

SANDRA KANTANEN

Persons
Projects

Sandra Kantanen has delved within the world of landscape photography: this fascination with creating idealised surreal sceneries stems from her earlier student days, when she went to China during her master studies in 2000. The notion of what real or not has been the driving force within Kantanen work ever since. Hers is an aesthetic journey in challenging the notion of what we as a culture believe to be ideal. Kantanen says: "It became for me a search for a landscape that doesn't really exist, an idealised picture." If the works reflect the ambiance of her liking, she leaves the photographs as they were taken - If not, she manipulates them through a digital process where she stretches the pixels to the point where they appear as if dripping paint. Kantanen photographs can only be described in her own words as "mindscapes".

Sandra Kantanen was born in 1974 in Helsinki. She lives and works in Hanko, Finland. She studied photography at Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture in Helsinki and at the Central Academy of Fine art, Beijing, China. Kantanen has had several international solo and group exhibitions most recently at Alfred Ehrhardt Stiftung (Berlin, 2018), Denver Art Museum (Denver, 2018), Rovaniemi Art Museum (Rovaniemi, 2017) or Fotografisk Center (Copenhagen, 2017).

Gallery



MEADOW, 2023

This series of work *Meadow* teeters between photography and painting, with scenes of atmospheric natural spaces digitally manipulated with drips, splashes, and strokes of pixelated pigment.

This series encapsulates the spring-time bloom of wildflowers in rural, disused spaces now untouched by human hands, the multitude of indigenous, and wild plant species fill the entirety of the shot. Each work within the series shows a different stretch of land taken in different counties or countries. These slices of meadows are located between the brick and concrete of housing, pavement and apartment blocks, exploding through the cracks of society. These sections of organic land remain untouched, continueing to grow in biodi-

versity, the only interaction is between the local insect population and the artist who photographs and digitally plays with the space, adding her own abstract painterly touch.

“I found these places by wandering around and observing, stopping and looking very closely. The Meadow is like a miniature landscape, especially in contrast to the Forests I have been photographing in recent years. In Finland the idea of an urban meadow is still quite new but in Germany, where many of these works were photographed, there has been a clear shift to leaving the lawn mower aside to create natural habitats for bees and pollinators.

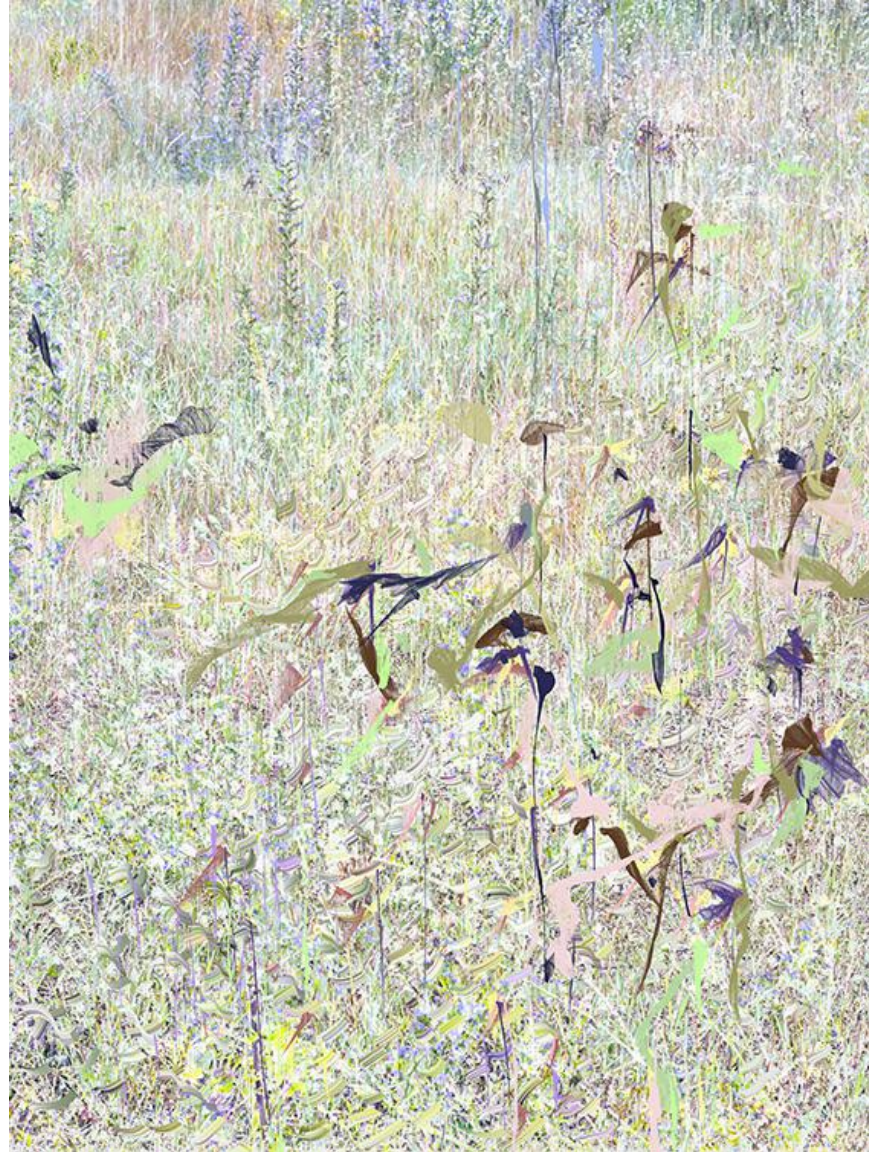
The works are also about the picture it-

self, where light and colours make up an image on the edge of visibility. The pictures are layered, allowing the surface to become further abstracted. The result is a resonating image that moves in the summer light,” explains the artist.



Meadow 02, 2023, Pigment print, 138 x 183 cm





Meadow 08, 2023, Pigment print, 183 x 138 cm

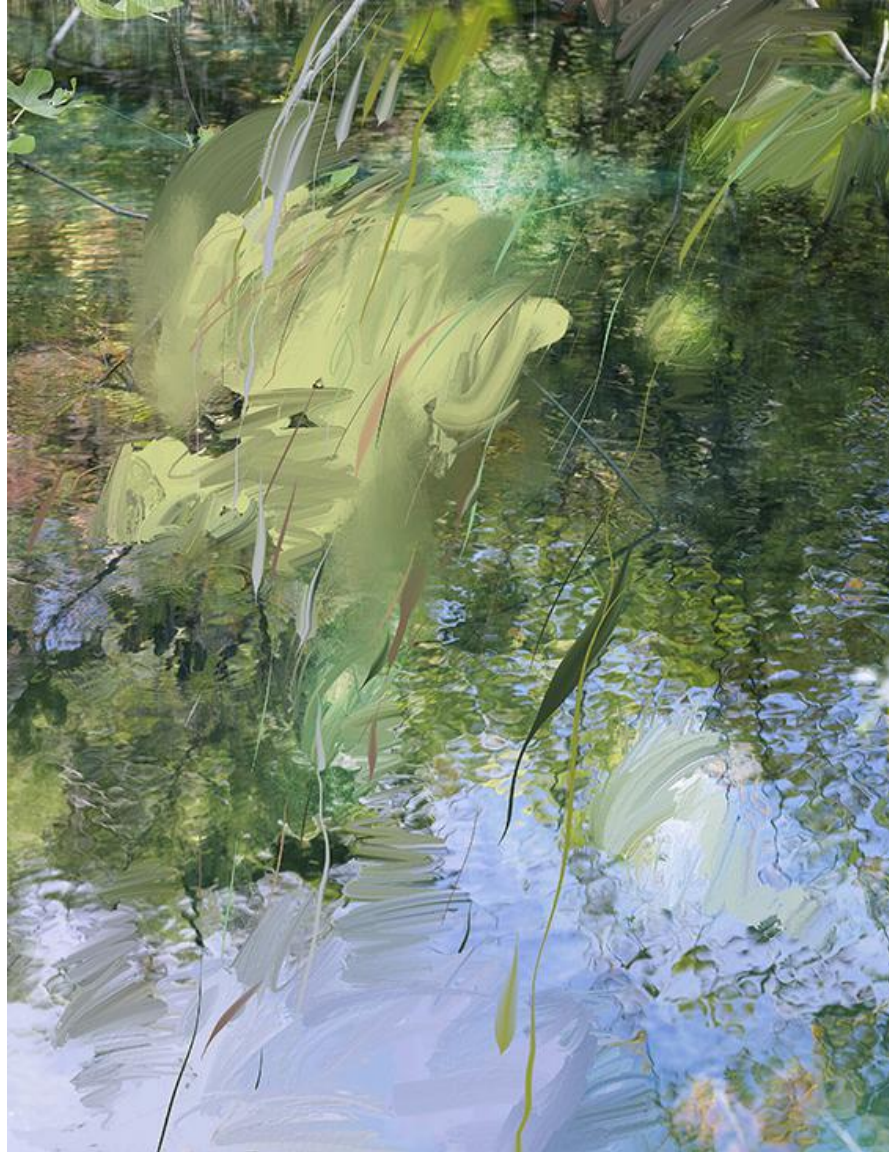
NEW LANDSCAPES, 2022-2023

The landscapes seem to be at odds with our age. Her photographs are seductively beautiful. They reference the idylls of traditional Chinese and Japanese worlds.” This clash of old and new time comes from studying her masters in China in 2000. As she explains, ‘I studied Chinese landscape painting and became completely obsessed with the idea of trying to understand their way of looking at nature. As I found most of the holy mountains they had been depicting for thousands of years, were almost destroyed by pollution or otherwise turned into tourist spots. It became for me a search for a landscape that doesn’t really exist, an idealised picture.’ Her Chinese forerunners were, of course, equally interested in an idealised depiction, not mere reproduction. ‘I’m not

Chinese,’ she writes, ‘but I have been wondering where I got this overwhelming feeling of belonging in that culture. I somehow had to understand it. I felt this deep sorrow for something that was lost when looking at their landscape.’

This push and pull continues in other aspects of her photographs. The sense of a distant time, of a Utopian dream made in the Chinese tradition out of water and mountains, has taken the photographer’s challenge to heart and literally stopped time – centuries ago in some idyllic Chinese ‘land’ of mountains and water. The simplicity of her pictures encourages contemplation of trees, blossom, mountains and sheets of still water, but the modern eye, unused to contemplation, finds a friction

under the misleadingly still surface. She appears at odds with today’s tempo and theories, yet her work relies on modern solutions. She has mixed photography with paint. She paints with light. One senses old values of a slower way of life, her interest in Tibetan Buddhism - there is a visual seduction pulling the viewer into a more thoughtful world – yet the hints at chaos with the occasional wash of colour, the mix of techniques that would have been heresy to traditionalists, seem to accept that there are flaws not only in man-made thinking patterns, but in nature itself, and even in her ‘idealised’ vision of it.



Untitled (Refraction 1), 2022, Pigment print on archival paper, 60 x 46,5 cm



By the Morning, the

Ilkka Halso
Sanna Kannisto
Sandra Kantanen
Mikko Rikala



Untitled (Lake 4), 2010, Pigment print on archival paper, framed, 62 x 50 cm





Untitled (Mountain 6), 2010, Pigment print on archival paper, framed, 62 x 50 cm

STILL LIFE, 2020 - 2022

With these works Sandra Kantanen follows one of the oldest painting traditions, reminiscing Dutch flower still lifes from the 17th century. Only by taking a closer, more careful look, one will recognize that the vibrant and dynamic brushstrokes are artificial. The artist digitally manipulated images, pulling and stretching pigmented pixels across the screen until the line between photography and painting blurred. These works exemplify how Kantanen can perfectly balance color within her motives through the selection of colored pixels to create her own imagined environment. By using the photographic process of multiple exposures and inserting digital brush strokes, Kantanen blurs the line between what we see in the image and how it makes us feel in the same tradition as the Impressionists.

The works of Sandra Kantanen can best be defined by the harmonic unity when photography merges with painting. The artist has extensively studied in both fields, and always had a strong penchant for using light in a whimsically painterly way within her photographs. This practice can be seen in her more recent body of work, which is reminiscent of Dutch still lifes from the 17th century. By using the photographic process of multiple exposures and inserting digital brush strokes, a process of time begins to show, as though watching an immediate growth, life and decay of organic still life subjects.



Still Life Flowers 3, 2020, Pigment print on archival paper, 66 x 55 cm





Still Life Flowers 4, 2022, Pigment print on archival paper, 66 x 50 cm

LANDSCAPES, 2015 - 2018

At first sight it is difficult to believe that Sandra Kantanen's work is based in the present. She has taken the photographer's challenge to heart and literally stopped time centuries ago in some idyllic land of mountains and water. The simplicity of her pictures encourages contemplation of trees, blossoms, mountains, and sheets of still water: but the modern eye, unused to contemplation, finds a friction under the misleadingly still surface.

These photographs are not just about water, air, and rock: they investigate the human relationship with our surroundings. The proof is in the positive lyricism of the work. The gently-layered compositions are affirmations of a belief in life. As Kazuo Ishiguro says in his novel *An*

Artist of the Floating World "It is hard to appreciate the beauty of a world when one doubts its very validity." The inclusion of this quote is not to evoke the Edo high-life/low-life connotations of the phrase. Rather it is wishing to concentrate on the movement in Kantanen's work. There are no fixed boundaries between her "spiritual" and "real" worlds. Tarkovsky's vision of the dangers of unchecked individualism is no longer an unusual view. Others, such as Hou Hanru, have a more positive take on it: "Individualism is the fundamental notion of Western society: is rooted in the worshipping of the romantic self. But somehow this generation now understands that this individuality is no longer individual, it's not a separate subjectivity. With each successive photograph

of Kantanen's, one explores this new understanding of the individual, and so, a new understanding of the worlds we inhabit.



Landscapes and Moths. Koriaamo Gallerv. 2014. Helsinki



Sandra Kantanen
Smokeworks





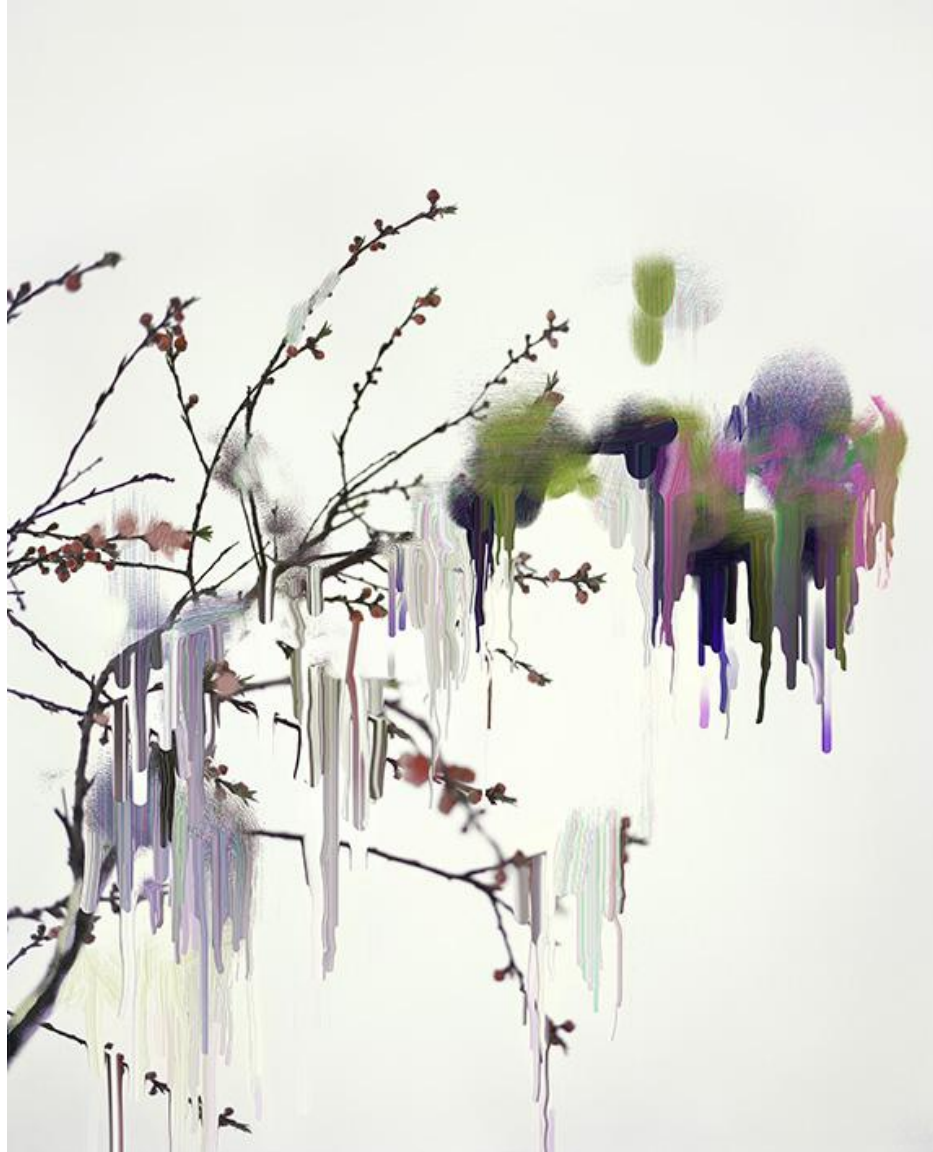
New Territory. Denver Art Museum. 2018

SAKURA, 2009-2019

The art of Sandra Kantanen is based on what it refuses. The mind and the eye want to conceive a point in time and space that marks the beginning of all things (or at least of a limited set of things), but both mind and eye risk discovering, at that point, where all things will end. What Kantanen's art tries to refuse is exactly endings: "I signal a struggle, and it is a struggle. It is easier to perceive endings than beginnings. All you hear about is ends: of art, aesthetics, modernity, politics, nature ... man. All it takes to see the end of things is to be au courant and blasé, but to spot beginnings one must be open and naive." In the case of Kantanen's photographs, fortunately, not too much effort is required to be open or naive for that matter. With the *Sakura* works, We are hyp-

notized by a bundle of meanings. Here photography that serves to put them flesh of fantasy on the Romantic poetics of "everything speaks of truth engraved on the very body of things. A blossoming cherry tree ... the light-too bright to be the sun-bewilders the eye. Her camera, like all cameras, incorporates ready-made the conventions of Renaissance perspective, and here she uses it for what it does best and for nothing else: making nature enter images. But she does not only do that -trees from a different continent and time come to mind. The picture of the cherry tree is not about making a naturalistic copy-almost any means are therefore permissible to avoid this, and the Chinese ink painters knew that better than anyone. This picture of a tree is also a part of

this old convention in which paintings of a landscape, figure, plum, cymbidium, bamboo, or chrysanthemum were so sophisticated that an artist would paint only one motif during his lifetime. This painting is not interested so much in resemblance as it is in the result of intuitive glimpses or reflections on life and the things around us. Kantanen says a great deal with small means, although she is prepared to sometimes exaggerate a characteristic feature in order to increase the impression of reality. Rather than attempting to place her within a mythology of the innocent or infantile eye, Kantanen must be thought of as an as observer who is astonishingly alert to whatever is anomalous in perceptual experience.



Untitled (Sakura 7), 2019, Pigment print, framed, 117 x 97 cm, work 2014



Internal and External Landscapes, Shiseido Gallery 2009, Tokyo, Japan



Untitled (Sakura 1), 2011, Pigment print on archival paper, framed, 108 x 128 cm





Untitled (Sakura 3), 2011, Pigment print on archival paper, framed, 128 x 108 cm

DISTORTION, 2016 - 2018

The *Distortion* series indicates its digital nature: the arrangement of organic material have been made with large-scale scanners to engage the eye with their sharp hyperrealistic contours. The detail Kantanen layers into her photo-graphs leaves the viewer with a sense of tangibility that resonates with her poetic interpretations.

By imitating the photographic process through the use of large scale scanners while layering multiple exposures and inserting digital brush strokes, Kantanen blurs the line between the analogue and the digital to a point where the viewer cannot determine if the artworks true origin lies in photography or not. The positioning of the flowers almost irritate the eye with the contrast of sharp hyperreal-

istic contours and bleary digital corruption. The mass build up of detail gives the impression of tangibility that is then disturbed by the digital distortions that Kantanen adds in afterwards. The wavy motions – that occurred by moving the flowers during the scanning process – recall technical errors. As theres types of mistakes tend not to happen with high-resolution scanners, the glitches indicate the artistic intervention that is juxtaposed to the objective scanning itself.



Untitled (Distortion 1), 2017, Pigment print, 48 x 35 cm





Untitled (Distortion 4), 2017, Pigment print, 48 x 35 cm



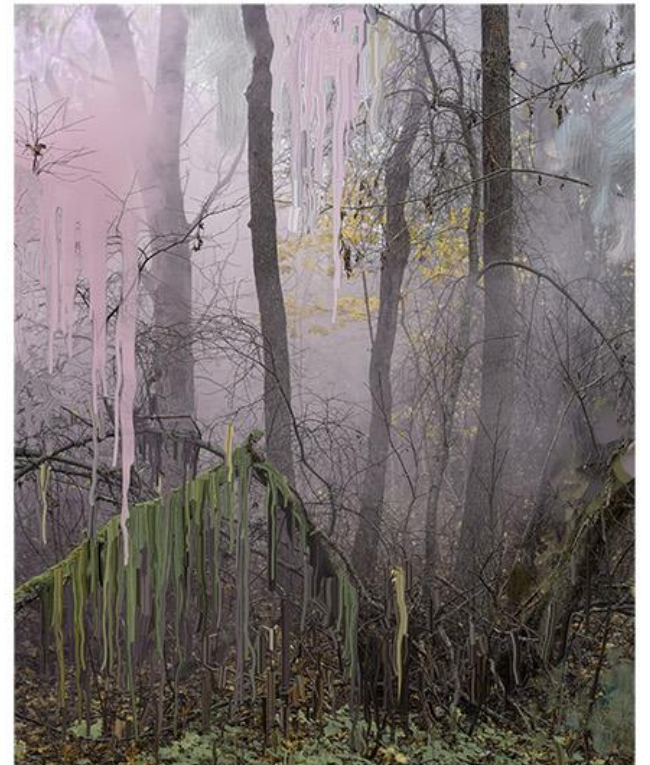
Untitled (Distortion 12), 2016, Pigment print, 48 x 35 cm

SMOKE WORKS, 2016 - 2019

It is no coincidence that landscape as subject emerge from the self-reflectiveness of paintings from the Romantic era, it has become pivotal when considering these questions surrounding images. From the early nineteenth century, landscapes were considered central in forging the new importance of painting as an art form. Landscapes enabled the painting to be viewed for the first time as an image in itself, not merely a representation or conduit for the allegories and stories of historical paintings.

The “airiness,” both in form and meaning, of the landscape as subject, meant that it lent itself well to being used as a platform from which to approach questions dealing with images themselves. This is also the role landscape plays

in Kantanen’s works. As in Romantic painting, the fog rolls in to obscure the lure of perspective and pin the viewer’s gaze onto the surface and image-ness of the work. Nature is also powerfully present in Kantanen’s work. It does not, however, reside in the cultural construct that is a landscape, but rather in the photograph itself: residing in the phenomenon of light, it is actually “nature once removed.” Nature is even more present in the marks Kantanen adds to her images: the digital brushstrokes, the corrupting of the image, the stretching of forms.



Untitled (Forest 10, 8 and 15), 2019, Pigment print, framed, 117 x 97 cm, each, triptych



Untitled (Forest 2), 2019, Pigment print, framed, 128 x 108 cm





Untitled (Forest 19), 2019, Pigment print, framed, 117 x 97 cm

MOTH AND BUTTERFLY, 2014

This collection of circular works display small studies of moths and butterflies interacting with flora and fauna. These works become romanticized scientific documentations, as we get to see the secretive lives of miniature life, all exhibited as if on a petridish. The images permanence contrasts against the fleeting lives of these small-scaled lives, coercing the viewer to pause and take in what Kantanen is showing.

In the daily flow of information, images can invoke strong emotions. They captivate, surprise, excite, and aggravate us. Alongside familiar themes, we are moved by elements that are harder to identify. One of these is the origin of an image. As I look at the subject of an image I am unknowingly also looking for

an answer to the questions: “What has brought this image about?” or “Where do the traces in it lead?”

The subject under consideration is the defining feature of photography: the medium's relationship to reality, its translucency. As we look at an image, we often see only the subject depicted, not the image itself. Therefore, to bring the image itself to the foreground, a certain separation is needed for example, visual allusions to themes and materials borrowed from painting, like the very material of paint itself.



Untitled (Moth 4), 2014, Pigment print, Diasec, 19 cm diameter



Landscapes and Moths. Koriaamo Gallerv. 2014. Helsinki



Untitled (Moth 5), 2014, Pigment print, Diasec, 19 cm diameter

