



# Earliest Human Relatives

Hiroshi Sugimoto

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## Not on display

**Title/Description:** Earliest Human Relatives

**Artist/Maker:** Hiroshi Sugimoto

**Born:** 2004

**Object Type:** Photograph, Print

**Materials:** Ink, Paper

**Technique:** Duotone offset printing

**Measurements:** h. 130 x w. 198 mm

**Accession Number:** 1284f

**Historic Period:** 21st century

**Production Place:** North America, The Americas, United States of America

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Hiroshi Sugimoto (b.1948) is a multidisciplinary artist, who is best known for his photography and architecture. Sugimoto's photographic exhibitions double as art installations, and are described by the artist as 'space sculpture'. [1] Throughout his career, Sugimoto has used the camera to investigate the passage of time and to raise questions about the nature of perceived 'reality'. For Sugimoto, the camera is a time-recording device and 'photography functions as a fossilization of time'. [2]

This black and white photograph titled *Earliest Human Relatives*, depicting human life from around 2 million years ago, is from Sugimoto's *Dioramas* series. Taken in 1994, the photograph was reproduced for *The Origins of Love* portfolio in 2004.

Sugimoto began his *Dioramas* series in 1976 and explored this theme over four decades. Responding to the artificial displays at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, in this series Sugimoto uses photography to invest a museum's taxidermy animals and plastic scenery with a vitality and authenticity that they do not possess in real life.

"When I first arrived in New York in 1974, I visited many of the city's tourist sites, one of which was

the American Museum of Natural History. I made a curious discovery while looking at the exhibition of animal dioramas: the stuffed animals positioned before painted backdrops looked utterly fake, yet by taking a quick peek with one eye closed, all perspective vanished, and suddenly they looked very real. I had found a way to see the world as a camera does. However fake the subject, once photographed, it's as good as real." [3]

Dioramas perform a didactic function in the context of the museum, and it is tempting to search for a Darwinian explanation of human evolution among these photos. Any linear display of Sugimoto's photographs of the great apes is problematic, for reasons articulated by Yuval Noah Harari.

"It's a common fallacy to envision these species as arranged in a straight line of descent, with Ergaster begetting Erectus, Erectus begetting the Neanderthals, and the Neanderthals evolving into us. This linear model gives the mistaken impression that at any particular moment only one type of human inhabited the earth, and that all earlier species were merely older models of ourselves. The truth is that from about 2 million years ago until around 10,000 years ago, the world was home at one and the same time, to several human species." [4]

Instead of offering a linear version of time, Sugimoto's series explores the cycle of life and death on earth, and charts both the emergence and extinction of humankind. Sugimoto articulates his own history of the world's creation, destruction and regeneration in the photobook titled *Dioramas*. [5]

Vanessa Tothill, January 2022

[1] <https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s3/hiroshi-sugimoto-in-memory-segment/>  
[Accessed 5 January 2022]

[2] <https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s3/hiroshi-sugimoto-in-memory-segment/>  
[Accessed 5 January 2022]

[3] <https://www.sugimotohiroshi.com/new-page-54> [accessed 6 July 2021]

[4] Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2011), p. 8.

[5] Sugimoto, Hiroshi, *Hiroshi Sugimoto: Dioramas* (Bologna: Damiani, 2014)

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## Further Reading

Ahrenberg, Staffan, Sam Keller, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, eds, Hiroshi Sugimoto. 38th Year (Paris: Cahiers d'Art, 2014)

Bonami, Francesco, and Marco de Michelis, eds, Hiroshi Sugimoto: Architecture (New York: D.A.P./Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 2003)

Brougher, Kerry, and David Elliott, eds, Hiroshi Sugimoto (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005)

Hrankovic, David, ed., Hiroshi Sugimoto: Glass Tea House Mondrian (Cologne: Walther König, 2015)

Müller-Tamm, Pia, Hiroshi Sugimoto (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010)

Rousmaniere, Nicole, ed., Hall of Thirty-three Bays (Norwich: University of East Anglia, Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, 1999)

Schneider, Eckhard, ed., Hiroshi Sugimoto: Architecture of Time (Cologne: Walther König, 2002)

Spector, Nancy, and Tracey Bashkoff, eds, Hiroshi Sugimoto: Portraits (Berlin: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2003)

Sugimoto, Hiroshi, and Hans Belting, Hiroshi Sugimoto: Theatres (Cologne: Walther König, 2006)

Sugimoto, Hiroshi, On the Beach (Tokyo: Amana, 2014)

Sugimoto, Hiroshi, Hiroshi Sugimoto: Dioramas (Bologna: Damiani, 2014)

Sugimoto, Hiroshi, and Klaus Ottmann, Hiroshi Sugimoto: Conceptual Forms and Mathematical Models (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2015)

Sugimoto, Hiroshi, and Munesuke Mita, Hiroshi Sugimoto: Seascapes (Bologna: Damiani and Matsumoto Editions, 2015)

Sugimoto, Hiroshi, Hiroshi Sugimoto: Theatres (Bologna: Damiani and Matsumoto Editions, 2016)

Sugimoto, Hiroshi, Iran do Espírito Santo, and Philip Larratt-Smith, Hiroshi Sugimoto: Black Box (Madrid: Aperture/Fundación Mapfre, 2016)

Sugimoto, Hiroshi, and Jonathan Safran Foer, Hiroshi Sugimoto: The Long Never, Lightning Fields 289 (Bologna: Damiani, 2016)

Sugimoto, Hiroshi, and Jonathan Safran Foer, Hiroshi Sugimoto: The Long Never, Lightning Fields 304 (Bologna: Damiani, 2016)

Sugimoto, Hiroshi, Hiroshi Sugimoto: Snow White (Bologna: Damiani and MW Editions, 2017)

Sugimoto, Hiroshi, Hiroshi Sugimoto: Portraits (Bologna: Damiani and MW Editions, 2018)

Sugimoto, Hiroshi, Hiroshi Sugimoto: Architecture (Bologna: Damiani and MW Editions, 2019)

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