



ABOVE
Lightening Fields 11, 2006
 Toned gelatin silver print
 FACING PAGE
Self Portrait
 Silver gelatin print

NATALIE KING

OPTICS AND ELECTRICITY

ARTIST HIROSHI SUGIMOTO

WHETHER MAKING ULTRA-LONG EXPOSURES OF MOVIE SCREENS, PHOTOGRAPHING MUSEUM DIORAMAS OR SEASCAPES, HIROSHI SUGIMOTO HAS ALWAYS USED HIS CAMERA TO EXPLORE UNSEEN PHENOMENA – ARTEFACTS OF TIME, LIGHT, THE ELEMENTS AND HUMAN PERCEPTION. USING A 8X10" LARGE-FORMAT CAMERA, SUGIMOTO IS KNOWN FOR HIS TECHNICAL MASTERY, BUT FOR HIS LATEST PROJECT, FARADAY CAGE (2010) AT THE BIENNALE OF SYDNEY, HE TRADES OPTICS FOR ELECTRICITY, SENDING 400,000 VOLTS THROUGH FILM TO A METAL TABLE. SUGIMOTO LEFT JAPAN IN THE EARLY '70S TO STUDY IN LOS ANGELES WHERE HE ENCOUNTERED MINIMALISM AND CONCEPTUAL ART, TWO ENDURING INFLUENCES ON HIS WORK. AT DUSK, WE SAT IN THE MCA'S OFFICE IN CIRCULAR QUAY WITH THE PERFECT BACKDROP OF A WIDE EXPANSE OF SYDNEY HARBOUR.

NATALIE KING: How did you select your site for the Biennale of Sydney?

HIROSHI SUGIMOTO: When I was first invited to Sydney I was given a number of potential sites including Pier 2/3, MCA and Cockatoo Island. Then, I found this abandoned power station at Cockatoo Island. I was already working on a project where I apply electricity directly onto film. You can't think of better location for an installation than this!

Tell me about your recent photographic experiments imaging static electricity on large-format film?

I started experimenting four years ago. I don't know whether you would still call this photography or not, since no camera and no lens was used, but everything was done in the darkroom in my New York studio. I place film onto huge metal sheets on top of a table and then, using 400,000 voltage generator connected to a discharge wand, I charge the air

between the wand and the surface of the film, it takes two to five minutes.

The results are like evanescent tendrils of forked lightning with subtle feathering. Do you have control over the outcome?

I have to risk my life to do this! After four years, I can't control the shape of the sparks but I can feel how much energy is being charged in the air. The hair on my skin stands up. I come close with my wand to the surface. Then, at a certain point, the charge is released onto the film making these audible sparks. Bang! Bang!

I enjoyed the electrical sound component of your installation which added another, sonic dimension to your work. The spark of electricity is ambient but terrifying. When you were making this work, were you looking back at Walter De Maria's installation of lightning rods in Western New Mexico?







I THINK THE BEAUTY OF DISTANCE IS LIKE A TIME CONCEPT AS WELL. MY ART IS ALWAYS ASSOCIATED WITH THE PASSAGE OF TIME. DISTANCE MEANS PHYSICAL LOCATIONS BUT THIS THEME - THE BEAUTY OF DISTANCE - IS VERY POETIC.

Of course! I named my series the same title as *Lightning Field*, but with a 's' at the end because you can see more sparks with mine. If you go to Walter De Maria's field, you seldom see lightning. He dedicated his work to nature, but mine is more about science. I artificially create a lightning field on film and then make a record. Sometimes I cut the film as a negative and then make prints. There's only one print being shown here. It's the halo of the Thunder God. Photography is always the baby of science but art and science all came from the same origin.

Is that why you incorporated a shrine element with a 13th Century sculpture of Raijin, the Japanese God of Thunder, at the top of a staircase?

Yes. People used to believe that thunder was a message from God and for Aboriginals, the story is quite similar about snakes and serpents. We have the same kind of stories. In Asian myths, a serpent always appears from chaos to control culture; a snake is a symbol of controlling nature.

How did you make that connection with the Yolngu people from North-Eastern Arnhem Land who are performing a ceremony in your installation?

I proposed a performance to David Elliott. I am interested in tracing the origin of consciousness. It's quite meaningful that Yolngu people will perform at my site.

What are your thoughts on the traumatic history of Cockatoo Island as a penal colony, a place for wayward children? The place is so tough and remote.

It's kind of spooky, like Madame Tussauds' Chamber of Horror.

FACING PAGE
Lightening Fields
128, 2009
From installation
Faraday Cage, 2010
Silver gelatin print
149.4 x 119.4cm

ABOVE
From installation
Faraday Cage, 2010
Sydney Biennale,
Cockatoo Island

Yet your work is so precise, minimal and pristine. How do you feel about showing in a former penal colony in such a derelict and rugged location?

I like history and history always has a dark side. I found out that during the Second World War, a Japanese submarine came to attack this island.

I was reading David Elliott's catalogue essay and he wrote about your work in relation to the 'beauty of distance'. How do you respond to this theme?

I think the beauty of distance is like a time concept as well. My art is always associated with the passage of time. Distance means physical locations but this theme - the beauty of distance - is very poetic.

In a conversation between you and the architect, Tadao Ando, you were critical of architectural and museum spaces, saying that 'there are a lot of things about architectural space designed by famous architects I find extremely difficult to use.'

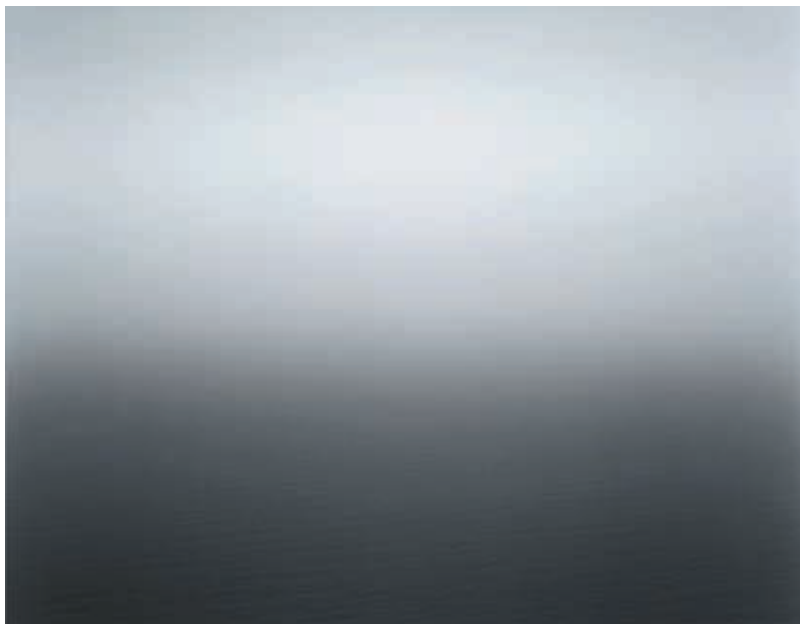
It's a kind of architect ego in most cases, not thinking of artists and how they use space.

Is that why you often modify spaces?

I have to otherwise it's not useful. I like conventional spaces, not too ambitious. There are many spaces and piers on Cockatoo Island so art shouldn't be limited to the inside of museum boxes. It's nice to be free of the museum.

Tell me about the New Material Research Lab that you established in 2008.

That's my architecture firm in Tokyo. I just finished the Izu Photo Museum. With museum shows, I really have to study the space and sometimes I have to make my own space within the museum, which



ABOVE
Aegean Sea,
Pilion, 1990
 Gelatin silver print
 119.2 x 149.2cm



ABOVE RIGHT
Bass Strait,
Table Cape, 1997
 Gelatin silver print
 119.2 x 149.2cm

I AM ALSO PROPOSING A 100 METRE ONE-LANE SWIMMING POOL ON A SMALL ISLAND. YOU CAN SWIM INTO THE SUNRISE AND SUNSET. SOMEHOW IT'S RELATED TO ANCIENT RELIGIONS OF WASHING IN THE SUN; A KIND OF WATER PURIFICATION CEREMONY ROOTED IN SHINTOISM. THE ANCIENT RITUAL OF REVIVAL IS ONE OF MY THEMES YET AT THE SAME TIME, MY ARCHITECTURE PRACTICE WILL MAKE A CONCRETE BOX OF 100 METRES.

involves technical and architectural knowledge, but I'm not a licensed architect. I am working on the lobby of a large building in central Tokyo but it hasn't been announced yet. I am also proposing a 100 metre one-lane swimming pool on a small island. You can swim into the sunrise and sunset. Somehow it's related to ancient religions of washing in the sun; a kind of water purification ceremony rooted in Shintoism. The ancient ritual of revival is one of my themes yet at the same time, my architecture practice will make a concrete box of 100 metres.

Does the swimming pool relate to your interest in the sea, water and immersion?

Water is very important.

One of your Seascapes was on the cover of a U2 album.

Bono invited me to his villa in the South of France with sea frontage. I didn't know Bono at all, until one day I was put into his private jet by mutual friends. We landed in Nice airport and I was taken to his residence. He asked me whether I can photograph his sea.

So he wanted to control the vista. What did you say?

Unfortunately 'no'. As an artist I never do commercial photography. Since he asked me, then I had to say no. Eventually he chose an existing Seascape photographed at Lake Constance between Switzerland, Austria, Germany. He loves my Seascapes and we became good friends.

Are the Seascapes ongoing?

No, I stopped after 9/11. Airport security got tight and it became impossible to pass through security without x-raying my film. I've been forced to stop. Alternatively, I came up with lightning experiments. I can do everything by myself in the darkness. I wish I could do more Seascapes, but coastal Japan is over-developed with many boats and yachts, so you can't get open vistas. I always photograph from land looking out at the sea. I have purchased sea front land about an hour and a half drive from Tokyo to establish my own art foundation. When I get too old and unable to move, then I can sit there

and photograph the seascapes.

My Foundation - Odawara Art Foundation - is not far from Tokyo, near Mt Fuji, and where there are many volcanos and the mountain is so steep so it cannot be developed. It's at the tip of the peninsula and 100 metres up high from the sea level and facing a big bay. It's very, very quiet and calm.

How do you mix life in New York since the '70s and this serene environment?

My production base is in New York. I have seven staff working all the time. We start mixing chemicals at 9.30am and at 10 o'clock we work on this photographic sparking process.

It sounds like a conventional atelier. Do you work with digital?

No, I only work in traditional silver gelatin prints.

How old were you when you first started taking photos?

When I was 12 years old I was given a serious medium-format camera because my father bought it but he abandoned it. It was too difficult to use. My father was a cosmetics merchant. Then, I set up my dark room probably the same year. It was just one of my hobbies and then I became a train-spotter in order to take photos of locomotives.

Were you interested from an early age in moving objects passing through space?

A locomotive is a 19th century kind of machine, a solid machine. I was fascinated to make a photographic record. I became a self-taught photographer.

Last year you won the Praemium Imperiale, like the Japanese Nobel Prize for artists, in the category of painting.

There is no photography category. It's part of painting which is flat art. Richard Long was given the sculpture award, Zaha Hadid for architecture, Tom Stoppard for theatre and then Alfred Brendel for music.

I wanted to ask you about life in New York in the 1970s?

It was free sex and drugs so I took advantage of it. Andy Warhol and those kinds of people were around - it was very, very exciting and free spirited. I was a hippy with long hair. I came in 1974 from California where I spent four years. I left Japan in 1970, but I was just a \$5 a day backpacker travelling around the world. I wanted to stay in California as something was actually going on. Counter-culture, flower children movement, and I thought something new, something interesting, something serious was going on. I decided to stay but I needed a visa so I became a student. It's like a camouflage student, not a serious student. Art school was the easiest school to enrol and I was already a self-taught photographer so it was easy. I met Yoko Ono in the mid-'70s. She invited me to play mah-jong at her house. At that time John Lennon was in love with a Korean girl so she was alone. There was a white grand piano and a tantric Buddhist altar there. Yoko Ono was like a Shinto priest - very strange and mysterious looking.

Where did you find the 13th century deity figure in your installation? I read that you deal in antiques.

Yes, in New York since the '80s in Soho, West Broadway. My studio was

connected to the back of my antique shop.

What's your favourite antiquity object?

Japanese religious art and Buddhist art. They are very rare. Because of my curiosity for esoteric artefacts and study of Japanese spirituality, the most interesting objects are 13th Century. This is part of my self-taught program of Japanese history that helps to establish my thinking. I just keep buying art objects - ancient Japanese and 8th century objects and Buddhist altars.

It's fascinating that your private collection, your own obsession is then integrated into your work. Can you tell me about the title Faraday Cage?

Michael Faraday invented this cage, or rather discovered the phenomenon, that when an electrostatic field is applied to a cage, the charge on the inside is cancelled out, forming an electrical barrier. So I'm recreating this type of cage that he first tested in the 19th Century to study electrical fields. I put the generator together myself. People may think that I'm a mad scientist.

BELOW
Boden Sea, Uttwil, 1993
Gelatin silver print
119.2 x 149.2cm

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