HIROSHI SUGIMOTO

Japanese

Hiroshi Sugimoto’s works seem to capture the Japanese notion of “aware,” a term connoting surprise or delight, the aesthetic experience of ephemeral beauty and the emotional awareness required to have such an experience. His artistic career comprises close studies of sameness and difference, the natural and the man-made, and the tenets of photographic vision, in eight distinctive series. Sugimoto has often returned to his subjects and adds to each series as inspirations and opportunities present themselves. His main subjects and corresponding years he initiated each series are: Dioramas (1976), Wax Museums (1976), Theaters (1978), Seascapes (1980), Hall of Thirty-Three Bays (1995), Architecture (1997), In Praise of Shadows (1999), and Pine Landscapes (2001).

Sugimoto’s photographs of dioramas and figures from wax museums are often unsettling as the artist uses photography to reinforce the sense of “reality” in these staged settings. Sugimoto excludes the surrounding architecture, glass, and labels to heighten verisimilitude. The illusionistic spaces of the painted, panoramic backgrounds are accommodated through focal points and technical solutions that do not seem to distort them. In his diorama and wax figure works, Sugimoto shows the unsettling verism of an illusion. The viewer is conditioned to believe that photography tells the “truth,” but Sugimoto shows that in shooting a fiction, only photographic “truth” remains. Sugimoto joked that he wanted to be “the first sixteenth-century photographer” and makes (re)portraits of wax effigies of “Henry VIII” (1999), and the monarch’s six wives. Sugimoto uses large-format film to capture minute details and presents them in larger-than-life prints that have the gallery “presence” of paintings (the wax figures were modeled after Renaissance paintings). In the portraits of wax figures, he uses black backdrops and high-contrast lighting to heighten the figures’ uncanniness—their human details and famous faces are familiar; yet stilted poses and patches of waxy “skin” betray their source. Wax figure portraits of contemporaries he could have photographed are even more strange—figures such as “Fidel Castro” (1999) or “Pope John Paul II” (1999) bear the same realistic details and stigmas of fakeness as the Renaissance personalities. In shooting dioramas from the American Museum of Natural History, Sugimoto seems to be the first prehistoric photographer in works depicting a seabed of the “Cambrian Period” (1992) or the Ukrainian steppes inhabited by “Cro-Magnon”
(1994). In his depictions of dioramas of extant animals such as "Stellar Sea Lions" (1992), Sugimoto notes the irony of a man-made space constructed to show nature.

Among Sugimoto's best-known works are those from his serial investigations of movie theaters. In these photographs, Sugimoto exposes the film for the duration of a motion-picture shown on the screen. The movie provides the ambient light—the result is a brilliant rectangle on the screen and reflections that reveal the theaters' architectural details. The emphasis on the central, bright screen reminds us that the theater is essentially a camera on an architectural scale. The blank screens also direct the eye to the photographs' edges where one sees an ersatz architecture of fantasy in the Chinese, Islamic, or baroque styles of early twentieth-century movie palaces such as "U.A. Walker, New York" (1978), or "Akron Civic, Ohio" (1980). Since his first impressions of this subject, Sugimoto has broadened his investigations to include such spare, modern theaters as "Arcadia, Milan" (1998) and drive-ins as "South Bay Drive-In, San Diego" (1993).

Each of Sugimoto's Seascapes has the same composition—equal halves of water and sky meet at a horizon. The locations are identified by their titles, but these titles differ from arbitrary and underscore the notion that we see only similar expanses of water. Each seascape varies according to lighting and weather conditions. For instance, "Caribbean Sea, Jamaica" (1980) shows a clear, bright sky and well-defined waves, while "Bay of Sagami, Atami" (1997) is atmospheric, has a blurred horizon and reveals almost no detail. Sugimoto has photographed nocturnal seascapes, such as "Mirtoan Sea, Sounion" (1990) using only ambient star- and moonlight to reveal wave patterns and celestial bodies that subtly emerge from the dark silver-gelatin abyss.

The Hall of Thirty-Three Bays (1997) series is a study of 1,000 bodhisattva statues from the thirteenth-century Sanjusangendo Temple in Kyoto, Japan. Sugimoto crops the temple's architecture to show only the rows of similar golden statues in the early morning light. These photographs reveal subtle differences in carving, positioning, and wear of each bodhisattva figure—their reflective gilding makes them seem radiant—literally enlightened. These variations reveal differences among the figures and Sugimoto's many similar photographs. From these images, Sugimoto has also created a limited-edition artist's book, Sea of Buddha (1997).

In 1997, Sugimoto was commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles to create images of modern architecture. Sugimoto's solution was to shoot each canonical building out of focus, eliminating details and leaving only the building's sculptural form. Like many Sugimoto works, these images present an unfamiliar view of the familiar, icons like the "Chrysler Building—William Van Allen" (1997) and "Chapel Notre Dame du Haut—Le Corbusier" slip into barely recognizable abstraction. Because these blurred images seem to disintegrate the massive materiality of these structures, Sugimoto's "World Trade Center—Minoru Yamasaki" (1997) seems especially poignant in light of the towers' 2001 destruction. Since 1997, Sugimoto has continued to add to this series.

Sugimoto's In Praise of Shadows works consist of images of a traditional Japanese candle, warinukoku, burning down over several evening hours—the exposure lasts as long as the burning candle. The resulting images are varied white lines extending from the top to the bottom of the photograph. Flame brilliance, flickers, smoke, and breezes affect the shape and value of this line. This series consists of photographs, photolithographs, and installations.

Quoting a famous sixteenth-century ink painting by Tohaku Hasegawa, since 2001, Sugimoto has been photographing pine trees (Japanese symbols of intransience) from Tokyo's Imperial Garden. As in the Thirty-Three Bays works, Sugimoto uses the ambient early-morning light. In works such as "Pine Landscape" (2001) Sugimoto underexposes the shot, creating a shadowy, seemingly nocturnal image. These large-scale works are each created of multiple images of different pines juxtaposed to read as a photograph of a single pine grove. The artist has used one of these pine landscapes as a backdrop for a collaborative theater production, Noh Such Thing as Time (2001).

**William V. GANIS**

**Biography**


**Individual Exhibitions**

1977 Sugimoto, Minami Gallery; Tokyo, Japan
1981 Hiroshi Sugimoto: Movie Theaters; Sonnabend Gallery, New York, New York
1988 Hiroshi Sugimoto: Movie Dioramas, Theaters, Seascapes; Sonnabend Gallery, New York, New York, and Sogocho Exhibits Space and Tokyo Zette Photo Salon, Tokyo, Japan
1989 Hiroshi Sugimoto: Dioramas, Theaters, Seascapes; The National Museum of Contemporary Art; Osaka, Japan
1994 Hiroshi Sugimoto: Museum of Contemporary Art; Los Angeles, California and traveling
1995 Hiroshi Sugimoto: Séries Photographiques; Centre international d’Art contemporain de Montréal; Montréal, Canada and traveling
1995 Sugimoto; The Metropolitan Museum of Art; New York, New York and traveling
1998 Sugimoto: Sala de Exposiciones de la Fundacion “la Caixa”; Madrid, Spain and traveling
2000 Hiroshi Sugimoto: The Architecture Series; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; San Francisco, California
2000 Sugimoto Portraits; Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin, Berlin, Germany; Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Bilbao, Spain; Guggenheim Museum SoHo, New York, New York
2002 Hiroshi Sugimoto: Architecture of Time; Kunsthall Bregenz; Bregenz, Austria, and traveling

**Group Exhibitions**

1982 24th Century Photographers From The Museum of Modern Art; The Seibu Museum, Tokyo, Japan
1985 The Art of Memory: The Loss of History; The New Museum; New York, New York
1987 Contemporary Japanese Art in America; Japan Society; New York, New York
1990 Japanische Kunst der 80er Jahre; Frankfurter Kunstverein; Frankfurt am Main, Germany and traveling
1993 Multiple Images: Photographs Since 1965 from the Collection; Museum of Modern Art; New York, New York
1994 Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky; Yokohama Museum of Art; Yokohama, Japan; Guggenheim Museum SoHo, New York, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California
1996 16th Biennial of Sydney; Sydney, Australia

Hall of Mirrors: Art and Film Since 1945; Museum of Contemporary Art; Los Angeles and traveling
1999 Regarding Beauty: A View of the Late Twentieth Century; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution; Washington, D.C., and traveling
2000 Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art; Museum of Contemporary Art; La Jolla, California and traveling

**Selected Works**

Mirrorn Sea. Solution, 1990
Cambria Period, 1992
Hall of Thirty-Three Boys, 1995
World Trade Center—Minoru Yamasaki, 1997
The Music Lesson, 1999
Fidel Castro, 1999
In Praise of Shadows, 1999

**Further Reading**