

# THE NEW YORKER

## *Hiroshi Sugimoto Is Right on Time*

*The artist futzes around in his Chelsea studio, where he keeps off-time clocks and fossilized dinosaur eggs, and discusses his redesign of the sculpture garden at the Hirshhorn Museum.*

by Emma Allen (December 12, 2022)

Have you found yourself confused lately about your age, or about what day of the week it is? Don't fret. According to a U.C. Irvine study, the covid-19 pandemic "altered many Americans' perceptions and experiences of the passage of time . . . blending days and weeks together into endless 'blursdays.'" But for the artist Hiroshi Sugimoto (age seventy-four)—who was back in his vast Chelsea studio the other day (Wednesday) after three years in Japan—the fluidity of perceived time has always been a preoccupation. (See his black-and-white photos of alive-seeming natural-history dioramas, or of wax figurines of Castro and Henry VIII, or of movie screens in theatres from past centuries.)

A guest arriving at Twenty-sixth Street was ferried upstairs by an elevator operator, then led by the smell of incense to a hidden teahouse.

Melissa Chiu, the director of the Hirshhorn Museum, in Washington, D.C., had just arrived. "There are a lot of very interesting adaptations on the traditional teahouse that you've made here," she noted. She wore all black, with one silver earring, one gold.

"It's modified for America," Sugimoto, who wore a white T-shirt, jeans, and boat shoes, said. "This is old American wood, from a torn-down farmhouse. This water vessel for handwashing is from Japan, a fifteenth-century architectural base stone." Living moss and ferns grew along the wall.

Chiu had commissioned Sugimoto to redesign the Hirshhorn's brutalist sunken sculpture garden. After five years of back-and-forth, the pair was taking one last look at a scale model before the groundbreaking. In 2018, Sugimoto had revamped the Hirshhorn lobby, adding a table made from a seven-hundred-year-old nutmeg-tree root. For the new project, he said, "my first idea was to make some kind of Zen sculpture garden, but that was *too* Zen-like—very simple—so there was no shade."

Sugimoto decided to introduce hand-stacked stone walls, built by master stonemasons using a medieval technique called *ishizumi*. "The walls' pre-modern structure stands out against the modern sculpture," he explained. "There's a time gap between the background and sculpture." The scale model featured miniature works by Henry Moore and Yayoi Kusama.

Additionally, Sugimoto was reopening a path from the garden to the museum's plaza, transforming it into a trumpet-shaped tunnel with reflective steel sides. "People who look at themselves, they look skinnier," he said. "I also try to make the artists' sculptures look as good as possible. Even if a sculpture is not first-class, it can be shown as first-class—I shouldn't say that."

Chiu pulled out a photograph of Gordon Bunshaft, the designer of the museum, in Kyoto at the Zen garden at Ryōan-ji, in the seventies. “Next spring, I’m going to be able to photograph this garden,” Sugimoto said. “A photo of a Zen garden is a kind of cliché, a stereotyped image. I am going back to very, very straight photography. I call it stereotype photography—daguerreotype, calotype, Sugimoto’s stereotype!”

He led a tour of the studio, pausing by a spindly metal object. “This is my hobby, to modify old clocks, so this is my design, but the mechanism is from the nineteen-thirties. I think it still works.” He wound it; it chimed eight.

“It’s off time,” he said.

Chiu pointed to the rafters, behind which were tucked sheets of rock. “Fossils!” Sugimoto explained. “A few million years old. That’s a starfish and this is a plant, seaweed—I have more!” He led the way to more. “Dinosaur eggs!”

Nearby, studio assistants maneuvered a large device that looked as if it had been designed by da Vinci or Galileo, and attempted to catch sunlight in a prism of optical glass, to project a rainbow on a canvas (which Sugimoto photographed). “I designed this based on the study of Isaac Newton,” Sugimoto explained.

He continued on, through a darkroom, and out onto a balcony.

“Three years ago, none of this was here,” he said, gesturing toward the view. “I used to see the George Washington Bridge in the distance.” He marvelled at a new building with a high glass observation deck which an assistant identified as the Edge. “So, this is the twenty-first-century look,” Sugimoto mused. He turned to gaze at the Empire State Building. “This is the difference of a hundred years.”

“Not that much difference, actually,” Chiu said.

“The solidness is different,” Sugimoto said. “I like the Empire State better. This”—he waved at the Edge—“looks like a cheap construction to me.”

The pair discussed the remaining timeline for the garden project. “The actual construction will be about eighteen months, but the grand opening will be in two years,” Chiu said.

“Two years!” Sugimoto exclaimed. “You have the cash ready?”

“We are in a capital campaign, yes,” Chiu responded.

“You are a professional,” Sugimoto said, smiling. “I don’t worry about it.”