

**PENTTI SAMMALLAHTI:  
WHEN WINTER REIGNS**

**22 NOV 2019 - 2 FEB 2020**

**THE  
PHOTOGRAPHERS'  
GALLERY**



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Solovki, White Sea, Russia, 1992

This selection of images from award-winning Finnish photographer, **Pentti Sammallahti** (b. 1950, Helsinki), reflects his fascination with cold-climate landscapes, isolation, nature and visual storytelling. As well as photographing in his native Finland, he travels across the globe, from Europe to Africa, Asia and Siberia in search of inspiration. His small-scale, meticulously hand-printed and toned silver gelatin prints offer quiet, poetic impressions of distant places, which are both melancholic and humorous.

His work over the last five decades also reveals the constant presence of animals that inhabit these isolated landscapes; in particular birds, which are celebrated in the recent publication *Des oiseaux* (Éditions Xavier Barral, 2018).

Pentti Sammallahti began photography as a teenager and held his first solo exhibition in 1971. Both as a photographer and a teacher, he has had an enormous influence on a whole generation of documentary photographers in Scandinavia. He taught at the Art and Design University in Helsinki for 17 years, and in 1991 he was awarded a 15-year grant from the Finnish government. Since then he has devoted himself completely to photography and has designed and self-published more than forty books and portfolios. Sammallahti has received the Finnish national photography award four times and his works are held, amongst others, in the collections of the MoMA (New York), the Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam), the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Moderna Museet (Stockholm), and the National Gallery of Ireland.



Pentti Sammallahti by Kristoffer Albrecht

Photography

# Pentti Sammallahti, Finland's top photographer

*An artist with a remarkable eye and an unusual approach to the art market*



Ristisaari, Finland, 1974

UNDER a low sun, a frog with a thuggish expression swims alone in a pond, its black reflection a crisply outlined mirror image on the still water. It stares straight ahead; an eye-to-eye confrontation seems imminent. This sinister yet amusing picture was taken by Pentti Sammallahti, a 68-year-old Finnish photographer with an unusual status: he is at once feted and deliberately low-profile.

His modest prices—prints start at €600 (\$702)—are part of the explanation. Peter Fetterman, who exhibited Mr Sammallahti's work at the Masterpiece fair in London this month, says he "is the best photographer whose work you can afford." But price tags that make his work accessible put off some collectors and galleries, who see price as a measure of quality. "Peter keeps telling me to charge more," says Mr Sammallahti.

He chooses not to raise prices, nor to limit editions of his prints. "I have the negative," he says, "why not print from it?" For him, making prints is part of his art. The frog peers from a silver-gelatine image taken from a black-and-white negative, one of his preferred techniques, but he experiments ceaselessly.

Mr Sammallahti is not a recluse, nor lacking in ambition. He travels the world taking photographs; a book, "Here Far Away", was published in 2012; another, of bird pictures, comes out later this year. But he shuns the art scene, believing that commercial pressures undermine quality. He does not lecture and rarely gives interviews. In 1991 he received an unprecedented 20-year grant from the Finnish government. Its sole condition was that he should concentrate on photography, so he gave up teaching. "I want to work in peace," he explains, "to be free to fail."

Failure has eluded him. In 2003 Henri Cartier-Bresson chose a photo by Mr Sammallahti—one of 100 images that the French master found most "stimulating, joyful and moving"—for his foundation's inaugural exhibition in Paris. A big dog sits high up on a Russian snowmobile, its ears pricked, king of all it surveys. •



Solovki, White Sea, Russia, 1992



## A Finnish Photographer Finds Major Recognition and Still Hasn't Sold Out

Pentti Sammallahti refuses to raise the relatively modest prices of his works and doesn't do editions. As a result, he remains largely unknown among the wider public.

*by Paula Weideger | August 26, 2018*

A lean dog, a briefcase hanging from its mouth, lopes along a snowy road. Lovers hug. A lone horse stands nose-close to a windmill's stone wall, a black bird perched on its highest sail. Each appears in a photograph by Pentti Sammallahti, yet none is its subject. "Everything inside the frame is equally important," says the 68-year-old Finn. Whether they appear as subtle silver gelatin prints, in the beautifully produced small books and portfolios of his Opus imprint or in volumes brought out by esteemed photography publishers, his images are magical, sometimes wry, often moving, yet always also down-to-earth.

Sammallahti is one of the best photographers working today. In 2003, Henri Cartier-Bresson chose his picture of a dog on a rustic Russian snowmobile for the show of works by his 100 favorite photographers — living and dead — that inaugurated the great French lensman's Paris foundation. At the time, Sammallahti was already well known in France, thanks to an exhibition of his images at the Finnish Institute in Paris 15 years earlier that he calls "decisive" and that served as his international breakthrough. The press raved, photographers flocked and international dealers lined up. Nevertheless, Sammallahti remains relatively unfamiliar to the general public. A longtime writer about the visual arts, I wasn't aware of him until three years ago, when I was strolling through the stands at Photo London and that image of horse and windmill forced me to stop. It took me into a soundless, haunting, seemingly eternal place — exciting, beautiful but also melancholy. I wanted it. It had already sold. Happily, Sammallahti does not limit editions. Another was found. Today, when I look up from the computer screen, there it hangs over my desk — a silver gelatin print that, somehow, is a talisman, too.

His modest prices (\$800 to a rare \$5,000) make his work accessible. They are also a reason he is not better known. Dollars are now the yardstick of an artist's stature, a world record at auction "proof" of genius. An artist whose prices are low — well, clearly, he can't be much good. No wonder that Peter Fetterman, Sammallahti's Santa Monica dealer, prods him to raise what he charges. "Pentti refuses," Fetterman says. Why? People do find their way to his work and often return to acquire more. But too many, among

them major photography collectors, don't even know his name. Yet he will not play by the rules of the market. Does he lack ambition? Is he allergic to fame and fortune? I wanted to know. And I wanted to meet this man whose work has come to mean so much to me. I asked for an interview. In time, at Fetterman's urging, Sammallahti agreed.

In late May, I flew to Finland, where Sammallahti was born and raised. He has been traveling the world since his 20s, but Helsinki remains his home base. In the midst of an unusual heat wave, I headed to the house — set far back from the road, on the outskirts of the city — where he and his wife, Pirkka, a psychologist, raised four now-grown children. I was greeted at the gate in the picket fence by Sammal-lahti, a large man with gray hair and beard. I had been warned that he is shy, but Sammallahti welcomed me with a wide, warm smile. As we walked through a garden filled with blossoming apple trees, we agreed to talk outside and settled ourselves in generous wicker chairs pulled up to a round wood table, on which I set down my phone to record our conversation. He suddenly looked uncomfortable, then asked me to later delete everything.

"You know," I said, "the only other person who ever asked me that was Cartier-Bresson." He looked surprised and laughed. "Then I am in very, very good company," he said.



Lake Numakawa, Japan, 2005

Sammallahti was eight when he was given a camera. A year later, his father, a goldsmith, took him to see "The Family of Man," the seminal 1955 Museum of Modern Art exhibition curated by Edward Steichen that celebrated the commonality of human experience, which in 1959, traveled to Helsinki. There, Sammallahti found his metier. Camera clubs followed. "They are good," he says. "You learn many technical things. But later on, for aesthetics, it is also good to leave." In 1970, it was time for university, but there were no departments of photography. At the University of Helsinki, he studied mathematics, musical theory and art history but soon left to work in the darkroom of Matti A. Pitkänen, Finland's most famous photographer at the time. Sammallahti began showing his own work. "Then, I went to prison," he said.

A pacifist, Sammallahti had refused to participate in Finland's compulsory military service. His sentence was an inverted version of day release. For one year, he worked in prison from breakfast through dinner and went home to sleep. A photograph he took

during this period shows a cell as primitive as it is bleak. "Conditions have improved a lot since then," he assured me.

By the time he was released, a few universities were building photography departments, and he began teaching printing. Because there were no Finnish art photography publishers, he became engaged in publishing, too. In 1979, he brought out *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, a portfolio of photographs taken in Ireland the previous summer. Adopting the terminology used in cataloguing musical compositions, he called the imprint *Opus* (Latin for work). Like many that followed, *Opus I* has text, in this case by noted Irish novelist Edna O'Brien. In the early '80s, he began teaching book arts to his students at the University of Industrial Arts (now Aalto University, School of Arts). Following his own practice, he taught every aspect:

## FURTHER READING

### INTROSPECTIVE MAG, 2018

photography, design, reproduction, book binding and various methods of printing. He took photographs, of course, traveling widely, from Russia to Japan and Namibia. And, he says, “I spent many, many years — almost every evening — making tests, not researching but investigating how to print well. Most of my books are tests in a sense.”

In these tests, he has had astonishing success pushing the range of tones that can be achieved in offset reproductions of his black-and-white negatives. The image of the snow hare in the forest in Archipelago, *Opus 41*, for example, has an unearthly radiance.

In 1991, Finland awarded Sammallahti a 20-year grant, stipulating that he had to use it to concentrate on photography. That was the first — and, so far, the last — grant of such duration ever awarded. So he stopped teaching, lecturing and, with rare exceptions, giving interviews.

Sammallahti excused himself briefly. He returned with a box. Inside were prints that would soon go to Éditions Xavier Barral, publisher of a new collection of his work to be launched at Paris Photo in November. He will collaborate on the typeface, layout, paper, inks; Barral will decide on the images that will make up the new book, *Des Oiseaux* (Birds).

“I like to watch very common species — sparrows, crows, pigeons, ducks, gulls, domestic birds — from home doorsteps to the ends of the earth,” he explained. “They are lovely and easy and sometimes funny to observe.” They often occupy only a small amount of space in a photograph, but, he said, “they are always essential.”

It is apparent that Sammallahti wants to share his work with other people. Why then doesn't he try to increase their numbers? “Why don't you ask more for your photographs?” I asked. “You would become better known — and richer.”

“What would be the use if the pictures are not good?” he replied. There's plenty of evidence that churning out “iconic” works to meet market demand builds an artist's celebrity and bank balance but can lead to self-parody. So why should one argue with an artist who does not engage with the market in that way, an artist who creates such imaginative and memorable work. Earlier in our conversation, I had been puzzled when Sammallahti corrected me for referring to photography as his profession. “It is my hobby,” he had said. Now, I understood. It was not a translation mix-up, nor was he being coy. In claiming amateur status, he was giving himself the freedom he needs to keep taking risks.

For him, Sammallahti says, “ninety or even ninety-nine percent of the time,” the negative is only the beginning. In the darkroom, in his investigations into offset (and ink-jet) printing techniques, he strives to narrow the gap between his initial vision and what appears on a sheet of paper. For a Pentti Sammallahti photograph to exist, he must be there to print it. As only he knows what he saw when he picked up his camera, only he has a hope of succeeding. Unless he is expressly asked to duplicate an existing print, each is one-of-a-kind, and although he does not choose to make limited editions, that is what they all are in reality. It is with wonder and excitement that we look forward to seeing many more of these moving, magical images. •



Gotland, Sweden, 1997

## Pentti Sammallahti's best photograph: ice fog in stormy northern Russia

'I was up all night drinking vodka. When I saw this view in the morning, all I had to do was press the button'



Solovki, White Sea, Russia, 1992

It was -20C when I took this picture. The fog you see is actually ice fog: lots of tiny ice particles suspended in the air. This happens when it's very cold but the sea has not frozen. It was February 1992 and I was in the northwest of Russia, on an island called Solovets in the White Sea.

I used to travel to Russia a lot, especially after glasnost when it became possible to visit the countryside. At the time, many people in the White Sea area spoke Karelian Finnish, so I was able to converse with them. It was like going back to my childhood: life there had not changed much over the years. Finland and Russia have a complex relationship. We fought each other in the second world war and there have been all kinds of troubles, but they are our neighbours and I think it is better to keep good relations. I like the country, the people, everything there.

Travelling round that part of Russia is quite easy because people follow an old byzantine tradition that says they have to be kind and polite to strangers. I have heard it said that this is because they believe every foreigner could be the next Christ. They are very poor but will always find you somewhere to stay: even if their home is small and crowded, there will be room for your sleeping bag.

The night before I took this, I stayed up until the early morning talking, playing chess and drinking vodka with a Finnish film-maker. I eventually fell asleep, but he roused me and said: "Get up, Pentti. If you don't get good pictures now, then you are a duffer!" He was right. It honestly felt like I could have photographed anything. In fact, anyone could have been working the camera – the circumstances were so perfect. It was around nine in the morning, just after sunrise and, although it was cold, the light was enchanting. The man in the picture might be going off to work, I don't know. He had his dog with him. It ran back and forth, always waiting up ahead. The dog is small, but it is important.

## FURTHER READING

THE GUARDIAN, 2014

# The Guardian

I feel like I received this photograph, I didn't take it. If you're in the right place at the right time, then all you have to do is push a button. Being a photographer doesn't come into it.

Another evening, I was sitting on some steps with my friend. We were drinking vodka and talking about how sorry we were about the situation in Russia, how it felt like everything had collapsed. We were almost crying about how sad everything seemed. Then we looked round and saw a group of dogs running around and having fun. My friend said: "Pentti, don't worry – this country is a paradise for dogs." I thought: "That is the point of view I will adopt when I photograph here."

So when I put the shots together for my Russian Way landscape series, I only chose ones that had dogs and a road in them. When I photograph dogs, I always have something to feed them – some sausage or sardines. They are quite easy to befriend. Give them something twice and they'll be your friend for life. •



Solovki, White Sea, Russia, 1992

### CV

**Born:** Helsinki, Finland, 1950.

**Studied:** Self-taught.

**Influences:** "My grandmother, the photographer Hildur Larsson; Kristoffer Albrecht; Paul Strand; André Kertész and Josef Koudelka."

**Top tip:** "Get a book of great photographs and spend a week studying each shot. Every day, think about a different aspect: subject, composition, tonal range, the moment when the image was taken and how the photograph was made."

● Work by Pentti Sammallahti can be seen at the Photographers' Gallery, London, W1.

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## Sammallahti: "I wait for photographs like a pointer dog"

Pentti Sammallahti is a master of black and white photography, he has been photographing people and landscapes across the world for nearly 50 years and is considered to be one of the most accomplished classic photographers working today



Solovki, White Sea, Russia, 1992

By the early age of 9, Pentti announced that he wanted to be a photographer. By age 11, Pentti was making his own photographs of everyday life in Helsinki. And at age 21 he was holding his first solo show.

Sammallahti has travelled extensively throughout his life, describing himself as a wanderer who favours remote and isolated destinations to provide the backdrop for his work. Often only the occasional figure or animal interrupts what are otherwise uninhabited scenes. Depicted with humour and warmth, they are part of a bigger narrative, one which encompasses universal themes shared by all living things.

As a benchmark figure in contemporary Finnish photography, his work has a supernatural sense of a moment in time with the sensitivity and beauty of the world displayed through its animalistic existence. His particular use of dogs, which reflects the human existential experience, shows the shared nature of the earth with a gentle humor and fleeting attitude.

"I wait for photographs like a pointer dog," he says. "It is a question of luck and circumstance. I prefer winter, the worse the weather, the better the photograph will be." His favorite time of day is dusk, and the mysterious light — His palette of whites, greys and blacks evoke all the senses, and forces you to look closer and the human connection with nature. •