

## KAZUO SHIRAGA

2/23/10  
MCCAFFREY

By Elizabeth C. Baker



**NEW YORK** Six large, paint-laden gestural abstractions made a ferociously muscular appearance in New York recently, constituting, along with photos and films, a compact account of a leading participant in Japan's postwar avant-garde. Kazuo Shiraga (1924-2008) was an early member of the Gutai Art Association, which was active from 1954 to 1972, primarily in and around Osaka. A scant decade after Japan's WWII defeat, young Gutai artists, determinedly international in their thinking and activities, were intent on revivifying Japanese art. Vehemently rejecting traditional art forms, they published their ideas and images in *Gutai* magazine and mailed it to far-flung kindred spirits, including Jackson Pollock and Ray Johnson in New York, the Paris critic and *Informel* proponent Michel Tapié, and many art professionals around the globe.

This was Shiraga's first solo in the U.S. Taken alone, the selection of paintings, dating from 1961 to 2001, could suggest a hyper-energetic variant of Abstract Expressionism. The photographic material, however, documents something more complicated. As early as 1954, urged on by Jiro Yoshihara, the group's leader, Shiraga and his colleagues devised various radically direct, performative approaches to raw materials. Refinement was not their game. A 1955 film shows Shiraga sprawled on the ground, half naked, wrestling with a viscous mixture of clay and concrete. This full-body engagement led to a versatile technique of painting with his bare feet. Other artists leaped through paper screens, fired paint at canvases with guns or made provocative use of ordinary objects.

The canvases at McCaffrey rewarded close examination. Several involve varied intensities of single colors, while others unleash multiple hues. Pictorial activity, whether swirled, lumpy or furrowed, may be all over, or centered and thinning toward the edges. Shiraga often worked while suspended from a rope above canvas (or paper) placed on the floor. The airborne attack yielded long, sinuous passages retaining the parallel tracks of his toes. His expressive range is considerable. Recurrent floods of blood-red pigment suggest violence. Elsewhere, footprint traces subtly allude to dance. Shiraga—like others in the group—was influenced by the Abstract Expressionists, who had exhibited in Japan in 1951. But the performance/action aspect of Gutai work, starting as early as 1954, anticipated and/or influenced Allan Kaprow's

Happenings, Yves Klein's Anthropometries and much that followed. In the '60s, Gutai drew many international avant-gardists to Osaka. When Gutai disbanded in '72, a period of eclipse followed. Subsequently, many shows in Europe and the U.S. have re-established the group's significance. A selection of Gutai work appeared at the 2009 Venice Biennale (emphasizing its proto-Fluxus aspect), while a small, fascinating show that opened last July at the Pollock-Krasner Center in East Hampton comprised paintings and archives. The Guggenheim held a Gutai symposium in November. Individual Gutai participants are finally receiving attention here, as well, but many individual careers remain to be explored, and a full-scale Gutai exhibition in a U.S. museum is surely overdue.

*[The Pollock-Krasner show, titled "Under Each Other's Spell: The Gutai and New York," is at UB-Anderson Gallery, University of Buffalo, Mar. 27-Aug. 22.]*

*Photo: Kazuo Shiraga: Funryū, 1973, alkyd paint on canvas, 7158 by 8938 inches; at McCaffrey.*