

ARTS > REVIEW

MCA Hiroshi Sugimoto exhibition breaks down time and memory

By JANE CORNWELL

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‘Pure clear air. Nice waves. A sharp horizon. And me, the first human being on earth.’ The great Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto is in his studio in Chelsea, Manhattan’s art district, recalling a seascape he’d pondered as a boy on a family holiday in coastal Japan. “It was calm, undisturbed, without a soul around. I compare this personal memory of mine with the consciousness of primitive man, experiencing the first vision of the world.”

At age 76, with homes in New York and Tokyo, where he has an architectural practice, a 50-year career as an image-making polymath, the Odawara Art Foundation he established in 2009 to promote Japanese culture and since 2017 the Enoura Observatory art complex set on 4ha of hillside overlooking Sagami Bay and the Pacific Ocean, Sugimoto says he never gets tired of gazing at the sea.

Which helps explain the longevity of the iconic Seascapes series he began in 1980: black-and-white photos of dreamlike maritime vistas taken in more than 250 remote locations from the Tasman Sea to the English Channel. Each uniformly composed. Each the same size. Each ostensibly the same unchanging vista, until you slow down enough to start properly looking.

“I wake before the sun and follow it as the light changes and the birds start singing,” Sugimoto says in his strongly accented English. “At twilight I calculate where the moon will show up and how big it will be. I wait for my moment of right conditions, for the message. My camera is ready to receive anything.”

Taken using an old-fashioned large format wooden box camera and processed in a darkroom using chemicals hand-mixed from a recipe by renowned 20th-century

photographer Ansel Adams, several such seascapes will feature as part of Hiroshi Sugimoto: Time Machine, the artist's first major retrospective in Australia.

A partnership between the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia in Sydney and London's Hayward Gallery, where the show premiered to acclaim in October last year, the exhibition traces a life devoted to reshaping notions of photography's ability to record time, light and space, to take us somewhere else.

Each seascape is both representative and abstract. Their oblong blocks of darkness and radiance recall the monochromatic late period paintings of Mark Rothko, which were juxtaposed alongside the photos in an exhibition at the Pace Gallery in London in 2012 (three years after U2 put a Sugimoto seascape on the cover of its album No Line on the Horizon, with Bono being moved to hail Sugimoto's genius during a gig at Giants stadium in New Jersey).

"My seascapes shared a sensitivity with the Rothko paintings, though of course the price difference was huge," Sugimoto notes with trademark droll humour.

Certainty is at a premium in Sugimoto's work. This is photography as documenter of fact and – in our world of artificial intelligence and digital fakery – manipulator of fiction. What looks like lighting splintering in a night sky is actually an electrical charge released on to photosensitive paper by a Van de Graaff generator, that senior secondary school physics lab classic, and captured in an instant. It's the essence of photography, even if he isn't using a camera, and a neat metaphor: Sugimoto often speaks of being "struck" by an idea.

Such was the way when, in 1976, having arrived in New York with a degree from a fine arts college in Pasadena, California, Sugimoto was visiting the American Museum of Natural History when he happened upon its Victorian-era dioramas: stuffed animals in glass cases with fake painted backdrops. Transfixed, he tried shutting one eye, viewing them as a camera might, and the taxidermied lions and gorillas suddenly appeared real. He returned and spent a night taking a long-exposure picture of the polar bear diorama: poised over a sacrificial seal inside an Arctic wonderland, his bear – the first photograph from his Diorama series – seems to quiver with anticipation.

“I wanted to be a conceptual artist, a minimalist, who used photography, which was still considered a second-class citizen by the art world,” says Sugimoto. “I had seen exhibitions by [conceptual artists and minimalists] Sol LeWitt and Donald Judd and was so inspired. I couldn’t wait to get going. When I succeeded in bringing the polar bear back to life on film, I knew that my life as an artist began.”

He wanted to poke at the human mind. To query what the eyes see and want they want to see. “After the invention of photography in 1839, people thought that every photograph they saw was evidence. But when digital cameras were introduced even police departments stopped using photographers. There are still those who believe.” A pause. “The question is: What does life mean to you?”

Then came another lightning bolt epiphany. He would set up his camera tripod at the back of a New York cinema and rejig the exposure time to match the length of the film. The result? A bright white screen, ominous and evocative, that became the leitmotiv of his ongoing Theaters series spanning opera houses, drive-ins and, since 2015, abandoned movie theatres – relics of a changing art form, omens of a declining civilisation.

“Since a boy I am questioning myself late at night and having hallucinations and coming up with concepts,” says Sugimoto. “What if I expose the entire movie? If I just have this shining screen and the [empty] interior of the theatre? I see things like a blueprint, then make my inner vision happen.”

In 1999 he photographed waxworks inside Madame Tussauds museum in London for his Portraits series, enhancing effigies of historical figures from King Henry VIII to Oscar Wilde in ways that spoke to traditional 16th-century portraiture while still being reproductions of reproductions. He’d previously photographed the museum’s Chamber of Horrors exhibit – a witness to murder à la American street photographer Weegee, another inspiration – and laments the poor quality of the newer 3D-scanned waxworks he saw when he visited Madame Tussauds last year.

Craftsmanship matters to Sugimoto. It’s there in his preference for retro technology, in his subtle use of natural light and shadow, in the tiny details his images give with deep looking, in the durational aspect of his series, in his elegant, just-so compositions.

“The concept of minimalism is really the basis of Japanese culture and aesthetics,” says Sugimoto, a father of one who sings opera and enjoys traditional Japanese Noh theatre, who collects fossils, Stone Age tools and rare books (he has early editions of Isaac Newton’s Opticks and Principia Mathematica) and is a skilled chef with a penchant for puffer fish.

The youngest of two sons born to parents who ran a pharmaceutical company, Sugimoto dabbled in photography at high school, and studied politics and sociology at university; then, fired by Marxist ideals, he backpacked across Russia and travelled around Europe in a VW campervan. He thinks his parents paid his tuition fees for art school in California to keep him out of the family business.

“They couldn’t understand this boy.” A good-natured shrug. “I was a flower child, a hippie. I was not business minded.”

Nevertheless, with his ex-wife, a painter, in 1981 he founded an antiques shop specialising in Eastern antiquities, across the course of a decade garnering big-name clients including the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

He says he wasn’t mathematically minded until he began photographing 19th-century plaster models of math concepts (Conceptual Forms, 2002), the sort celebrated by American surrealist Man Ray, then started producing models from aluminium and stainless steel (Mathematical Models, 2005) using computer-controlled machines, reshaping them with a camera instead of a chisel.

Looking and learning, dreaming and doing are the precepts by which Sugimoto lives. Having read Newton, who in 1704 asserted that natural light consisted of seven distinct colours, he embarked on a string of experiments using a Polaroid camera, a glass prism and a mirror. His 2018 Opticks series are a riot of flaring, kaleidoscopic hues – and the only colour images in the Time Machine exhibition.

“This [series] is not just colour photos,” he says. “I am photographing the nature of the colour itself, which no one has tried to do. I am pleased to arrive to this state of coloured mind at the end of my life.”

Not that the multifaceted artist has plans to slow down. New Material Research Laboratory, the lauded architectural practice he founded in Tokyo in 2008, continues

to design restaurants, gardens, museums and settings for Sugimoto's exhibitions. But while indisputably architecturally minded – his Architecture series features photos of modernist buildings including the Eiffel Tower and World Trade Centre, their silhouettes blurred by a camera set to twice infinity, a ghostly imprint of their architect's original idea – Sugimoto is not an architect.

Younger qualified architects including Tomoyuki Sakakida, the practice's celebrated director, assist Sugimoto to enact a vision that values techniques from ancient and medieval eras as much as it does cutting-edge innovation. "Nothing is newer than the use of old materials" is the motto of NMRL, which strives to create structures that will outlast humanity – even if no one will be around to see them.

The Enoura Observatory, Sugimoto's magnum opus, is a case in point. "This is my everything together, my experience of life as a conceptual artist and garden designer, as one whose goal is to glimpse what lies just over the horizon," he says.

The complex's multiple stone-and-glass structures are built to follow the sun, offering ideal conditions to experience solstices and equinoxes in ways influenced by ancient forms such as Britain's Stonehenge and the Mayan pyramid Kukulcan at Chichen Itza in Mexico. As with those monuments, Enoura has the sort of in-built sustainability that will ensure its beauty thousands of years from now, even as a ruin.

"So the glass is smashed, the cantilevered tip is bent over, but the stone structure will remain, the same as a pyramid or a Greek temple," says Sugimoto. "I don't know who will be able to see it and I don't care. These are imaginative ruins. My last piece.

"Human civilisation is on its way out. I am pessimistic that human nature will never be able to change. Many of the things I have thought about, half-seriously and half-jokingly, are becoming a reality. I may be able to meet the end of the world while I am living." Perhaps standing on the roof of the observatory, watching the nice waves, the sharp horizon?

Sugimoto nods. "Yes, like that," he says. "Like the vision of the very last man on earth."

Hiroshi Sugimoto: Time Machine runs at the Museum of Contemporary Australia, Sydney, from August 2 to October 27.

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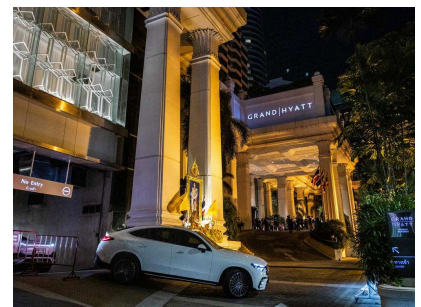
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