



Mud, Sweat, and Oil Paint

KAZUO SHIRAGA'S ALTERNATE MODERNISM.

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Chizensei Kirenji, 1961. OIL ON CANVAS, 51¼ x 63¾ IN.

What does rolling around in the mud have to do with painting? Everything, according to the late Japanese artist Kazuo Shiraga, who was a prominent member of the legendary Gutai Art Association. Although the bulk of his output was on canvas, in *Challenging Mud*, 1955, Shiraga wrestled with a formless mixture of wall plaster and cement that bruised his body. To him, this and such other performance pieces as *Sanbaso-Super Modern*, 1957—in which he swayed on stage clad in a red costume with a pointed hat and elongated arms that made sweeping motions against the dark background—were alternate methods of painting. “There exists my action, regardless of whether or not it is secured,” Shiraga wrote in his 1955 essay “Action Only.” Defining painting as a gesture rather than a medium was revolutionary in the 1950s.

Despite his innovative thinking, Shiraga has not been well known in the United States. This is perhaps because when his work debuted in New York, in a 1958 Gutai group show at Martha Jackson Gallery, it was panned as multiply derivative. “As records, they are interesting enough, but as paintings they are ineffectual,” the critic Dore Ashton wrote in the *New York Times*. “They resemble paintings in Paris, Amsterdam, London, and Mexico City that resemble paintings that resemble paintings by



Performance stills from *Challenging Mud*, third execution. Created at first Gutai Art Exhibition, Ohara Kaikan, Tokyo, October 1955.



Pollock and his followers.” The negative critical response reflected a New York–centrism that saw the city as the source of all that was new, and could not acknowledge that Japanese artists might also participate in shaping the future of painting. In fact, derivativeness was contrary to the philosophy of the Gutai collective, as reflected in this passage from its 1955 manifesto: “After Pollock many Pollock imitators appeared, but Pollock’s splendor will never be extinguished. The talent of invention deserves respect.”

The worldview expressed by Ashton is no longer in vogue, and a recent surge of interest in postwar Japan’s rich modern art has led to a broader understanding of Shiraga in the U.S. and beyond. His work appeared in the 1998 “Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979,” organized by Paul Schimmel at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, whose catalogue cover carried an image from *Challenging Mud*, and in “Scream Against the Sky: Japanese Art After 1945,” curated by Alexandra Munroe at the Guggenheim in New York in 1994. Shiraga was also included in the show “In-Finitum,” at the Palazzo Fortuny during the 2009 Venice Biennale. And last fall, McCaffrey Fine Art staged Shiraga’s first U.S. solo exhibition, giving New Yorkers a rare first-hand experience of his very original artistic achievement. Among the works on show were six large

pictures that he made between 1961 and 2001 using his signature technique: painting with his bare feet.

The foot paintings are extraordinary, demonstrating that their peculiar method of creation was more than mere gimmick. The pictures are gestural and bold, their quick execution producing a sense of immediacy. Suspended from a rope and daubing his feet directly in the paint, Shiraga was able to make long strokes not possible with a handheld brush. “I wanted to make a painting that was like a sea cucumber,” he said in a 1973 interview appearing in a Tokyo Gallery catalogue. “A painting as slippery, as uncatchable as a sea cucumber, or *konnyaku* jelly, or a jellyfish. A painting with no center, no pyramid composition, no L-shaped composition.” The pictures at McCaffrey attain this slipperiness, producing a temporary vertigo, an oceanic loss of self. In *Kanyo (Xianyang)*, 1980, mountains of striated paint are bunched and pushed along the canvas. Elegant black-and-white calligraphy forms a long cursive S in *Shiu (Praying for Rain to Stop)*, 1973. Footprints travel around the perimeter of *Soryu no Mai (Dance of the Two-Headed Dragon)*, 1994, in a pattern oddly reminiscent of a Warhol dance diagram; in fact, all the works bear traces of a methodical if improvised choreography. Some resemble landscapes alive with air bubbles dotting their



Shiu (Praying for Rain to Stop), 1973. ALKYD PAINT ON CANVAS, 51¼ x 76¾ IN.
BELOW: *Chimosei Hakujuitsuso*, 2001. OIL ON CANVAS, 76 x 51¼ IN.



smooth surfaces, shiny moonscapes and slippery topographies marked by puckers and rolls, splatters and explosions. The somatic handling of the paint elicits visceral reactions in the viewer.

Shiraga's expansive, liquid technique sprang from his deep involvement in the postwar Japanese avant-garde. Born to privilege, he attended the Kyoto Municipal School of Painting, where he was trained in *nihonga*, an orderly and structured form, mixing pigments with inks. In 1952, however, he helped found the *Zero-kai* (Zero Society), a collective that exhibited together and shared ideas about breaking with traditional Japanese art forms. Two years later Zero was invited to merge with *Gutai*, whose members, under the direction of the older artist Jiro Yoshihara, were challenged to experiment constantly and given assignments. "We have decided to pursue the possibilities of pure and creative activity with great energy," Yoshihara wrote in the group's manifesto. "We tried to combine human creative ability with the characteristics of the material in order to concretize the abstract space." Shiraga, with his growing interest in painting governed by action, fit in perfectly.

He honed his ideas in the collective's publications. "I want to paint as though rushing around a battlefield, exerting myself to collapse from exhaustion," he wrote in his 1955 essay "What I Think," expanding that idea in an essay written later that month, "Action Only": "Before I knew it, my palette knife was replaced by a piece of wood, which I then impatiently threw away. Let me do it with my hands, with my fingers. Then,

as I ran and ran, believing that I was moving forward, it occurred to me: Why not feet? Why don't I paint with my feet?"

Wishing to free himself from the constraints of color, Shiraga created his first "Performance Paintings" (a term coined by the Shiraga scholar Reiko Tomii) in 1953 using only crimson lake, the hue of fresh blood. This contributes to a sense of exhilarating violence that culminates in pictures like *Wild Boar Hunting II*, 1963, in which a boar skin was affixed to the canvas and smeared with black and red, wet and matted like lacerated flesh. Over time Shiraga abandoned monochromism and started using a wide range of colors. After a mid 1960s experimental phase, from which little work remains, and in 1971 becoming a Buddhist monk in a sect promoting enlightenment through physical experience, he shifted from the violence of "rushing around a battlefield" to the dance of foot painting, which he would continue until his death, in 2008 at age 84.

For Shiraga, who once remarked that "painting with my feet is an honest line of work for me," these pieces were explorations of a complicated concept. With his disarmingly simple gestures, he expanded the definition of painting, taking performance from a separate discipline onto the same plane as watercolor and tempura. This categorical fluidity is beautifully illustrated in the McCaffrey show, which juxtaposes an image of Shiraga's back covered in the mud he had just "challenged" with a later, more topographic painting whose surface echoes the grainy coating on the artist's body—a captured moment in black and white and a painting still drying after 30 years. **MP**