

PRESS RELEASE

## Hiroshi Sugimoto—Playing with Fire

2023.9.5 (Tue) – 10.27 (Fri)



Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Brush Impression 0884*, 2023

**Brush Impression**

When I finally returned to my New York studio after the three-year-long disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic, I discovered that I was in possession of a large amount of photographic paper which had passed its expiry date. Rather like fresh food, this special paper for photographic printing deteriorates over time. The defining feature of my prints is the subtle expression of different shades, something that is very hard to achieve with photographic paper that is even slightly degraded. What I therefore did was to flip my thinking, Copernicus-style. My idea was not to accept deterioration as deterioration per se but to treat it as a form of beautification instead. When ancient works of art are exposed to the operations of time, deterioration usually causes an aesthetic improvement. The white of photographic paper looks rather like albumenized paper, while black tones acquire a certain softness on it. I decided to bring the calligraphy skills I had mastered during three years of enforced leisure into the dark room. In the dim room suffused with pale orange light, I spread out a sheet of photographic paper then dunk my brush into developer. In the darkness, I gropingly draw the characters which I cannot actually see. Then, just for a fleeting moment, I expose the paper to a burst of light like a flash. Just the areas which are touched by the brush metamorphose into Japanese characters and float to the surface in black.

Having shown that it was possible to do calligraphy using developer, I then tried dipping my brush in photographic fixer. I plied my brush surrounded by the stench of acid; this time it was white characters appearing on a jet-black ground. As I wrote, I tried to concentrate on the invisible characters, focusing my mind on the place where the meaning of the characters would manifest itself.

Protean and shapeshifting, fire is an extraordinary thing. Gaze at it and you will feel yourself being drawn into another world. This planet of ours was originally born from the fires of the sun. A blazing flame is at once a sacrament of birth and an echo of a burned-out death. Sometimes, as here, the burning flame flings out its arms and legs to be transcribed as the kanji character for fire.

Hiroshi Sugimoto

Gallery Koyanagi is pleased to announce the solo exhibition by Hiroshi Sugimoto, "Playing with Fire," from Tuesday, September 5th to Friday, October 27th, 2023. This exhibition will feature Sugimoto's latest works from the series "Brush Impression," with a rich variety of the character of *Fire*. In this series, Sugimoto directly painted *kanji*, ideographs of the Chinese characters, onto the light-sensitive paper with an ink brush imbued with photographic chemicals.

As a child, I used to play with fire. I had a vague notion that fire was dangerous, but the way adults always made a fuss whenever they found me playing with it only encouraged me to do so more. There was a girl in the neighborhood who sold matches. She was always egging on the neighborhood bad boys to commit acts of mischief.

As an adolescent, I played with fire. Under pressure from mysterious and hard-to-understand impulses, my reason shattered into tiny pieces in a doomed struggle to figure out what was happening to me.

As a student, I played with fire. With the student movement at full pelt, Molotov cocktails sparked our young souls. When the riot police charged, I fled for my life. I never knew I could run so fast.

As a middle-aged man, I played with fire. Soon I came to regret it and devised a different kind of fire play. Late at night, I lit a Japanese candle. It gutted and flared although there was no wind. I used a box camera to capture the entirety of the candle's life. It was fleeting and fugitive.

As an old man, I played with fire. Knowing all too well that I did not have long left, I resolved to look deep into the fire. In my mind, the flames assumed the shape of the Japanese character for fire. I used fixer to draw the character on photographic paper with a brush. I always knew that photography was a tough business; now, after so much time and somewhat to my own surprise, I have discovered that it is also a means of manifesting truth.

Hiroshi Sugimoto

The genesis of this series is rooted in Sugimoto's return to his New York studio after the three-year absence due to the Covid-19 pandemic, encountering a plethora of photographic paper that had reached its expiration date. His work does not allow the usage of deteriorated photographic paper, but turning to the allure of antiquities which aesthetics matures with the passage of time, Sugimoto ingeniously transformed this paper into his canvas. Sugimoto brought his calligraphy skills into the darkroom, wielding an ink brush imbued with developer and photographic fixer, writing his calligraphy onto the photographic paper, guided by his physical sense rather than sight.

This exhibition stands as an exploration of *Fire*, a theme that has captivated Sugimoto's fascination since his formative years. Described by the artist as "A blazing flame is at once a sacrament of birth and an echo of a burned-out death," Sugimoto captured the passage of time through the journey of a candlelit flame, encapsulated in a single photograph. In this exhibition, Sugimoto further extends his fascination by continuously writing numerous

*Fire* characters, almost as if he is continuing to play with *Fire* in the dimly lit darkroom. Infused with diverse textures brought forth by an array of brushes, the letter embodies its state of, at times, “burning flame flings out its arms and legs”. Instant exposure to light imbues these letters with shades of light pink and red, transforming the gallery space into a tapestry of fiery hues. The characters of *Flames* and *Ashes* are secretly hidden in between, telling stories of various state of *Fire* that at times furiously burn with blazing flames and gently transforms into the tranquility of ashes.

Sugimoto has been endeavoring to transform his own interpretation of what already “exists” and develop it into a new form of expression. He refers to his method as *Honkadori*, a traditional technique in *waka* poetry involving allusion to an older poem. Rooted in this philosophy, Sugimoto has expanded *Honkadori* in his work. Commencing with *Rinsho*, a calligraphic method of practice used to imitate classical masterpieces, he delves even deeper by unraveling the origins of characters and transcribing inherent symbol of *Fire* itself. His creative odyssey draws inspiration from the ancient cuneiform script, Egyptian hieroglyphs from the “Book of the Dead,” and the sacred words inscribed on the “*Ofudesaki*” written by Nao Deguchi, a guru of the *Oomoto* religion. This journey culminates in a series that includes the matching of the phonetic “a-i-u-e-o” to the ideographic Chinese characters creating a poetic composition.

The Shoto Museum of Art, Shibuya, will hold a solo exhibition, “Hiroshi Sugimoto Honkadori Azumakudari” from Saturday, September 16th to Sunday, November 12th, 2023, featuring a series of works including the above-mentioned *Honkadori* in calligraphy.

The Hayward Gallery in London will host a large scale, major retrospective of Sugimoto, “Hiroshi Sugimoto: Time Machine,” from Wednesday, October 11th, 2023, to Sunday, January 7th, 2024.

On the first day of the exhibition, Sugimoto will be at Gallery Koyanagi on the 5th of September, from 5 to 7p.m. With great anticipation, we await your presence.

For further inquiries, kindly reach out to us at [mail@gallerykoyanagi.com](mailto:mail@gallerykoyanagi.com)

Gallery Koyanagi

Press images

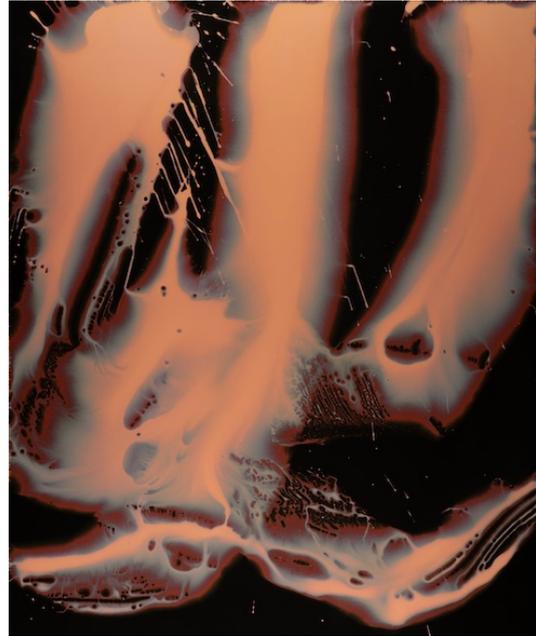
Notes for reproduction:

- Photograph must be credited with the caption and credit line exactly as specified below.
  - Image must not be cropped, edited or overlaid with texts/objects in any way.
  - The provided digital image must be destroyed after the use.
- 



[Caption]

Hiroshi Sugimoto  
*Brush Impression 0884*  
2023  
gelatin silver print



Hiroshi Sugimoto  
*Brush Impression 0827*  
2023  
gelatin silver print

[Credit Line]

© Hiroshi Sugimoto / Courtesy of Gallery Koyanagi

Information

Exhibition title: Playing with Fire

Exhibition dates: Tuesday, September 5 – Friday, October 27, 2023

Opening hours: 12:00 – 19:00

Closed on Sundays, Mondays and National Holidays

Address:

Gallery Koyanagi

Koyanagi Bldg. 9F, 1-7-5 Ginza, Chuo-ku,

Tokyo 104-0061, JAPAN

Access:

Tokyo Metro: Ginza, Hibiya, and Marunouchi line Ginza Station, Exit A9/

Yurakucho line Ginza 1-Chome Station, Exit 7

Tel.+81-(0)3-3561-1896 / Fax.+81-(0)3-3563-3236

Email: [mail@gallerykoyanagi.com](mailto:mail@gallerykoyanagi.com)

Website: <http://www.gallerykoyanagi.com>

Press inquiry: please contact us to [mail@gallerykoyanagi.com](mailto:mail@gallerykoyanagi.com) for further information.

## HIROSHI SUGIMOTO

Born in Tokyo in 1948, Hiroshi Sugimoto moved to the United States in 1970 to study photography. A multi-disciplinary artist, Sugimoto works in photography, sculpture, installation, performing arts, architecture, gardening, and gastronomy. His art bridges Eastern and Western ideologies while examining the nature of time, perception, and the origins of consciousness. His photographic series include Dioramas, Theaters, Seascapes, Architecture, Portraits, Conceptual Forms, and Lightning Fields, among others. In 2008 he established the architecture firm New Material Research Laboratory and in 2009 he founded Odawara Art Foundation, a charitable nonprofit organization to promote traditional Japanese performing arts and culture. He has deep knowledge about traditional performing arts. Sugimoto Bunraku “Sonezaki Shinju: the Love Suicides at Sonezaki” received high acclaim nationally and internationally. In the fall of 2019, *At the Hawk’s Well*, directed by Sugimoto, was featured as one of the opening programs of the season at The National Opera of Paris.

Sugimoto’s art works have been exhibited around the world and are in numerous public collections including The Guggenheim, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York; the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.; the National Gallery and the Tate Gallery in London; and the National Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo. Sugimoto is the recipient of the Hasselblad Foundation International Award in Photography in 2001. He was awarded the 21st Praemium Imperiale in 2009, Medal with Purple Ribbon by the Japanese government in 2010, and conferred the Officier dans l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (The Order of Arts and Letters) by the French government in 2013, the Isamu Noguchi Award in 2014, and honored as a Person of Cultural Merit by the Japanese government in 2017. In 2023, he was elected as a member of the Japan Art Academy.

---

1948	Born in Tokyo, Japan
1970	Graduated from Saint Paul’s University, Tokyo
1974	Graduated from Art Center College of Design, Los Angeles
1974	Moved to New York

Lives and works in Tokyo and New York

Grant/Award/Honor

2023	Member of the Japan Art Academy, Tokyo
2018	National Arts Club Medal of Honor in Photography, New York
2017	Person of Cultural Merit, Tokyo The Royal Photographic Society, Centenary Medal, London
2014	Isamu Noguchi Award, New York
2013	Officier de L’ordre des Arts et des Lettres, Paris
2010	The Medal with Purple Ribbon, Japan
2009	Praemium Imperiale in Honor of Prince Takamatsu, Painting category, Tokyo
2006	PHotoEspaña Prize, Madrid, Spain
2001	Hasselblad Foundation International Award in Photography, Göteborg, Sweden
2000	Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts, Parsons School of Design, New School University, New York
1999	Glen Dimplex Award, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin International Center of Photography, Fifteenth Annual Infinity Award for Art, New York

GALLERY KOYANAGI

- 1988 Mainichi Art Prize, Tokyo  
 1982 National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C.  
 1980 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, New York  
 1977 C.A.P.S. (Creative Arts Public Service) Fellowship, New York

Selected Solo Exhibition

- 2023 Hiroshi Sugimoto: Time Machine, Hayward Gallery, London, UK  
 Hiroshi Sugimoto Honkadori Azumakudari, The Shoto Museum of Art, Tokyo, Japan  
 Playing with Fire, Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo, Japan
- 2022 Special exhibition: The Descent of Kasuga Spirit, Kasugataisha Museum, Nara, Japan  
 Hiroshi Sugimoto Honkadori, Himeji City Museum of Art, Hyogo, Japan  
 OPERA HOUSE, Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo, Japan  
 Journey of the Kasuga spirit, Kanagawa Prefectural Kanazawa-Bunko Museum, Kanagawa, Japan
- 2021 OPTICKS, Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo, Japan
- 2020 HYOGU - Frame of Japan, The Hosomi Museum Kyoto, Kyoto, Japan  
 Hiroshi Sugimoto - Post Vitam, Higashiyama Cube, Kyoto City KYOCERA Museum of Art, Kyoto, Japan  
 Past Presence, Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo, Japan
- 2019 Past Presence, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, USA
- 2018 Quatro Ragazzi: Hopes and Illusions of the Momoyama Renaissance - Europe through the Eyes of Hiroshi Sugimoto and the Tensho Embassy, Nagasaki Prefectural Art Museum, Japan  
 Hiroshi Sugimoto, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, Israel  
 SUGIMOTO VERSAILLES: Surface of Revolution, The Estate of Trianon, Palace of Versailles, Versailles, France  
 Nobunaga and Quattro Ragazzi: Hopes and Illusions of Momoyama Renaissance – Europe through the eyes of Hiroshi Sugimoto and the Tensho Embassy, MOA Museum of Art, Shizuoka, Japan  
 Hiroshi Sugimoto: Still Life, Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels, Belgium
- 2017 Gates of Paradise, Japan Society, New York, USA  
 Le Notti Bianche, Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Torino, Switzerland
- 2016 Lost Human Genetic Archive, Tokyo Photographic Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan
- 2015 Art and Leisure, Chiba City Museum of Art, Chiba, Japan/ Hosomi Museum, Kyoto, Japan(2016)  
 Past and Present in Three Parts, Chiba City Museum of Art, Chiba, Japan/ Multimedia Art Museum, Moscow, Russia(2016) / Musée des Beaux-Arts, Le Locle, Switzerland(2016)
- 2014 ON THE BEACH, Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo, Japan  
 Aujourd'hui, le monde est mort [Lost Human Genetic Archive], Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France  
 Hiroshi Sugimoto: Past Tense, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, USA
- 2013 Hiroshi Sugimoto, Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul, South Korea
- 2012 Five Elements, Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo, Japan  
 From Naked to Clothed, Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan
- 2011 Hiroshi Sugimoto ORIGINS OF ART | Architecture, Marugame Genichiro-Inokuma Museum of Contemporary Art, Kagawa, Japan
- 2009 Hiroshi Sugimoto: Nature of Light, IZU PHOTO MUSEUM, Shizuoka, Japan  
 Lightning Fields, Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo, Japan

G A L L E R Y                      K O Y A N A G I

- 2008      History of History, 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Ishikawa, Japan/ The National Museum of Art, Osaka, Japan(2009)
- 2007      Leakage of light, Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo, Japan  
Hiroshi Sugimoto, K20 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Dusseldorf, Germany/ Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Germany(2008)
- 2006      Art Capturing, Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo, Japan  
Mathematical Forms, L'atelier Brancusi, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France
- 2005      History of History, Japan Society Gallery, New York, USA  
Hiroshi Sugimoto: End of Time, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan/ Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., USA(2006)
- 2004      Étant donné: Le Grand Verre, Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, France
- 2003      Hiroshi Sugimoto, Serpentine Galleries, London, UK  
Hiroshi Sugimoto: L'histoire de l'histoire, Maison Hermès Forum, Tokyo, Japan  
ARCHITECTURE, Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo, Japan  
Hiroshi Sugimoto: Architecture, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois, USA
- 2001      Hiroshi Sugimoto: The Architecture of Time, Kunsthau Bregenz, Austria  
Portraits, Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo, Japan
- 2000      Hiroshi Sugimoto, Museo de Arte Contemporaneo Internacional Rufino Tamayo, Mexico City, Mexico  
Hiroshi Sugimoto: The Architecture Series, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, California, USA  
Sugimoto: Portraits, Deutsche Guggenheim Museum, Berlin/ Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain/ Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum SoHo, New York, USA
- 1999      In Praise of Shadows, Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo, Japan
- 1998      Modernism, Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo, Japan
- 1997      Twice as Infinity, Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo, Japan
- 1996      Hiroshi Sugimoto—Photographies, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden  
Motion Picture, Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo, Japan
- 1995      Sugimoto, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA/ Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, USA(1996)/ Hara Museum Arc, Gunma, Japan(1996)/ Akron Art Museum, Akron, Ohio, USA(1997)  
Sill Life, Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo, Japan  
Hiroshi Sugimoto: Time Exposed, Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland
- 1994      Hiroshi Sugimoto, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, California, USA
- 1992      Hiroshi Sugimoto: Time Exposed, CAPC Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, France
- 1991      Hiroshi Sugimoto: Time Exposed, Sagacho Exhibit Space and IBM Courtyard, Tokyo, Japan
- 1989      Hiroshi Sugimoto: Dioramas, Theaters, Seascapes, National Museum of Art, Osaka, Japan
- 1988      Hiroshi Sugimoto, Sagacho Exhibit Space and Zeit-Foto Salon, Tokyo, Japan  
Hiroshi Sugimoto, Sonnabend Gallery, New York, USA
- 1977      Hiroshi Sugimoto, Minami Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

Selected Group Exhibition

- 2023      WORLD CLASSROOM: Contemporary Art through School Subjects, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan  
Shin Japanese Painting: Revolutionary Nihonga, Pola Museum of Art, Kanagawa, Japan

G A L L E R Y                      K O Y A N A G I

- 2020      STARS: Six Contemporary Artists from Japan to the World, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan
- 2017      What Absence Is Made Of, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C., USA .
- 2015      Simple Forms: Contemplating Beauty, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan
- 2014      Simple Shapes, Centre Pompidou-Metz, France
- 2012      Phantoms of Asia, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, California, USA
- 2011      Yokohama 2011 International Triennale of contemporary Art, Kanagawa, Japan
- 2010      17th Biennale of Sydney, Australia  
Sexuality and Transcendence, PinchukArtCentre, Kiev, Ukraina
- 2009      Mapping the Studio, Punta Della Dogana, Venice, Italy  
The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989, Solomon R. Guggenheim  
Museum, New York, USA
- 2008      Reality Check: Truth and Illusion in Contemporary Photography, Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
New York, USA  
Photography on Photography: Reflections on the Medium since 1960, Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
New York, USA
- 2004      Singular Forms (Sometimes Repeated): Art from 1951 to the Present, Solomon R. Guggenheim  
Museum, New York, USA
- 2003      Happiness: A Survival Guide for Art and Life, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan  
The History of Japanese Photography, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas, USA / Cleveland  
Museum of Art, Ohio, USA
- 2002      Moving Pictures, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA
- 2001      Yokohama 2001 International Triennale of contemporary Art, Kanagawa, Japan
- 2000      Gendai: Japanese Contemporary Art – Between the Body and Space, Center for Contemporary Art,  
Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, Poland  
Expanding Horizons: Landscape Photographs from the Whitney Museum of American Art,  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA
- 1999      Regarding Beauty: A View of the Late Twentieth Century, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture  
Garden, Washington D.C., USA  
The Third Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Brisbane, Australia  
The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect, Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA
- 1998      At the End of the Century: One Hundred Years of Architecture, Museum of Contemporary Art  
Tokyo, Japan / Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, California, USA
- 1997      In Visible Light: Photography and Classification in Art, Science and the Everyday, Modern Art  
Oxford, UK
- 1996      Tenth Biennale of Sydney, Australia  
Prospect 96: Photographie in der Gegenwartskunst, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Schirn Kunsthalle,  
Frankfurt am Main, Germany  
By Night, Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, France
- 1995      Album: De fotoverzameling van Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam (Album: the  
Photographic Collection of Museum Boymans van-Beuningen Rotterdam), Museum Boijmans Van  
Beuningen Rotterdam, Netherlands  
Art in Japan Today: 1985-1995, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan
- 1994      Photography and Beyond in Japan: Space, Time and Memory, Hara Museum of Art, Tokyo, Japan

G A L L E R Y      K O Y A N A G I

- Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky, Yokohama Museum of Art, Kanagawa, Japan/  
Guggenheim Museum Soho, New York, USA/ San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, USA
- 1993 Das 21. Jahrhundert / The 21st Century, Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland
- 1992 Réflexions Voilées (Hidden Reflections), Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel
- 1991 Carnegie International 1991, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pennsylvania, USA
- A Cabinet of Signs: Contemporary Art from Post-modern Japan, Tate Gallery Liverpool, UK
- 1990 Japanische Kunst der Achtziger Jahre, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt am Main, Germany
- The Past and the Present of Photography, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, Japan
- 1987 Contemporary Japanese Art in America (I): Arita, Nakagawa, Sugimoto, Japan Society Gallery, New York, USA
- 1978 Recent Acquisitions, Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA