



*Snake Bracelet with Egg*, 1963  
Dye transfer print  
49 x 38 cm

A total of twelve astronaut suits are hung neatly in a row. They hang so close together that only the side of each suit is visible. Though the suits have been placed one behind the other in a seemingly uniform manner, they by no means hang in the exact same fashion. Sometimes one shoulder hangs lower than another, and with each suit the foot section is positioned slightly different. There is an uncanny and unexpected individuality in the postures, as if the suits were alive, having moved unnoticed. Being full-body suits, there are no gaps in the fabric where one could confirm that there is no human body inside, and every finger of every glove is fully extended, looking like hands. Only the head – that is, where the helmet would be – is missing. Thus twelve headless figures hang in a row on the wall, appearing slightly helpless. How can objects be photographed in such a surreal way? Hiro managed to do so in 1978 in Houston, Texas, where he photographed the Apollo spaceflight training suits. He was a fashion photographer, but he also often created still lifes. His photographs were imaginative, bold, uncompromising and still highly aesthetic.

Born in Shanghai in 1930 as Yasuhiro Wakabayashi, he was raised in pre-World War II Beijing by his Japanese mother and father.<sup>1</sup> In 1946, after the war ended, 15-year-old Hiro and his family returned to Tokyo, with Japan having suffered the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>2</sup> In 1952, when he was 22 years old, he left Japan to study photography in the United States and was determined to work for Richard Avedon, whose works he got to know back home from *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*.<sup>3</sup>

After assisting Avedon for around a year, he was found to be too talented to play second fiddle and was introduced to Alexey Brodovitch, the art director of *Harper's Bazaar*, becoming one of his disciples.<sup>4</sup> He continued close to Avedon, as they shared a studio for many years.<sup>5</sup> Later on, during the 1960s, Hiro worked as the lead photographer for *Harper's Bazaar*, becoming one of the best in the field of editorial and commercial photography.<sup>6</sup> Nicola Erni had the honour of being welcomed to his studio several times to discuss his works and the way in which to print them. She still preserves in her memory the first time he opened the door for her. He had a very observant and straightforward look in his eyes and a very pleasant appearance. Lucky to have acquired numerous prints for the collection, Nicola Erni regrets only one thing: Hiro never made it to Steinhausen to visit the exhibition spaces showing his creations.

Another image surprising for its composition is *Foot Series No. 8 with Ant*, which was published in the April 1982 issue of US *Vogue* to accompany an article titled "Mirror of the Body: Your Feet". The image covered a full page which emphasised the reversed micro-perspective. Here he photographed a big toe, its nail beautifully painted with bright red nail polish. A small ant stands on the highest point of the toe and seems to be almost bravely triumphant, pushing slightly upwards. This scene is complemented with a blurred, seemingly fake background of a blue sky with clouds. This is a wonderful example of Hiro's ability to combine only the essential objects in a beautiful image of unprecedented quality.

The best known and most iconic works of Hiro's oeuvre are probably the surreal still lifes that manage to present products glamorously but simply. He once said: "In the process of photographing, I always put only a few things in the picture. My photographs are very simple-looking. Always."<sup>7</sup> Art critic Richard B. Woodward writing in *Graphis* magazine called it a distinct Japanese sensibility.<sup>8</sup> This is the case, for example, with the *Snake Bracelet with Egg*, where the photographer has placed a flawless duck's egg horizontally inside the bracelet.<sup>9</sup> With the fortune that the size and proportions of the two objects allow them to nestle perfectly into each other, the image poetically depicts the animal, the snake, in its natural behaviour in the wild, tightly enveloping its prey.

Hiro was not the type of photographer who went with his camera in search of an image to capture. He left nothing to chance in his work and self-determinedly manipulated his subjects/objects. He once said: "I usually don't touch a camera until I know exactly what I'm doing. There's a vain discipline in me that wants to think a problem out first."<sup>10</sup> This is consistent with Woodward's experience from 1992. When planning the studio visit, the photographer told him at the time that he can't talk with him the day he's shooting, because when he works he can't concentrate on anything else. After watching Hiro in his studio, he concluded that Hiro is – as his reputation suggested – indeed a perfectionist, repeating his shots until finally capturing the image he strove for.<sup>11</sup> Avedon has related similar experiences which reveal that Hiro knew very much what he was doing in an almost scientific way, saying that Hiro could study a single photograph silently for hours.<sup>12</sup> Photographer Jacques Henri Lartigue, with whom Hiro had a decades-long friendship, described Hiro's manner of taking pictures as follows: "Hiro belongs to a world where science and photographic perfection risks making the work too perfect, classic and cool ... But he is able to go beyond this limit. His technique



is only in service of his artistic ideas. All that Hiro looks at and photographs turns into a masterpiece.”<sup>13</sup> Skilfully crafting his images to reflect his conception and style, these thrilling photographs provoke the viewer to – as they should – look twice.

This is also the case with the experimental works *Subliminal Look* and *Donna Mitchell with Silver Hand*, among others. In the former, you can see the model looking straight into the camera. Her lips are glossy, her eyelashes complemented with exceedingly long artificial extensions, and her silver and gold glittering eyelids and ears are only outshone by her domin-ant earring. The earring itself is composed of several spherical pieces with shiny points, which are the source of the motion effect in the image. These fine lines painted in light extend onto the black left half of the frame, the striking shadow of a male profile. This highly graphic incision in the picture’s composition may evoke for many Cubism and the heads painted by Picasso: a single image contain- ing different perspectives, one frontal and another from the side. Instead, though, it is a direct homage to the innovative photographer Erwin Blumenfeld, who used this precise combination in various ways and forms in his oeuvre.

In *Donna Mitchell with Silver Hand*, Hiro explored similar effects. Here the model’s make-up is much more discreet, but her ears are particularly resplendent. Upon closer in-spection, one notices that the left hand, without make-up, is a man’s hand – analogous to the profile in the previous image. The two hands move horizontally such that the large ring finger draws a beam of light through the motion. Such kineticism was vital to the visual effects in these two images.

Movement is subconsciously associated with liveliness. And Hiro was able to skilfully add this liveliness to the non-moving objects – be it jewellery or other objects of desire – through subtle juxtapositions, particularly with the visually striking animals that had the power to “move” the viewer. He created a style of modern opulence of which one never tires.

Fabiola Son



*Apollo Spaceflight Training Suits,*  
Houston, Texas, 1978  
Dye transfer print  
54.5 × 67.5 cm

1

Owen Edwards, "Hiro: Who may just be... The Great American Photographer", *American Photographer*, January 1982, p. 40.

2

Ibid., p. 40.

3

Ibid., p. 34.

4

Lyle Rexer, "Hiro", *Photograph*, March/April 2016, p. 8.

5

Mark Holborn, Afterword to *Hiro: Photographs*, ed. Richard Avedon, Boston 1999, p. 140.

6

Edwards, "Hiro: Who may just be...", p. 36.

7

Richard B. Woodward, "Still Just Beginning", *Graphis*, no. 278 (March/April 1992).

8

Ibid.

9

Holborn, Afterword to *Hiro: Photographs*, p. 141.

10

Woodward, "Still Just Beginning".

11

Ibid.

12

Veronica Horwell, "Hiro obituary", *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2021/aug/27/hiro-obituary> (accessed 19 June 2022).

13

Jacques Henri Lartigue, cited in Robert Y. Pledge, Interview by Pucci Meyer, *ZOOM*, no. 13 (1972).

Hiro





*American Sky*, 1993  
Pigment print  
129.5 × 98 cm



*Turntable*, 1973  
Pigment print  
129.5 × 100 cm





*Synchro-energizer*, 1988  
Pigment print  
129.5 × 94 cm





Hiro

*Foot Series #8 with Ant*, 1982  
Pigment print  
129.5 × 94.5 cm



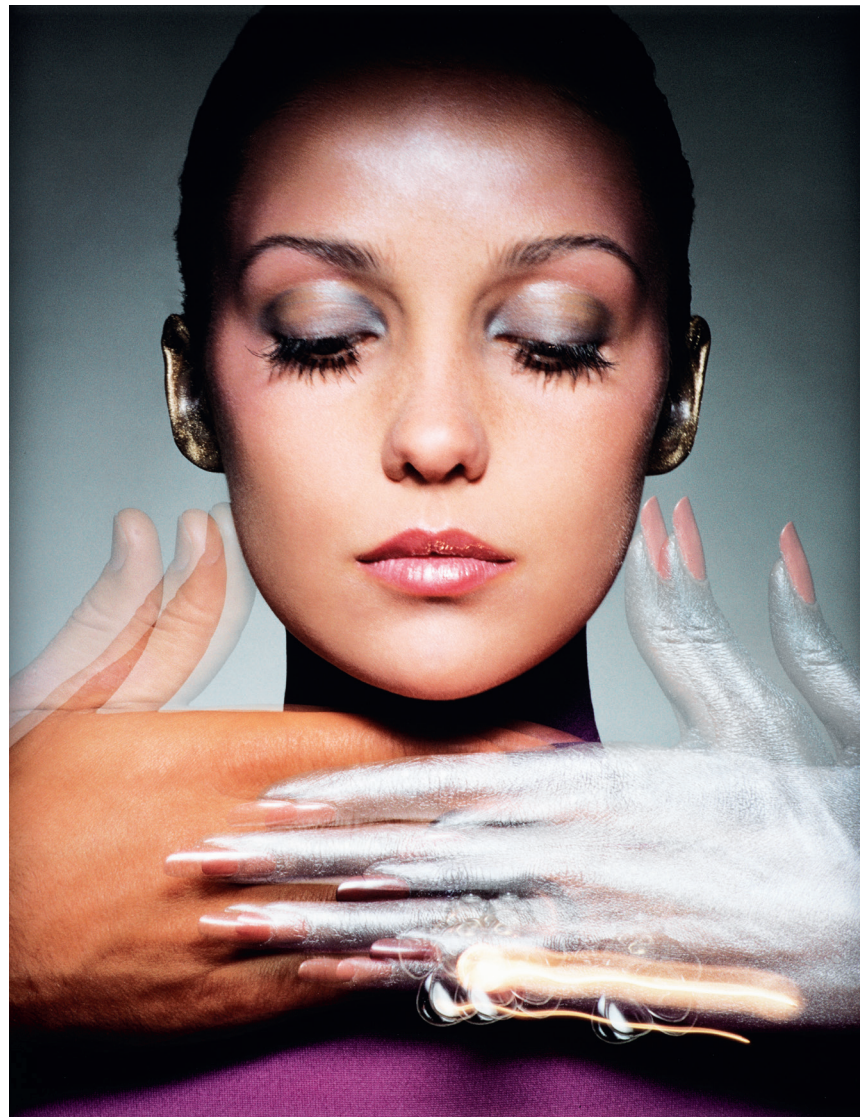


*Jerry Hall, Saint Martin, West Indies, 1975*  
Pigment print  
130 × 93 cm



*Kelly Stewart, New York, 1994*  
Pigment print  
130 × 106.5 cm





*Donna Mitchell with Silver  
Hand, 1968*  
Pigment print  
40 × 32 cm



*Subliminal Look, 1968*  
Dye transfer print  
47 × 35 cm