

HIROSHI SUGIMOTO

PAST TENSE

Hiroshi Sugimoto began his ongoing photographic series “Dioramas” in the mid-1970s, and its images, which capture lifelike habitat displays in museums, continue to fascinate in their liminal existence between nature photography and still life, reality and pretense. Born in Tokyo in 1948, Sugimoto moved to New York in 1974 and started the series after his first visit to the American Museum of Natural History two years later. He was intrigued by the elaborate details and sense of veracity in its habitat exhibits, but also by the fact that the wild animals were not real. The posturing of truth in these displays paralleled the medium of photography itself. These dioramic images would go on to inform much of Sugimoto’s career to date and his exploration of the photographic medium. “Past Tense,” at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, included these “Dioramas” along with the artist’s portraits of wax models and his photogenic drawings inspired by the pioneer of photographic technology, William Henry Fox Talbot (1800–77).

Working almost exclusively with a traditional large-format camera, and using black-and-white film and the gelatin silver process, Sugimoto presents placid images that subtly but consciously question history and expand the conventions of photography. Commissioned in 1999 by the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin, Sugimoto embarked on a series capturing statues of historical figures—including Napoleon Bonaparte and Diana, Princess of Wales—housed within the Madame Tussauds wax museum in London. Every detail of the intricate wax effigies was captured using a prolonged nine-minute exposure. Out of this body of work, the Getty presented *Henry VIII* (1999), in which the rich tonal quality of the gelatin silver print highlights the subject’s sumptuous attire—from the feathered flat cap and velvet mantle to the embroidered doublet and jewel-encrusted gold accessories. Also on view was *Queen Victoria* (1999), whose frontal positioning accentuates her stern visage and unending, unnerving gaze. The recording of history is intricately layered in this project: the wax figure of Henry VIII is modeled after copies of a lost portrait by 16th-century German artist Hans Holbein the Younger; the wax figure of Queen Victoria is based on a photograph of the monarch at around the time of her Diamond Jubilee in 1897. At almost two meters in height, these three-quarter-length portraits by Sugimoto are beguiling not only in their size and haunting human presence, but in their conflation of chronology.

While the wax portraits encompass multiple points in history, the “Dioramas” convey a suspension of time. For Sugimoto, a collector of small archaeological fossils, both the habitat exhibits at natural history museums and his photography are akin to the process of



fossilization—each is an attempt to contain and capture something that, through its very existence, is in motion and evolving. Furthermore, the relationship between photography and dioramas is salient: the diorama was first introduced in 1822 by Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre (1787–1851), the inventor of an early photographic process called the daguerreotype. At the Getty exhibition, selections from “Dioramas” included *Manatee* (1994), in which a manatee calf nuzzles its mother while floating through light-dappled, rippling water. Another photograph was *Polar Bear* (1976), which shows the fierce white predator standing over its kill, a bloodied seal. The presence of motion and life pervades these photographs of immobile museum tableaux.

The show’s conclusion paid homage to William Henry Fox Talbot, the inventor of the calotype, which, with its capacity for multiple negatives, was an improvement on the daguerreotype. In the 1830s, Talbot pioneered a method in which images could be imprinted on salted writing paper, which he called “photogenic drawings.” In 2007, Sugimoto photographed and enlarged Talbot’s photogenic drawings, adding subtle tones of color to mimic the original silver nitrate and salt prints. Like the “Dioramas,” these large silhouettes of museum busts and fern leaves reference the process of fossilizing and, moreover, have the noble appearance of age-addled, petrified relics. With the three diverse but coherent bodies of work that were exhibited at the Getty, Sugimoto demonstrated that black-and-white photography is anything but simple, and that the infinite gradations between these two hues are what make the monochromatic medium remarkable.

JENNIFER S. LI

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Polar Bear

1976

Gelatin silver print, 42.1 x 54.6 cm.

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