



Hiroshi Sugimoto: Time Machine

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UCCA Center for Contemporary Art presents “Hiroshi Sugimoto: Time Machine” from March 23 to June 23, 2024. Featuring 11 series and 127 pieces from the past 50 years of the artist’s oeuvre, this comprehensive survey exhibition encompasses his signature “Seascapes,” “Theaters,” “Lightning Fields,” and “Portraits” series from early in his career, in addition to a newly created darkroom calligraphy that will be shown to the public for the first time. These works highlight the artist’s philosophical and playful inquiry into our understanding of time and memory, as well as the ambiguous nature of photography as a medium suited to both documentation and invention.

Exhibition Period:

2024.3.23 – 2024.6.23

Location:

UCCA Great Hall, Open Gallery, Atrium

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BEIJING, China—From March 23 to June 23, 2024, UCCA Center for Contemporary Art presents “Hiroshi Sugimoto: Time Machine,” the first major institutional solo exhibition of the world-renowned artist Hiroshi Sugimoto in the Chinese mainland. A holistic retrospective of Sugimoto’s career over the past 50 years, this exhibition features 11 series and 127 pieces in a systematic presentation of his works since 1974. The collection on display includes his early creations, his signature “Seascapes,” “Theaters,” “Lightning Fields,” and “Portraits” series, as well as a newly created darkroom calligraphy that will be shown to the public for the first time. “Hiroshi Sugimoto: Time Machine” is designed by Shinsoken (New Material Research Laboratory), an architectural firm co-founded by the artist. Spanning Sugimoto’s multidisciplinary practice of photography, installation, and sculpture, this exhibition highlights the artist’s innovative ideas about the properties and technologies of the photographic medium since the 1970s, as well as his philosophical and playful inquiry into our understanding of time and memory. The works intend to inspire viewers to reconsider the essence of photography and its role as a means of perceiving the world. “Hiroshi Sugimoto: Time Machine” is organized by Hayward Gallery, London in association with UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, and will travel onward from UCCA to the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney. The original London presentation was curated by Ralph Rugoff, Director of Hayward Gallery, London. The Beijing presentation is organized by UCCA curator Neil Zhang.

Press material available at

ucca.org.cn/en/press

Speaking about the Beijing exhibition, Sugimoto remarked: “This is the first time that my works are exhibited in an art museum in China. It is the most delightful to have them meet with an audience I have never imagined before. The unexpected is what encourages me the most.”



Philip Tinari, Director of UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, also commented: “UCCA is honored and delighted to present this comprehensive survey of one of the most pioneering and original voices in global contemporary art. We look forward to bringing Sugimoto’s unique aesthetic sensibility and masterful technique to the broadest possible audience, and hope to create a lasting cultural dialogue.”

Sugimoto started his career as an artist in New York in the 1970s. His works, especially the exquisite large-format film photographs, expand our understanding of this time-based medium. At the beginning of his career, photography was just celebrating its sesquicentennial, and the debate about its validity as an artistic medium had only recently been resolved. As documentary photography became a widely accepted art form, Sugimoto worked to find his own position at the intersection of East Asian culture, contemporary art, and photographic technique. In 1976, while visiting the American Museum of Natural History, Sugimoto was inspired to create his earliest works—the “Dioramas” series. He began photographing the museum’s displays in their glass cases using an old large-format camera and black-and-white film, removing them from their museum backgrounds, and creating seemingly natural yet almost uncanny scenes by making careful lighting adjustments during the long exposure time. “Adopting photography as a medium but turning away from photography,” Sugimoto transformed it from a conventional means of recording reality into a creative apparatus for reconstructing the world. His approach demonstrated the ambiguity of photography as a simultaneously documentary yet inventive medium, ingeniously challenging our fundamental presumptions regarding the medium, and reshaping our comprehension of history, time, and the essence of existence. He thus established the foundation for his unique and ever-evolving aesthetics and philosophy—led by pre-determined concepts, he often shoots in film with a large-format camera. Sugimoto repeatedly explores in-depth themes and practices from the nineteenth-century onward, including subjects such as dioramas, wax figures, and architecture. In the process, his work stretches and rearranges concepts of time, space, and light that are integral to the medium. In his later works, whether the “Theaters” series that compresses time through the long-exposure technique, or the time-traveling “Portraits” series of wax figures, Sugimoto’s focus on time always prevails—his thoughts on the past, present, and future are all condensed into a set exposure time.

The Chinese title of this exhibition echoes Sugimoto’s philosophies trifold. First, “Wú Jin” (perpetual) and “Chà Nà” (instant) are antonyms, referring to two extremes on a temporal



spectrum. Although not normally used to describe the same thing, they are deftly conjoined in Sugimoto's works. Second, as descriptors of time, these terms allude to the photographic techniques used by Sugimoto, such as the long exposure time that compresses "Wú Jin" and the "Chà Nà" captured on camera. Lastly, "Chà Nà" is a transliteration from Sanskrit. Classic Buddhist texts were largely translated into Chinese in the Tang Dynasty. Incorporating this term in the Chinese title also reflects the artist's unwavering interest in the fluidity of culture throughout history and the connecting role played by Buddhist culture across East Asia.

"Hiroshi Sugimoto: Time Machine" is designed by Shinsoken (New Material Research Laboratory), an architectural firm co-founded by the artist. The scenography integrates the open and pillarless structure of UCCA's Great Hall with stunning details from the large-format originals of Sugimoto's works, offering an immersive experience. The exhibition starts in UCCA's Open Gallery with the artist's highly visual "Lightning Fields" series, in which Sugimoto experimented with capturing the instant electric energy discharged directly on film without using a camera. This series embodies Sugimoto's ceaseless experimentation with photographic techniques, as if seeking to reproduce the Big Bang, and demonstrates the groundbreaking possibilities he has created for the future development of photography. Displayed nearby in the Atrium is his "Opticks" series—the only works in color created throughout Sugimoto's 50-year career. Inspired by Newton's experiments with prisms, Sugimoto began his own efforts to document light in 2009, devising his own prism apparatus, which refracted the incoming light beam and then reflected it onto the wall. He then captured the resulting color spectrum using an old Polaroid camera. After almost ten years of experimentation, the subtle gradient of colors in the final presentation of the large-format images is mesmerizing. By documenting these changes in color that are imperceptible to the human eye, the "Opticks" series blurs the boundary between photography and painting, enriching our perception of the real world.

Walking into the Great Hall, visitors will first see the "Theaters" series that took Sugimoto over 40 years to complete. This series began in 1976: shooting inside movie theaters, Sugimoto set the exposure time to match the length of the film, effectively compressing thousands of frames into a single still image. The brilliant white screens resulting from the long exposure embody the collectivist and spiritual aspects of movie-going. From 1976, Sugimoto continued to explore creative ways of using long exposures in a variety of cinematic and theatrical settings: the "Drive-Ins" series captures light trails of planes and stars behind outdoor screens; the "Opera House" series witnesses the grandeur and immortality of European opera houses that have withstood the test of time; and the



“Abandoned Theaters” series reveals the gradual desolation of classic American cinemas due to technological advancements. Sugimoto chose to use lead frames for his “Opera House” and “Abandoned Theaters” photographs, reflecting the passage of time depicted in the images themselves through the patination process.

Sugimoto’s “Seascapes” are photographs of seas and oceans around the world taken over four decades. These photographs feature evenly divided expanses of sea and sky unmarked by any trace of human existence, like Abstract Expressionist paintings. The photographs are dense with Sugimoto’s questioning of time, space, and the origin of human consciousness. In the “Portraits” series, by photographing waxworks at Madame Tussauds in London, Sugimoto presents famous historical figures across a span of 500 years, including Napoleon, Shakespeare, and Rembrandt. Before the arrival of photography, wax portraits were the truest means of capturing a human likeness; Sugimoto made these waxworks his subject. With his knowledge of Renaissance painting, careful lighting, and the figures enlarged by about 20 percent, Sugimoto was able to bolster the impression of portraiture in the grand historical tradition and use his camera to revivify a cast of famous characters. The artist suggests that “if this photograph now appears lifelike to you, you should reconsider what it means to be alive here and now,” anticipating that the “revived” historical figures may induce a feeling of temporal and spatial displacement in the viewers.

“Architecture,” “Conceptual Forms,” and “Mathematical Models” reveal to us the versatility of Hiroshi Sugimoto’s artistry in architecture, mathematics, sculpture, and other fields. Since 1997, Sugimoto has photographed over 90 modernist structures around the world, using his lens to reappraise the buildings designed by celebrated twentieth-century architects such as Le Corbusier. By deliberately obscuring his subjects, the artist seeks to convey a sense of the original vision of these buildings as they might have appeared in the mind’s eye of their designers. In 2002, astonished by the purity of mathematical forms, Sugimoto began to present mathematical models using photography and sculpture. In the “Conceptual Forms” series, he photographed plaster mathematical models used as teaching aids at close range, making them look like grandiose, eternal monuments. Their slightly chipped and scuffed edges convey a sense of their belonging to ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. In 2005, after photographing 24 models for the “Conceptual Forms” series, Sugimoto started to input mathematical equations into computers, carefully maneuver high-precision milling machines, and hence construct his own “Mathematical Models” out of aluminum and stainless steel. In both of these series, Sugimoto contextualizes and visualizes the unseen,



presenting stunning forms of mathematics that people have been seeking to express since the dawn of humanity.

The final series, “Sea of Buddha,” contains photographs of the 1,001 twelfth-century statues of Kannon located in the Sanjūsangen-dō Temple in Kyoto. In 1995, after seven years of application, Sugimoto was finally granted permission to shoot in the temple for three hours a day for ten days. He removed all late-medieval and early-modern embellishments, turned off the contemporary fluorescent lighting, and photographed the glowing buddhas in the first light of the sun, recreating the magnificent scene as it would have looked in the Heian period. Placed in front of the “Sea of Buddha” is the “Five Elements” series made out of ultra clear optical glass. From bottom to top, these pagoda sculptures consist of a cube, a sphere, a pyramid, a hemisphere, and a cintamani (mystic gem). Each corresponds to an element of the Five Universals in the Buddhist scriptures: earth, water, fire, wind, and emptiness. Sugimoto also embedded photographs from the “Seascapes” series into the spheres, which represent water. In addition to these, *Taima Temple 01-12* (seventh-eighth century/2008) and the rarely shown *Anti-Gravity Structure* (2007) form an installation to present photographs of the Taima-dera Temple from the Nara period, including ancient timbers from the three-story pagoda and details of its wooden structures. As the second-oldest wooden structure known in the world, its ancient timbers bear signs of supporting the building for over a thousand years. Photographs of the wooden structures shown in *Anti-Gravity Structure* depict the “masugumi” technique adopted to build the pagoda. This technique is simple but sturdy—it disperses the weight with interlocking structural elements, supporting the building against the force of gravity. Time is an inherently abstract concept that is intangible and hard to grasp, but when the viewer encounters the “Sea of Buddha” images, the “Five Elements” pagodas, and the ancient timbers, they can experience first-hand Sugimoto’s practice in concretizing time into tangible models, as well as his thoughts on the universe, the history and belief of mankind, and other monumental topics. For centuries, the pagoda and ancient temple have served as spiritual totems for people to trace their origins and those of the universe. From Sugimoto’s perspective, the magnificent sculptures of buddhas in the “Sea of Buddha” series are the twelfth-century version of the conceptual and installation art of the 1970s and 1980s. Through his works, he poses the question: “Will conceptual art survive for another 800 years?”

Finally, this exhibition presents the newly created darkroom calligraphy *Brush Impressions, Heart Sutra*, marking the debut of this piece worldwide. The work is a transcription of one of the most famous texts in Buddhism, *Heart Sutra*, at a length of 262 kanji characters. Using



developer and fixing solution as “ink,” Sugimoto wrote on expired photographic paper in his darkroom. A classic text in East Asian Buddhism, *Heart Sutra* was written in India, translated in China, and then spread to Japan. It remains part of people’s spiritual heritage all over the world today. Similar to the “Lightning Fields” series, *Brush Impressions*, *Heart Sutra* also represents Sugimoto’s exploration in a new form of photography without using a lens. Instead, he used expired photographic paper directly as his medium, allowing the audience to experience the confluence and diffusion of culture that the classic Buddhist text has conveyed and witnessed over time.

Support and Sponsorship

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Public Programs

On the opening day (Saturday, March 23, 2024), artist Hiroshi Sugimoto will present a keynote address followed by a conversation with exhibition curator Neil Zhang. Commenting on the exhibition design and the works on display, their discussion will elaborate on how Sugimoto incorporates and combines Eastern and Western cultures in his practice.

A series of programs will take place throughout the exhibition, focusing on Sugimoto’s practice and the associated historical and cultural context. Two special guided tours will help visitors further understand the curatorial concept and Sugimoto’s world of art—one led by the exhibition curator, and the other by an art researcher and translator of select chapters from Sugimoto’s autobiography. Further programs include a Kōdō workshop and a panel discussion on Noh theater. These events aim to expand the exhibition and showcase Sugimoto’s artistic expressions in other fields, as well as his involvement in and contributions to traditional culture.

For the most up-to-date event information, please check UCCA’s official website and social media platforms, including the official UCCA WeChat account.



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Publication

In conjunction with the debut of “Hiroshi Sugimoto: Time Machine,” a comprehensive retrospective exhibition of the artist’s practice, Hayward Gallery, London has published an English-language catalogue that systematically surveys Sugimoto’s oeuvre over the past five decades. The catalogue encompasses select pieces from all of Sugimoto’s major photographic series, as well as lesser-known works that fully embody his innovative and conceptually driven approach to making pictures. Also included in the catalogue are texts by a number of international artists, scholars, and curators—including James Attlee, Geoffrey Batchen, Allie Biswas, David Chipperfield, Edmund de Waal, Mami Kataoka, Ralph Rugoff, Lara Strongman, and Margaret Wertheim—offering thoughtful explorations of Sugimoto’s artistic endeavors from a variety of perspectives. *Hiroshi Sugimoto: Time Machine* is designed by Graphic Thought Facility and published by Hatje Cantz. Purchases of the English catalogue during the exhibition at UCCA will be accompanied by an exclusive booklet containing Chinese translations of all nine critical essays.

About UCCA

UCCA Center for Contemporary Art works to bring the best in art to ever wider audiences, global dialogue and cultural exchange. Opened in 2007, its Beijing flagship is registered as a non-profit museum, occupying over 10,000 square meters of regenerated factory space at the heart of the 798 Art District. UCCA also operates UCCA Dune in Beidaihe and UCCA Edge in Shanghai. In addition to its exhibitions, public programs, and research initiatives, UCCA includes a charitable foundation (UCCA Foundation), a comprehensive children’s art education program (UCCA Kids), and a platform for commercial collaborations (UCCA Lab). Consistently ranked as China’s leading art institution, UCCA has pioneered an integrated operating model distinct in the world.

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