

# Study of Hiroshi Sugimoto's Photographic Works: The Characteristics of Picture Expression of Photography in Postmodernism

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**Abstract:** This article explores the artistic journey of Hiroshi Sugimoto, a renowned photographer whose work has profoundly engaged with modernism and postmodernism. Sugimoto's approach to photography is characterized by its minimalist aesthetic and deep exploration of themes such as time, history, and memory. The analysis focuses on several of his notable series including "Dioramas," "Theaters," "Seascapes," "Lighting Field," and "Appropriate Proportion." Each series is examined for its unique methodological contributions to photography and how Sugimoto revisits and reinterprets these works to provoke varied cultural interpretations among viewers. The article highlights Sugimoto's background and how his early experiences and education influenced his distinctive style. It also discusses his innovative use of camera-free photography techniques, particularly in the "Lighting Field" series, where he employs electrical shocks to create abstract images on photo paper. The paper concludes by reflecting on how Sugimoto's work challenges traditional perceptions of photography and contributes to ongoing dialogues in contemporary art, illustrating his role as a bridge between the artistic legacies of modernism and the diverse narratives of postmodernism.

**Keywords:** Modernism and Postmodernism Photography; Memory; Hiroshi Sugimoto; Abstract Photography.

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## 1. Introduction

After entering modern society, a large number of excellent photographers have emerged. Photography from the middle class and bourgeoisie into the life of ordinary people, from the studio to the countryside, from the shackles to the open, these changes increase the possibility of photography. Some people use lens to record society, some people use photography to express their hearts, and some people focus on photography itself. Hiroshi Sugimoto was an artist who has focused on photography itself. Some people call him the last "modernist". He did not confine himself to a certain framework; he was more likely to explore the same theme with different methods.

This essay will discuss how photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto, was involved with modernism and postmodernism photography, focused on the work of art itself and reinterpret his previous work to make the audience to have different interpretations based on cultural differences by examining in his works such as *Diorama*, *Theaters*, *Seascapes*, *Lighting Field*, and *Appropriate Proportion*.

## 2. The Background of Hiroshi Sugimoto

Hiroshi Sugimoto lived in an area free from airstrikes, one of the areas least affected by the war in Japan. He was born into a business family in Japan and grew up wealthy. His father was a performer in his spare time, so the environment during childhood is more peaceful than that of artists of the same era. He received western education in high school. He entered Christian High School and studied oil painting and sculpture, which laid a good foundation for later art development. Considering the inheritance of the family business, he chose economics in the university, but he didn't want to take over the family business himself, so he

negotiated with his family to study in the United States. Early contact with western culture made his vision more open, and he was baptized by a more diversified culture. This is of great benefit to his later creation.

At the age of 22, Sugimoto embarked on the road to study in the United States. He spent his college time at the Art Center College of Design, where he systematically learned about photography and laid a solid foundation for future recreation.

In 1976, 26 years old Hiroshi Sugimoto immigrated to New York and won prizes from the New York state government and the Guggenheim foundation to start his artistic creation. However, at the same time, he was also engaged in antique trading business. He travelled between Japan and New York, and his identity as an antique dealer enables him to have access to a large number of antiques and works of art. It also had a subtle influence on his later creation and theme. As writer, Joshua Petitto, stated in his article, *The Oceanic Vision of Sugimoto Hiroshi*, "Sugimoto's oceanic imagining is indebted to a strain of modernist thought, romantic in origin and regressive in inclination, deeply embedded in Japanese cultural modernity and, in particular, in Japanese cultural production during the 1930s [1]." In his works, his exploration of time and history echoes his experience.

## 3. One Big Step into Postmodernism

His picture is usually very pure, which means that there will not be too many elements or information in the picture to disturb the audience. In his *Seascapes* series (Figure 1), his simple pictures only leave the relationship between sky, water and atmosphere. In one of his interviews, he said the images came from his childhood memories of the sea. He was instantly attracted by the vast sea, like waking up from a dream and staring at himself in the sky[2].



**Figure 1.** Sugimoto Hiroshi, North Atlantic Ocean, Cape Breton Island, 1996, gelatin silver print, 119.4 cm × 149.2 cm. © Hiroshi Sugimoto, courtesy Pace Gallery

The sense of history displayed by Sugimoto is not focused on the history of personal experience, but on the origin and development of human society. In Walter Benjamin's book, he referred to as the 'optical unconscious'[3]. Sugimoto recorded the information that the human eye could not capture with the camera, simplifying the picture through photography, but increasing the sense of massiveness and artistic meaning of the picture from the content.

The photographer's way of creation is also very special, usually he used large and medium-sized pictures of the camera to create, but he also used camera free photography in his recent works. His technique is both traditional and modern, which is a kind of rule-abiding, this also made him a maverick.

Electrical shocking, which Sugimoto used in "Lighting Field" (Figure 2) allowed the appearance of abstract image on

photo paper abstract. Writer Kent notes that the electrical shocking process which Hiroshi used is an unprecedented method which develops photos without camera and lens[4]. In the process, he puts a film on the top of a metal tablet and passes about 40000 volts' electrical current through the tablet. In this way, the film records the path of electrical current. The image created by the scientific process is significant; it is a link between wild nature and human technology. According to Kent, the result of the process is "brilliantly luminous"[5]. The appearance of image on photo paper shows a wonderful scene that never existed before, which "explores themes of consumerism, narrative and existence in rich and evocative imagery." [6] His artwork inspires a lot of photographers to create artworks using experimental methods.



**Figure 2.** Hiroshi Sugimoto, Lightning Fields Composed 012, right, 2009, April 25, 2020, <https://www.sugimotohiroshi.com/lightning-fields-composed>

The image developed from the methods are unique while the traditional photos are reproducible. Depending on different environmental conditions, experimental processes are not replicable, so that the appearances of image on photo paper are coincident, which means they are unique and rare. According to Kent, the image from electrical shocking is "violent bursts, like distant meteor showers, unfurl across a black background in unruly patterns, some furry and others

razor-sharp." [7] The appearance on photo paper is abstract and random because of its production processes were influenced by a complex environment. Hiroshi Sugimoto notes that the outcome of his work is uncertain due to the changes in atmosphere [8]. Temperature, humidity, ambient light and time can all be a determining element to the final artwork. Under this condition, the appearance of image on photo paper cannot be duplicated while traditional photos can

be reproduced when the environment is stable.

In modern times, photographers began to explore the nature of photography, which is close to conceptual photography. Photographer's research on photography itself has continued to this day. If these are studies on carriers, then pinhole photography is the study on conversion media. Now, Sugimoto took a further step to explore camera free photography, which is closer to the essence of photography defined by the earliest definition, light painting.

What's more, Sugimoto didn't stop thinking about his

works after he had already created a series of works. With the change in environment and times, he combined his works with the understanding to display again, and give the works new charm and significance.

Both of Hiroshi Sugimoto's works (Figure 3, Figure 4 and Figure 5) are displayed in the open-air environment of the museum. One of his pictures of the sea is placed on a cliff, facing the sea. Although the two works were shot in different periods, the themes are different. But they were all on display together in 2006.



**Figure 3.** Hiroshi Sugimoto, Benesse House Museum Outdoor works, 2006, Benesse House Museum, Japan, April 17, 2020, <http://benesse-artsite.jp/en/art/benessehouse-museum.html>



**Figure 4.** Hiroshi Sugimoto, Cambrian Period, 1992, Benesse House Museum, Japan, April 17, 2020, <http://benesse-artsite.jp/en/art/benessehouse-museum.html>

Whether some old works of art can be interpreted differently in the new environment is not a question for today's artists, they injected new soul and meaning into their old works and used a new way to present their old works. In the post-modernism environment, this diversity of interpretation can make some previous works glow with new

significance and value. The significance of photography is not only as a reflection of life but as part of life.

The photographer, Sugimoto, summed up the works and environment on the cliff in the site-specific category within the field of art. This is also an additional art category since modernist times. This kind of art has relationship with

sculpture, and also originated in installation works, but it is independent due to its strong response to geography and

dependence on specific places. Because of that, some previous works has been attached new significance and value.



**Figure 5.** Hiroshi Sugimoto *Time Exposed*, 1980-97, Benesse House Museum, Japan, April 17, 2020, <http://benesse-artsite.jp/en/art/benessehouse-museum.html>

#### 4. The Perfection of Modernism

Many of Hiroshi Sugimoto's photos are works of minimalism, his minimalism is not a deliberate minimalism, but a natural minimalism. He didn't follow the idea of minimalism to create his works, but his works can reflect the style of minimalism. The elements are simple, the visual

experience is clear, and the information is conveyed accurately without any burden. *Play House* is Sugimoto's early work. One day, he thought about how to watch a movie in a picture. He took his camera and found an old theater to shoot. He started shooting after the movie and finished shooting two hours later. He was shocked by the image when he developed the film that night (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Hiroshi Sugimoto, U. A. *Play House*, 1978, <https://www.sugimotohiroshi.com/new-page-7>

Sugimoto's theater series explores the relationship between time and moment, and explores topics related to eternity. In his pictures, the white square brought by the long-time liquidity picture contrasts with the internal outline of the building depicted by the still building. But in practice, it's hard to tell who is more eternal. He uses pictures to record time to think. It's a record and precipitation of older memories and

time.

Although most of Sugimoto's pictures are calm and quiet, his rebellious and free soul can be felt from his treatment of some subjects. His early works originated from his tour experience in the American Museum of Natural History. He saw a lot of fake animal models in the museum. He knew that they were fake, but when his eyes only focused on parts of



them, just as the camera only focused on a certain range, these

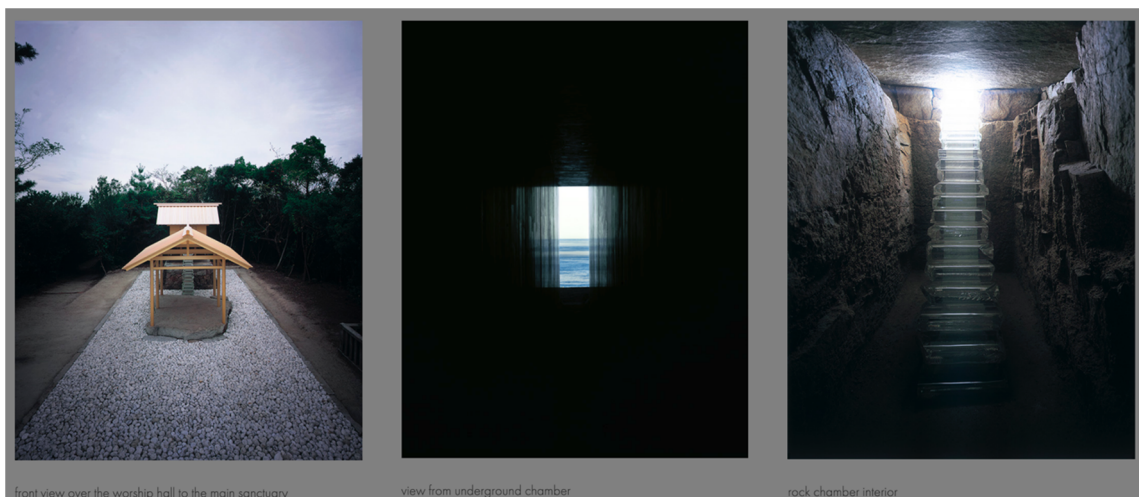
images were so real (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Hiroshi Sugimoto. Diorama, Hyena - Jackal - Vulture, 1976

Thus, he photographed parts of these artificial landscapes, and it's hard for the naked eye to distinguish the true from the false in the first two-dimensional picture. If the previous discussion is still on the authenticity level of pictures, then Sugimoto is using pictures to lie bringing this absurd sense of reality to the audience. In the history of photography, photographers have never stopped discussing the authenticity of photos. Critics do not have a generally accepted answer to the question of whether photography can present reality, how photography presents reality, and what kind of reality it presents. Sugimoto didn't get tangled in it but gave his answer directly, and confirmed his point with the pictures in this series. And for those who take pleasure in reveling in doomsday fantasies, Sugimoto's photographs might even seem to depict our future—what beleaguered Planet Earth will look like again if, or once, humans wipe themselves out[9]. Besides that, Sugimoto redefined architecture with his own language, which should be put into the category of “site-specific art”. In site-specific art, the appearance and meaning of work largely depend on the configuration of space. It means that if the same objects are arranged in different places, they will form different works. The importance of a space can

be its dimensions, its general characteristics, the materials it builds, or its role in events of political or historical significance. In his works, he not only showed the beauty of architecture, but also showed the soul of architecture. In 2002, Sugimoto participated in an art project to repair the shrine (Figure 8). The origin of this shrine can be traced back to 700 years ago, even back to the mythical world. In Japanese culture, there are some legends about gods living in mountains, plants and rivers. The ancient Japanese conceived of their kami or deities, as manifesting themselves only when humans purified their “power places” for them[10]. Sugimoto used a stone of 24 tons to make a rock partition and divided the whole building into three parts: The Worship Hall, the Main Sanctuary, and the Rock Chamber. Worshippers need to enter the dark basement through the glass steps to pray, and then pass through the stone corridor. On the way out, they will see the sea view through the gate. In describing his design for the entrance to the tomb, Sugimoto writes, “For the opening I decided upon a structure that omitted the numerous islands floating on the Seto Inland Sea, leaving only the oceanic horizon in the darkness of the chamber to divide the atmosphere from the surface of the water” [11].



**Figure 8.** Hiroshi Sugimoto, Appropriate Proportion, 2002, frontal view over the main hall to the worship sanctuary, view from the tomb passage toward the exit, Art House Project, Go'oh Shrine on Naoshima, Japan. © Hiroshi Sugimoto

In the whole design, he built a huge frame between the narrow corridor and the ceiling, just like the viewfinder of a camera just as Jonathan Crary has written, created a categorical division between interior and exterior, between light source, aperture, and screen [12]. His design combines photography with philosophy and architecture. He respected the Japanese culture's views on death and gods, and integrated the most important landscape for him, the sea. The sea view extends to the shrine's tomb, revealing a sabbath atmosphere. At the end of Romain Rolland's letter to Freud he writes, 'I may add that this "oceanic" sentiment has nothing to do with my personal yearnings. I yearn for eternal rest; survival has no attraction for me at all'[13]. In addition, Sugimoto used materials to run through history, from the site-specific art of glass and concrete, which are unique modern material, to stone and wood, some of the most primitive materials. Such a series makes the building, or art, more profound. To visit the shrine from the beginning to the end is like a kind of retrospection and feeling for our own cultural history and cultural history of the whole humankind.

## 5. Conclusion

Sugimoto's pictures tell the story of time, history and death. Behind the calm picture is the sense of eternal rest. As critics Erica McGrath said "While the beauty of these photographs is clearly striking there is an element to them that leaves me unsettled; there is something hauntingly ominous behind them." His multi-cultural background combines the aesthetics and philosophy of the East and the West and perfectly integrates them in his works. Sugimoto is called the last master of modernism, and his works meet the requirements of modernist art. Focusing on the work of art itself, it attracts the attention of the audience from the spiritual and visual aspects, and provides a unique aesthetic experience. He presents clean and concise works of art in the way of combining the advantages of all families, which has a high artistic value both in appearance and content.

At the same time, Sugimoto is also the mainstay of the post-modernism movement. He examines and edits the works he created before in the new era environment, uses innovative techniques to give the works a new meaning, and makes the old works have new vitality, which is an important way for him to practice postmodernism. Finally, his works not only have pure aesthetic experience, but can also make the

audience to have different interpretations based on cultural differences.

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