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Your Summer Must-Reads

Six art books about the great outdoors



Hiroji Kubota, *The Golden Rock at Shwe Pyi Daw, Kyaiktiyo, Burma* (1978) © Hiroji Kubota / Magnum Photos

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As summer unspools, it feels timely to consider how artists view the great outdoors. It is perhaps the oldest subject in art history, a constant muse and canvas—from paleolithic drawings to [Turner's](#) washes, to [Jeanne-Claude and Christo's](#) manipulated landmarks. The following art books, in their various ways, look at natural phenomena and wild spaces and ponder our complicated relationship to them.

Take a peak

MOUNTAINS

BY MAGNUM PHOTOGRAPHERS



Cover of *Mountains by Magnum Photographers* (Prestel)

With their geometry, humbling scale and terrifying potential, mountains have obsessed plenty of artists. On canvas, they absorbed [Casper David Friedrich](#) and his romantic ilk and, as illustrated in *Mountains: By Magnum Photographers*, a swarm of shutterbugs have been equally infatuated.

Since the agency's foundation in 1947, [Magnum](#) has traded on its reputation for reportage accumulated from the world's extremes. In this varied selection of works from their archives we find this ethos served neat. There are epic shots of the winding roads and vertiginous heights of the Andes, Alps and Himalayas, the Khyber Pass and Machu Picchu, the Tyrol and the Matterhorn.

Giants of their craft are represented, including [René Burri](#), [Robert Capa](#), [Eve Arnold](#) and [Alec Soth](#). Magnum has always excelled at providing the human story along with the exoticism and in these pages even the dizzying landscapes are occasionally dwarfed by the amusing, shocking and inspiring glimpses of life lived at high altitude.

Mountains: By Magnum Photographers (Prestel)

Inventive imagery



Anna Atkins/Anne Dixon, *Peacock*, from an 1861 presentation album to Henry Dixon © Hans P. Kraus Jr., New York.

From the intrepid to the intricate: [Anna Atkins](#) was a Victorian botanist and a polymath who, in the mid-19th century, created extraordinary images of ferns, feathers, flowers and all sorts of seaweed—all without a camera.

Atkins was the first person to produce a photo-book, the snappily titled *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions*, privately published in 1843, and perfected the cyanotype photogram (the process using chemically-treated light-sensitive paper, invented by [Sir John Herschel](#)). Atkins was a keen naturalist (her herbarium is in the [Natural History Museum, London](#)) and a fine draughtswoman—she illustrated her father’s books on shells.

But it is for her ghostly, watery calotypes of wheat, grasses, leaves and plumage that she is best remembered. Illustrated here on beautiful paper stock and in large format, these beguiling blueprints are part silhouette, part X-ray. While providing taxonomic evidence they transcend science to become timeless works of art.

Sun Gardens: Cyanotypes by Anna Atkins (Prestel)

Into the woods



The cover image of *Trees*, published by Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, Paris

The wonderfully evergreen actress Dame Judi Dench recently described trees as “beautiful magical giants”. A new book from the [Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain](#) introduces contemporary artists, from [Agnès Varda](#) to [Giuseppe Penone](#), who share Dame Judi’s love of branch and bark.

This handsome volume effectively blends the tangentially linked areas of art, botany and philosophy. The foundation has a history of staging shows which explore the confluence of nature and humanity; and here the curators invite the public to reconsider trees as “important living beings in a shared world”. Drawings, sculpture, photographs, paintings and film all inform an argument for treating trees as organic—almost sentient—art works.

“You can find all the most complex and beautiful colors, structures, and architectures in nature,” states Brazilian painter and printmaker [Luiz Zerbini](#). This book addresses deforestation, climate change and the myriad aesthetic complexities of various species. As Francis Hallé, a French specialist in rainforests, testifies: “I move around it, I look at it from the front, from the side, from below, from above... it takes time to become familiar with a tree.”

Trees (Fondation Cartier/Thames & Hudson)

Wings of desire



Helsinki, Finland (1983) by Pentti Sammallahti

Finnish photographer [Pentti Sammallahti](#) is the [Cartier-Bresson](#) of birding: his enigmatic pictures bring abstraction and feeling to instants in the natural world. The avian moments have now been compiled in [Des Oiseaux](#), one of the most beautiful photography books of recent years.

Sammallahti's images, which were taken on travels across Asia, Europe, America and Africa, teeter on the brink of magical realism: a murmuration of starlings forms a question mark in the sky; a couple of crows chatter on path; a crane builds a nest on a power station. This is a bird's world, in which we are the outsiders.

A perceptive essay by ornithologist Guilhem Lesaffre puts words to Sammallahti's vision: "Photography grasps a moment in these fleeting lives and endows them with an enduring existence."

Des Oiseaux: Pentti Sammallahti (Xavier Barral)

Hive mind



Eileen Hogan, *UL 238, FH 172, FR 59* (2011)

One of the few gems in this year's otherwise murky [Royal Academy Summer Exhibition](#) is Eileen Hogan's charming oil of a beehive. The work is one of several hive studies completed in the country garden created by the late Scottish poet and artist [Ian Hamilton Finlay](#), a series which also features in a new monograph on Hogan's work lovingly produced by Yale.

"I describe myself as an urban-based painter who is interested in green spaces," Hogan writes in her introduction. Her paintings explore the spaces where people try to harness wildlife: allotments, orchards, commons and greens. Her works are sometimes dramatic, sometimes sensual—a sprinkler guns a lawn; a fountain splashes languidly into its basin—and near-Cubist in their delivery of light.

Hogan has tried her hand at beekeeping and butterfly breeding, and that practical approach extends to her canvases, which draw parallels between landscaping and working up a palette. She has turned her easel to Peloponnese palms, park benches and watering cans and, as this book illustrates, she captures the heady days of summer so evocatively you can almost hear the grasshoppers.

Eileen Hogan: Personal Geographies (Yale)

Elements of style



Cover of *Olafur Eliasson: In Real Life* (Tate)

Finally, a book about bringing the great outdoors indoors. In 2003 the Danish-Icelandic artist [Olafur Eliasson](#)'s made headlines with *The Weather Project*, popularly known as "The Sun", which recreated a hazy soporific sunset in the cavernous Turbine Hall of London's [Tate Modern](#). The museum is now staging "*In Real Life*", an exploration of Eliasson's obsession with making the natural world a sociable space (until 5 January 2020).

The accompanying volume is a manual to enjoying the elemental wonders we so often take for granted. This is a pared-back paperback—stitch-bound and tactile and all the more effective for its simplicity. It suits a backpack; it wants to be thumbed in the fields.

In terms of immersive art, Eliasson's conceptual slight-of-hand rivals Anish Kapoor's sculptural eye. *In Real Life* provides walls of moss draped like giant tapestries, kaleidoscopic tunnels that mirror the rapids of a river, monochrome rooms which replicate dawn and dusk. Forget artificial intelligence, Eliasson introduces us to AN—artificial nature—and it is both seductive and discombobulating.

Olafur Eliasson: In Real Life (Tate)

