

Toshio Shibata's glorious photos find mystery where man meets land

Leah Ollman

Review



Toshio Shibata occupies a distinct place in landscape photography: His pictures don't idealize pristine wilderness nor do they moralize about the damaging imprint humans leave upon the natural world. Shibata studies places of contact — where we have altered the earth — and finds reflection, wonder, awe.

Beauty, in his work, is inclusive, and purity is a matter of compositional elegance rather than rarefied subject matter.

"Japanscapes" at Gallery Luisotti showcases Shibata's work in color, mostly from the last few years. Large, immersive images and 4-by-5-inch contact prints alike crystallize the photographer's remarkable visual intelligence. Every scene is a marriage of touched and untouched landscape, of geometric precision and organic irregularity, of the engineered and the elemental.

Shibata distills each view to its formal essence, eliminating the horizon and accentuating pattern. Red buoys read as a chain of dots on a still, green plane of water.



Toshio Shibata, "Totsukawa Village, Nara Pref.," 2015, Fuji Crystal archival print, 4 inches by 5 inches Toshio Shibata / Gallery Luisotti

The narrow wooden platform of a suspension bridge, seemingly under construction, stretches from top to bottom like a zipper, its shadow a long, skinny spinal column on the dry gully beneath.



Toshio Shibata, "Totsukawa Village, Nara Pref.," 2011, Fuji Crystal archival print mounted to Dibond, 24 inches by 20 inches Toshio Shibata / Gallery Luisotti

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Texture is an active element, and allusions to elastic skin and gridded weaves abound. In "Takeda City, Oita Pref.," for instance, the curved stone wall of an old dam reads as a sensuously twisting body — one slope, bleached dry, giving way to another, moss-moistened.

This glorious show also includes several black and white photographs from Shibata's "53 Stations" series of the mid-'80s. In his contemporized take on Hiroshige's 1832 woodblock-print chronicle of the journey between Kyoto and Edo (Tokyo), traditional post stops are replaced by today's stark, generic service stations. However site-specific, Shibata's nighttime views hint at an underlying sense of dislocation.

In one image, the gleaming display windows of vending machines float within utter darkness in a steady, percussive rhythm across the page. Our created world, Shibata reminds us again and again, is no less mysterious than the given one.

*Gallery Luisotti, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica.
Through Jan. 20; closed Sundays and Mondays. (310) 453-0043,
www.galleryluisotti.com*



Toshio Shibata, "Takeda City, Oita Pref.," full frame, 2010, Fuji Crystal archival print mounted to Dibond, 33 inches by 41 inches

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