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*Photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto:
‘I use the camera to project my inner idea of reality’*

*The Japanese artist on his latest shows,
and exploring our relationship with actuality*

By Jane Ure-Smith (November 10, 2017)



The end of America — or just the moviegoing era? With their rubble-strewn floors and crumbling plaster, Hiroshi Sugimoto’s portraits of long-closed cinemas in Gary, Indiana, and Newark, New Jersey, are a distressing sight. Recent additions to the Japanese artist’s long-running “Theaters” series, the pair are on show in Marian Goodman’s London gallery. There they rub shoulders with images of splendidly ornate Italian opera-house interiors and a breathtaking New York view that captures the Chrysler Building, the Empire State and one of the city’s water towers behind a cinema screen erected on a Manhattan rooftop.

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When I meet Sugimoto in his studio, a few floors below that rooftop, his mood is more abandoned-cinema than Italian baroque. “It’s a peculiar period in the history of human beings now; it seems we’re going backwards,” he says. “Democracy always seemed to be the symbol of progress, but it isn’t functioning. Maybe the Chinese system is better than the American system,” he adds, not entirely seriously. “It’s more like a monarchy!”

It’s a busy time for the multidisciplinary artist. Alongside the London exhibition, another featuring his “Seascapes” has just opened at Marian Goodman’s Paris gallery. Last month saw both the unveiling of his most ambitious architectural project yet — a spectacularly located museum complex on the Japanese coast — and the opening of Gates of Paradise, a show conceived by him at the Japan Society in New York.

Sugimoto, 69, left Tokyo for California in 1970. Having studied Marxist economics in Japan, he was steeped in western philosophy, but not prepared for the questions that Americans asked. “I’d read Hegel and Feuerbach, but I had to catch up on oriental philosophy and mysticism,” he laughs. He studied photography in Los Angeles, but it was only when he moved to New York in 1974 that he decided to become a conceptual artist, and adopted large-format, black-and-white photography as his signature style. He loves the craft side of photography, though, and trawled the writings of Ansel Adams to help get it right.

What fascinates Sugimoto is our desire to believe a photograph is more “real” than a painting. Closing one eye to eliminate perspective as he looked at exhibits in the American Museum of Natural History in New York, he realised that was how a camera would see it. “I thought, if I shoot this fake scene with my high-quality camera, it may be more believable — I can bring dead animals back to life.” The result was “Dioramas”, the series that launched his career when he sold a picture to MoMA. The results glow with life: people still believe he’s a wildlife photographer.

The “Theaters” series, begun in 1976, is partly about architecture, partly another exercise in perception. Sugimoto asked himself what would happen if he shot a whole movie in a single frame. Then, armed with a large-format camera in an East Village cinema, he did just that, opening the shutter when the movie started and only closing it 90 minutes later. What unites the series is a glowing white rectangle at the centre of each image. “They have the dreamy quality I envisioned one night,” he explains. “Usually photographers capture something: I use the camera to project my inner idea of reality.”

In 2015, a chance encounter in Italy sowed the seeds for the Japan Society exhibition. Sugimoto was in Vicenza to photograph Palladio’s Teatro Olimpico, when the theatre’s director alerted him, as he puts it, “to four Japanese-looking young men” in a fresco. Sugimoto recognised them immediately: the quattro ragazzi of the Tensho Embassy, four young Christian converts, who in 1582 embarked on a mission to meet the Pope to build support for Jesuit efforts in Japan. “I thought, ‘This is my subject,’ and I began reading . . .”

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Out of his researches has come a beautiful exhibition that tells the story of the brief period when Japan opened its doors to an exchange of ideas with the west. For Sugimoto, it's personal:

“The first encounter of the Japanese with the west; the westerners’ first encounter with Japan: that sense of mutual surprise from 430-odd years ago, still flows, not quite wholly absorbed, in my bloodstream,” he writes in the catalogue. By 1633, Christianity had been outlawed and Japan closed its doors to European influence for more than 200 years.

For the show, Sugimoto has photographed buildings the ragazzi visited on their travels through Italy: the cathedrals in Florence and Siena; the interior of the Pantheon in Rome, illuminated only by moonlight. What drives him is the desire to experience the world as human beings might have experienced it — in this case 400 years ago, but also at other times — as far back as it's possible to imagine, to the earliest times of human life on earth.

That is where “Seascapes” comes in. On show in Paris alongside five of his delicate, optical glass “pagodas” (each of which also contains a tiny seascape), they appear rigid in concept, yet infinite in their dreamy variations. “My first personal memory is a seascape; that’s what prompted the series,” Sugimoto says. “The sea has changed so much less than the land, so when human beings first gained consciousness, moving from an animal to a human state, the seascape might have made a strong impression on their minds. I can share that vision. I can compare my own memory with the first vision of the world.”

Begun in Jamaica in 1980 and now including images of the Tasman Sea shot this year, the seascapes have become his “lifetime project” — and technically his most difficult. “Each wave has to be sharp and clear.” He admits to having a digital camera, so can he imagine one day taking the digital route? He might, he says. But for now he’s happy travelling the world, armed with a portable processing kit “like a 19th-century photographer”.

‘Gates of Paradise’, New York, to January 7, japansociety.org; ‘Snow White’, London, and ‘Surface Tension’, Paris, both to December 22, mariangoodman.com