He was four years old, traveling with his parents on the Tokaido railway line, peering out of a window. The shimmering waters of the Pacific came into view. That's his first memory: the light; the horizon; the uninterrupted line stretching beyond the vastness of the ocean. Hiroshi Sugimoto says it was the starting point of his mind, the beginning of consciousness.

Returning to that first moment—his personal childhood memory, but also the primordial state when humans began to form self-awareness—would become the driving force behind most of his artistic endeavors. Born and educated in Japan, Sugimoto spent most of his career working from New York—first as an antique dealer, later pursuing photography, but also experimenting with architecture, sculpture, installations and most recently Noh theater and Bunraku puppetry. Today however, approaching 70 and widely regarded as a leading contemporary artist, he feels humanity lacks clear answers as to what art should express.

"Throughout human history, art has embodied the pinnacle of our mental and spiritual evolution" writes Sugimoto in a brief introduction given to visitors in Enoura. "When we first became self-aware beings, art commemorated this awakening in cave paintings. Later, art went on to manifest the forms of the divine, and splendidly symbolize the might of kings. Today, as we stand at a critical point in our evolution, art has lost its onetime clarity of purpose."

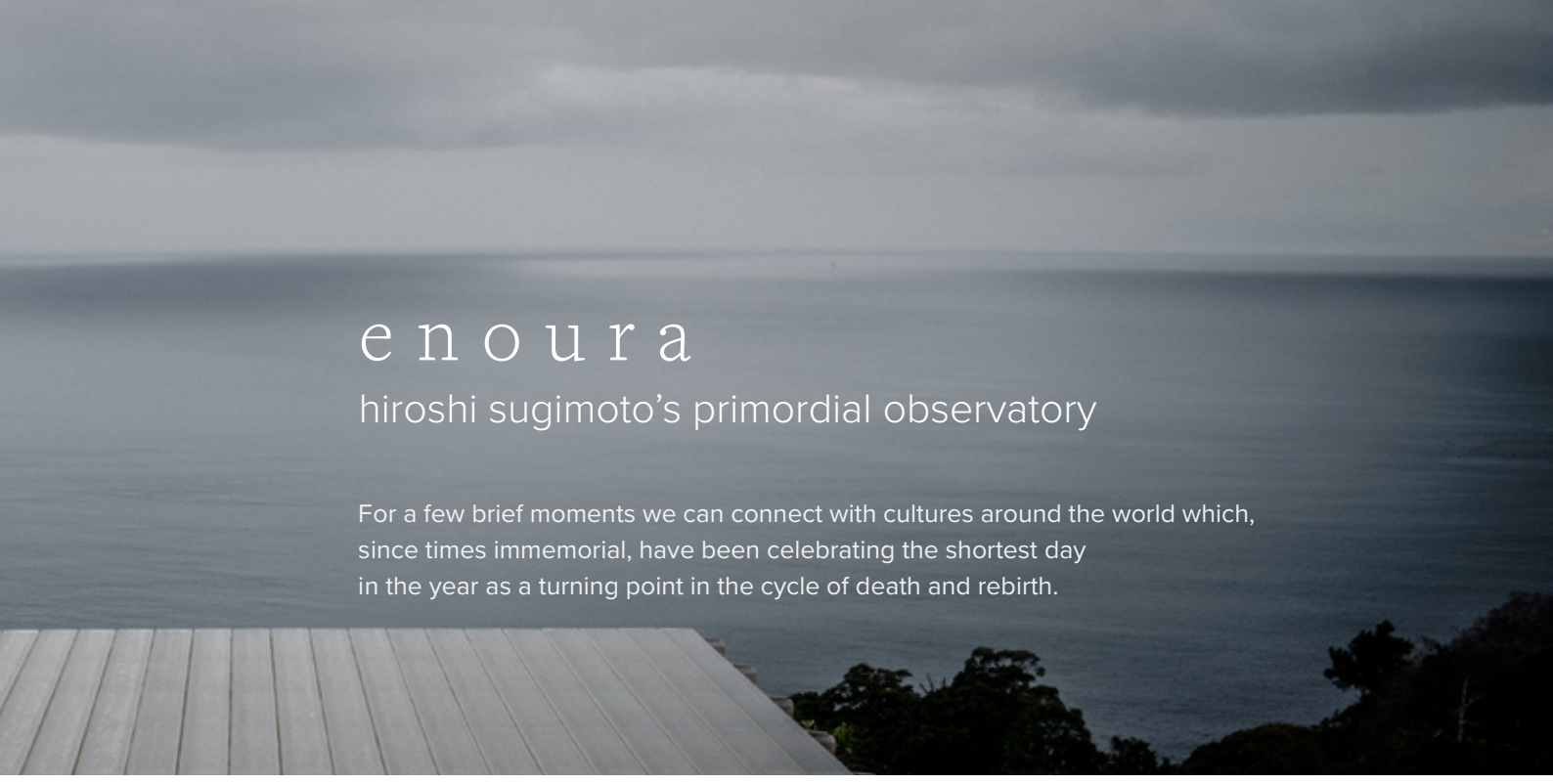
Is that why he decided to return to his spiritual home? Sugimoto says that in Japan, "culture is [still] rooted in the art of living in harmony with nature." He believes he was guided there—to a secluded cliff overlooking Sagami Bay near Odawara—by some "unseen hand." It's very close to that coast imprinted in his mind, his first childhood memory. He hopes visitors who come here will also be able to "return to the wellspring of human consciousness."

Sugimoto, who spent more than a decade designing Enoura, conceived of it as an observatory. The intention is to help visitors reconnect with nature the way our ancestors did—by turning to primal observations of the heavens. "At the dawn of history, when the ancients first gained self-awareness, their first step was to search for and identify the place they occupied within the vastness of the starry firmament."

With that "starry firmament" in mind, but also thinking about the sun which travels across the sky and the changing seasons, Sugimoto designed the main structures on the site to celebrate winter and summer solstices and spring and autumn equinoxes.

The most dramatic perhaps is the Winter Solstice Light Worship Tunnel—a 70-meter tube built of rusty metal, which protrudes from the ground at a slight angle and ends abruptly in the air with an opening directed towards the sea. A rock tied with rope, *sekimori-ishi*—in Japan they can often be found in places considered sacred and signify the area is off limits—serves as the only barrier. The opening frames the limitless horizon stretching beyond the shimmering waters of Sagami Bay.

One cannot help thinking of Sugimoto's seminal



e n o u r a

hiroshi sugimoto's primordial observatory

For a few brief moments we can connect with cultures around the world which, since times immemorial, have been celebrating the shortest day in the year as a turning point in the cycle of death and rebirth.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY MAGDA RITTENHOUSE

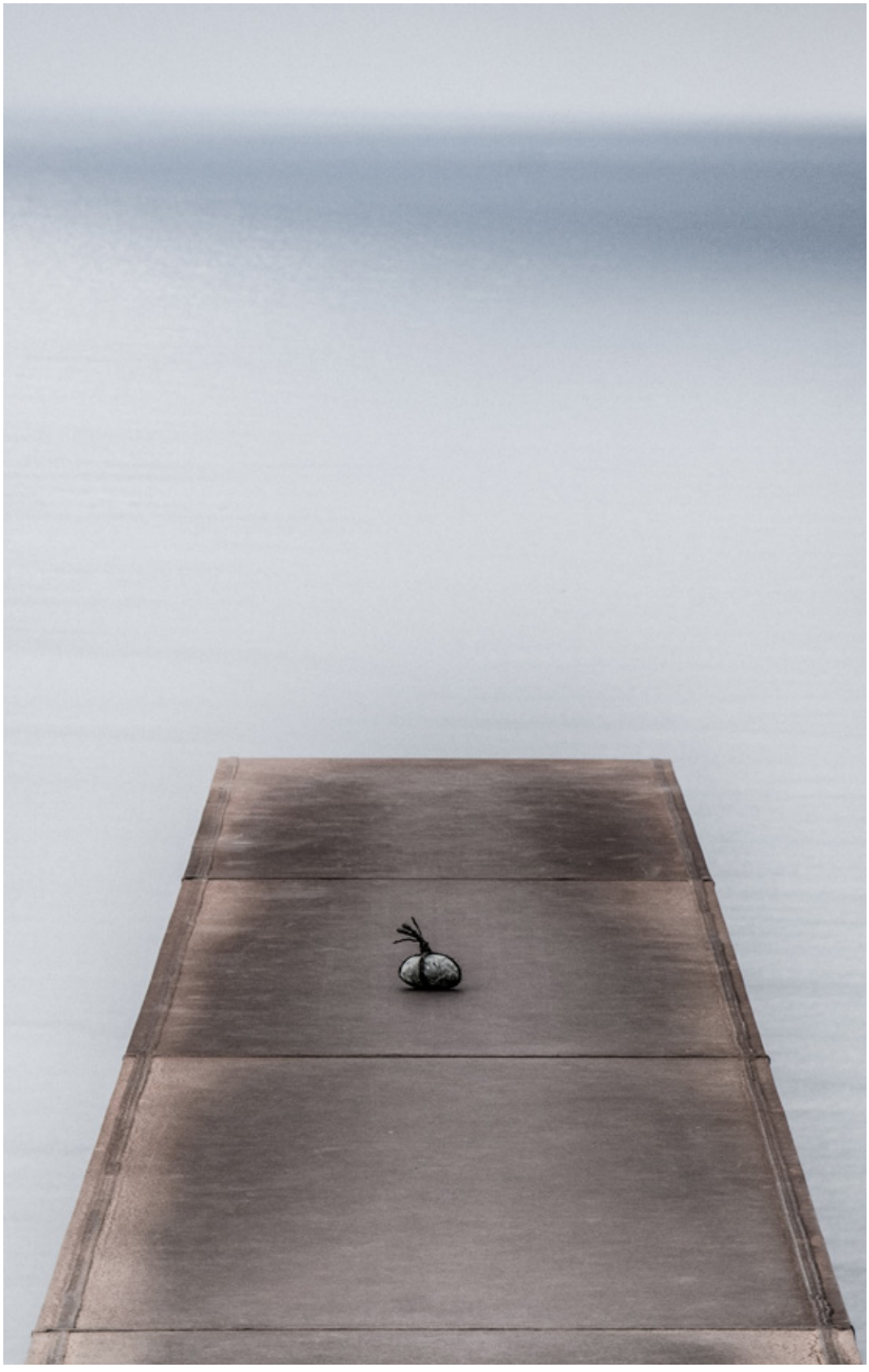
work—a series of restrained, quiet images depicting horizons stretching beyond seas and oceans of the globe. Entitled *Seascapes*, they are his meditation on the "mystery of mysteries"—the beginning of life; passage of time; water and air, which he considers to be most basic, "primordial substances," vouchsafing human existence. "Every time I view the sea, I feel a calming sense of security, as if visiting my ancestral home," he wrote of that work, which he began in the 1980s and continued for the next three decades.

The horizon seems perfectly still, even though the sea and the sky—the clouds—remain in constant motion. The rest of the tunnel is submerged in darkness. Just one small opening, in the middle of the chamber, admits light from above. Directly beneath, an ancient stone well has been filled with chunks of glass resembling huge crystals of salt, or perhaps ice, and reflecting that feeble light.

Sugimoto positioned the whole structure at precisely the right angle so that on the winter solstice, the first rays of sun rising over Sagami Bay can cut across to the other side of the tunnel. It is easy to imagine how the dark chamber fills up with light and how for a few brief moments we can connect with cultures around the world which, since times immemorial, have been celebrating the shortest day in the year as a turning point in the cycle of death and rebirth.

To celebrate the summer solstice, Sugimoto designed a 100 meter long gallery, situated 100 meters above the sea level and angled to admit rays of rising sun at dawn on June 21st. With one of the walls sheathed in glass (there are no visible supports between 37 glass panels lined up next to each other), it affords an uninterrupted view onto a rock garden. Sugimoto, an avid collector of stones, amassed an impressive array, stretching from archeological finds of the Kofun period (250-538 AD) to more recent ones brought from different parts of Japan. "Fossils, which can transport our consciousness back to when life itself was coming into being, can deepen our sense of time," says Sugimoto. "A continuous thread connects [them with] our own lives."

But such threads can be spun through less precious—in fact ordinary—objects as well. In homage to the great tea master Sen no Rikyu, and to honor *wabicha*—the simple, modest style that he favored, in Enoura, Sugimoto decided to replicate one of his famous tea houses, Taian. In doing so, however, he chose to copy the spirit, rather than exact look and so, covered the house with a rusty, corrugated metal roof recycled from a nearby barn. "If Rikyu were alive now, a rusty piece of corrugated iron strikes me as precisely the kind of material he would use," explains Sugimoto, who called the house *Uchoten,* or 'Listen to the Rain.' Indeed, when it rains, those sitting in a tiny, two-*tatami* mat room can hear the raindrops drumming on the iron above their heads. Sugimoto kept the traditional *nijiriguchi* crawl door, but chose to place a big slab of optical glass in front of it. It serves as a step, but also catches and reflects beams of sunlight at dawn during spring and autumn equinoxes.



MAGDA RITTENHOUSE, a writer and a photographer currently based in Tokyo, worked as a news journalist in Europe and in the US for more than two decades. A native of Poland, she came to Japan from New York in 2014 for what was supposed to be a short adventure. It still continues... She is currently working on a book of Japanese essays and photographs and runs a journal at ***magdarittenhouse.com.*** This is her first piece for *Kyoto Journal*.