

Book Review: Life

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By WSJ Staff



Frans Lanting

The Italian for 'still life' is 'natura morta.' 'Dead nature' is a good description of such paintings, but this paradox applies equally well to almost any artistic attempt at documenting the natural world. Such work has always sought to freeze the restless motion of life into a single instant, a challenge that pushes artists to overcome their medium's limitations, or to emphasize them: the straining muscles of Michelangelo's drawings of figures and horses, for instance, or Henri Cartier-Bresson's careful use of shadows and reflections to suggest motion in a still frame. Frans Lanting takes advantage of photography's timeless quality to accentuate the most primeval aspects of diverse animals, plants and fossils. The images in **'Life' (Taschen, 303 pages, \$29.99)** seem like postcards from the earliest moments of life on earth. A black heron fishing in Botswana's Okavango Delta hides beneath the penumbra of its wings and appears more like a water lily or some nomadic tent. Resting in the fork of a Madagascan tree, a lemur fuses with the trunk. A flower-hat jellyfish resembles some microscopic organism blown up for the human eye. Mr. Lanting relishes the colors and textures of nature's flora and fauna, but he shapes them into totems. 'On land life turns tough,' Mr. Lanting notes. The quiver trees (above) in South Africa's Richtersveld National Park are posed not against blue sky but against harsh red rocky soil that evokes Mars and emphasizes the trees' remarkable endurance in arid terrain. Mr. Lanting's almost abstract deployment of color takes us out of time: The earth stands still, and life is what endures.

—The Books Editors