

# Dreamscapes & doubt

*Finnish artist Sandra Kantanen, has adopted aspects of the Chinese landscape watercolour tradition, drawing in photographic experiment, a northern mindset and the blur tendency with a difference*

TO COME FACE TO FACE with the photographs of the young Finnish artist, Sandra Kantanen, is to be brought to a world which is other, and yet also of this world. Kantanen uses the camera to uncover ways of documenting the natural world expressed as magically real. It is also a world which, for a European at least, is geographically and culturally other, that of the vast palette of Asia's woken giant, China.

Her photographs convey nature at its most intensely alive, at times almost overwhelmingly so. To look is to find the photograph's moment rich in both foreground detail and longer limed background where the intermediate natural world takes on qualities of the dreamscape. Yet at the same time the images are stretched toward painterly abstraction; the tree trunks in her *Beech* series highlighting the blackness of the four scraggy trunks, while an indistinctness renders them into blocks cut into the white washed backdrops. Painterly is appropriate, as Kantanen has used various techniques of camera manipulation to layer what seem like washes of pigments over the initial photos, most effectively in her 2009 *Untitled (Mountain)* series. In the series, a mix of cherry blossoms, magnolia, bamboo and tree branches, often reflected in lake water, summon up both the sheer sharpness and attention to the semi-still world found throughout the Chinese landscape painting tradition, and the indistinctness, blur and melding that brings to mind the master of blur, Gerhard Richter. But Kantanen's eye is drawn to completely different subject matter from that of the German painter and others of the blur tendency. Recurring subjects are plant and flower studies, along with much longer field-of-depth landscapes, different mountain series, or field, with rice fields stretching into a valley surrounded by the strange and surreal – for a Westerner – landscape mountains of Dali in southern China.

Kantanen is part of the increasingly influential group of Finnish photographer known as The Helsinki School. In Finnish art history photography is a significant form. The internationally renowned Helsinki School of Art & Design (which was merged with Helsinki Technical University, and then re-launched in 2009 as the Aalto University) is home to many of the best-known elder generation of photographers. These include Jyrki Paavola, Esko Männikkö and Pentti Saavalainen, the latter surreal and strange photographic documentation of northern Finnish life and

nature significantly influenced pre-university Kantanen. Again and again, these photographers explored the photograph as social document and record, although in increasingly individual ways. After seeing Saavalainen's work, Kantanen decided she wanted to make a career in photography. "I wanted to go the Art & Design School very much," she says over the phone from Helsinki, adding that she applied to HEAD several times before being accepted in 1996. By that time the Helsinki school was in its infancy, under the tutelage of Timothy Persons, a well-connected academic and gallerist, who has been instrumental in promoting the best of each new wave of photography department post-graduates. At first there was no umbrella name, for these photographers, but gradually, "The Helsinki School" stuck. Those associated with the school share neither a single aesthetic nor technical approach, and, from the outside, it can look not unlike a piece of creative industries branding. "It sort of developed from this large group of photographers, which were somehow involved with each other. Now it is getting bigger and bigger. It's an amazing chance to really make a career as an artist."

The photographic emergence of the Helsinki school is a reflection of Finland itself, which since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, has been on a journey of discovery and re-invention, from what a few describe as the 'Albania of the North' – an isolated, insular backwater – to the 'Japan of the North', a contemporary comparison. If hi-tech mobile phone company's and a closeness to forests, suggest two similarities between the countries, the broadening of horizons are updating things. Finland's sense of looking out to the rest of the world has matched the march of globalisation. Thirty years ago it would have been unimaginable for the child, Kantanen, to imagine that in her student years she would be travelling to China on an exchange. That this is how things turned out is evidence of the extent to which her country has embraced change and the twenty-first century.

Like many others, Kantanen's initial exposure to China left her stunned. "That was my first reaction," she says now. The first visit was in 2000 on a student exchange between the Helsinki School of Art and Design to Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts. "I was lucky as it was a very good school, with an advanced department of photography." As with many from the Nordic world, she talks of feeling a connection and empathy with the natural world, nurtured by summer-house visits in the Finnish forests. Her father, an enthusiastic and encouraging amateur photographer himself,

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