Kazuo Shiraga

McCAFFREY FINE ART

Though Kazuo Shiraga (1924–2008) has long been considered one of the most important members of Japan's Gutaï group, this lucid exhibition was his first solo show in the United States. In consequence, many viewers may have been unaware, at least initially, of the salient fact that he painted with his feet. Laying his support (first flimsy paper, later canvas) on the floor, and holding on to a rope suspended from the ceiling of his studio, he would slip and slide through blobs of oil paint. The marks that resulted have a kind of beastly quality: deeply furrowed; seemingly random, sometimes spasmodic, in their trajectories; with pigments messily intermixing and dragging themselves across the canvas in striated streaks. Six such paintings, made between 1961 and 2001, were on view at McCaffrey Fine Art, along with a judicious selection of performance documentation from the 1950s, including a photograph of the artist thrashing around in a goopy-looking mound of plaster and concrete during the action *Challenging Mud*, 1955, created for the first Gutaï Art Exhibition in Tokyo. With this photo as prompting, *Kanyō (Xianyang)*, 1980, might have reminded some visitors of the Alaskan mudflat in Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man*, rutted and churned by the two bears who'd been fighting on it. A viscerally arresting six-by-eight-foot painting in which a shocking-green diagonal plows through a tangle of black, white, and pinkish tan, *Kanyō (Xianyang)* looks less like a composed painting than a site of combat—flatbed picture plane as wrestling mat. The same might be said of the equally monumental *Sōryū no Mai* (Dance of the Two-Headed Dragon), 1994, a Gordian knot of blue, turquoise, white, yellow, and red encircled by a trail of restless footprints. "I want to paint as though rushing around a battlefield," the artist wrote in 1955, a year after he'd developed his foot-painting technique.

It's important to stress that Shiraga's seeming abdication of the higher faculties—expressed in the declension from hand to foot—was itself a carefully considered move, underpinned not by impulse but by intellectual engagement with the avant-garde discourse of postwar Japan. In fact, as gallerist Fergus McCaffrey points out in the catalogue accompanying the show, Shiraga's Western reception (such as it is) has been dogged by the mistaken idea that he was a second-generation Abstract Expressionist. Rather, he was in sync with Gutaï's agenda, which explicitly sought to surpass Abstract Expressionism and its "centripetal," or introspective, energies. *Gutaï* means "concreteness," and its members, per their 1956 manifesto, were after a "centrifugal" art that was deeply invested in the immanent, material, and corporal. Pushing the link between concreteness and carnality, Shiraga strove to produce paintings that were both *isamashii* (brave) and *iyō* (grotesque), according to catalogue contributor Reiko Tomii. Here the Herzog comparison again seems apt; Shiraga's work appears to have evolved from the same existential machismo, the same almost compulsive need to thematize bravado and Thanatos. A skilled marksman, a hunter, and a sometime wrestler, in the 1950s and '60s he made works incorporating cows' livers, chunks of raw lamb, and flayed boars' hides. He pored over traditional Japanese horror stories and pulp monster tales, and named paintings after the 108 demon-heroes of the classical Chinese epic *Water Margin*. His favorite color in these early years was red; in *Chizensei Kirenji* (Demon Face Incarnated from Earthly Whole Star), 1961, progressively brighter crimson and scarlet marks are layered over one another, throwing off arterially brilliant splatters. But crucially, as in Herzog's case, one senses the artist standing back from a grim construction of masculinity—not enacting it haplessly (as, arguably, Jackson Pollock did) but investigating it, possibly even exorcising it. In this regard it seems relevant to mention that Shiraga became a Buddhist monk in 1971 and then, after a hiatus from artmaking, produced a group of black, white, and gray alkyd works from which all the fleshiness and grotesquerie of the earlier paintings is absent. Two beautiful exemplars of this phase—their complicated surfaces evincing a kind of photosensitive delicacy—were on view at McCaffrey. However delicate, they still pack a powerful punch.

—Elizabeth Schambelan

Kazuo Shiraga, *Funry* (Jetstream), 1973, alkyd paint on canvas, 71⅝ x 89⅜".

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