

# Alec Soth's Archived Blog

September 17, 2006

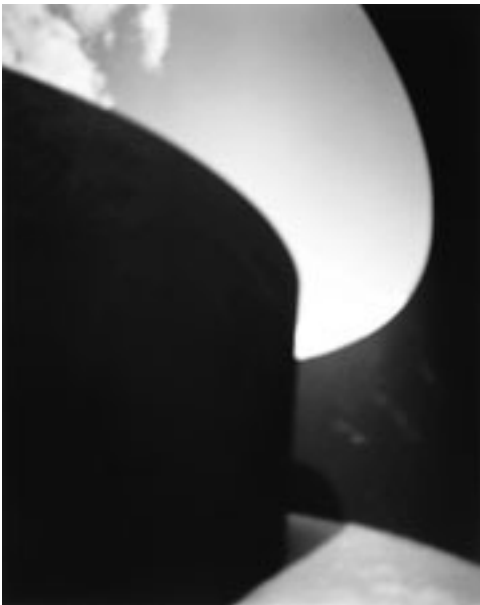
## On photographing sculpture

Filed under: [sculpture](#) — alecsothblog @ 11:07 pm

The single most satisfying exhibition I've ever seen was *Brancusi and Serra in Dialogue* at the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts in St. Louis. The Pulitzer is the best place I've ever been to see art. Open only two days a week, the galleries are restricted to fifty visitors at a time. The building by Tadao Ando is perfect. Every space is designed for quiet contemplation. The work is allowed to soar.

And boy did it soar with Brancusi and Serra. You can see the installation online [here](#). Of course the installation pictures don't do the work justice. But we shouldn't expect photographs to replicate the experience of seeing sculpture.

This is my problem with Hiroshi Sugimoto's recent series of photographs, *Joe*. Sugimoto photographed Serra's sculpture, also named *Joe*, in the Pulitzer courtyard (Serra and Ando collaborated on its placement). The sculpture is a masterpiece. It sounds cliché, but when I viewed the work last year I had the experience of being transported.



© Hiroshi Sugimoto

Sugimoto's photographs attempt not to illustrate the sculpture or installation but to replicate the experience. They are monumental in scale and number. While I'm a big fan of Sugimoto, I find these pictures extraordinarily weak. Nevertheless, they've commanded a lot of attention. This Sunday they were profiled in this New York Times [article](#).

Sugimoto's pictures have me considering the issue of photographing sculpture. I think it can be done well. In fact, I saw some terrific examples at the Brancusi/Serra show. Brancusi's sole subject as a photographer was his own sculpture. He didn't try to mimic the experience of the work itself. He used his pictures to convey the spirit of the process. He photographed his studio, himself working, etc. Brancusi once said, "Why write [on my art]? Why not just show the photographs?"



The Studio, Constantin Brancusi, 1927

Brancusi's photographs are stimulating documents. They evoke a feeling for the time and dirty work that went into his refined and seemingly timeless objects. The pictures add to the experience of seeing his work whereas Sugimoto's pictures feel like high-end spin-offs (when did \$75,000 photographs replace posters?).

I do think that photographers can work with sculpture. In fact, sometimes the photographs are better than the sculpture. Richard Long's [photographs](#) are always more interesting than his mud and rock sculptures in real life. But for me the greatest example is David Smith. While I recognize that he is a tremendously important figure, his sculptures have never had as great an impact on me as these photographs by Dan Budnick:



## 6 Comments

1. This post makes me think about how much we privilege the eye and how powerfully misleading the visual can be.... and this makes me think about the way that most photography tends to freeze the moment and present a certain gaze – a distilling of a physical experience onto a one dimensional plane – because of course photography deals only with the eye (as the portal) – then the mind must imagine all the rest. The mind must recreate the space that is only visually presented (through light and shadow)... We can't climb into a photograph after all! What of all the senses that do not come into play – What of sound? – Does the wind make sound as to goes over – around or through – and is it amplified in a way (thinking of Serra's works) that makes you aware of an unseen curve ahead? What of smell ? and of course (when allowed) what of touch... are you standing on grass? Is the steel cold – or hot to the touch from the sun? Is it wet? All of this sensory input creates a deeper impression – helps us form an understanding and maybe draw some conclusions. It is in short a much richer experience.

I wonder if the emptiness (Sugimoto's pictures) is that so much is inherently left out in a photograph of sculpture (or architecture for that matter) that these particular pictures only barely begin to inform our experience and yet leave strong impressions (different than your experiences?).

This is how photographs lie and tell other stories (and sometimes very good ones !!) You alluded to this in your experience of Richard Long's works....

Great subject – worth thinking more about !

*Comment by [Matt Niebuhr](#) – September 18, 2006 @ [12:19 am](#)*

2. I agree.. I picked up a copy of the new Sugimoto, Joe book, clearly the work fell very short from his inspirational early Seascapes, Theaters, and Architecture projects.

Ha! The new \$75,000 photograph.. is probably here to stay! It's right up there with the 10,000+ square foot Hamptons McMansion, and the Hummer H2... all very telling of the excess in the USA at the turn of the millennium!

*Comment by [Mike](#) – September 19, 2006 @ [11:21 am](#)*

3. Good thing I never make big prints.

*Comment by [Alec Soth](#) – September 19, 2006 @ [11:28 am](#)*

4. Love the Serra -Sugimoto post!  
Exactly my thought – posters mounted on aluminum though which is very nice

And Serra's description of his "collaboration" with Ando in the actual Times was priceless  
I did this, I did that, I did this, I did that ...and yes of course you can say it was a collaboration

It is funny about back in '88 when I was one 2 painting majors at GTown U  
Serra's popularity was on the wane during the height of neo expressionism and Neo Geo  
And so he came to give a lecture at the school

He was mostly angry then always wearing a jumpsuit railing at the Reagan administration  
deeply embroiled in the Tilted Arc controversy – it was pre-Gehry  
before he found the right software and stuff

But for the important artist lecture they wanted to make a brochure – Serra refused to use any his images for a brochure He said that images of his work were no more than pornography ! – they pushed for something

finally he relented and allowed a cut-out with a picture and info that could easily be assembled into a maquette of the tilted arc to be given out during the lecture.

....about 8 yrs later , I think in a Whitney Biennial – there appeared simple framed photos of his sculptures taken by his wife.

*Comment by [Bill Sullivan](#) — September 20, 2006 @ [11:38 am](#)*

5. Sugimoto has a long history of photographing sculptures in various guises. Natural history dioramas, hall of 33 buddhas, wax portraits, and even praise of shadows (for what is a candle flame, if not a sculpture of light?). So I can see why he took this on. But it is too literal and obvious for most fans I suspect, including myself.

To be perfectly blunt, I don't think Jonathan Safran Foer's text helps either, no matter what words he uses. Twice Infinity reduced to something closer to, well, zero. The NY Times has had a long relationship with Foer so it is no surprise the article is more him than Sugimoto.

The other obvious photographer of sculpture was Brassai, especially with his anthology of Picasso's work.

*Comment by [rob](#) — September 20, 2006 @ [3:52 pm](#)*

6. I have to agree about the recent Sugimoto work as compared to his earlier work. I especially love his theater and seascapes, but I just don't get the architectural work (at least not in any non-intellectual way).

One more artist I would throw in that creates an interesting intersection of photography and sculpture in Zeke Berman.

*Comment by [Colin](#) — September 22, 2006 @ [4:51 pm](#)*