

JAPAN

S
H
I
B
A
T
A



TOSHIO

S

H

I

B

A

T

A

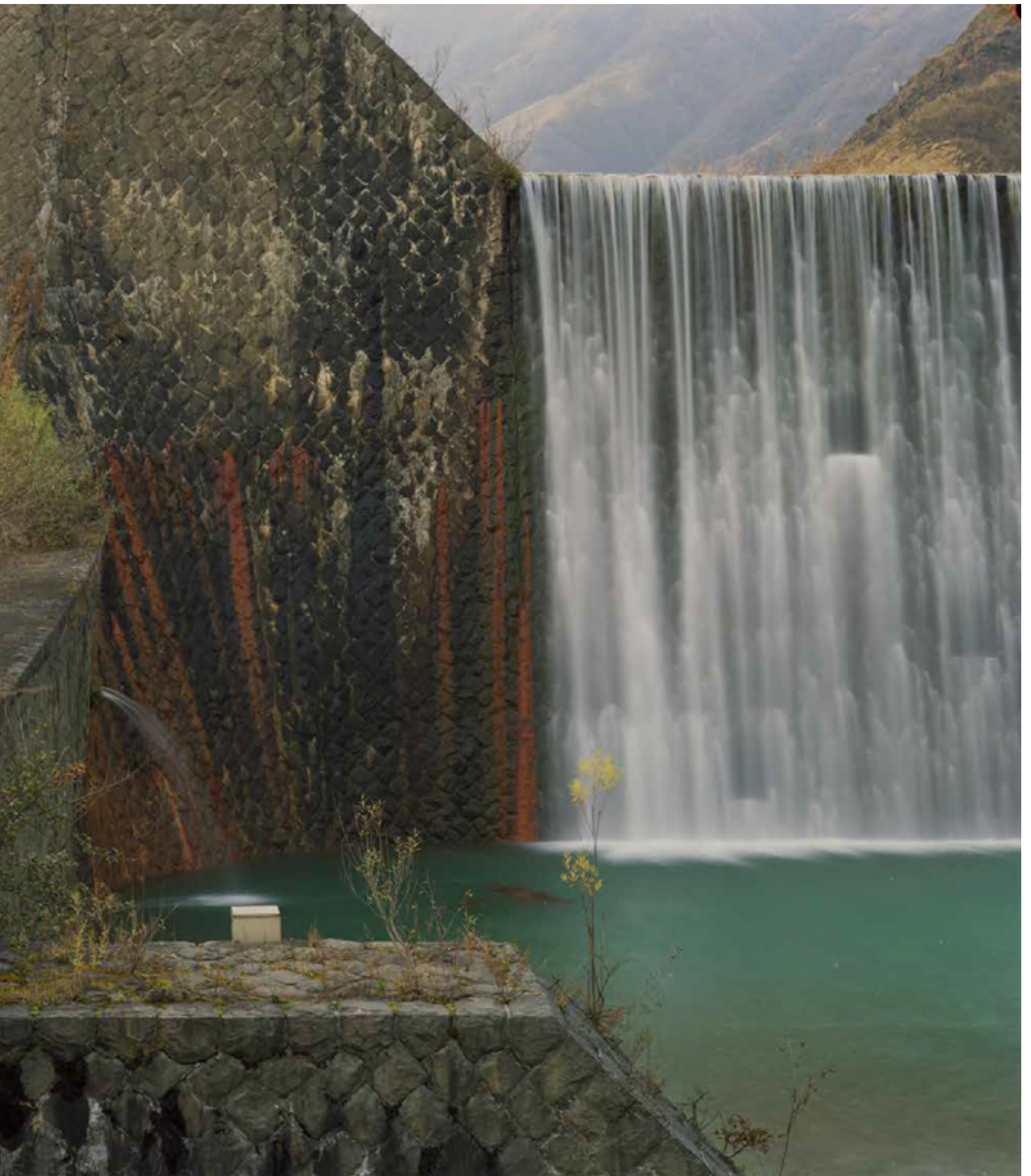
PHILLIP PRODGER

JAPAN

PRESTEL

MUNICH · LONDON · NEW YORK







Shimogo Town, Fukushima Prefecture, 1990

TOSHIO SHIBATA: SECOND NATURE

PHILLIP PRODGER

Standing on a precipice, perched high above a pool of water and jumbled rocks, Toshio Shibata's *Shimogo Town, Fukushima Prefecture* at first seems confused and disordered. But as the eye adjusts, captivating details become clear. Small waterfalls ring the lower edge of the picture, as the surface is divided into four planes, tipped up like a traditional Japanese print. Two thin rows of boundary markers can be seen traversing the water in the upper left, connecting opposite shores of the pool, while dozens of six-sided artificial stones fill the central basin. Like cement jacks thrown by a giant, these scattered stones serve, as so many elements of Shibata's pictures do, as erosion control—engineering works designed to stabilize the land. Their jagged, spiky design makes them hard to turn in the current, preventing the basin from washing out during heavy rains.

For now the water is largely placid, with just a few ripples flowing gently across the surface, blown by an unseen wind. The still waters, combined with Shibata's artful exposure, enable the viewer to see above and below at the same time. The exposed surfaces of the stones, crusted where the water has risen and fallen over time, give way to murky submerged forms underneath. In the upper left of the picture, an old stone bridge is also visible underwater, partially concealed beneath the surface. Farther out, the disintegrated forms of three artificial boulders just barely graze the surface, blending with the rocks around them, and blurring the distinction between natural and human-made. A dark shadow looms over the entire upper half of the composition, hinting at the existence of an escarpment above, and adding to the picture's contemplative mood.

Shimogo Town contains the characteristic elements of a great Shibata photograph—the devotion to quiet places that most viewers miss, and the attention to engineering works designed to control the landscape. Shimogo is a small tourist town in the mountains north of Tokyo, with historic thatched cottages and a festive main street. Shibata's photographs provide no sense of this. He intentionally avoids such places, preferring to photograph in areas that are not obviously picturesque. Those looking for photographs of famous landmarks, such as Mount Fuji or the temples of Kyoto, will be disappointed—he never photographs them.

An expert craftsman, Shibata's sensitivity to light, form, and tonality are all but unparalleled. Razor sharp and exquisitely detailed, his pictures are made using large-format, analog photographic materials, with deep focus. Though largely devoid of people, there is something unmistakably human about Shibata's works. They explore tensions between people and the world around them: aspiration and reality, entropy and order, the mundane and the universal. Squint at Shibata's *Shimogo Town*, and it transforms from a complex picture of a water spillway into a constellation—a cosmic arrangement of stars against the night sky.

Shibata is usually described as a landscape photographer—indeed, he is widely regarded as one of the preeminent landscapists in Japan. Yet his pictures challenge what we usually think of as "landscape." Their subject matter—erosion control barriers, water catchments, road works, dams and bridges—does not fall into any neatly established category. Traditional motifs such as earth, water, and plant life do appear, but they are shown in juxtaposition to, and sometimes even in competition with, civil engineering works. The landscapes Shibata photographs are in this sense largely architectural, shaped and formed by human activity. Consequently, he is often referred to as a photographer of "constructed" landscapes. But the implications of his work are more far-reaching than this term suggests.

All landscapes are to some extent constructed. Even Ansel Adams's famous photographs of Yosemite depict an artificial environment, since they feature areas set aside and managed as a national park. Efforts to define space for a particular purpose, be it urban park or farmland, walking trail or picture spot, are acts of intervention in themselves. Painting and photographing are parallel acts, since the artist identifies a conscribed space as worthy of a viewer's attention. In a country such as Japan, finite in size and continuously inhabited for tens of thousands of years, the land has been thoroughly explored and managed. Whether private or public, every hill, tree, and waterfall belongs to a designated prefecture and/or village, as the titles of Shibata's works remind us.

Inevitably, the ways in which land is organized have a political dimension. In some cases, Shibata shows us the results of administrative distinctions inscribed in the

landscape. *Hinohara Village, Tokyo* (p. 53), for example, depicts a section of hillside located on the border between two municipalities. The quilt-like cascade of railings and cement zigzagging down the slope may look spectacular, but the reasons behind this intricate patterning are mundane, as separate construction crews approached the same section of hillside from different directions, using various designs, materials, and approaches over time.

Despite its ancient history, Japan's geography is constantly in flux. A mountainous country located in the notorious ring of fire, it is prone to earthquakes and tsunamis, typhoons, flooding, rock falls, mudslides, and even volcanoes. The structures Shibata photographs are intended to mitigate and control these forces. They are signs of the country's relentless instability, and the human need to continuously maintain order, given the stresses and strains of weather, temperature, and use. No matter how well made, engineering works degrade over time, and must be tended and repaired. Sites become overgrown, iron rusts, and concrete begins to crumble. While Shibata's landscapes may look static, they are in fact acutely momentary. Any given site may look completely different weeks, months, or years into the future.

Many nations face unstable geography, but the Japanese approach to managing this instability is unique. Japanese civil engineering works tend to be highly aestheticized, shaping functional materials such as concrete and rebar into elaborate designs. Through Shibata's lens, it is as if vast swathes of the country have been covered in *furashiki*, the patterned textiles famously used to wrap gifts in Japan. Seen this way, the thin skin of engineering works is merely a superficial layer covering its surface. The engineering works themselves are applied with meticulous care,

reflecting the vision of the engineers and workers who made them.

Some of their designs recall traditional Japanese crafts, particularly the dense, abstracted patterns of textiles and ceramics of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Edo period. Like *Plate with Design of Pine Needles* (fig. 1), such historic works are characterized by repetition, graphic simplicity, and all-over coverage, conforming to the shapes of the vessels they embellish. Shibata embraces design decisions made in the built environment but is careful not to overinterpret them. It is tempting to ascribe symbolic undertones to certain subjects, but Shibata cautions us against this. If a red bridge, such as the one shown in *Okawa Village, Kochi Prefecture* (p. 15), is painted vermilion like a torii temple gate, he does not romanticize it; the color of the bridge is a matter determined in the course of construction, for practical reasons. If the rectangular patches on the concrete bed of a waterfall cause it to look like an otherworldly kimono, as in *Okutama Town, Tokyo* (p. 189), this is merely an illusion, a coincidence created by mold and mineral deposits and the haphazard seepage of water through its surface.

Although certain patterns repeat in Shibata's photographs, such as the hollow boxlike poured-concrete grids used to cover slumping inclines, or the bolted stars that reinforce retaining walls, their individual forms are infinitely varied, both by design and circumstance. In Shibata's photographs they become recurring characters, familiar friends that may appear and reappear in surprising new contexts. Circles, squares, and rectangles are bent and elongated organically in order to match contours in the land. Cranes excavate ground and hoist equipment, while the hillsides to which they attend resemble patients undergoing surgery.

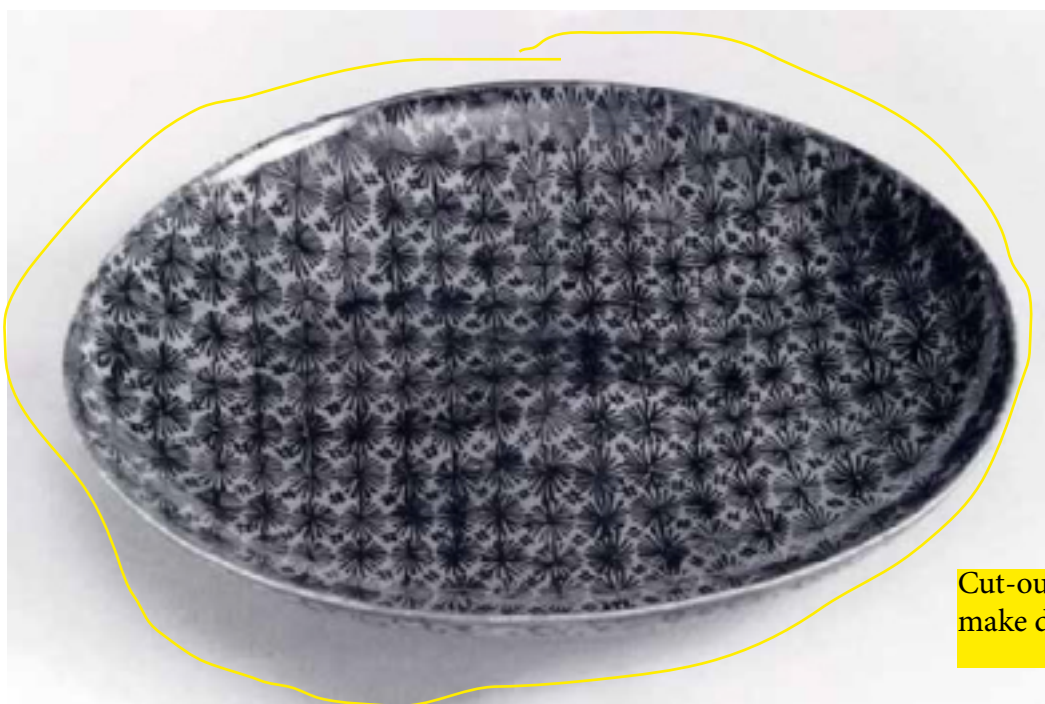


Fig. 1
Maker unknown, Edo period (1615–1868),
Plate with Design of Pine Needles, 1650s,
porcelain with overglaze enamel

Cut-out
make drop shadow

As viewers, we may still glean the true nature of the ground underneath—rises and ravines, outcroppings and creek beds—only partially obscured by the engineering works that surround them. Whereas many landscape photographers focus on traces of human activity in the land, Shibata frequently does the opposite, revealing the way natural forms assert themselves regardless of human interventions. Sometimes the resulting forms are decidedly anthropomorphic, resembling bones, skin, and sinew stretched across the land.

From a Western perspective, the people of Japan are engaged in a constant battle with nature. While many contemporary Japanese people might agree with this idea, there are philosophical differences between how nature is conceived in Japan and the West that may alter their perception. Nature itself is a cultural concept; in Japan, it is most often translated as *shizen* (自然), a word that in lexicographic terms is relatively young. In its kanji (Chinese character) form, the Japanese is identical to the Chinese from which it was borrowed. In China, it is believed to have first appeared in the *Tao Te Ching*, the foundational text of Chinese Taoism, compiled around 400 BCE. Although organized Taoism is not prevalent in Japan, its influence on Japanese culture has been widespread. Taoism is a group of related religions/philosophies that emphasize the connections between living things, and harmony with the universe. Consequently, the word *shizen* has a spiritual implication largely absent in the English word “nature.”

The Japanese understanding of nature involves a synchronous relationship between humans, earth, plants, and animals. Although this attitude is not completely foreign to Western thought, Americans tend to see nature and humanity as a dichotomy, in which humans may own, exploit,

and defend against nature rather than living in harmony with it. The Japanese tradition is more nuanced, seeing humans and their environment as linked. For example, the Western notion of “wilderness”—a fearsome, unconquered place beyond human control—is all but missing in traditional Japanese thought. Similarly, the idea of a “constructed landscape” reads differently. Rather than conquering the land, one may see the built environment in Shibata's photographs as negotiating its challenges. His pictures are microcosms, in which natural and human forces engage in an intricate symbiotic dance.

Shibata took up photography at an opportune time. He graduated from the Tokyo University of the Arts with a Bachelor's, in 1972, and a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1974, and began his career as a painter and printmaker in the mid-1970s. As a painter, he focused on landscapes among other subjects. Some of this work foreshadows his photography—as early as 1968, he was already developing an interest in lesser-known, unpopulated scenes as in his *Landscape, Kisofukushima* (fig. 2). Like the black-and-white photograph *Shimago Town*, Shibata painted *Kisofukushima* at a site removed from the tourist heart of the well-known post town, at a location all but unrecognizable to viewers.

Offered a fellowship by the Ministry of Education of Belgium, he began postgraduate studies at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Ghent, where he studied from 1975 to 1978. This was to prove decisive, since not only did it immerse him in contemporary European art discourse, it was here that he first took up photography seriously. After a period photographing in Europe, Shibata returned to Japan determined not to repeat the lessons of the past, but to develop a new art reflecting the experience of postwar



Fig. 2
Toshio Shibata, *Landscape, Kisofukushima*,
1968, oil on canvas

generations. During the later Showa era, as the political and financial turmoil of the 1970s gave way to the bubble economy of the 1980s, and as commercial expansion pushed development ever farther into the countryside, Shibata developed the distinctive approach to landscape for which he is now celebrated.

For Shibata, this meant a decisive break with the past. The obscurity of the places he photographed enabled him to insulate his practice from the weight of historical association. Perhaps more radically, he also set aside the Japanese landscape canon, one of the most esteemed landscape traditions internationally, with the aim of becoming more relevant to modern audiences. Yet it would be a mistake to think Shibata is unmindful of the Japanese landscape tradition, or disrespectful of previous generations of artists. For example, from 1982 to 1986 he produced a series of photographs made by night, which he called *Fifty-Three Stations*, referencing Utagawa Hiroshige's (1797–1858) iconic series of woodblock prints, *Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido*, depicting officially designated towns and rest areas on the road between the then-capital Kyoto and the city of Edo (now known as Tokyo).

Based on earlier treatments of the same subject by his elder, Katsushika Hokusai, Hiroshige's prints took the viewer on an imaginary journey to every station on the road, showing the kinds of scenes a traveler might find along the way. A burst of wind on a quay in Yokkaichi; boats crossing the choppy harbor at Kuwana; a train of merchants carrying goods over the marshes at Okazaki—each station was illustrated with a realistic mini-narrative, showing the kinds of things one might see there. In *Akasaka* (fig. 3), Hiroshige shows nightfall under a full moon at the edge of town, the blue of dusk falling

on the horizon, as the warm glow of lanterns shines through the window of an inn, a lone rider leading a horse out of town. The horse bows its head, and stomps a hoof reluctantly. It is a richly evocative scene, showing sympathy and affection for the land and its inhabitants.

In Shibata's *Fifty-Three Stations*, bucolic scenes such as Hiroshige's have disappeared, replaced by the slick urbanization of tarmac and city lights. *Shonan Toll Gate* (fig. 4), for example, shows an entrance to one of the many expressways built in the latter half of the twentieth century to facilitate truck and automobile traffic around the country. Foregrounding the bright glare of arc lights against the black of night, it shows the journey as alien and impersonal, in stark contrast to Hiroshige's humanistic view. The message is clear: the Japan of the past no longer exists; this is a new world, with new ways of living.

Shibata only produced his night pictures for a comparatively short period as he honed his interest in built landscapes. Nevertheless, they were an important part of his artistic evolution. His early studies of urban architecture would eventually give way to more ambiguous views, in which human presence is no longer completely absent, but subtly implied. Swan boats parked alongside a temporary bridge on a river bank (p. 105); rough-hewn wooden fences erected on a mountainside (p. 140); a row of marker buoys pulled lazily across a pond (p. 153): Shibata's photographs sometimes seem to commemorate human ambition—serving as beautiful but melancholy artifacts of time's passage.

Shibata's night photographs gave way to an intense period of invention, from the late 1980s until 2003, during which he focused exclusively on black-and-white photographs



Fig. 3
Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858),
Akasaka, 1832–33, woodblock
print, from the series *Fifty-three
Stations of the Tokaido*, printed
ca. 1837–42



Fig. 4 Toshio Shibata, *Night Photo*,
Shonan Toll Gate, Zushi City, 1982

of the constructed landscapes featured in this volume. In 2003 he ceased photographing in black and white, switching exclusively to the color materials with which he has photographed ever since. The extraordinary palette of his color work, vibrant but with pervasive softness, results equally from his masterful technique and the lighting conditions in which he photographs. Over time, he has been remarkably consistent in his composition and choice of subject matter, although the graphic boldness of his black-and-white landscapes has given way, in part, to an embrace of unexpected juxtapositions of color.

As his repertoire has grown, the collective value of Shibata's work has become increasingly apparent. Inadvertently at first, but later by design, travel has become integral to his art, his photographs mapping expeditions around the length and breadth of Japan over the last half-century. Collectively, one may think of these journeys as a kind of performance, as he constantly revisits old sites and seeks out new ones. In this, Shibata has much in common with the so-called Land School of the 1970s, a movement of American and European artists who expressed their relationship to nature through the act of placing themselves within it. In Shibata's case, what began with a singular, probing vision has now grown into a photographic bildungsroman—an epic journey of reinvention and discovery, paralleling Japan's own trajectory in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Driving across the country, most often with his partner, the photographic artist Yoko Ikeda, Shibata is heir to the travelers in Hiroshige's *Fifty-three Stations*—endlessly tasked to journey down the metaphorical road from Edo to Kyoto and back.

But perhaps it is another historic artist who more closely approximates Shibata's inventive spirit. Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) was a fiercely independent artist who, despite having many followers, was always regarded by his peers as something of an outsider. Most famous for his *Thirty-six*

Views of Mount Fuji, including the *Great Wave off Kanagawa* and *Red Fuji* (more properly known as *Fine Wind, Clear Morning*), he was responsible for many of the most famous landscapes in Japanese history. However, around 1833–34, at the age of seventy-three, he embarked on a tour of local waterfalls around Honshu (Japan's main island), creating the series *A Tour of the Waterfalls of the Provinces*. In their bold use of color, innovative treatment of flowing water, and esoteric compositions, Hokusai's waterfalls were unprecedented.

Like Shibata's photographs, Hokusai's waterfalls are largely horizonless and usually cloudless, implying a viewer standing above or across from the scene, looking down or at level distance, as in the example *Yoro Waterfall in Mino Province* (fig. 5). This seemingly simple gesture, placing the implied height at a slight elevation, provides a privileged perspective as if the viewer were an engineer, visitor, or explorer surveying the scene. Although Hokusai's waterfalls include depictions of people, they are usually seen from the back, small in scale, and blend in with the colors of the landscapes they inhabit. The waterfalls are shown as geometric, patterned forms—all at once a physical presence, an object of contemplation, and a vortex of energy. Shibata's waterfalls may be lined with concrete, channeled into causeways, and buffered with modern revetments, but in their ambiguity and power, they are fundamentally the same. The human world may have changed since Hokusai's time, but the forces of nature have not.

Shibata's photographs show us the landscape as it is, as it was, and as others aspire to make it. Each is a small but vital parable—an exercise in color, shape, and form, but more deeply, the insistence of nature and our place within it. They are much more than clever pictures of civil engineering. And as we contemplate them, we might imagine drawing up beside one of Shibata's many waterfalls, watching closely as water flows down its face, and listening.



Fig. 5
Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), *Yoro Waterfall in Mino Province*, ca. 1832, woodblock print, from the series *A Tour of Waterfalls in Various Provinces*





16 Kuroiso City, Tochigi Prefecture, 1989



Kashima Town, Fukushima Prefecture, 1990



