

Kayne Griffin Corcoran The New York Times

Art World Rediscovered Kazuo Shiraga



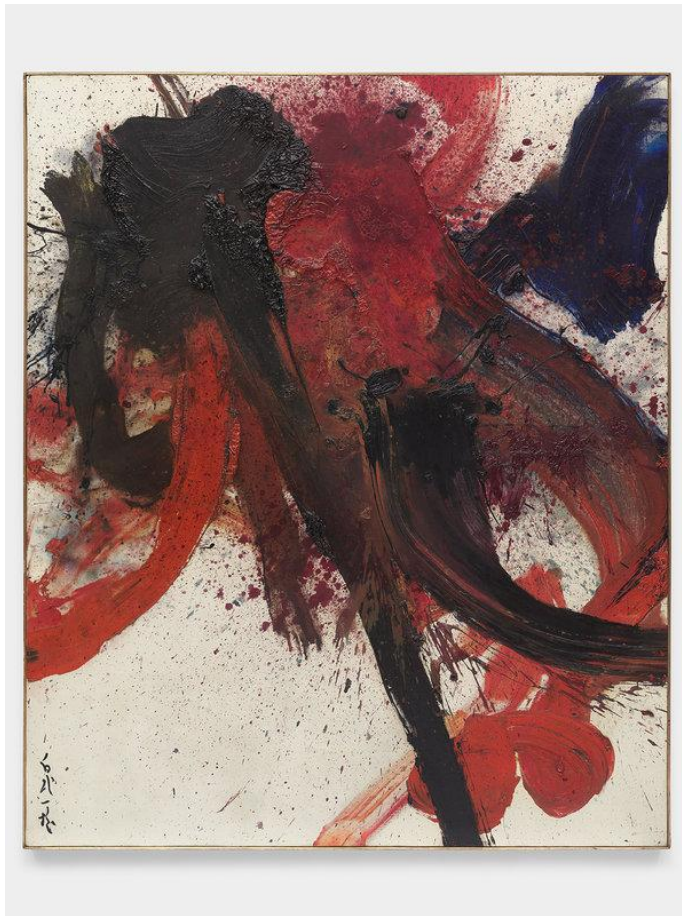
Kazuo Shiraga in his studio in 1960. Credit Amagasaki Cultural Center

LONDON — Kazuo Shiraga is the art world's rediscovery of the moment.

A member of Japan's Gutai group of avant-garde artists, Shiraga (1924-2008) developed during his six-decade career the singular technique of painting suspended from a rope, using his feet to make violently abstract, thickly impasted canvases. It has only been since the artist's death, however, that the conceptual originality and visual power of these "foot paintings" have been recognized by Western curators and collectors, particularly in the United States.

Shiraga was one of the central figures in a 2013 retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York devoted to the Gutai collective. Now, he and a fellow Gutai member, Sadamasa Motonaga, are the focus of an exhibition at the Dallas Museum of Art to July 19.

There are also two shows that combine loaned and for-sale Shiraga works at the New York galleries Mnuchin and Dominique Lévy. And starting April 30, the New York dealer Fergus McCaffrey, who represents the artist's estate, will be exhibiting works by Shiraga and his wife, Fujiko Uemura.



Shiraga's 1961 painting "Chihekisei Dakosho" at Mnuchin Gallery in New York. Credit Mnuchin Gallery/Photograph by Tom Powel Imaging, Inc./The Estate of Kazuo Shiraga

Shiraga has also been popular on the auction market. In December, Ketterer Kunst in Munich sold Shiraga's prime-period 1961 abstract, "Chijikusei Gotenrai," for 3.25 million euros, about \$3.7 million. The seller was the widow of a doctor who had bought the painting for 25,000 Deutsche marks, about \$17,000, from Galerie Georg Nothelfer in Berlin in 1992.

"I told my collectors it would be good for their collections if they had a Shiraga," said the gallery's founder, Georg Nothelfer, 77, who, with Rodolphe Stadler in Paris and David Juda in London, was one of the few European dealers who exhibited Shiraga in his lifetime. "I used to charge between 20,000 marks and 40,000 marks for them."

The Japanese artist was virtually unknown in the United States for most of the second half of the 20th century.

Shiraga's resurgence is helped by the vogue for so-called process-based abstraction, and a revival of interest in performance art. Shown by the Belgian dealer Axel Vervoordt next to European postwar abstracts by Luciano Fontana and Zero group artists at the Venice Biennale beginning in 2007, his paintings were a revelation to American tastemakers like the Dallas collector and philanthropist Howard Rachofsky and Ms. Lévy, the New York gallerist.

"When you saw it in context with Fontana, there was a degree of interaction; it was a quick and easy leap," said Mr. Rachofsky, a former hedge fund manager who has a private museum and is one of the world's most prominent collectors of American minimalism and Italian postwar art. "There's a lot of spirit in these paintings."

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In recent years, Mr. Rachofsky, with his adviser, Allan Schwartzman, and Mr. McCaffrey, has regularly traveled to Japan, quietly amassing a collection of about 40 works by Shiraga and other Japanese conceptually minded artists that complemented his holdings of American and European art.

Mr. McCaffrey said in an email that they had made "four or five trips" to Japan. "The whole gallery system is broken down in Japan," he wrote, "and no one was representing these important artists or their estates, so literally we would go to artists' homes, old warehouses and museum vaults, as there were no galleries that showed this work."

Six pieces from the Rachofsky Collection have been included in the Dallas Museum's current Shiraga and Motonaga show.

Since the art market crash of 2009, many wealthy collectors have become reluctant to pay six-figure prices for works by young artists, believing that there is better value and quality to be found among the neglected talent of the 20th century. The challenge is timing, though. As Mr. Rachofsky put it, "If you're not there at the nanosecond of rediscovery, you can find yourself queuing up to pay \$250,000."

Shiraga has now been rediscovered, prompting some collectors to explore more rarefied and affordable areas of the Japanese avant-garde, such as the Mono-ha and Hi-Red Center movements. Robert Mnuchin and Ms. Lévy — who from 2005 to 2012 were partners in the New York gallery L & M Arts — have both priced their few available Shiraga paintings at about \$2 million to \$6 million, slightly above the auction high of \$5.3 million for the artist. Both dealers said they had made sales, but did not identify the individual works or prices.

"He was an artist's artist," said Ms. Lévy, who has collaborated with Mr. Vervoordt on a 300-page monograph on Shiraga to coincide with her exhibition. "Books by him were found in Pollock's studio, and Tàpies owned a work by Shiraga and said it was his favorite painting."

Although she and Mr. Mnuchin are convinced of Shiraga's originality and importance, both dealers are uncertain whether the momentum in his market — his auction high has increased almost five-fold since 2008 — can be maintained.

"The increase in interest in the United States has been extraordinary," Mr. Mnuchin said, "but in two years I'm not sure you'll be seeing a Shiraga in every auction as you are now."

When the prices for rediscovered artists approach the levels of those in the museum-ratified "canon," collectors and museums are faced with the same question they confront when asked to pay \$200,000 for a painting by a 25-year-old: Is the reputation of the artist — and by extension, the investment — going to last?

This was the question posed when a 1967 multilayered white canvas by the recently "rediscovered" Italian artist Paolo Scheggi (1940-1971) sold for an auction record of 1.2 million pounds, about \$1.8 million, at Christie's postwar and contemporary sale in London on Feb. 11. In October 2013, eyebrows were raised when another monochrome by this all-but-forgotten contemporary of Fontana and Piero Manzoni sold for £218,500 at auction, but prices have since soared as more works have come on the market.

Is something similar going to happen to the more cerebral and political art of Fabio Mauri (1926-2009)? Beginning Thursday, the New York branch of the Hauser & Wirth gallery will be showing about 50 works from the estate of this Italian multidisciplinary avant-garde artist, who explored the totalitarian ideologies that overshadowed his youth.

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These include the 1970 canvas "Schermo The End," a recreation of the screen that concluded Italian Fascist movie documentaries in the 1930s. Prices will range from \$50,000 to \$1 million. To date, no work by Mauri has sold for more than \$100,000 at auction.

"There are opportunities for collectors," Mr. Rachofsky said. "People gravitate to areas and artists that haven't been explored. But not all of them are as interesting as people think. There was a reason that some artists fell into obscurity."

—Scott Reyburn