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Hiroshi Sugimoto's Radical Traditionalism

The Japanese photographer and architect, who's redesigning the Hirshhorn Museum's sculpture garden, is tired of modern architecture and much of the art made amid contemporary capitalism

by Cody Delistraty (April 28, 2021)

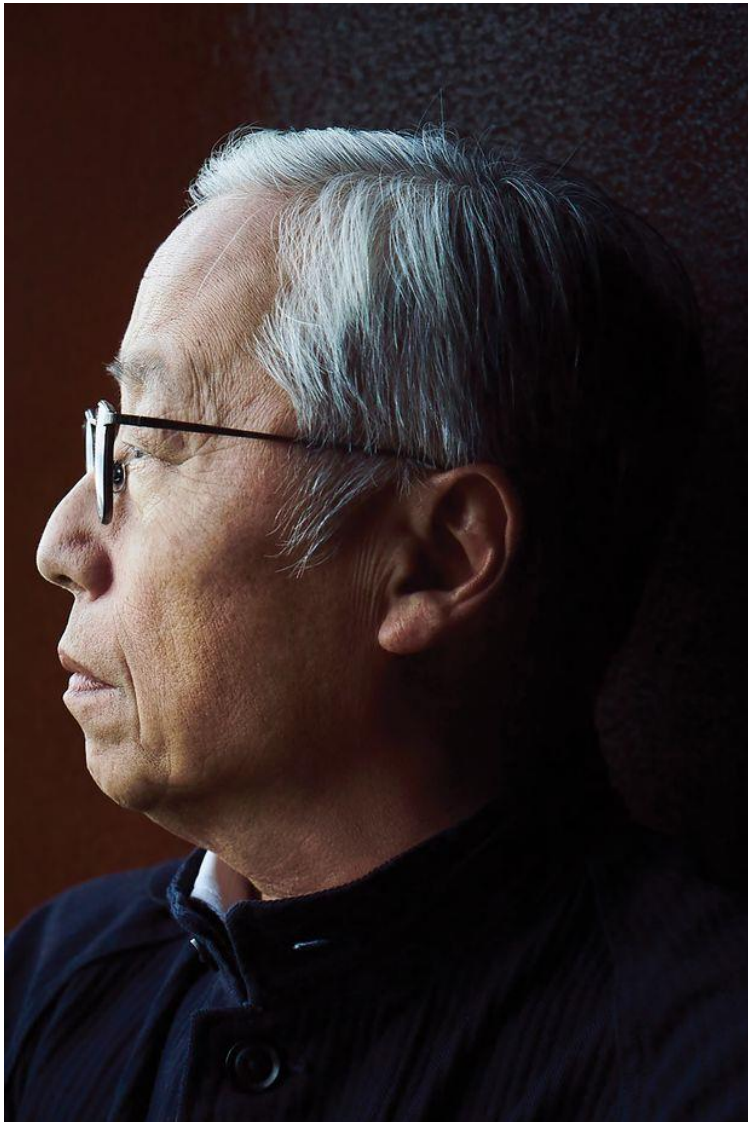


PHOTO: HIROSHI SUGIMOTO

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Hiroshi Sugimoto has dedicated much of his art to capturing the fleeting sense of time. He photographs buildings with ultralong exposures, lending them a blurred effect, as though they were dissolving with the passage of history. His grainy seascape photographs, their blocky waviness like black-and-white Rothkos, feel boundless, as though one might fall into them. As an architect, the buildings he designs with centuries-old techniques also seem to be a part of that infinite past.

As a keen lover of history, it's unsurprising that the 73-year-old is an avid collector of objects, buying up fossils, prehistoric tools, meteorites and ancient books—from a first edition of Isaac Newton's *Opticks* to Giovanni Battista Piranesi's *Antichità Romane de' Tempi della Repubblica, e de' primi Imperatori*, a detailed four-volume collection of diagrams and illustrations of ancient Rome.

Currently, he's redesigning the sculpture garden of the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., where he presented the first career survey of his art in 2006. His plan for the garden, set to open in 2024, involves a stone-laying technique from 16th- and 17th-century Japan called "ano-zumi" that he hopes will bring a starker focus to the modern sculptures in the Hirshhorn's collection. Not everyone's happy about it. "To be perfectly honest, stacked stone to me...if it's the wrong kind...just reeks of Olive Garden," said Mina Wright, who serves on the National Capital Planning Commission, one of the bodies evaluating the Hirshhorn's proposed revitalization. "That is not a good look on anybody." The obsession with modernity, however, comes at the expense of artistry, says Sugimoto.

"We've lost the signature style of our time," he says. "Frank Gehry's style is our style now. I don't think it's art, honestly."

You collect many ancient objects—from fossils to Stone Age tools. How does a sense of history affect you as an artist?

I just want to understand the development of my mind from the child's state to the adult state to the old man state now. [To know] my mind I have to understand the history of humans and the human mind. For example, holding a Stone Age stone, it fits in my hand perfectly, and I can transfer that ancient man's mind through this tool through my skin and, oh, I can feel it, I can understand it. 200,000 years ago. The first human, I can understand him. I am a materialist in a way: I have to have the actual thing to touch it, see it.

You describe yourself as a materialist, but so many of your photographs—blurry images of buildings, seascapes—are hyperabstract.

My job is to make the material abstract through my art. I [am] influenced by many, many of my collections. This is my educational material. I should be able to deduct it from my business!

What led you to photography and architecture?

When I started out with photography, I was a very, very handy child. My father bought a beautiful camera, but he couldn't figure out how to use it so he threw it out. I took it. I instantly discovered how to use it. I'm a self-taught photographer, very late stage, already high school age. When I came to New York City in 1974 I decided to be an artist, not just as a photographer. But I saw how painting was already so out of fashion, so photography—as a contemporary art, as a conceptual art—that's what I imagined I wanted to do at that time.

And architecture?

Architecture is just a coincidence. I started to [exhibit] my shows around the world, with famous museums, mostly designed by starchitects. I found out how unusable [they are]. The design is very bad. They're not thinking about the artists. I wanted to design my ideal space for the artist, not for the architect's ego. So I started to design my own space—my studio—and now I've established my art foundation called Odawara. People started asking me to design museum spaces and gallery spaces. I never intended to be an architect, but I found out that I'm an architect.

With your Hirshhorn sculpture garden renovation, what are you looking to achieve?

I want to make a premodern setting for the space, which means using the Japanese historical stone technique that is totally handmade. It makes the modern art stand out against the premodern background. I cannot send the stones from Japan. So I am using American stone and then a 16th-, 17th-century Japanese technique. I'm trying to train American stone craftsmen to be as Japanese as possible. Working with the government, I have had to negotiate with many different types of people. Some people don't want to change anything.

Yeah, you've gotten some criticism for your proposed renovation that it might look cheap or cheesy. Why do you think some people are reacting to it this way?

I don't know. There are always conservative people around. To make my art I make all my decisions by myself. I want to make my architecture as artistic as possible, but some conservative people don't want that.

Is modern architecture in general against your more historical, artistic way of working?

I don't know whether architects now should be treated more like artists. So function and art are against each other. This is very interesting. Which way do you want to go? Only function? Today's buildings all basically function as far as how to make them as cheap as possible, as high as possible, with the fewest costs. In the early state of modernism, in the 1920s, '30s, there was a dream about a [more artistic] modern architecture, but now [buildings] only need to function. We've lost the signature style of our time. Frank Gehry's style is our style now. I don't think it's art, honestly.

Why do you think that is?

That's what the [modern] economy is, our style of production, capitalism; it's asking to make [buildings] as big as possible, as cheaply as possible, as comfortable as possible.... We should stop growing. We should be shrinking.

In what sense?

Global size of development. To grow 5 percent every year, we have to destroy nature. It's impossible to keep growing. We have to think about other social methods, not the capitalistic ideas. Now in the Covid state, I think this is a message from nature: You shouldn't grow anymore.

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PHOTO: HIROSHI SUGIMOTO

And here, in his own words, a few of Sugimoto's favorite things.

“On the right, a bonsai pine sent to me by Melissa Chiu, director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, as a birthday gift. The bonsai is the symbol of the Japanese garden. We’ve been working together for many years to renovate the Hirshhorn’s sculpture garden. The glass sphere toward the bottom is quite unusual. It’s made of the leaded glass that allowed scientists to see inside nuclear reactions during the Manhattan Project, when Americans made the atomic bomb. Beneath that are cuneiform writings on clay tablets, from between 3,000 to 2,000 BCE. Those small tablets usually are IOUs. This is the beginning of civilization. On the far left, there are stone tools. The oldest are about 200,000 to 250,000 years old. Humans started using tools to separate themselves from animals and, probably around then, gained a consciousness of time and were able to imagine the future. Also on the far left, *The Principia*, by Isaac Newton—my copy was published around 1739–42—and the first edition of his *Opticks*, from 1704. Newton is my most respected scientist. *Opticks* is the first time someone studied the nature of light, and this guides me as a photographer because photography is a tool to control light and time. The large book in the middle is *Antichità Romane de’ Tempi della Repubblica, e de’ primi Imperatori*, by Giovanni Battista Piranesi from the 18th century, who was commissioned by the pope to excavate ancient Rome. For this book, he used his imagination and his excavation to create a picture of ancient Rome. On the left are fossils, which I’ve been collecting as a part of my Odawara Art Foundation. In the middle are meteorites, pieces of the Gibeon meteorite, collected around Gibeon, Namibia; the lunar meteorite, collected in the Sahara; and the Ensisheim meteorite, found in France in the 15th century, the first recorded meteorite in Europe [from which samples remain]. It was chained down in a church basement to prevent it from flying back to God’s place.”