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# Toshio Shibata sees art in the everyday

By Mark Feeney | GLOBE STAFF MAY 04, 2013



Toshio Shibata's "Okawa Village, Tosa County, Kochi Prefecture"

The Japanese photographer Toshio Shibata has spoken of the balance between natural and manmade environments in his images. He takes photographs of engineering works — “architecture” would be too grand a word — often situated in handsome settings. Dams and power plants are one thing. The industrial sublime is still sublime.

Abutments, pavement, aquatic booms, those are quite another. How about a waterfall behind a chain-link fence? The juxtaposition is all the more striking for Shibata's having photographed the fencing so that it looks like a vine.

"Toshio Shibata, Constructed Landscapes" runs at the Peabody Essex Museum through Dec. 31. The show consists of 28 photographs, taken between 1988 and 2012. Some are as large as 49 inches by 60 inches. None is smaller than 25 inches by 30 inches.

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"I took pictures of things that were neither unique nor photogenic," Shibata has said. "And adopted an approach in which it was acceptable to include power lines, garbage, and other superfluous things." Superfluous is a bit strong. The things Shibata documents may seem superfluous visually, but for practical purposes they are highly useful. We tend to associate the purely purposeful in design with the nondescript in appearance. Shibata knows otherwise. The structures he shows are utilitarian, but rarely ugly. He sees art in the everyday.

The word incongruous has no meaning in his visual vocabulary. His large-format camera, with its long exposure times and ability to capture very fine detail, is utterly accepting. It offers no judgments. These images convey a sense of repose and reserve: a subdued grandeur. They are at once tranquil and mighty. That's another type of balance which informs Shibata's photography: between the bulk and heft of the subject matter and the photographer's delicacy of approach. These images can feel almost wan at times — but only almost. The scale of most of them further insures against preciousness or over-refinement.

The Peabody Essex's photography curator, Phillip Prodger, has done a very sly thing in hanging the show. Two of the photographs aren't in the photography gallery. They're in a nearby gallery for Japanese art. They blend in



## **TOSHIO SHIBATA, CONSTRUCTED LANDSCAPES**

Peabody Essex Museum, East India  
Square, Salem 866-745-1876.

<http://www.pem.org>

Closing date: Dec. 31

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so well with the traditional pieces there that a visitor wouldn't likely notice their not usually being there. Which is the point: Shibata may not be photographing Mount Fuji or bonsai gardens, but the aesthetic and sensibility are by no means anomalous.

The titles consist only of the subjects' location. That's Shibata's one nod to placement. No horizon line is visible in the pictures. What's within the frame isn't framed by anything else. Spatially, they're self-contained. Yet there's no sense of dislocation to the images. Looking at them a viewer feels well situated.

Shibata doesn't really care if you know what it is you're seeing. Often it's apparent, of course, though not always. It's not that he's trying to disguise these structures. The point is that purpose doesn't matter; appearance does. He wants the image to be experienced for how it looks, not for what it shows. So many of the structures verge on abstraction. Where normally one would focus on their function, Shibata emphasizes their formal properties. The bridge in "Okawa Village, Tosa County, Kochi Prefecture" could be a sculpture — its rusty red suggesting a version of Richard Serra, perhaps.

The color in that image matters. Slightly fewer than half of the photographs are in black and white. Those images are fine, but with color something extra happens to Shibata's work. It breathes. "Hanno City, Saitama Prefecture" looks like one of David Hockney's swimming pool paintings — with all the beauty, but minus the splash.

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