



The Perfect Backdrop

Text / Danielle Demetriou Images / Courtesy of Odawara Art Foundation

Hiroshi Sugimoto is staring at the sea — an unsurprising scene given the photographer's famed Seascapes series, a decades-long passion project that captures the sky and sea divided by a clean-lined horizon. The location, though, is new. Sugimoto is sitting, white-socked feet tucked beneath him, on a glass stage that clings to a hillside covered in aromatic citrus groves on a sleepy coastal spot in rural Japan. The scene-stealing view is pure Sugimoto, the horizon neatly splitting the Pacific Ocean and cloud-packed skies into half water, half air.

'As long as I'm looking at the sea, I find myself returning to these questions: How did the human mind or human consciousness start?' ponders the artist. 'What is the difference between animal state and human state? Who are we and who am I? Maybe people will ask these same questions when they come here.'

Sugimoto's ambitious new art project, the Enoura Observatory, opened this autumn following nearly a decade of planning. The complex may come to represent the pinnacle of his creative legacy and is as ambitious as it is expansive: around 10,000 square metres of forested hillside and farmland transformed into a Sugimoto wonderland. There is a glass-and stone-walled gallery, two al fresco stages, a teahouse, centuries-old temple artefacts, ancient boulders and even a metal tunnel — all perfectly framed against a sea-view backdrop. Less than two hours by train from Tokyo and

backed into the mountains overlooking Sagami Bay, the bucolic setting in rural Odawara is richly evocative for the artist, whose earliest childhood memories involve staring at the sea from the window of a train as it pulled into a nearby station. 'I've been dreaming of this moment for a long time,' says Sugimoto, now 69, who splits his time between Tokyo and New York. 'This is a memorable moment in my life — maybe a turning point. It takes me back to the origin of my mind.'

The entrance sets an atmospheric tone with its Zen-style Meigetsu Gate ('full moon gate') dating back some 500 years, a curved-tile roof, white *noren* and bamboo walls. The complex gives way to an expanse of abstractly arranged boulders, sand gardens raked in moon-like curves and winding stone paths, fringed by bamboo forest and citrus trees.

A 100-metre-long wall of speckled Ōya stone located at precisely 100 metres above sea level is a standout feature. This is the exterior wall of the Summer Solstice Observation Gallery — itself a long, narrow structure lined with a handful of Seascape photographs, encased in glass and leading to a viewing platform overlooking the faraway horizon.

Nearby, the clear Optical Glass Stage is built on a traditional *hinoki* frame and surrounded by stone amphitheatre-style seating, while just next to it is a 70-metre tunnel of weathered

In rural Odawara, the Enoura Observatory is the culmination of a lifetime of imagining the perfect gallery space for artist Hiroshi Sugimoto



Each structure has been designed with geography in mind, to perfectly frame a sea-view backdrop at every turn

steel precisely positioned to capture the sunrise just one day of the year, on Winter Solstice.

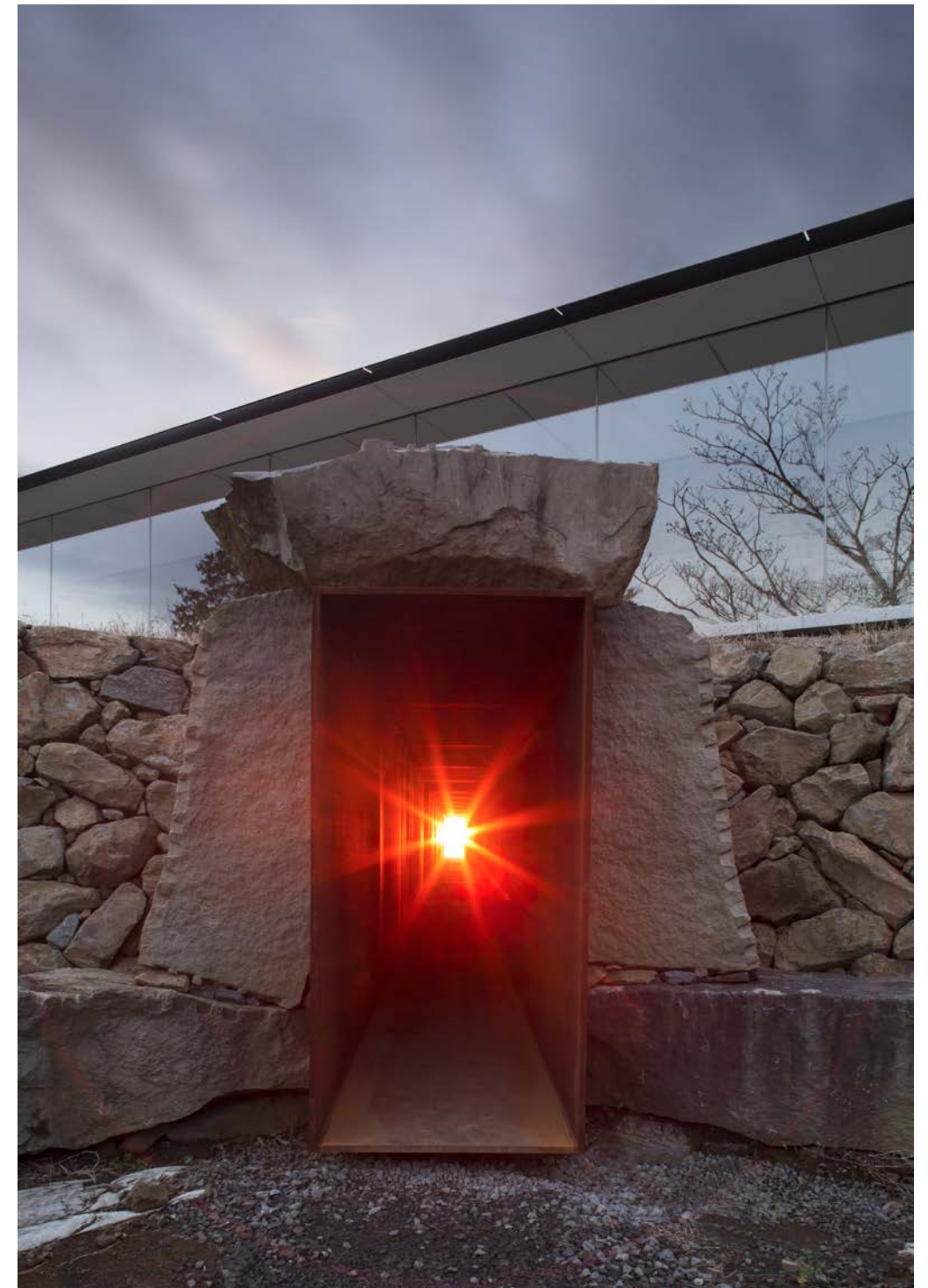
The entire site is a temple to Sugimoto's much-documented passion for collecting — be it stones, old buildings or sea vistas. Winding paths lead visitors past artefacts such as a 13-storey pagoda from a Japanese temple, a circular stage created from stones once used in Kyoto's tramway system or an exquisitely *wabi-sabi* teahouse with a corrugated iron roof specifically designed to capture the sound of falling raindrops.

'The concept of this design is very geographically orientated,' explains Sugimoto, who created the observatory partly in response to a lifelong pursuit to find a satisfactory space for showcasing his work. 'The mission of the complex is to revive traditional building methods which are

in danger of being lost and to pass them on to future generations.'

Sugimoto enjoys speculating on what the complex will look like in a thousand years, when the current human population is long gone but his much-loved stones remain — the passing of time recorded in their weathered, moss-covered forms.

Ever the visionary, he is already planning the next iteration: a new structure to house his collection of fossils, which he describes as 'recording devices' from a pre-photographic age. 'We keep buying more land to expand it,' he laughs. 'It keeps going on and on. It's definitely not over yet.' His eyes contentedly rest on the horizon where sea meets sky as he adds: 'It's an endless project.'



In a beautiful extravagance, Sugimoto has built a 70-metre tunnel of weathered steel precisely positioned to capture the sunrise on Winter Solstice