

Art in America

EXHIBITION REVIEWS



View of Hiroshi Sugimoto's exhibition "The Day After," 2010; at Pace.

NEW YORK

HIROSHI SUGIMOTO

PACE

In winter 2009, Gagosian Gallery elevated Hiroshi Sugimoto's "Seascape" series (1987-96) to iconic status with a dramatic installation evoking a sacred space on the order of the Rothko Chapel. This fall, newly representing Sugimoto, another gallery of means, Pace, offered him the opportunity to push this theatrical tendency in another direction, as the artist transformed Pace's 22nd Street space into a solemn Hall of Science—the kind in which grand dioramas, demonstrations and other exhibits offer the public lessons in matters as lofty as creation itself.

A small antechamber set the tone of instructive awe, displaying an ancient meteor fragment and an exquisite fossil (nature's photography, in a way), both from the artist's collection, alongside several images of dinosaurs in landscapes from his ongoing "Diorama" series (begun 1976). Beyond, in a central, naturally lit gallery, were seven "Seascapes," representing yet another victory lap for these acclaimed pictures. But the star was the recent (2009-10) "Lightning Field" series (the relationship to Walter De Maria is in more than title alone), displayed in the other two rooms. These are spectacular cameraless photographs resulting from the direct exposure of sensitized paper to electricity produced by a Van der Graaf generator and other equipment constructed for this sole purpose.

A pair of giant, 47-foot-long diptychs showing electric bolts within a charged atmosphere occupied two entire walls of one

room. In *Lightning Fields Composed 011*, a repeated "strike" resembles a bleached white tree arcing through a dark field of barely perceptible feathery tendrils of light. These lyrical expanses almost summoned an accompanying soundtrack; I recalled the prologue to Disney's *Fantasia* (1940), set to Bach's "Toccatina and Fugue in D Minor," with Oskar Fischinger's stylized, abstract animations.

The crackling sound one periodically heard was produced by a theatrically lit contraption (*Faraday Cage/Bachelor Machine*, 2010) near the front desk. Composed of a Tesla coil electric generator, birdcage and found objects, it felt vaguely menacing, though also not unlike a horror movie prop. Here Sugimoto evokes science in the Romantic era, as thrillingly described in Richard Holmes's book *The Age of Wonder* (2008): medical and astronomical experiments (not to mention the discovery of electricity), possessing both beauty and terror. Also on view were nine 58¾-by-47-inch photos, among them *Lightning Fields 768*, which is emblematic in its convulsive imagery. These photographs restore a certain elemental mystery to the photographic process—its juggling of light, time and chemistry—that has been erased by digital practices. One is also reminded of darker doctrines such as Vitalism, whose 19th-century practitioners sought to reanimate dead animals through contact with a voltaic battery (drawing the attention of Mary Shelley). In Hiroshi Sugimoto's laboratory, science is returned to the service of art. The photographic evidence of this dramatic encounter is nothing less than sublime.

—Tim Maul