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CONTEMPORARY ART IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

HIROSHI SUGIMOTO

FORM IS EMPTINESS

29.5.2026 – 4.10.2026
TANJONG PAGAR DISTRI PARK

**HIROSHI
SUGIMOTO**

FORM IS EMPTINESS

Hiroshi Sugimoto: Form Is Emptiness marks the internationally acclaimed artist's first major exhibition in Southeast Asia. Bringing together 63 works from 11 series, alongside 14 fossils from the artist's personal collection, the exhibition traces five decades of artistic inquiry and sustained conceptual exploration.

The exhibition title draws from a well-known phrase in the Heart Sutra, a foundational Buddhist text. The phrase "form is emptiness" articulates a profound yet direct insight: all physical and tangible forms are considered "empty" because they lack permanence and nothing exists independently. We perceive the world as we do through the definitions we construct for ourselves. The tension between appearance and reality has long been central to Sugimoto's practice.

Although Sugimoto is best known for his photography, his work extends far beyond a single medium, encompassing sculpture, installation, writing and architectural design. For him, these are not departures from photography, but expansions of photographic thinking—ways of distilling and contemplating time and space so that a moment becomes a catalyst for deeper perception.

At the intersection of Buddhist philosophy and scientific inquiry, Sugimoto approaches time not as a fixed measure, but as something open and malleable. He invites viewers to slow down and reconsider the act of seeing itself, which is not passive reception, but an intentional and reflective gesture.

Designed by Sugimoto, the exhibition layout takes the form of a mandala—a circular, geometric figure representing the universe in Hindu and Buddhist symbolism. Rather than a single linear route, paths branch, loop and reconnect, inviting multiple directions of movement.

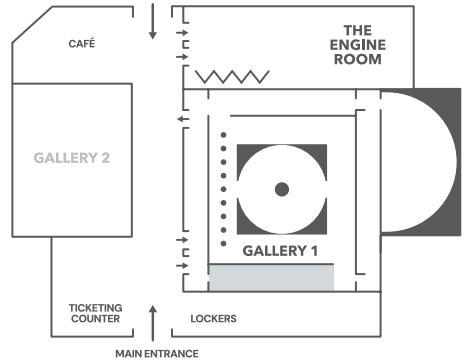
Visitors are invited to move through the exhibition at their own pace and in their own sequence. In doing so, the spatial experience echoes Sugimoto's enduring concern: how form and emptiness exist in interdependence, and how understanding gradually emerges through experience rather than relying on predetermined interpretation.

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Hyena-Jackal-Vulture. 1975.

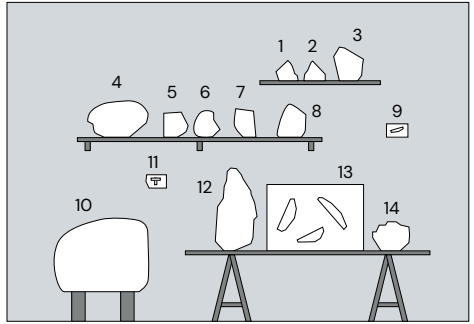


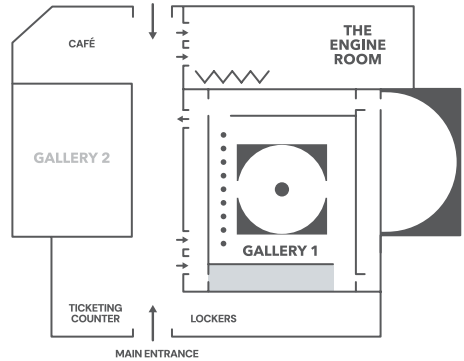
Dioramas

Wapiti. 1980; *California Condor*. 1994;
Hyena-Jackal-Vulture. 1975; *Alaskan Wolves*. 1994;
Ordovician Period. 1992; *Devonian Period*. 1992.
 Gelatine silver print, varying sizes.

In *Dioramas*, what at first seem like spectacular wildlife photographs are, in fact, images of natural history displays. When Sugimoto encountered these dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, he noticed that closing one eye caused perspective to collapse. What had seemed artificial suddenly became uncannily lifelike.

This revelation became the conceptual foundation of the *Dioramas* series. Through careful framing and controlled lighting, Sugimoto transformed stuffed animals and painted backdrops—imitations of life—into images that feel alive. The works reveal the fragile boundary between appearance and reality, and the camera's power not only to still life, but to instill it.





Fossils

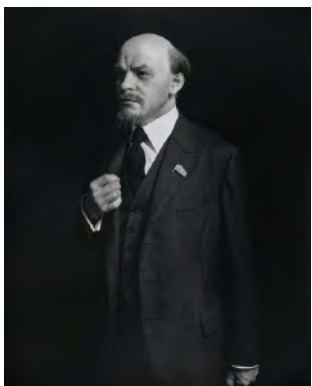
From left to right, row by row

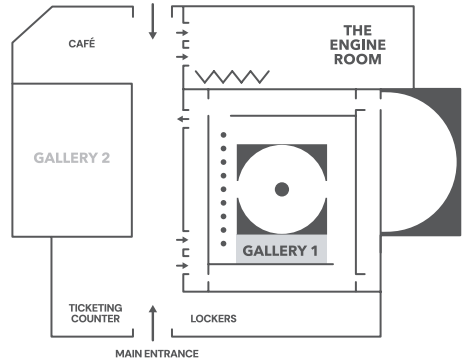
Frog, *Rana latonia*; Frog, *Rana latonia*; Shrimp, *Aeger tipularius*; Brittle Stars, Class: *Ophiuroidea*; Dragonfly, *Protolindenia wittei*; Dragonfly, *Protolindenia wittei*; Fish, *Mene rhombea*; Stonecrab, *Cycleryon propinquus*; Fish, *Mioplosus labracoides*. Trilobites, *Asasphellus sp.*; Dragonfly, *Libellulium longialatum*; Reptiles, *Claudiosaurus germani*; Fish, *Diplomystus dentatus*, *Mioplosus labracoides*, *Notogoneus osculus*; Oviraptorid egg clutch, *Elongatoolithus sp.*
 Fossil, varying periods and sizes.

In addition to his artworks, this exhibition includes Sugimoto's fossil collection, among them trilobites, ancient fish, frogs and dragonflies.

For many of us, photography is said to have begun in 1816, when the French inventor Nicéphore Niépce found a way to permanently fix an image with a camera obscura. Sugimoto proposes a longer view. He suggests that fossils are pre-photographic, time-recording devices.

What is a photograph, if not a fossilisation of time? And what is a fossil if not time's own imprint?





Portraits

From left to right, row by row

*Emperor Hirohito; Yasser Arafat; Diana, Princess of Wales;
Fidel Castro; Vladimir Ilyich Lenin; Napoleon Bonaparte;
Queen Victoria. 1999.*

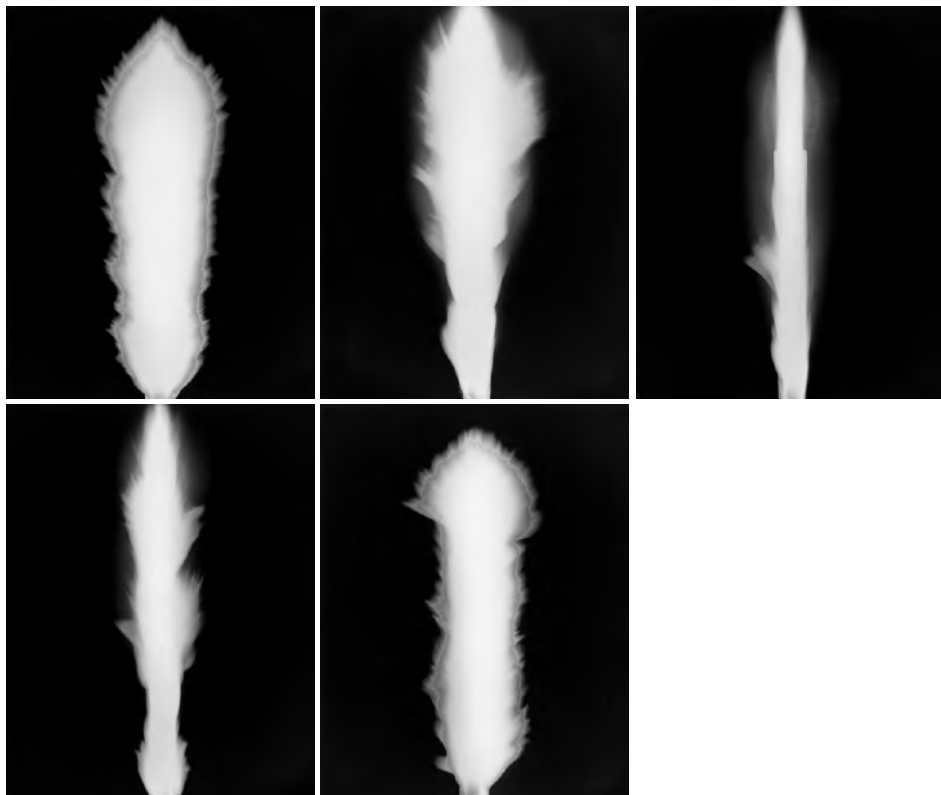
Gelatine silver print, 93.6 × 75 cm each.

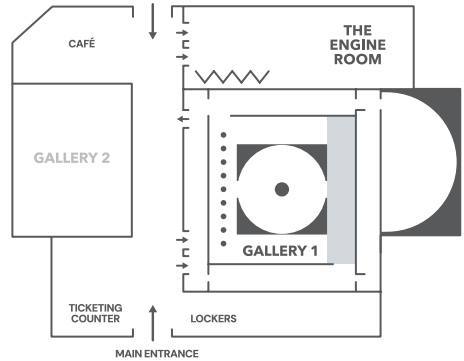
Sugimoto's *Portraits* series appears at first to be a conventional series of historical portraiture. Yet none of these individuals stood before his camera. Instead, Sugimoto photographed hyperreal wax figures from the wax museum Madame Tussauds in London.

Removed from their display environments and lit with dramatic light and shadow, the figures look surprisingly real. Their skin, eyes and expressions seem convincing, even though we know they are made of wax.

In fact, many of the historical wax figures at Madame Tussauds today were not cast directly from the original individuals but modelled after existing portraits by artists such as Holbein, van Dyck and Vermeer. They are therefore three-dimensional renderings of paintings, already several steps removed from the original subjects.

The series thus becomes an inquiry into the history of visual representation and the ways we perceive reality, asking how images mediate our understanding of what we take to be real.





In Praise of Shadows

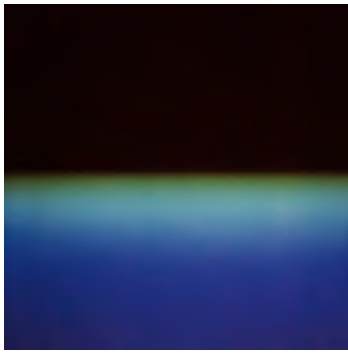
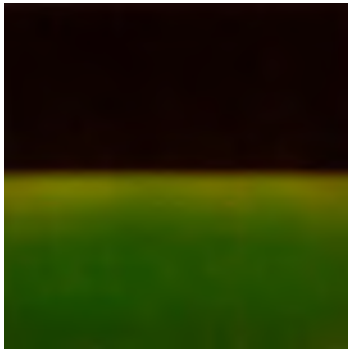
From left to right, row by row

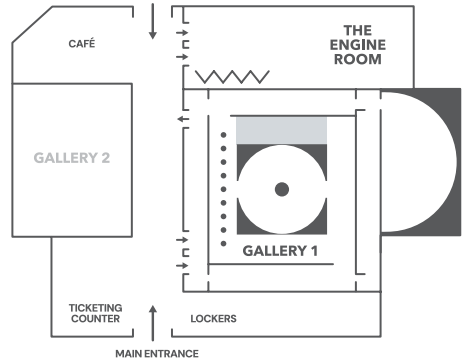
*In Praise of Shadows 980821; In Praise of Shadows 980809;
In Praise of Shadows 980806; In Praise of Shadows 980728;
In Praise of Shadows 980812. 1998.*

Gelatine silver print, 149.2 × 119.4 cm each.

Titled after Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's 1933 essay on the beauty of shadow and subdued lighting, *In Praise of Shadows* consists of long-exposure photographs of candles burning through the night. Some flames burnt out quickly; others lasted for hours. Each photograph records the full life of a candle, charting time through the slow accumulation of light.

Like Tanizaki, who valued shadow over the harsh glare of modern lighting, Sugimoto turns to the soft glow of candlelight. The flickering flame recalls one of humanity's earliest tools—fire—while quietly marking the passage of time and the perpetual cycle of life and death.





Opticks

From left to right, row by row

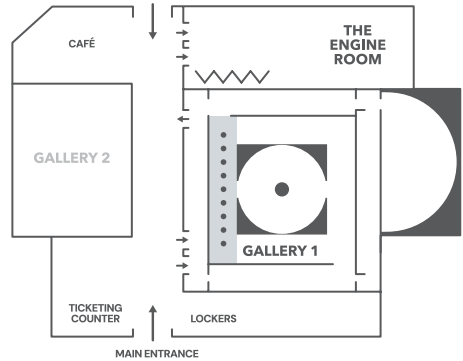
*Opticks 064; Opticks 050; Opticks 163; Opticks 076;
Opticks 033; Opticks 131; Opticks 597. 2018–2023.
Chromogenic print, 119.4 × 119.4 cm each.*

Rooted in the study of light, the series takes its name from Isaac Newton's 1704 treatise *Opticks*, which demonstrated that all colours exist within white light, but are only perceivable when absorbed, reflected or transmitted by external objects. In this series, Sugimoto focuses on light itself, turning photography away from objects and toward the source of perception.

Revisiting Newton's experiments, Sugimoto placed a prism in his studio and focused not on the familiar seven-colour spectrum but on the subtle "intracolours" within it. Using a mirror he designed, he further divided each band of colour into countless gradations. Originally photographed on Polaroid film, then digitised and enlarged, each photograph immerses us in fields of colour that seem to dissolve form, inviting us to encounter light itself.



S. Pacific Ocean, Maraenui. 1990/2012.



Five Elements

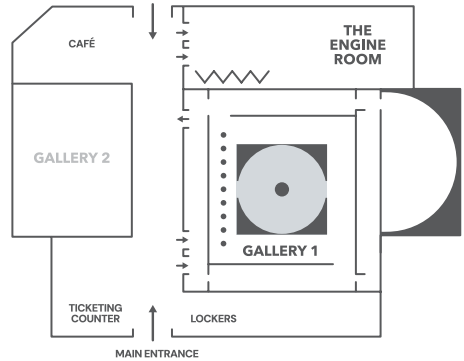
East China Sea, Amakusa. 1992/2012; *Sea of Japan, Rishiri Island.* 1996/2011; *Boden Sea, Uttwil.* 1993/2011; *Gulf of Bothnia, Holic.* 1996/2011; *S. Pacific Ocean, Maraenui.* 1990/2012; *Yellow Sea, Cheju.* 1992/2011; *Bay of Sagami, Kaikoh.* 2011/2012; *Lake Michigan, Gills Rock.* 1995/2011; *Tasman Sea, Ngarupupu.* 1990/2011.
 Optical glass, black-and-white negative, steel and wood,
 15.5 × 7.6 × 7.6 cm each; pedestal: 134 × 35 × 35 cm each.
 Courtesy of Odawara Art Foundation.

Five Elements consists of small, gleaming pagodas made of optical glass. This same material is used for lenses, prisms, telescopes and more, allowing us to see both the furthest reaches of the universe and the most microscopic of mysteries. This is the material through which Sugimoto has observed and understood the world.

Each pagoda is composed of five geometric forms symbolising earth, water, fire, air and void. The sphere represents water, and within each one, Sugimoto enshrines one of his iconic *Seascapes* images, also on display in this exhibition. He has described gazing at the sea as one of his earliest memories, a formative moment that revealed to him the origin of consciousness itself.



Sea of Buddha O25. 1995.



Sea of Buddha

Sea of Buddha 025 to 034. 1995.

Gelatine silver print, 119.4 × 149.2 cm each.

Sea of Buddha captures the 1,001 gold-leaf statues of Guanyin, the Buddhist bodhisattva of compassion. The statues are enshrined at the Rengeō-in temple in Kyoto, rebuilt in the 13th century. They stand within the temple's Kannon-dō hall—better known as Sanjūsangen-dō, the Hall of Thirty-Three Bays. After seven years of negotiation, Sugimoto was finally granted permission to photograph them. Working at dawn using only natural light and removing modern additions from the temple, he recreates a vision of how they might have looked when they were first installed 800 years ago.

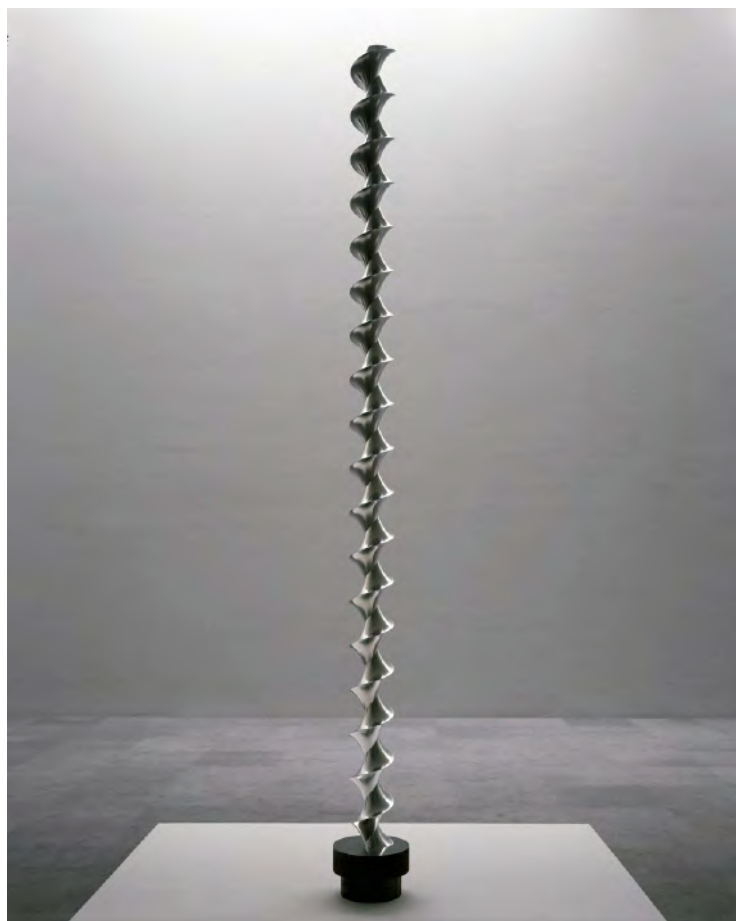
Arranged in dense rows, the statues extend beyond the limits of the frame and appear to recede to infinity. Each photograph repeats frame by frame like prayer beads turning in a ceaseless loop, inviting sustained, meditative looking.

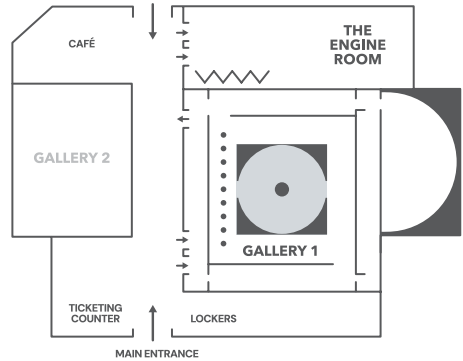


N. Pacific Ocean, Ohkurosaki. 2013. Gela



tine silver print. 119.4 × 149.2 cm.





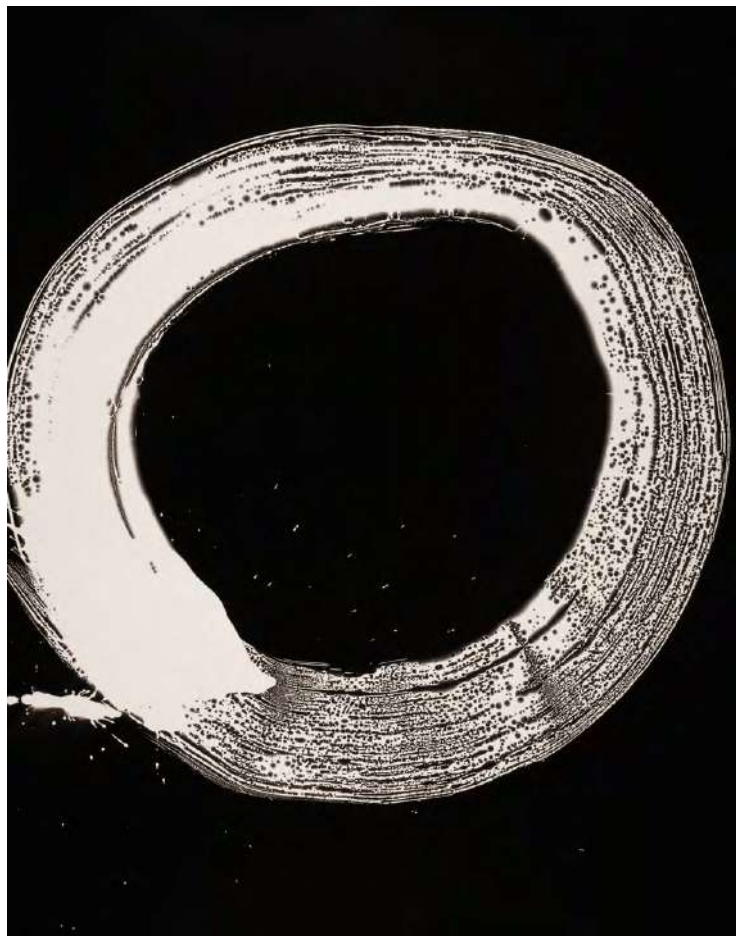
Mathematical Model 002: Dini's Surface

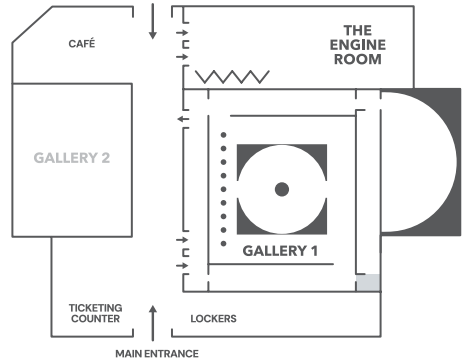
Mathematical Model 002: Dini's Surface. 2005.

Aluminium and steel, Model: 262.2 cm (H);

base: 16 × Ø 25 cm; total: 278.2 cm (H).

In this work, Sugimoto transforms the mathematical equation for Dini's surface into a tangible object made of aluminium and steel. Inspired by pioneering mathematicians and artists who crafted plaster models by hand to visualise complex geometric forms, Sugimoto continues this investigation into how abstract knowledge can be made visible through material means. In doing so, he draws attention to a long-standing affinity between art and mathematics: both seek to understand structure through pattern and form and position themselves at the forefront of human inquiry. In this sense, they emerge from a shared impulse—one which seeks to render visible unseen realms.



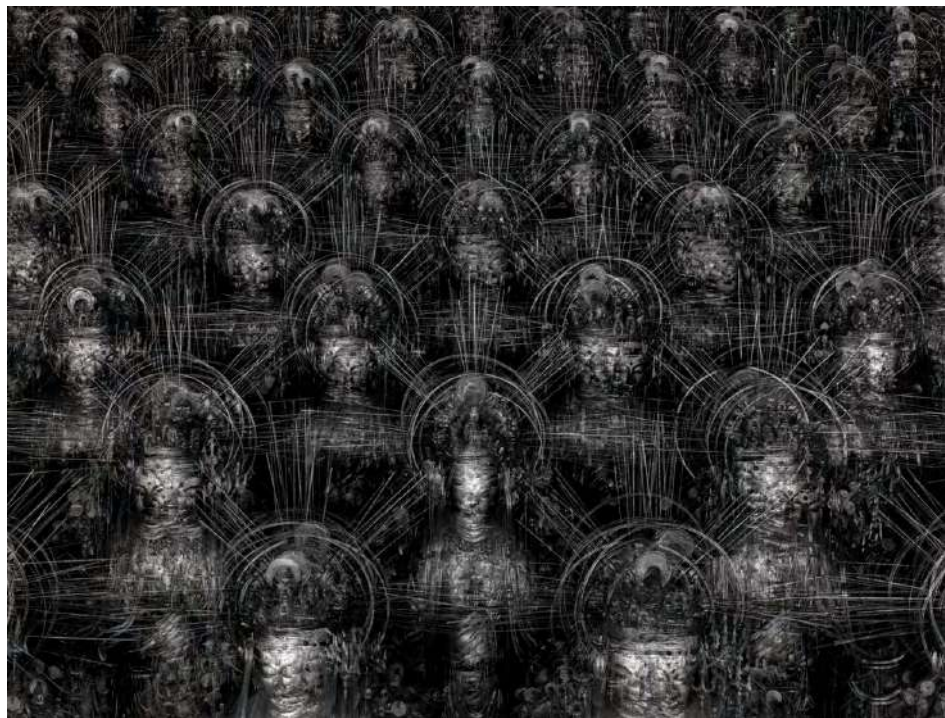


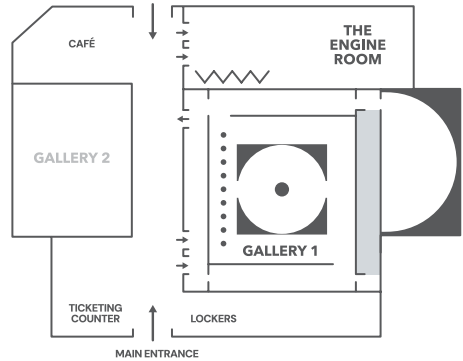
Brush Impression, 1547

Brush Impression, 1547. 2024.

Unique gelatine silver print, 93.6 × 75 cm.

Working in near-darkness, Sugimoto dips a brush into fixer and “writes” on photographic paper. A brief flash of light then fixes the brushstroke’s trace. *Brush Impression, 1547* marks Sugimoto’s conceptual exploration of the intersections between presence and emptiness, which begins with a single “circle” that invokes notions of zero and cyclical continuity. Pointing to Asian philosophical and mathematical ideas—especially the Buddhist concept of “emptiness”—the circle symbolises continuity without origin and a space where presence and absence coexist. Through photography, Sugimoto creates an image that attempts to give form to the idea of emptiness itself.



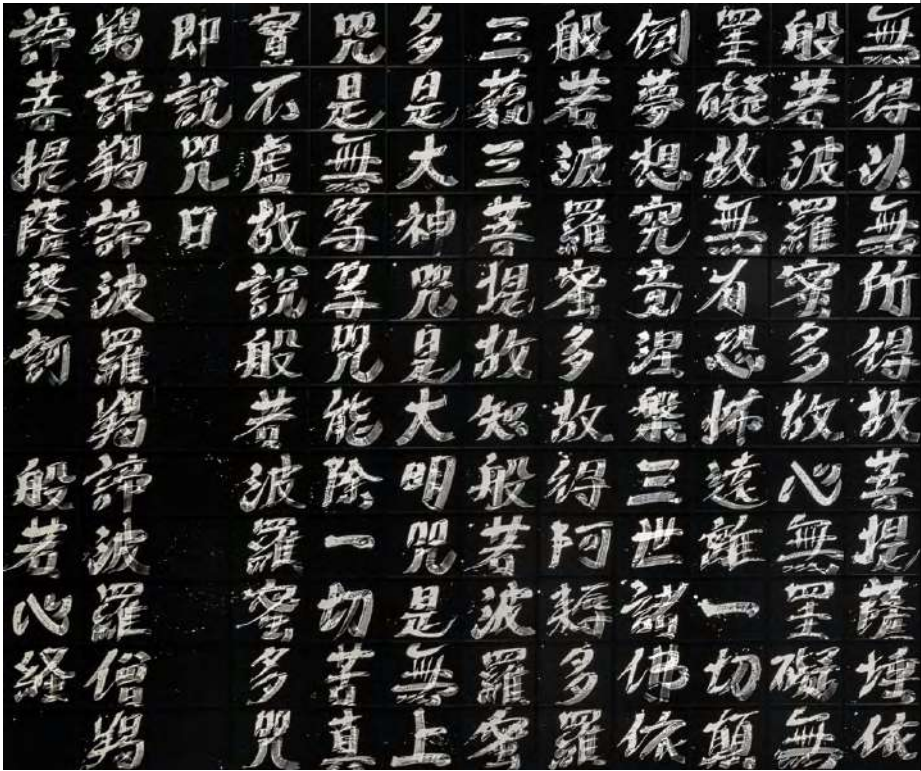


Accelerated Buddha

Accelerated Buddha. 1997–2017.

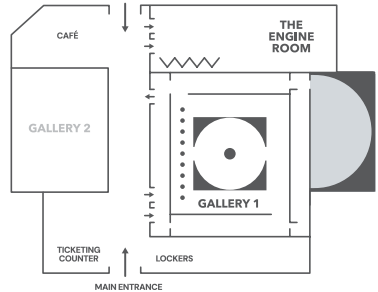
Three-channel video projection, sound,
5 min 45 sec.

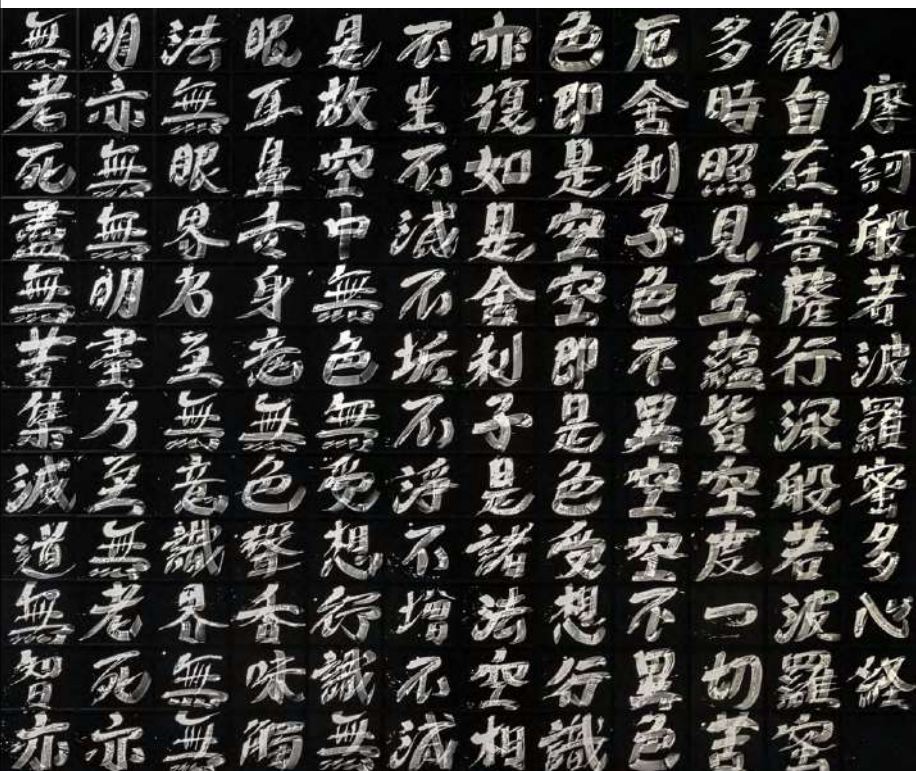
Accelerated Buddha, Sugimoto's first video work, extends the *Sea of Buddha* series into sound and motion. Within five minutes, 48 images of 1,000 buddhas appear in succession—slowly at first, then with increasing speed—until the forms blur into a vibrating field. The acceleration reflects Sugimoto's meditations on the cyclical history of civilisations across time: they are born, expand and inevitably decline. Drawing parallels to our present era, Sugimoto notes that our mass expansion and growth cannot continue indefinitely and that civilisations often accelerate as they near their demise.



Brush Impression, Heart Sutra

Brush Impression, Heart Sutra. 2023.
 288 unique gelatine silver prints,
 49.5 × 59.7 cm each.





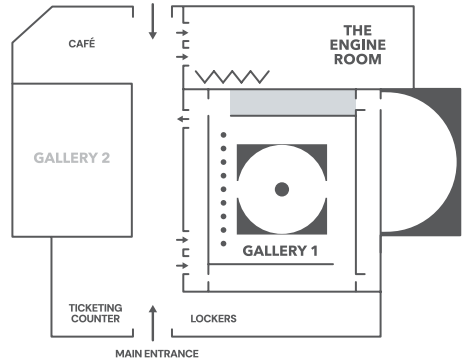
Brush Impression, Heart Sutra is a monumental convergence of photography, calligraphy and spiritual reflection. Comprising 288 unique gelatine silver prints, the work transforms the Heart Sutra's 274 Chinese characters into an architectural and bodily encounter.

Embracing impermanence, Sugimoto intentionally employs expired photographic paper. In his darkroom, he undertakes a meditative ritual: with a brush dipped in fixer, he writes the sutra in the dark, guided only by rhythm and memory.

With a burst of light, the invisible script then becomes image—emerging through chemical revelation. This ceremonious process enacts and manifests the Sutra's insight, inviting viewers into a space where matter, time and void coexist and dissolve.



U.A. Walker, New York. 1978.

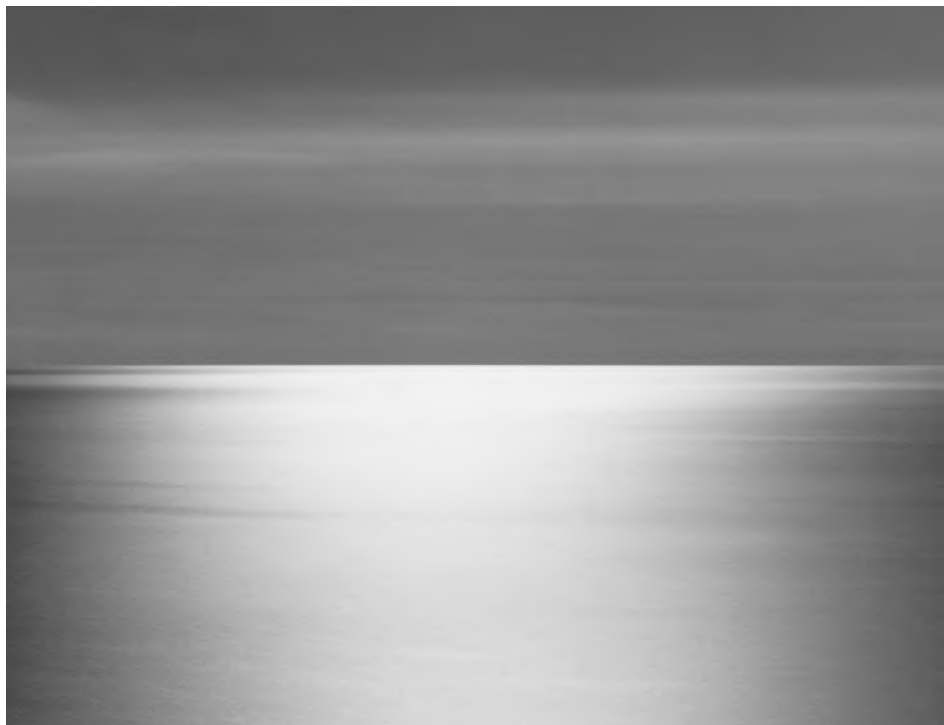


Theaters

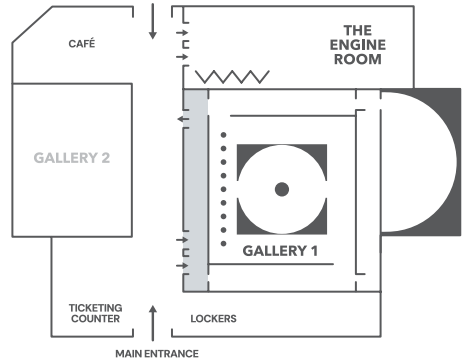
U.A. Playhouse, New York. 1978;
Salle 37, Palais de Tokyo, Paris. 2013;
Avalon Theater, Catalina Island. 1993;
AL. Ringling, Baraboo. 1995;
Metropolitan L. A., Los Angeles. 1993;
U.A. Walker, New York. 1978;
Goshen, Indiana. 1980.
 Gelatine silver print, 119.4 × 149.2 cm each.

Spanning more than four decades, Sugimoto's celebrated *Theaters* series features empty cinemas illuminated solely by their glowing screens. By keeping the shutter open for the full duration of a film—about two hours—he compresses hundreds of thousands of projected frames into a single luminous rectangle.

Early works were made in operating cinemas like St. Mark's Cinema in New York. He later expanded his repertoire to include *Abandoned Theaters* and *Opera Houses* where he could choose the films that were being projected. Each photograph collapses a film's "lifespan" into a single image, reflecting his recurring comparison between cinema and life—it begins, unfolds and ends in disappearance.



N. Atlantic Ocean, Cape Breton Island. 1996.

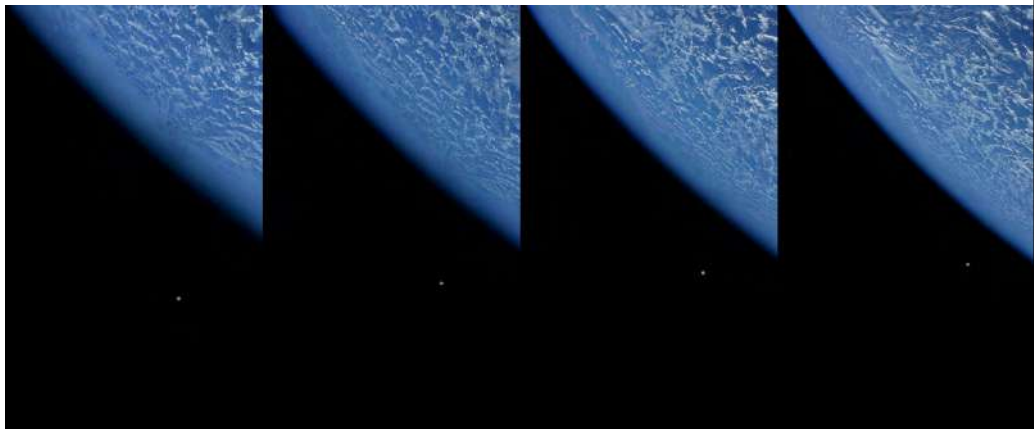


Seascapes

Sea of Japan, Rishiri Island. 1996;
N. Pacific Ocean, Ohkurosaki. 2013;
Tyrrhenian Sea, Scilla. 1993;
Baltic Sea, Rugen. 1996;
Ligurian Sea, Framura. 1993;
N. Atlantic Ocean, Cape Breton Island. 1996;
Ionian Sea, Santa Cesarea. 1990.
 Gelatine silver print, 119.4 × 149.2 cm each.

For more than four decades, Sugimoto has photographed his seminal *Seascapes* across 250 locations worldwide. Each image follows the same compositional structure: sea and sky meet at a perfectly centred horizon line, with subtle variances in light, weather and atmosphere. By stripping away markers of place, Sugimoto reveals sea and sky as shared conditions across time and geography, revealing the fundamental unity of our planet—and, by extension, the shared history of humankind.

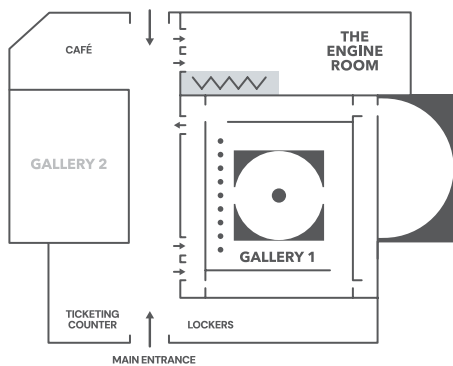
Sugimoto traces his lifelong interest in *Seascapes* to an early childhood memory of looking out at the ocean. For him, the sea is a reminder of the long span of human history, while the horizon—where water, air and light converge—holds the primordial beginnings of life.

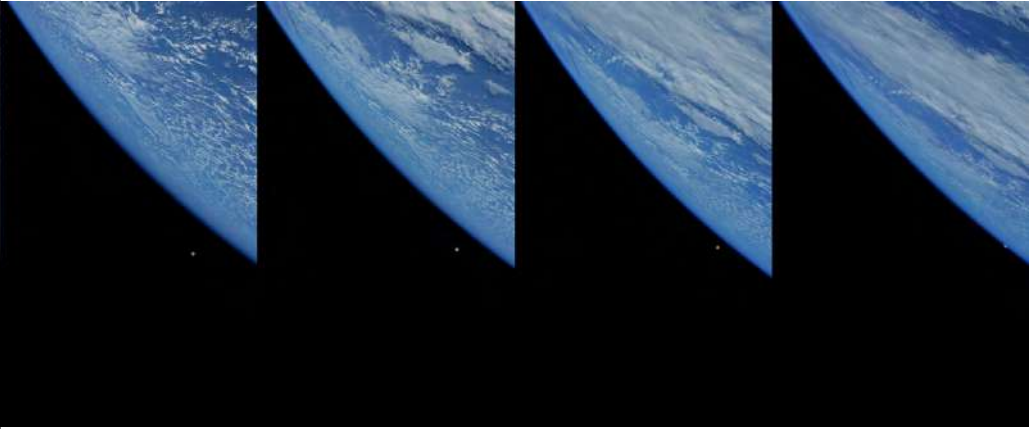


Spacescape

Spacescape. 2024.

Pigment print on washi paper,
mounted to a folding screen,
8 panels, 180 × 109 cm each;
180 × 872 cm overall.





On view for the very first time, *Spacescape* takes the form of a folding screen and depicts Earth and the Moon at multiple points in orbit, seen from the omniscient vantage of outer space. The work emerged from a collaboration with Sony, the University of Tokyo and the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA), which together launched EYE—an ultra-compact satellite with a Sony camera—into orbit in 2023.

If *Seascapes* locates its horizon on Earth, *Spacescape* relocates it to the cosmos, extending Sugimoto's inquiry into perception and scale. The work shifts the viewer from a terrestrial perspective to one shaped by satellite vision, prompting us to reconsider where and how human consciousness is situated. Through *Spacescape*, Sugimoto moves from observation towards speculation, expanding vision beyond sight alone.

About the Artist



Hiroshi Sugimoto was born in Tokyo, Japan, in 1948. He graduated from Rikkyo University, Tokyo, in 1970 and from the Art Center College of Design, Los Angeles, in 1974. He currently splits his time between Tokyo and New York.

A multidisciplinary artist, Sugimoto's practice encompasses photography, sculpture, installation, architecture, garden design, writing, calligraphy, culinary arts and performing arts. His practice bridges Eastern and Western ideologies while examining the nature of time, perception and the origins of consciousness.

In 2008, Sugimoto founded the New Material Research Laboratory, an architectural design office that incorporates new uses for traditional materials and techniques. A year later, he established the Odawara Art Foundation, a charitable non-profit organisation promoting traditional Japanese culture and performing arts. In 2017, the Odawara Art Foundation opened Enoura Observatory, a land art complex set between the foothills of Hakone Mountain and Sagami Bay.

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Hiroshi Sugimoto: Form Is Emptiness

Conceived in relation to the exhibition *Hiroshi Sugimoto: Form Is Emptiness* at the Singapore Art Museum, this catalogue invites readers into the artist's contemplative world. Through texts by the exhibition curators, Harvard scholar Dr Yukio Lippit, Mori Art Museum director Mami Kataoka and Sugimoto himself, a series of resonances within Sugimoto's photographic practice unfolds, tracing its dialogue with Buddhist philosophy and cosmology; its intersections with scientific inquiry; its mediation of Sugimoto's Japanese upbringing and aesthetic sensibilities and his formative years working in 1970s New York City; as well as its allusions to poetic and aesthetic traditions. Spanning more than five decades of work, this publication takes readers through Sugimoto's enduring investigations into consciousness, time and perception. The texts extend his artistic inquiries, mapping the interplay between form and emptiness, presence and (im)permanence.

About the Editors

Amy Cheng, Senior Curator at Singapore Art Museum.

Angelica Ong, Assistant Curator at Singapore Art Museum.

About Singapore Art Museum

Singapore Art Museum opened in 1996 as the first art museum in Singapore. Also known as SAM, we present contemporary art from a Southeast Asian perspective for artists, art lovers and the art curious in multiple venues across the island, including a new venue in the historic port area of Tanjong Pagar.

SAM is building one of the world's most important public collections of Southeast Asian contemporary art, with the aim of connecting the art and the artists to the public and future generations through exhibitions and programmes.

This exhibition brochure is published in conjunction with *Hiroshi Sugimoto: Form Is Emptiness*, an exhibition organised by the Singapore Art Museum from 29 May 2026 to 4 October 2026 at Tanjong Pagar Distripark.

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