

HIROSHI SUGIMOTO

Seascapes, Theatres, Dioramas and Drive-Ins

Hiroshi Sugimoto is an obsessive perfectionist who uses his cumbersome 10"x8" plate camera to photograph the same three subjects over and over again: dioramas, film theatres and seascapes. The resulting black and white prints are rich, subtle and, given the size of the negative, dense with incidental detail. Inevitably, in an enterprise as formally rigorous as this appears to be, one is sucked into trying to decide what, exactly, the artist's three subjects have in common. A "sense of imminence", as John Yau suggested in *ArtForum*? A theatrical quality? The complete absence of any human presence? In fact, of course, the search for insightful connections is the oldest of critical fallacies. There doesn't *have* to be a link; perhaps it was precisely the formal characteristics of these subjects that attracted Sugimoto.

On the other hand, it is always a mistake to ignore the practical strictures underlying artistic creation. As it happens, while a 10"x8" camera offers superb resolution and grain, it suffers from an impossibly shallow depth of field. To judge by the great precision of these prints, Sugimoto is unlikely to tolerate even the slightest degree of blur or lack of focus; it is also evident that he makes exclusive use of available light, avoiding the use of additional light sources such as strobes or floodlights. Hence the attraction of static subjects allowing a long exposure time.

In the case of the cinema interiors, Sugimoto gives new meaning to the term 'available light'. The camera shutter is left open during the projection of an entire feature-length film in an otherwise empty auditorium; after a hundred or so minutes, the screen has become a radiant white rectangle while the rest of the interior is bathed in a soft, reflected light modeling every curve and cranny. Were Sugimoto more of a conceptualist, he might play games with the actual quality of the illuminating film: is the cumulative light emanating from, say, *La Notte* more or less than that produced by *The Searchers*? On the evidence of these prints, however, the artist's intentions remain rooted in representation.

He has certainly unearthed some mind-boggling cinemas in the United States. The Ohio Theatre boasts a starry dome, twisted pillars and a gigantic organ; a monumental renaissance frontage complete with a dozen or so larger-than-life allegorical statues towers over the screen of a cinema in Tampa; in Michigan, the Fox comes complete with Corinthian columns, huge gilded peacocks and a spherical chandelier the shape (and, seemingly, the size) of a montgolfier; the Prospect Park Theatre goes in for enormous Moorish arches; and the Cabot Street Cinema is decorated with pseudo-pompeian wall paintings. All art history, in fact, is here recapitulated. The only theatre not to allow Sugimoto access to an empty auditorium was Radio City Music Hall in New York, so that in this image one finds at last vague traces of human presence - a few dim figures seated here and there.

If cinema theatres hold a distorting mirror up to art, then natural history dioramas clearly recapitulate evolution. Other photographers have been drawn to these strangely compelling tableaux, notably Joan Fontcuberta, but they have tended to emphasise the artificiality of the subject, deliberately breaking the illusion by including extraneous elements into the frame. Sugimoto plays it absolutely straight, photographing these impossibly encyclopedic assemblages as though he were before a real landscape.

One reason for the strangeness of dioramas is that they improve upon nature to an unnatural degree, setting up incredibly perfect situations and point of view. The hunting dogs stand on their hillock like Apaches in the first reel of a western, a family of white rhinos thrust their way to a watering hole with the arrogance and panache of armoured knights with lances couched, a vulture poses in a thorn tree with more than vulturine perfection. All - dogs, rhinos, vulture - are platonic archetypes inhabiting perfect landscapes.



At first sight, the seascapes seem elliptic, almost ungenerous in comparison to the other two groups. Bisected almost exactly halfway down by the horizon they all seem taken from some high eminence, since there is never any indication of a shoreline in the foreground - as though, in fact, Sugimoto had had access to some impossibly stable platform hovering a hundred feet or so feet above the waves. There is little or no drama, simply variations of grey in the sky, the slow patterns of weather and cloud. We are just high enough for surface ripples and small waves to become invisible; instead, we can mark the slower surge of currents thrusting across the waters. In the Sea of Japan, mists often blur the separation between sea and sky. After studying them for a while, we realise that these images, too, share a kind of impersonal perfection. Perhaps after all that is what the subjects of Sugimoto's images have in common: self-sufficiency and perfection.

© John Stathatos 1993, 2014

First published in *Untitled* no.3, London, winter 1993/94

Review of "Seascapes, Theatres, Dioramas and Drive-Ins" at White Cube, Oct-Nov 1993