



Photographer Tokihiro Sato Plays With Light and Perspective to Capture a Fresh Vision of the World Around Us

Luminous Warrior

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By Joe Nolan



While Dale Chihuly's geysers of glass and the unblinking glamour of *The Golden Age of Couture* seem to be ruling the day at 10th and Broadway, there's another exhibit that's considerably less splashy, yet every bit as magical.

Photographer Tokihiro Sato's *Presence or Absence* brings a welcome note of stillness to the Frist Center's summer programming. Currently showing in the Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery, the exhibit feels like two shows in one. The first part features new

groupings of photographs that are hung to create spectacular cityscapes while the larger — and more compelling — portion of the show is dedicated to the photographer's well-known black-and-white images.

In his latest work, Sato, one of Japan's most revered contemporary photographers, utilizes homemade pinhole cameras to create colorful urban panoramas. The pinhole camera is a lightproof box containing an emulsified surface. When a hole is poked in the box, reflected light from its surroundings exposes this surface and creates an image. Sato ratchets this centuries-old technology to another level by building cameras with numerous apertures. The resulting multiplicity of images creates an almost cubist effect, capturing his street scenes from numerous perspectives simultaneously.

In a piece like "Gleaning Light (The Ravine)," these disparate images are hung side by side in a grid of 24 separate photos, effectively reconstituting a Manhattan street scene. While the technique is compelling and the resulting images are quite lovely in their charming abstraction, this part of the show suffers in

comparison to the rest of the exhibit, which more fully embodies Frist curator Mark Scala's eloquent observation that at his best, Sato is a "harvester of the ephemeral."

In Sato's cityscapes, the legs of his camera's tripod are visible on the sidewalk, but in his black-and-white images, the artist and his equipment are nowhere to be found. This distinction speaks directly to the show's titular paradox, and it also highlights an irony of Sato's oeuvre: In his best-known works, the ones showing no trace of the photographer, Sato is actually spending a great deal of time *in front of* the camera.

These images of unpopulated urban scenes, interiors and landscapes are richly detailed and infused with a haunted sensibility, partly because they are shot with extremely long exposures — some as long as three hours. While the aperture of his camera is still open, Sato will move into the frame armed with a small hand mirror or a flashlight. While the artist himself won't show up in a photo that is being exposed over such a long period, strategic flashes from the mirror or patterns drawn in empty space with a flashlight will register in the final image.



In a piece such as "#9 Shirakami," Sato's flashing mirror creates a cluster of luminous orbs around the tangled roots at the base of a tree. The image calls to mind the fairies of folklore or perhaps souls of the dead. In "#276 Koto-ku Aomi," an empty urban walkway is filled with a tangle of illuminated swirls and loops that creates the effect of an onrushing river of light.

The literal meaning of photography is "writing with light." While the phrase certainly has special resonance with Sato's work, Sato's luminous leavings aren't verbal or symbolic messages to be read by his viewers. Sato writes in body language, and the marks he makes within the fields of his still-forming images are better understood as the ghosts of these gestures. They don't convey the artist's ideas, they attest to the presence of the artist himself.

Sato's work relates to other Japanese visual arts traditions, and the precision and athleticism required by the photographer's movements immediately call to mind the dances of his native land — in particular, Kenbu, a sword-dancing martial art tradition dating back to the late 1800s. It's not unreasonable to think of Sato as a Kenbu dancer — his flashlight cast as an eloquent light saber. In fact, Sato's light-writing works can be seen to contain the same three elements that define a moment of martial conflict: confrontation, impact and movement. The viewer is confronted with the images' haunting stillness, impacted by their uniqueness and technical audacity, and moved by their magical nature, as they archive the movements of a dancer just beyond the grasp of the viewer's gaze.