

# Toshio Shibata's Visionary Photographs Transform Infrastructure To The Sublime

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James Bartolacci

Toshio Shibata, *Okawa Village, Tosa County, Kochi Prefecture*, 2007 © Toshio Shibata

Until the 1980s, landscape photographers in Japan traditionally turned the focus of their lenses toward conventionally picturesque locations—historic temples, exquisite gardens—in hopes of conveying national sentiments of beauty and splendor. However, one Japanese photographer challenged these orthodox notions by finding grandeur in the most improbable of places.

That photographer, Toshio Shibata, is the subject of a new exhibition at the [Peabody Essex Museum](#) in Salem, Massachusetts. "[Toshio Shibata, Constructed Landscapes](#)" shows how Shibata's images of construction and infrastructure revolutionized Japanese landscape photography—and documented Japan's transformation into a highly industrialized nation. But most important, Shibata's photographs uncovered the hidden beauty and majesty of these stalwart government projects, turning them into something sublime.

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Toshio Shibata, *Okutama Town, Nishitama County, Tokyo, 2006* © Toshio Shibata

Like traditional temples, Shibata's man-made subjects sit serenely within the landscape, showing a subtle balance between the artificial and natural. In the structures' attempt to conform to their surroundings, a discernable sensuality is evoked in their organic forms. Serene waterfalls cascade over a concrete dam, while a rippling grid of beams and bolts take the shape of bedrock, showing an acute awareness of nature.

“As stunning as Toshio Shibata’s photographs are, they are infused with deep awareness of humanity’s place in nature,” says Phillip Prodger, PEM’s curator of photography. “As with all the best landscape photographers, his works cause us to reflect on what it means to live in this world.”

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Toshio Shibata, *Tajima Town, Minamiaizu County, Fukushima Prefecture, 1989* © Toshio Shibata

On view until October 6, the visionary exhibition is part of PEM's continuing effort to introduce contemporary international photographers and their work to new audiences. Featuring 28 examples of Shibata's seldom-seen photographs, the exhibit includes the artist's first color photos to be displayed at an American museum, as well as newer photos highlighting recent projects across Japan. A welcomed addition to the Peabody Essex Museum's already storied collection of Contemporary Asian Art, the photographs give everyone another reason to venture up to New England this summer.

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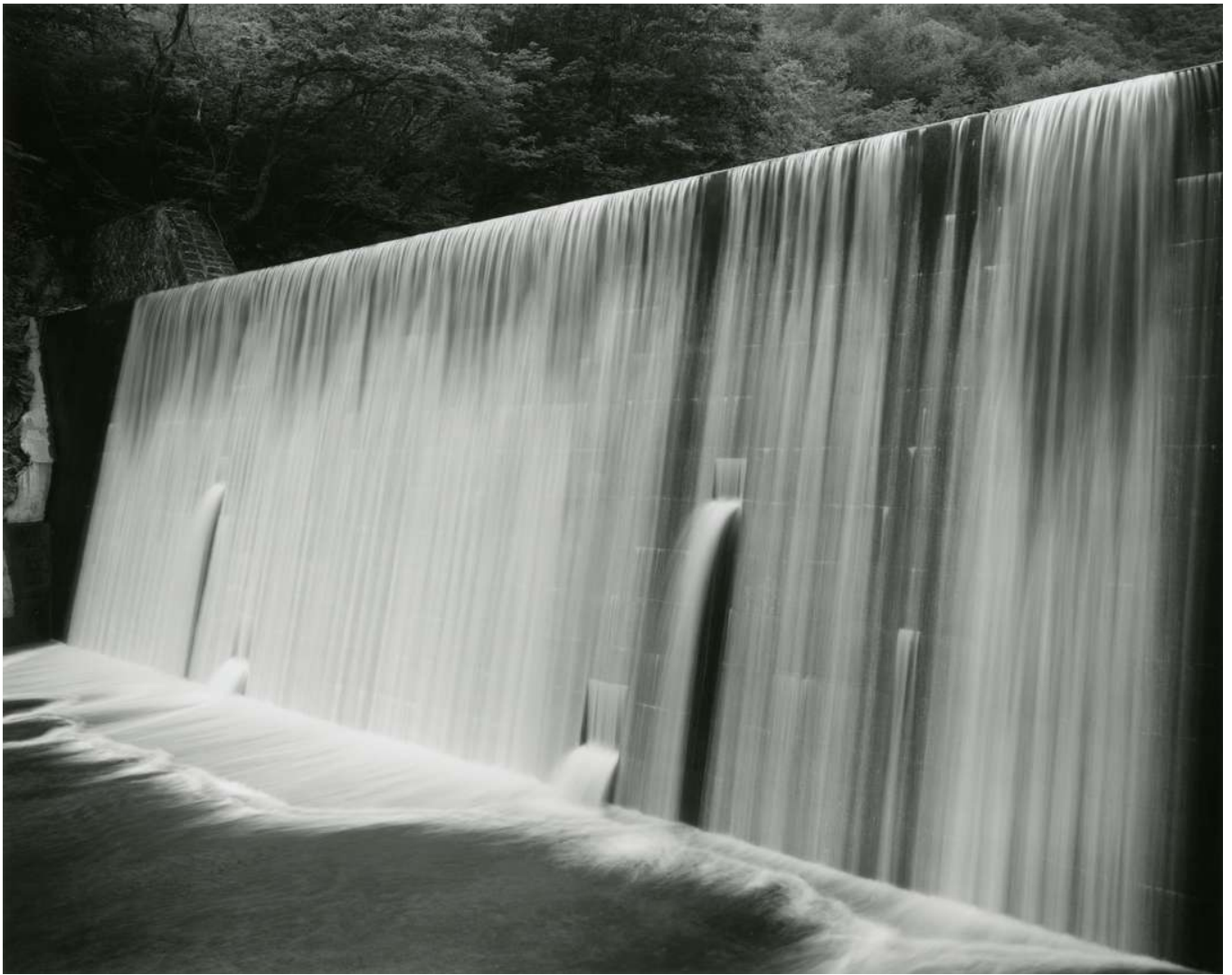
Toshio Shibata, *Sukumo City, Kochi Prefecture*, 2012 © Toshio Shibata

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Toshio Shibata, *Okutama Town, Nishitama County, Tokyo, 2006* © Toshio Shibata

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Toshio Shibata, *Kuroiso City, Tochigi Prefecture*, 1989 © Toshio Shibata

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Toshio Shibata, *Hanno City, Saitama Prefecture*, 2006 © Toshio Shibata

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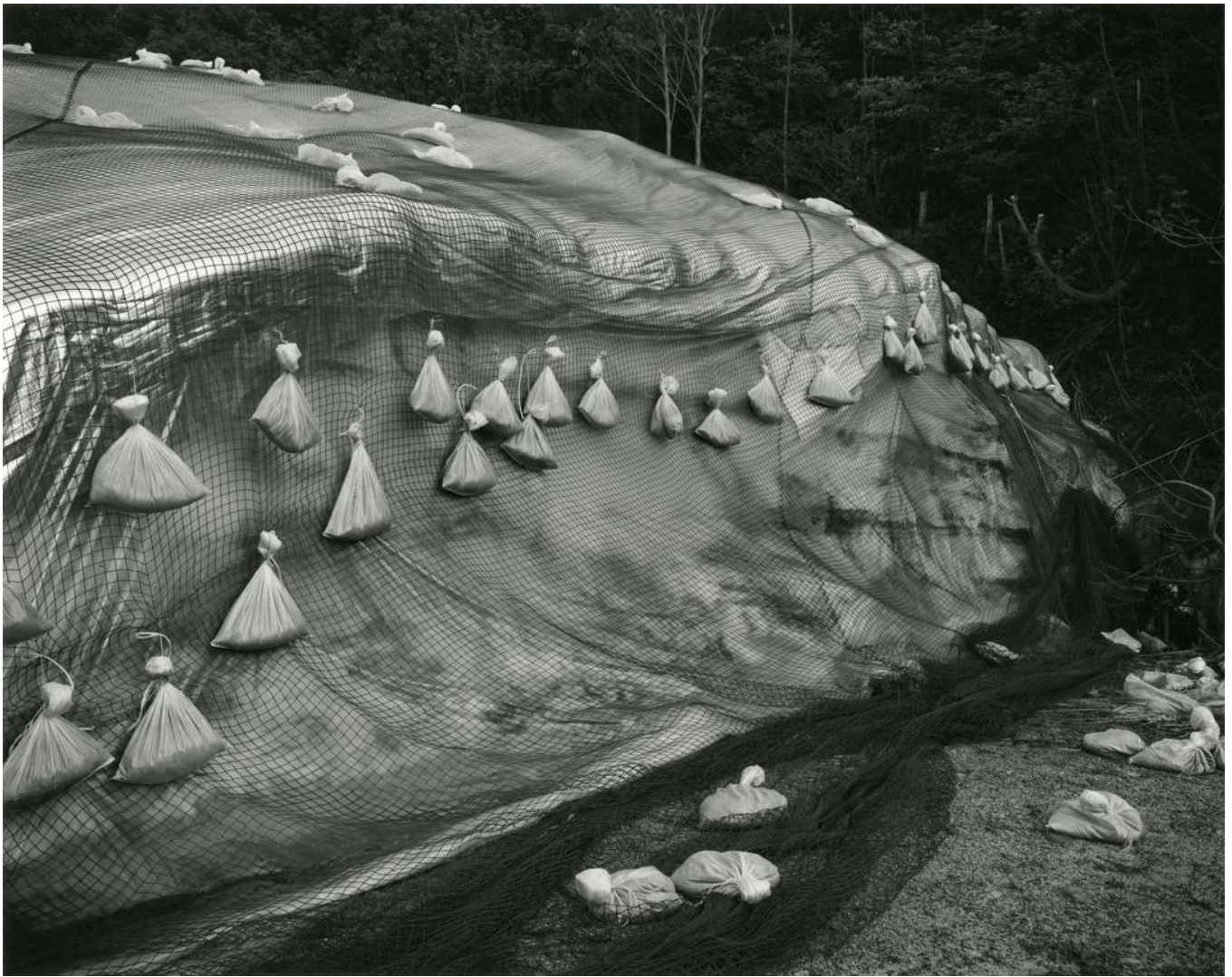




Toshio Shibata, *Matsuda Town, Ashigarakami County, Kanagawa Prefecture, 1991* © Toshio Shibata

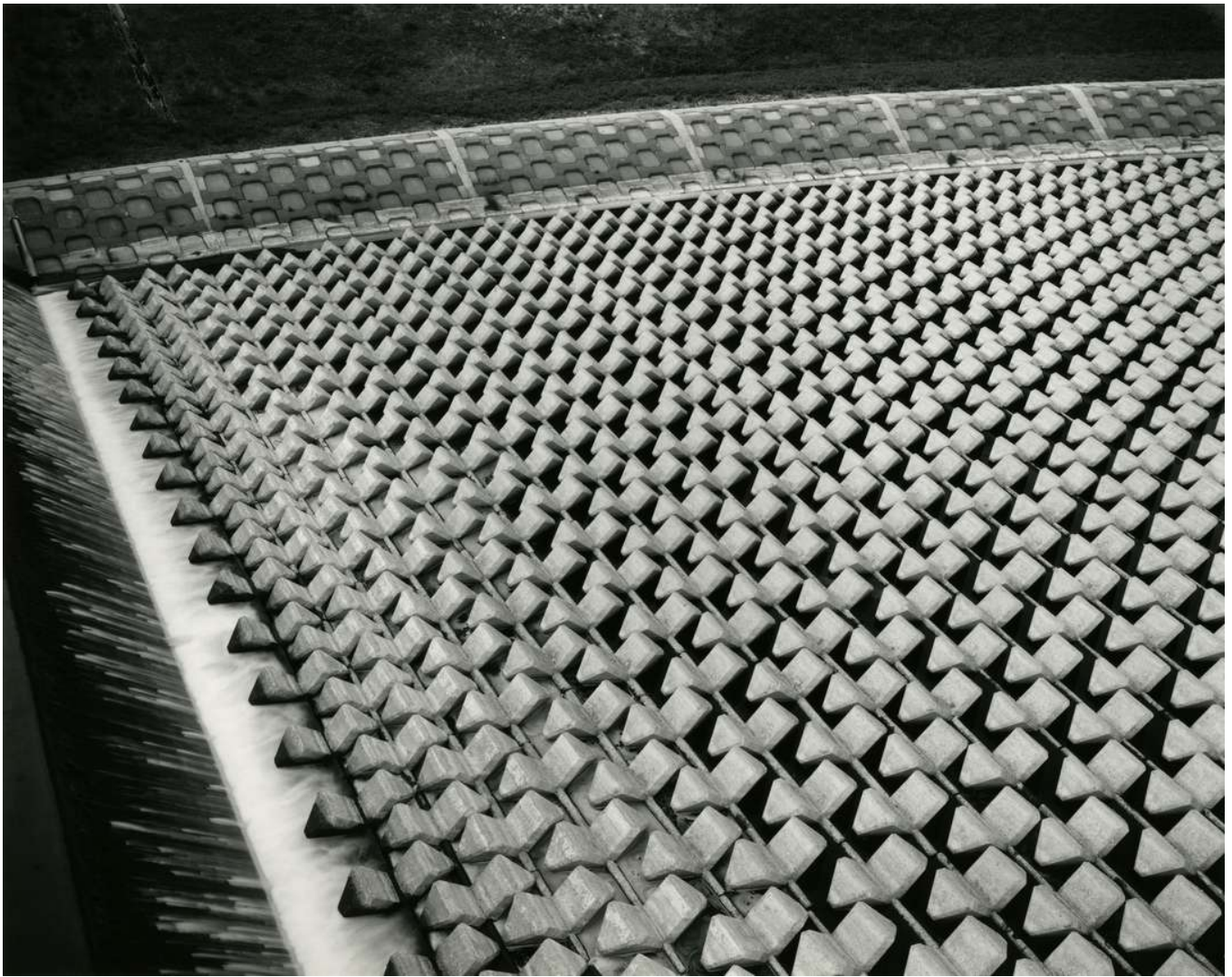
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Toshio Shibata, *Yunotani Village, Kitauonuma County, Niigata Prefecture, 1989* © Toshio Shibata

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Toshio Shibata, *Tomuraushi*, Kamikawa County, Hokkaido, 1988 © Toshio Shibata

*Images courtesy of Whitney Van Dyke, Senior Press Officer at the Peabody Essex Museum*