

## HIROSHI SUGITO

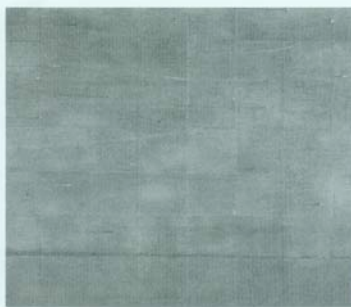
NICOLE KLAGSBRUN

The wide gray fields that fill many of Hiroshi Sugito's big new paintings are subtle and tender, and you might almost think they were contributions to the traditions of the monochrome, but narrow horizontal bands at the bottom of most of the pictures instantly transform them into sky above a low horizon of land or sea. Then, too, there are those little extras: perhaps lace drapes faintly painted in at the outer edges of the image, and a frilly filigree valance at the top, making a vast outdoor space into a cross between a proscenium and a boudoir; or else a looming central form that looks to be a skyscraper or a lighthouse but for a divide in the base, which, becoming a pair of legs, turns the whole form into a robotic figure or a fairy-tale giant. Elsewhere a speckle of little dots turns out on inspection to be airplanes flying their flight patterns, tokens of the machine world. Whether we associate the monochrome with the intellectual ambitions of modernism or the mystic aspirations of tantric art, Sugito is playing a different game.

Other sources for Sugito, of course, must be the Japanese painting traditions in which he trained, and the delicacy and precision of his work certainly have national precedents. Much of the pictures' success lies in their surfaces, in which acrylic approaches the fragile softness of watercolor. In *story man* and *screen II* (all works 2001), Sugito actually works on paper, transferring the watercolor's sense of an intimacy between medium and ground into full-scale paintings. *Story*

*man*, the work with the lighthouse/giant, is nearly nine feet high and seems to be made of a single piece of paper; in *screen II*, Sugito mounts smaller sheets abutting each other on canvas, so that the image is underlaid by a grid. The same grid makes an appearance in *screen I*, but this time it is painted rather than provided in the ground. The result reminds me of the New York painter and sculptor Michelle Stuart, who has supplied the grids of Minimalist and other serial art with contents from the natural world. Something similar happens with Sugito, who turns austere systems—the grid, the monochrome—into fantasy and illusion.

The whimsical element in Sugito's additions suggests a sense of humor, but he isn't an artist who thinks that a joke is enough, nor is he satisfied with subverting the codes of art history. First of all, his lace curtains are as prettily painted as the sky they frame and have their own visual rewards. Second, lace and sky have an area of agreement: Both invoke immateriality, or some tension between substance and bodilessness. As the lace gets finer—and Sugito has the skill to show it fine—it becomes more diaphanous, its filaments thinner, more tenuously imposing their design on the void. The skies, meanwhile, are a careful balance, solid planes mysteriously packed with light. Both in the curtains and in the air they frame, Sugito is addressing the old challenge of rendering transparency with an opaque medium. The spiritual spaciousness connoted by these planes, it seems to me, is the paintings' strongest pull. Superficially anomalous, the lace may end up just



Hiroshi Sugito, *screen II*, 2001, acrylic, pigment, and paper on canvas, 42 x 50 1/2".

qualifying this intimation of the sublime without really changing the mood.

—David Frankel