

Fergus McCaffrey is pleased to present a solo presentation of paintings by Kazuo Shiraga from the 1980s and '90s

Fergus McCaffrey, Tokyo

March 23 – May 18, 2019

Opening Reception: March 23, 6 – 8PM

Fergus McCaffrey is pleased to present an exhibition of **Kazuo Shiraga's** paintings from the 1980s and '90s at the gallery's Tokyo location, marking the artist's first solo exhibition in the city in over a decade. A selection of the artist's forceful gestural canvases, including several large-scale oil-on-paper paintings mounted on canvas, will be on view March 23 through May 18, 2019.



Kazuo Shiraga emerged as one of the most prominent members of the avant-garde group Gutai with his innovative foot painting practice, begun in 1954, in which the artist used his feet to paint powerful and energetic abstract forms. He would set a canvas on the floor of his studio and, suspending his body from a rope hung from the ceiling, push and kick oil paint applied in dynamic strokes over the canvas' surface. Shiraga continued to paint in this manner for the majority of his career, developing an entirely new form while engaging historical techniques of painting with the body rather than with brushes. As Shiraga described it: "I want to paint as though I were rushing around a battlefield, exerting myself to collapse from exhaustion."

When Shiraga first began painting in the mid-1950s, he preferred to work on sheets of raw, porous paper, finding that the support absorbed oil paint to produce amber halos of excess oil around his energetic strokes of pigment. The artist abandoned this technique in 1958 when French art dealer and curator Michel Tapié began circulating his paintings internationally: works painted directly on canvas were easier to transport and exhibit internationally. Despite this, Shiraga remained captivated by the stark juxtaposition of fragile paper—a material with a rich and long tradition in Japan—and viscous oil paint, which carried the connotation of the Western art historical tradition. In 1985, he became increasingly interested in the liquidity of paint, and began using a transparent type of oil paint to produce works with a stainlike underpainting; Fergus McCaffrey's exhibition celebrates this tendency by bring a group of these rare works together. In works such as *Hatengō* (1985), for example, slick and violently worked jet-black footstrokes are undergirded by pooled oil, producing a haunting shadow atop the energetic central burst.

The exhibition also includes a selection of monochrome paintings by the artist, all executed in his typical foot painting technique. In 1971, Shiraga began the arduous process of studying to become a monk of the Tendai sect of esoteric Buddhism. That year, he was given the name *Sodō* (Simple Way). Shiraga was ordained in an initiation ceremony in 1974 and resumed his

painting practice thereafter. Praying to the god *Fudō* and chanting the heart sutra became part of Shiraga's preparation before painting; works made after this experience—such as *Deishaku* (1987)—incorporate soft, pastel colors, and often evoke a sense of sublimity and calm as opposed to the more violent energy of the earlier works. As the artist continued his formal experiments into the 1980s, he often used a single monochromatic color on unprimed canvas, as in *Hatengō*. In the 1990s, bolder colors, including dense black, vibrant blue, and bright orange appear, as in *Fūma* (1996), which incorporates red-orange strokes under loose, balletic black and, most notably, a shocking streak of vibrant blue and white in the painting's upper-left quadrant.



Fūma, with its dynamic and stark coloration, derives from a perturbing childhood memory of the artist's, in which he later recollects. Writing about the painting, the artist recalled, "When I was little, there was a place called *Hiyo-tsuji* (the street of day-laborers) where children believed, and feared, that dust devils stirred in the winter. It's said that, in the old times, day labors lined up there every morning to get jobs from the recruiter. One freezing winter night, under a star-filled sky, the sound of Geta-clogs was echoing through the nearby houses, and then a strong, sudden gust of wind stirred from the Rokko mountains. I had heard a rumor that, under those conditions, demons would appear, and I remember how fearful I was in that moment. *Fuma* was created on November 22, 1996 with this subconscious memory from my childhood in mind."

About the artist

Kazuo Shiraga was born in 1924 in Amagasaki, Japan. After studying Nihon-ga (Japanese-style painting) in Kyoto and growing frustrated with the stylistic and material confines he found in *Nihon-ga*, Shiraga participated in *Gendai Bijutsu Kondankai* (Contemporary Art Discussion Group) with several other students and began experimenting with making oil paintings using his hands and fingers. Shiraga found the viscosity of tube-ready oil paint more "free" than the inconvenient and thin ink-based pigments he had used in painting school. In 1955, Shiraga joined renowned Japanese avant-garde collective Gutai and was inspired by Gutai's leader, Jiro Yoshihara, to further push his performative, material-driven painting practice in order to "make something that never existed" before. During his time as a member of Gutai, Shiraga simultaneously pursued oil painting and performance, often integrating the two practices in performance-painting pieces as *Challenging Mud* (1955), in which the artist used his entire body to manipulate mud as if it were thick, pliable paint, and *Ultramodern Sanbaso* (1957), in which he wore a dramatic red costume with elongated and wing-like arms, his movements creating slashes of color against the stark black backdrop of the stage. Shiraga continued this exploration of the relationship between body and material over the course of his career, and is best known for the large-scale foot paintings he made well into his eighties.

About Fergus McCaffrey

Founded in 2006, Fergus McCaffrey is internationally recognized for its groundbreaking role in promoting the work of postwar Japanese artists such as Sadamasa Motonaga, Kazuo Shiraga and Jiro Takamatsu. The gallery also exhibits the work of emerging and seminal Western artists such as Marcia Hafif, Birgit Jürgenssen, Richard Nonas, Sigmar Polke and Carol Rama. In keeping with the gallery's commitment to Japanese art and culture, McCaffrey opened its Tokyo outpost in March 2018 with an exhibition of paintings by Robert Ryman. The gallery's 2019 program features solo exhibitions by Ari Marcopoulos, Patti Smith, and Jasper Johns, among others.

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Images:

1. Kazuo Shiraga, *Hatengō*, 1985, Oil and ink on Japanese paper, 82 5/8 x 103 3/4 inches (210 x 263.5 cm) © The Estate of Kazuo Shiraga
2. Kazuo Shiraga, *Deishaku*, 1987, Oil on paper mounted on board, 68 1/4 x 90 1/4 inches (173.5 x 229.5 cm) © The Estate of Kazuo Shiraga
3. Kazuo Shiraga, *Fūma*, 1996, Oil on canvas, 76 3/8 x 102 inches (194 x 259.1 cm) © The Estate of Kazuo Shiraga

Map:

(Omotesando station A3 exit)

