



The Art of Observation

Curiosity and field skills guide a photographer through tropical rainforests to study nature through science and art.

By Julie Leibach
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Sanna Kannisto wouldn't give up. For five or six nights, stubborn storms and intense moonlight had denied her attempts. Finally the elements cooperated and the insects emerged. The resulting photograph, "Private Collection," is a dreamy self-portrait of her in the rainforest, silhouetted against a glowing white sheet sprinkled with moths and framed by tropical greenery. "It tells something about the personality of the collector," said Kannisto in a recent talk, "about [her] obsessions and passions."

In this case, the collector is a soft-spoken Finn who has devoted the past 14 years to exploring, through photography, how art and science portray nature. She lived at research stations in Brazil, Costa Rica, and French Guiana, developing field skills by assisting scientists and teaching herself. A decade's worth of work—entailing eight trips in all, each lasting two to three months—bear fruit in her new book, *Fieldwork* (Aperture). The images, like "Private Collection," are surreal and documentary at the same time.

Take her still-life series, featuring forest plants and animals photographed in a stark white studio fringed by black curtains. Like a puppet master, Kannisto positioned each of her subjects as if preparing them for a show. But she also treated some as a scientist would a specimen, fastening them with laboratory clamps. "My work moves between fact and fiction," she wrote in an email. "More sensuous and poetic expressions of rainforests are important to me as well as documentary aspects."

As they straddle the "real" world and the subjective one, Kannisto's images can even seem absurd. Her shot of *Aristolochia gorgona*, for example—a plant with some of the largest flowers in the neotropics—seems exaggeratedly large, like whimsical stage scenery in a play with no actors.

Unlike a professional scientist, Kannisto casts a wider net over the organisms she studies, preferring a broader understanding to specialized knowledge. "I feel that I can approach any kind of subject or any kind of species," she said during the talk. "I'm kind of a Renaissance person." The researchers at each station do play a role: On occasion, they offer tips on where to explore, or assist her with set-ups. But overall, she collects species "out of curiosity and out of fascination," she wrote (and she takes pains to return the animals when she's done).

Growing up, Kannisto immersed herself in nature: berry picking, forest romping, and frog collecting. Capturing the ephemeral nature of life still drives her: “Through photography, I may preserve things as they were, forever in their glory.” She also finds inspiration in such sources as 16th and 17th century still-life paintings and natural history drawings. Her image “Zona antisismica” might recall an allegory, such as Johannes Vermeer’s “The Art of Painting,” a reflection of the Dutch artist’s role in society. Whatever message Kannisto’s leaf-toting ants convey, however, seems hidden in her bemused expression. In a way, Fieldwork itself is her own private collection, a conceptual work whose meaning only the artist knows but that we can all interpret.

[See this article’s accompanying photo gallery](#)



Photo: Sanna Kannisto