to photograph birds for a long time because it offers the opportunity to create such a wide variety of images. Birds are such a diverse group, and I think they have interesting ways of being in the picture. However, it is anything but easy to photograph them. Whenever I start in the spring or autumn (at migration time) I always wonder how I managed to photograph in the past. Every time it's like starting all over again. There are fewer elements in a studio photo than in nature, so everything that is included up in the picture is ever more

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important, the positions of the birds, the choice of the right kind of branch, the cropping of the image, and so on.

KR: You have been photographing birds for over ten years now. How has your photography changed during this time?

SK: One of the biggest changes is that I now consider the images I shoot as raw material from which I start an experimental creative process based on a plan. I always change something in the image. If the bird has been in the same position, I can, for instance, choose a leg or tail for the bird from another frame with better depth of field. After releasing the bird, I may photograph the branch and other similar branches again. In image processing, I combine pieces of branches and rotate and resize them. The need for this activity is partly because my field studio is very small, and I have no assistants. However, I do want to have larger plants in my pictures, for example.

In the three-part piece *Unexpected Warm Day*, my studio was only able to accommodate only a 50-centimetre section of cattail at a time. I photographed the cattail plants in the whole again later against a large white background. In *Turdus merula* I photographed a maple branch in full bloom in my studio in Helsinki and a blackbird separately in Hanko, sitting on the same branch when the flowers were already wilted. I have done this before especially when photographing delicate blooms. When I make more complex images, the workload increases considerably. I constantly have a bunch of sketches that I'm working on – images where I still need some element to complete the whole.

KR: In your recent works you have made different visual choices compared to the earlier ones, such as using a black background. What factors and sources of inspiration influence these choices?

SK: The black background is a natural choice for shooting owls, as it evokes darkness and night. The black background is somehow more timeless and gives more distance compared to a white one, even more portrait or studio-like. It is not as open to interpretation as the white

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background. The black background has no reference to the tradition of scientific illustration but is more closely related to the tradition of still life – if we are talking about these two traditions. I see it as carrying with it a heavier symbolism of the transience of life. I've been using a white background for so long that I've had gradually to get used to using black. In some images it has felt completely strange and impossible, such as with the green tree leaves.

KR: Plants and branches play an important role in your work. How do you choose the branches and plants for your images?

SK: Branches and the whole "interior design" of the studio need to be given special attention in the shoot. Above all, the studio must have enough resting places for the birds, a variety of branches at all heights, rocks, things that create a sense of security and things for the birds to explore. And there must be that one "good" branch for the picture. A new rule I have is that the branches and plants I use as part of the pictures must be interesting enough to work in the picture even without the bird. There is a rugged beauty in dry branches. Decaying trees have a certain aesthetic in themselves. There is so much small detail that is usually hidden from view. Once you start looking for these things, you find all sorts of interesting things. Branches also allow me to create contrasts inside the image. If the bird is flamboyant, like a bee-eater, it's better if the branch is barren.

KR: How do you choose the locations you are shooting in?

SK: I have photographed a lot of images at the Hanko Bird Station, which is run by the Helsinki Region Ornithological Society. I've shot there because it's the biggest one in Finland and there are regular bird ringers working there. The station is located in the Tulliniemi nature reserve, and it is the last stop for the birds to rest before crossing the sea on their migration. For this exhibition I've also photographed images in Italy on the island of Ponza last spring, and this was the second time I was there. The station in Ponza is small and only open during the spring migration, but the species are partly different from those that are ringed in Finland.

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KR: In making the images for this exhibition, you have been interested in the relationships and communication between birds. Encountering birds and establishing contact with them have been special starting points for your photography, haven't they?

SK: In making art, I think intention and mood are very important – the mindset with which something is made. For me, it's important to encounter the bird in a calm and appreciative way.

My aim is not to portray the bird as a representative of its species, but as an individual with its own temperament and character. I want to convey a certain feeling or thought about the bird I am photographing. It is probably a combination of my own feelings and knowledge and the impressions of the situation I am photographing, in the way the bird behaves. The pictures show the energy level or curiosity of the bird. Eye contact is also important. If the bird is confident, you can see it in its gestures.

KR: In the works in the exhibition, we encounter some birds that you haven't had the chance to photograph before. What was it like to work with, for example, Eurasian jays?

SK: The Latin name for jays, *Garrulus*, means "talkative", and it's an apt description for these birds. The Eurasian jays were making calls on set and staring at me, maybe even bossing me around. Photographing both the Eurasian jay and the Northern nutcracker was demanding, as they are very intelligent species of the crow family. As the philosopher John Berger has written in his essay *Why Look at Animals*, the animal gaze is both fascinating and frightening because it points to something unknown, something beyond our understanding. The animal gaze makes man aware of himself.

In photographing all these larger birds, it was important that everything was carefully prepared. In the final picture, the bird seems to turn at just the right moment, one leg in motion, and the pose is just perfect. The bird seems lightweight. Sometimes, when I released the birds I was shooting, the last thought that occurred to me was that the birds probably thought they were more cunning and clever than I when they initially got away from the

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shoot. I've read in Jennifer Ackerman's book *The Genius of Birds* that the New Caledonian crows involved in a long-term study recognised their researchers from a crowd on the university campus after their release. After recognising them, they bombarded the researchers with twigs, small stones and their droppings! Luckily, my moments with these birds were short!

KR: You've also talked about your fascination with owls. What is it about owls and working with them that particularly interests you?

SK: They have a very different kind of enigmatic gaze to them compared to birds of the crow family. You don't even really meet their gaze, because it seems like they're looking right through you into somewhere where their instincts take them – into another time and place. It's amazing that owls can fly and hunt in total darkness without making a sound! New research has even shown that owls process sound in the visual center of their brains, so they may actually have in their minds a “picture” of the environment that they are hearing.

The cultural significance of owls is also fascinating. The oldest man-made images of owls can be found in cave paintings, including one from the Chauvet cave in France, dating back as far as 32 000 years. In Indian folklore, owls were symbols of wisdom. The Moche culture of Peru depicted owl warriors with human features. The owls' ability to fly in the dark was seen as a divine power. The owl is also a symbol of intelligence and understanding in Roman and Greek mythology (the owl of Minerva). Francisco Goya's *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (1797–1799) is one of the best-known works on owls, and in art the owl was also depicted by Picasso, who famously also owned a pet owl.

KR: In your working process, art and science meet. What role does natural science play in your work? How has the ecological state of alarm influenced your work over the years?

SK: Research knowledge is a kind of fuel that can provide ideas for making art or push you in a certain direction. It's interesting to see things viewed from different perspectives. I have made works that deal with the relationship between man and nature and the decline of the

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natural world. In some works, this is more direct, in others more subtle. My work has always had a respectful approach to nature. Therefore, I believe that presenting my work can contribute to the understanding of the natural world, and the research and conservation of the of it, as well as increase people's appreciation of, for example, birds. Bird populations in Finland have been declining throughout the 2000s. Bird researchers have calculated that this means the disappearance of 15 million individual birds in Finland over the last twenty years. In order to protect birds, their habitats must be protected from human activity.

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