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PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

## PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW; The Dams of America, With a Japanese Touch

By MARGARETT LOKE

Correction Appended

Toshio Shibata's sublime, crisply detailed portraits of public-works projects show that human intervention on a pristine landscape need not be jarring but can, in fact, be in exquisite harmony with nature.

Two years ago the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago commissioned Mr. Shibata, who had spent about 15 years photographing public-works projects in his native Japan, to create his signature black-and-white images of the American landscape. Thirteen photographs from this body of work are on view at the Laurence Miller Gallery in SoHo.

It is said that landscapes reveal the cultures in which they were made, but the American landscape in Mr. Shibata's photographs, specifically the places where man has left his imprint, has an unmistakable Japanese esthetic.

"Gibson Dam, Lewis and Clark County, Mont." (1996) brings to mind Mr. Shibata's 1990 picture of a dam at Kashima in Fukushima Prefecture, in which a lone branch poised at the gently curving edge of the man-made waterfall lends a poignant note to a finely calibrated scene of mirror-smooth water, even, silvery lines of a waterfall and a foamy mass at the waterfall's base.

Gibson Dam's waterfall also has a gently curving edge, but some engineer with a lovely (Japanese) sense of esthetics positioned the waterfall's edge near a cluster of large rocks, and the water rushes down those rocks, creating a wild counterpoint to the waterfall's sleek straight lines.

Water has long been a focal point in Mr. Shibata's landscape photography, and he obviously sees it as a source of amazing visual textures as well as a mirror to catch surrealistic abstractions. In two astonishingly otherworldly pictures of the Grand Coulee Dam in Washington, the largest concrete structure in the United States, it's impossible for the viewer to know what the subject is (the water's flow and the foam collected below) without being told.

In each image, the frame is divided into two sharply contrasted segments, the top third virtually black except for a horizontal white, swirly shape. Taking up the rest of the frame is a flat plane that

ends abruptly where the black part begins. On each plane are mysterious, fast-moving vertical cloudlike bands. In one picture, two such bands in a sea of smooth dark gray take center stage. In the other, the cloudlike bands are off to the sides, while most of the flat plane, which is streaked with fine vertical lines, appear to reflect a pileup of clouds.

Unlike most landscape photographers, Mr. Shibata passes up wide vistas, zeroing in instead on man's stunning reordering of the natural world. The horizon may be missing, but the sense of immense scale and majesty is intact.

Mr. Shibata, who is 48, has an impeccable eye for graphic design, honed, no doubt, while a student at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music and, in the mid-1970's, at the Royal Academy of Ghent in Belgium. His photography shows the influence of modernists like Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind, but Mr. Shibata cites Edward Weston as having the most influence on his work. He discovered Weston's photographs in the late 1970's and was immediately drawn to their simplicity, beauty and, as he put it, "abstractness in reality."

Although Mr. Shibata's photographs of the American landscape are a superb synthesis of East and West, they were possible only after he had spent years photographing in his own country. Mr. Shibata tried to photograph the American West in 1985 but, overwhelmed by the sheer size of the land, he said, the effort was a failure.

For his American landscape commission, Mr. Shibata took four monthlong trips to the United States over the last two years, photographing in the South (North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee and Arkansas) and in the West (Washington, Oregon, Montana, Idaho, Nevada and Arizona). If the results are any indication, this time he was very much at home.

Characteristically, in "Kingman, Mohave County, Ariz." (1997), Mr. Shibata focuses on two enigmatic cavelike structures (actually culverts), whose polished metal sides are contrasted with the nearby rough ground and the compacted earth above them.

At Nimrod Dam in Perry County, also in Arizona, Mr. Shibata catches a big splash of water at the foot of a concrete platform. The cone-shaped spray connotes both force and, unexpectedly, fragility because the spurting water has created lines that resemble the veins on a Calla lily.

"Bartlett Dam, Maricopa County, Ariz." (1997) is simply a dazzling study in textures. Seemingly carved into a hillside is a stepped structure not unlike some minimalist sculpture, its smooth sides mirrored on the body of water at its base, the water's ebony coloring and smooth surface accentuated by the whiteness of the surrounding rough-hewn rocks.

The exhibition's piece de resistance is "Weir Dam, Sullivan County, Tenn." (1997). In this riveting work with a touch of the impossible about it, there is much more than initially meets the eye.

At first, one might think the rows of gray-white slabs in the middle of the picture are tombstones. They're not. The slabs and connecting dark walls are part of the dam, but beyond them is a serene

panorama: many young trees with slender trunks, a few dark low clumps of trees, a low wooden bridge and, seated on lawn chairs to the extreme right of the picture, two men dressed as if they're going fishing. The trees in the distance bring the viewer back to the foreground of the picture, with tall trees and the sky reflected upside-down on the water. But look again and at the bottom of the water is a bed of pebbles.

"Nothing in nature has a hard outline," wrote the 19th-century British photographer Peter Henry Emerson. Yes, but seen through Mr. Shibata's lens, human impositions of hard outlines have a way of making nature all the more wonderful.

Toshio Shibata's photographs remain at the Laurence Miller Gallery, 138 Spring Street, SoHo, through July 10.

Photo: Grand Coulee Dam in Washington, photographed by Toshio Shibata. (Laurence Miller Gallery)