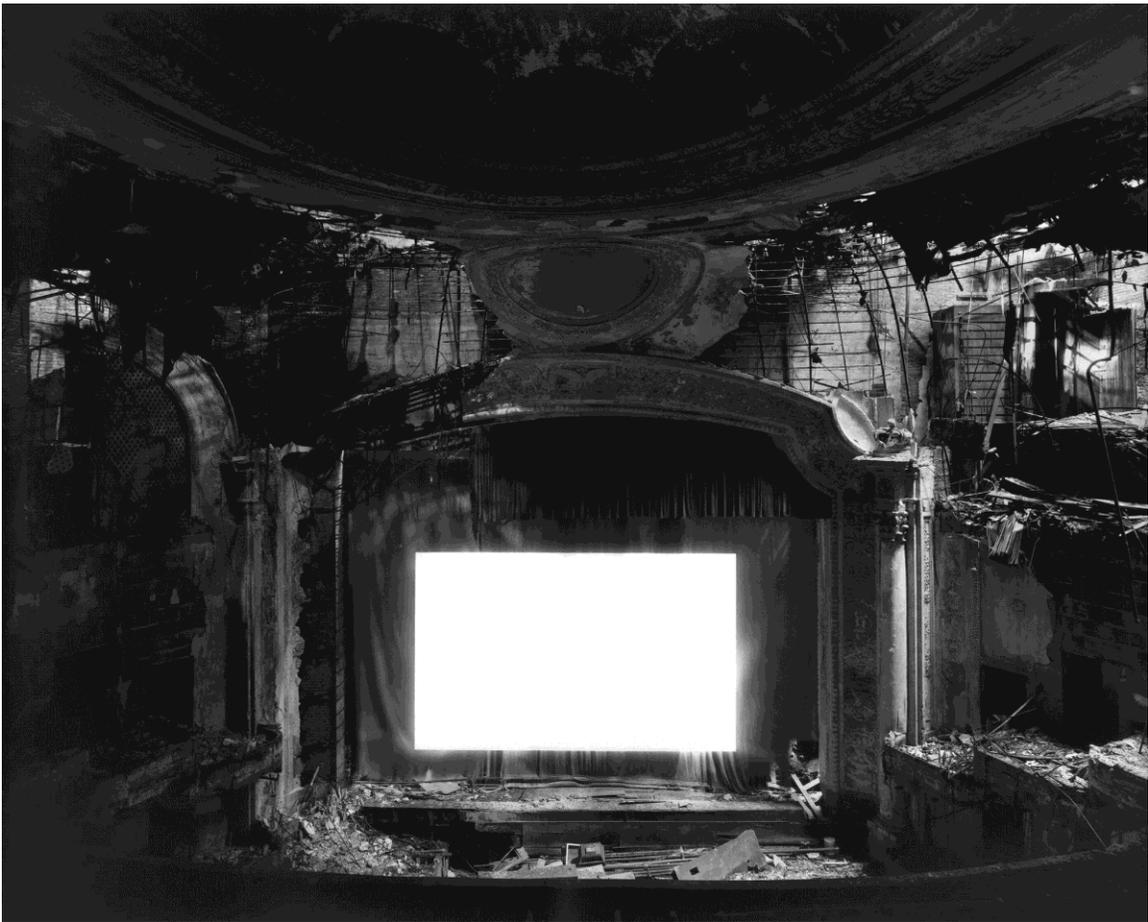


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The New York Times

*Hiroshi Sugimoto:
Illuminating Opera Houses and Abandoned Movie Palaces*

By James Estrin (May 9, 2017)



“On the Beach” (1959) at Paramount Theater. Newark. 2015. Hiroshi Sugimoto

Growing up in 1950’s Tokyo, Hiroshi Sugimoto sometimes was brought to tears by the movies he saw with his mother. He still remembers feeling ashamed by those public displays of emotion. Above all, he remembers the emotional connection he felt being inside the theaters.

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After teaching himself photography in his early teens, one of his first subjects was Audrey Hepburn — or at least a 20-foot-tall image of her projected onto a theater screen. He discovered that by employing a shutter speed of a 30th of a second he could produce a still image of a single frame of the movie. But he eventually realized, in New York City in 1976, that the light that entranced him on screen could also illuminate the interiors of America's remaining movie palaces.

This vision led to his seminal, and surreal, "Theater" series that captures the splendor of cinema and is also a meditation on the nature of time. By leaving his shutter open for the full length of a movie to create a single still image with a luminescent white screen, Mr. Sugimoto offers a meditation on impermanence and the fleeting nature of civilization.

"Usually a photographer hangs around and captures the moment, but I created my own illusion that doesn't exist in reality," he said. "It's just my own imagination — but I get to make my imagination visible."



"Summertime" (1955) at Teatro dei Roszi. Siena, Italy. 2014. Credit Hiroshi Sugimoto

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Forty years after the beginning of that series, Mr. Sugimoto has turned his attention and technique to capturing the majestic opulence of Italian opera houses. The results are on display at the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo — a contemporary art museum in Turin, Italy — from May 16 to Oct. 1. For the first time, he has also included images of the reverse view from the screens of the audience seats.

While some of the opera houses had existing screens to aid in staging live performances, most of the time Mr. Sugimoto brought projectors with him and built the screens. He played the complete versions of classic films about Italy by Fellini, Visconti and others.

Different film genres, he has learned, demand different exposures. Upbeat films and comedies tend to be brighter, he said, while sad movies are darker. Occult movies are the darkest, because they are mostly shot inside, so he opens up the aperture on his large-format camera by two stops, he explained.

“The brightest movies are spaghetti westerns because they are all shot outside,” he added.

The opera house series reflects his passion for architecture and his fascination with the history of theater, reaching back to ancient Japanese and Greek plays. These interests are not just limited to photographic expression.

Mr. Sugimoto recently designed a center for his Art Foundation in the coastal city of Odawara in Japan. The seaside complex is a “traditional Japanese style structure,” he said, and includes a tea house, exhibit space and two outside theaters where he will host live performances.



Hiroshi Sugimoto at his Manhattan studio. May 3, 2017. Credit Fred R. Conrad

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In addition to designing buildings, he is also working with a choreographer and a composer on a ballet influenced by Noh theater, commissioned by the Paris Opera, and is also organizing a Bunraku Japanese puppet show, to be performed at Lincoln Center in 2018.

The grand movie palaces he documented in the 20th century are now mostly abandoned and he has begun documenting their decay by temporarily reviving them by projecting films. These emotional, visceral images reveal the death of the glory days of cinema, when the screens were large, and the stars even larger.

“Look at Greece and the beautiful Parthenon,” he said. “It once was glorious, and now it’s in terrible condition” he said. “History is passing and we will not be forever. I can look out my window and watch New York City being built now. But maybe 500 years later, 1,000 year later, this might be ruins too.”