

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### Hiroshi Sugimoto

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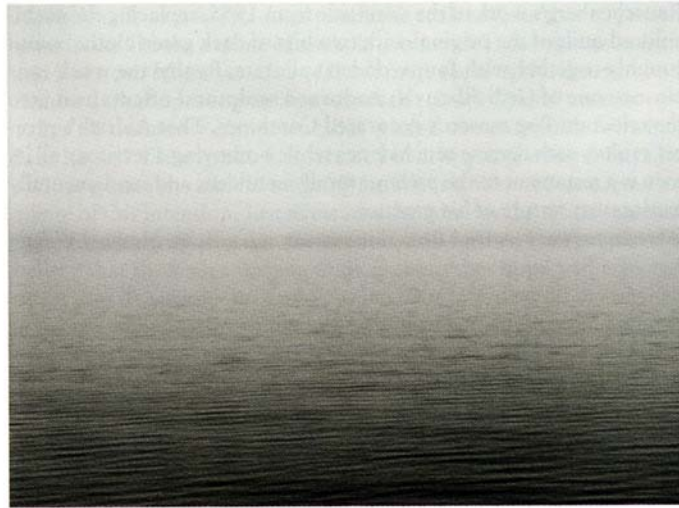
Sometimes, when looking at solemn, serious works of art, particularly religious art, I have the giggle reaction of a teenager in church: I wonder, Does this guy ever go to the *mall*? What are his feelings on *chocolate*? It helps to get over this hump if I can mentally substitute art for religion—if the artist seems to have invested in artmaking the concentration that a Christian might spend on prayer or a Buddhist on meditation, a care that rewards looking even without shared belief. Hiroshi Sugimoto is one such artist. The quality of his attention to the subjects of his photographs—most famously natural-history-museum dioramas, cinema screens, and seascapes—is long and slow, literally so in that his camera exposures can last a couple of hours. The resulting images have a kind of calm intensity, a sense of acute, precise, fine-grained photographic detail yet simultaneously of something indistinct, deindividualized, shifted in time, as if we had somehow glimpsed not the thing seen but its Platonic form.

This is true whatever Sugimoto's subject, but his views of the sea in particular invite symbolic reading. "I am not a religious person," he has said, "but I am a spiritual one," and the ocean as he shoots it suggests a window onto infinity. (So for that matter do the movie screens, which is perhaps more surprising.) When Sugimoto apparently wanted to make a kind of sacred space—this show's title, "7 Days/7 Nights," was the giveaway—it was the sea pictures he chose. The fourteen images here weren't new; only one was made in the past decade and four dated back to 1990. More, Sugimoto had put a good number of them in the same show together before—in smaller prints, at a different gallery, in 1997. So this show, bluntly, was all about the installation.

The space was divided into two long, parallel rooms, one brightly lit, one near dark, each holding seven prints. These photographs, likewise, were divided into daylight and night scenes—so, seven days, seven nights. In each room the pictures hung in a row on the long wall facing the entering visitor. From the day space, which the visitor reached first, openings at both far ends of the wall holding the large, handsomely mounted prints led through an entirely black corridor into the second room, where it took time for the eyes to adjust before one could move to the dimly spotlit images on the facing wall.

It was not a conventional sacred arrangement, this pair of mirrored spaces, implying not a central shrine or sanctum but two complementary experiences of equal weight. Yet the idea of a secular church came

Hiroshi Sugimoto,  
*Lake Superior, Eagle  
River, 2003*,  
black-and-white  
photograph, 47 x  
58 ¼". From the  
series "Seascapes,"  
1978–2003.



immediately to mind—a kind of photographic Rothko Chapel. The images, too, each either divided clearly into equal horizontal bands—sea, sky, and nothing else—or based on that structure but fogging it in effects of light or dark, recalled Mark Rothko's paintings, while the detail slowly emerging from the close-to-black surfaces of the prints in the night room brought to mind Ad Reinhardt's late black work, another arguably mystical touchstone.

All this was more than enough to pull me away from subversive thoughts of chocolate, but I couldn't help going somewhere else—to wondering whether reprinting old work at a larger scale, and showing it in a spectacular exhibition design, had a connection to the gallery as well as to the art. Sugimoto joined Gagosian a few years back, but "7 Days/7 Nights" was his first solo show in New York with the gallery, and while this grandly ambitious installation was on the one hand interpretable as the kind of thing a dealer makes possible to the artist's benefit, on the other its timing led one's mind to the relation between commerce and aesthetics. A press release insisting that the installation was Sugimoto's conception was perhaps counterproductive. In the end, though, the question had to be whether or not this stately scheme intensified the effect and power of the work, which it undoubtedly did.

—David Frankel