

Kayne Griffin Corcoran



An Inventive Postwar Japanese Painter Has His Moment



Kazuo Shiraga's "Iizuminokami-Kanesada" (1962). Works by Shiraga, the breakout star of the Gutai Art Association, are being featured in four major exhibitions in New York and Dallas this winter and spring. *Credit Courtesy of Tom Powel Imaging*

Ironically, Kazuo Shiraga's feet were nearly his feet of clay. The breakout star of the Gutai Art Association, Shiraga became colloquially known as the "foot painter"; the Japanese postwar movement's founder, Jiro Yoshihara, even dismissed Shiraga as a "nobody, if he didn't paint with his feet." After his 1955 performance "Challenging Mud," in which the artist wrestled a mixture of cement, gravel, clay, plaster, pebbles and twigs into a "formless form," Shiraga devised an entirely new painting technique. From 1959 onward, he suspended himself from his studio ceiling and manipulated the paint exclusively with his ten toes to create a range of textures from the slinky and supple to the protruding and violent. Almost 60 years later, Shiraga, whose dynamic contributions blend painting and performance, is still a misunderstood radical who is only now receiving the sort of American institutional and gallery attention that properly contextualizes the depth and reach of his practice.

Though Gutai emerged from the rubble of a post-Hiroshima Japan its psyche and physical surroundings obliterated the art collective's motto, declared by Yoshihara, was: "Make something that never existed." Shiraga's expressive painting style was groundbreaking, though the popular narrative that the work remained in isolation in Japan unfairly prevails. Not long after Jackson Pollock dripped paint onto his canvases, and not long before Allan Kaprow began to stage his "happenings," Shiraga anticipated a conceptual rubric that married theory with practice. "Shiraga and other members of the Gutai Art Association had their work dismissed as derivative of second-generation Abstract Expressionism when showing at Martha Jackson Gallery in New York in 1958," the Gutai specialist Fergus McCaffrey explains, "and it is only recently that we have been able to shake off that terrible misunderstanding."



Shiraga's "Chijikusei Gotenrai" (1961). *Credit Courtesy of Ketterer Kunst*

The spring of Shiraga commences this week at Dominique Levy gallery, which is staging “Body and Matter: The Art of Kazuo Shiraga and Satoru Hoshino.” The show, according to Levy is “very much about the relationship between your body and the matter. Shiraga, more than any other Gutai artist, has pushed that.” It includes 23 of Shiraga’s paintings, dating from 1959 through his last efforts in the 2000s, ranging from his noted “Warrior” series of red textured abstraction to his “Nature” pictures, which incorporate blues and explorations of white. “Where he had the courage to stop the movement, he freed himself from the mud,” Levy says. The show also looks at Hoshino, a Kyoto-based Sodeisha ceramicist whose own practice incorporates physicality but emerged later in the 1980s and 90s, extending the line of influence drawn by Shiraga in his own country.

Levy, known for her sharp-shooting secondary-market prowess, has undertaken this feat with the help of a few famous friends who have long championed Gutai in the West. Most notable is the Belgian collector and wabi-sabi practitioner Axel Vervoordt, who first began acquiring pieces from the movement in 2005 and is almost entirely responsible for reigniting Shiraga’s market in this past decade. Levy tapped Vervoordt to publish the monograph, which contains new scholarship by the art historians John Rajchman and Reiko Tomii. The other names to know when considering Gutai in Western art patronage are the Dallas stalwarts Howard and Cindy Rachofsky, the most prominent of Gutai’s American collectors, who championed his cause so effectively that the Dallas Museum of Art will, on Feb. 8, open “Between Action and the Unknown: The Art of Kazuo Shiraga and Sadamasa Motonaga,” featuring extensive holdings from their personal collection, which the Rachofskys often display in their Warehouse exhibition space. The show is co-curated by Koichi Kawasaki, who organized Levy exhibition as well.

During the movement’s heyday from 1954 until 1972, Gutai art found its way to Europe courtesy of the critic Michel Tapié, who placed Shiraga’s works into notable collections. However, it’s telling that in America, the Museum of Modern Art owns not a single work of his, nor did Shiraga have a first solo exhibition until 2010 — posthumously, thanks to McCaffrey, who represents Shiraga’s and Motonaga’s estates. McCaffrey’s gallery will, in late April, stage its fifth Shiraga show this time examining the artistic relationship between Kazuo and his wife Fujiko. And the subject of Gutai only received its first retrospective in 2013 at the Guggenheim. “This is a situation where America has been

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out of step with Europe and Japan in the recognition of Kazuo Shiraga," McCaffrey says. The story of Gutai in America is one of revival at the hands of these headlining collectors and dealers, who, along with Levy, include Robert Mnuchin, Tim Blum and Jeff Poe. The Shiraga renaissance also gets the white-wall treatment from Mnuchin Gallery, which opens its Shiraga foot-painting show on Feb. 10.

It's no secret that Western art history has ignored many except its own kin, but this current moment of Shiraga is a public plea for his necessary inclusion into its formal narrative, as well as into the market. For the inner collecting coterie, the moment feels overdue, but for a public just beginning to whet its palate, Shiraga's vitality and action feel anything but stuck in the mud. "The confinement of the paintings haunts; you can't really go back, you can only go in," Levy says. "People think you need space, but you need to go make love with the painting."

—Julie Baumgardner