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Reviews

Hiroshi Sugito

Nicole Klagsbrun, through May 3
(see Chelsea).

Nihonga is the name given to a Japanese genre of painting that first developed in the 19th century and has endured to the present day. Conceived as a form of resistance against the insurgent influence of Western aesthetics, the style is marked by a certain conservatism and nationalism. Still, Nihonga does

share a few things with the 19th-century European academic art it sought to rebuff, most notably a predilection for comfortingly bland, even cloying, subject matter. A contemporary adherent of this venerable heritage, Hiroshi Sugito partakes of its nostalgic sensibility. However, if one can get past his work's effete veneer, there are some surprising and provocative facets to be discovered amid his anodyne imagery.

Sugito's most common gambit is to present the painting as a stage set, glimpsed through parted curtains and a proscenium arch of dainty, doily-like shapes. On the stage itself we see tiny reflecting pools with equally diminutive chairs arranged around their perimeters. These objects are engulfed by enormous open fields of color, creating a kind of spatial conundrum: Are we looking at a painting of a life-size theater that contains minuscule props or at a miniature dollhouse-style diorama? The resulting perceptual disorientation is enhanced by the dreamlike quality of the painting's surface—a mere mist of powdery pigment that has come to rest on the canvas. By confounding viewers' expectations—in terms of a realistic depiction of scale and a traditional (in Western terms) treatment of paint—Sugito's works catalyze a collapse of distance between viewer and object that might just be the essence of *Nihonga's* intended *ganchiku*, or hidden significance. The historically elusive definition of *ganchiku* dovetails nicely with the open-ended quality of Sugito's canvases, which suspend viewers in a precarious space between reverie and representation.—Noah Chasin



Hiroshi Sugito, *The Blue Room*, 2003.