MOMUS

SEEING RED: UNDERSTANDING KAZUO SHIRAGA'S SUDDEN FAME

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Kazuo Shiraga performing "Challenging Mud" at the 1st Gutai Open Air Exhibition, Tokyo, 1955.

Kazuo Shiragao, "Untitled," 1962, Courtesy of Dominique Lévy Gallery.

In recent years, the reputation of postwar abstract painter Kazuo Shiraga (1924-2008) – known for turbulent, crimson paintings made with his feet – has taken a giant step forward on a path long in the making.

As a result of Shiraga's expanded visibility, curators and gallerists specializing in Japanese modern art are finally witnessing non-Western works be admitted to a formerly Euro-American art-historical narrative. "We've been arguing for this for a long time," says Alexandra Munroe, senior curator of Asian art at the Guggenheim Museum. "It's been a real fight." The independent curator Reiko Tomii agrees. "It's only in the last ten years that academia is trying to incorporate non-Western art into art history, especially for those diehard modernist art scholars."

The avant-garde movement called Gutai has received a belated recognition and a new appreciation of perhaps its most brilliant member, Shiraga. While an ethnocentric, aesthetic chauvinism in the American artworld has downplayed the significance of this movement, a newly revisionist spirit is driving a wedge into the monolithic canon, upsetting an entrenched view of the West's monopoly on reinventing art.

Collectors, curators, critics, and educators are rectifying past neglect. In the market, Shiraga's prices have soared since 2003, when a 1961 painting went for $46,000 at auction, to 2014 when Sotheby's sold a 1969 painting for over five million. This spring, three shows at major New York galleries and a museum retrospective have spotlighted Shiraga, the most well-known of the Gutai art collective.

Although his work is a staple in Japanese museums and has been exhibited widely in Europe for nearly fifty years, Shiraga is having "an American moment," says Ming Tiampo, associate professor of art history at Carlton University, Ottawa. "It's really only now that American audiences are paying attention," she adds. "Having all four strands of the artworld – academia, museums, the market, and critics – interested in his work at the same time is really quite powerful."

"There seems to be a Shiraga-mania going on," a visitor to the Mnuchin Gallery (showing 17 canvases until April 11) noted of the flurry of exhibitions. At the Dominique Lévy Gallery, 23 paintings were on display until early April. From April 30-June 20 Fergus McCaffrey, who represents the artist's estate, will exhibit works by both Shiraga and his wife Fujiko at his eponymous gallery. The Dallas Museum of Art pairs Shiraga with his Gutai colleague Sadamasa Motonaga in a comprehensive show enriched by loans from the Japan Foundation until July 19. Scholarly catalogues accompany each exhibition.

Munroe first showed Gutai artists at the Guggenheim SoHo in New York in 1994 as part of J*apanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky*. Since 2012, both the Museum of Modern Art in New York and Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles have included some Gutai works in exhibitions of postwar Japanese art, but it was the recent Guggenheim show, *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, that formed a tipping point. "Our presentation was the first sweeping introduction to Gutai in a major American museum," says co-curator Munroe. "The world was not ready to fully take on the historical achievements of Gutai in the context of world art until 2013."

The Gutai Art Association was a collective of radical artists founded by Jirō Yoshihara that lasted from 1954 (Shiraga joined in 1955) until 1972. Yoshihara's mantra – "Do not imitate others" and "create what has never been done before" – demanded originality. The artists jettisoned past practices in an explosion of experimentation, staging performance-based works outdoors that predated Happenings in the West.

Shiraga took his mentor's mandate furthest when he enacted his pioneering performance *Challenging Mud* in 1955. Stripped down to shorts, he plunged into a mixture of mud and unset concrete, struggling to shape the gloppy mess with his whole body. Shiraga expert Reiko Tomii calls the product a "performative painting." "The way he channeled force into mark-making," she says of his energetic style, "is where we see the artistry."

Shiraga was already familiar with Jackson Pollock's practice of dripping and pouring paint; he had seen Pollock's work in Japan in 1951. Yet the critic Harold Rosenberg's 1952 definition of action painting, which considered the canvas "not a picture but an event" and "an arena in which to act," was not known in Japan until 1959. The confluence of Gutai practice and Rosenberg's concept of a painting as an improvised result of an encounter with material rather than a planned image seems to have been part of the *zeitgeist* in both East and West.

“It was the whole idea of moving art from depicted reality (a picture that hung on the wall) to experiential reality,” Munroe says. “Our show proved definitively that Gutai not only expressed these ideas – often first – but also expressed them extremely well.”

Gabriel Ritter, co-curator of the Dallas exhibition, says knowledge of Shiraga’s achievements “expands our understanding of modernism, dispelling notions that movements such as Abstract Expressionism and the participatory and process-driven elements of so much contemporary practice are purely Western inventions.”

Gutai art, including work by Shiraga, was first shown in the US at New York’s Martha Jackson Gallery in 1958. The critic Dore Ashton’s negative review in *The New York Times* set the tone for underestimating the work. She pronounced it derivative, basically a knockoff of New York School Abstract Expressionism. “It’s really shocking reading criticism of that show because it’s so myopic and narrow,” says McCaffrey, an expert on Shiraga. “It’s completely dismissive” of anything not conceived in New York.

Ritter terms Ashton’s analysis not just “uninformed” but wrong, since the impetus for Japan’s radical departure from tradition was spurred by entirely different issues than those of the Abstract Expressionists. “Now that the context in which the Japanese works were being made is more fleshed out and people have information, background, and art-historical knowledge, it would be difficult to say there was anything derivative at all,” Ritter maintains.

Tiampo, co-curator of the Guggenheim Gutai show, explains the vastly different circumstances that gestated the new art: “People think about postwar Japan from an American perspective, but from a Japanese perspective – especially for artists, intellectuals, and writers – a lot of the reflection wasn’t, ‘why were we victims [of atomic blasts]?’ It was more, ‘why did we perpetrate a war that was unjust?’” Gutai artists concluded that the reason the masses obediently followed the Emperor to an unjustified war was due to what Tiampo calls “a lack of humanism and subjective autonomy.”

American critics, inflated with pride at the shift of the artistic avant-garde from Paris to New York after World War II, were afflicted with not only a victor’s arrogance but cultural blinders that kept them from understanding the divergent philosophical underpinning of work emanating from Japan.

Understanding Gutai and Shiraga requires awareness of the socio-political situation in Japan following a war that claimed 60 million lives worldwide. Cities and the countryside were devastated; people were starving, factories destroyed. In two days’ bombing of Tokyo alone, in 1945, 100,000 people died and more than one million lost their homes. The cultural ground, too, had shifted: Americans occupied Japan, the Empire was dismantled, the Emperor forced to repudiate his divinity.

Chairman Mao’s epigram, “there is no construction without destruction,” comes to mind, for in the face of this void came the freedom re-create visual art: to discard tradi-

tion and make it express the new, unsettled reality. Artists felt liberated from constrictions of the past but also deeply skeptical of groupthink ideology that had subordinated free will to the dictates of a militaristic, totalitarian state.

Gutai sought to express the trauma of war and its aftermath after the anguish of defeat. One translation of Gutai is "concreteness," and these artists trusted no abstract concepts like "Fatherland" that had led them astray – only tangible, physical things with objective reality like the body and matter.

In place of social unity and conformity that had abetted the fascist state, they substituted individual expression – not for novelty but to nurture an independent spirit. The Japanese word *shishitsu*, meaning individual qualities – aesthetic, intellectual, and philosophical—at the core of a person, would be expressed through the body's collision with material.

Throwing away his training in traditional Japanese painting, Shiraga used his body rather than paintbrushes, first using his hands, then fingernails, and in 1954 developing his signature style: painting with his feet. Channeling energy into action, he hung by a rope above a canvas on the floor, swirling a pile of pigment around the canvas with his bare feet to create paintings that in Dominique Lévy's words seem like "an implosion and explosion" of force.

"I want to paint as though rushing around a battlefield, exerting myself to collapse from exhaustion," Shiraga said in 1955. He described the symbiosis of creation and destruction his work embodies: "My inner feeling became so urgent that immediately I had to crash into my canvas."

The early works of the 1950s and '60s are characterized by a prevailing use of the pigment crimson lake, which Shiraga said "reeks of blood." An athlete who had belonged to both *Judo* and *sumō* clubs, Shiraga had a macho side not unlike the heroicism of Abstract Expressionism. He wanted to paint "brave" or "daring" paintings, Tomii says, embodying power and something of the grotesque. Besides hanging onto a rope and twisting his torso to spread arabesques of paint, he stomped aggressively, splashing colors like crashing waves.

"The horrors of war," Shiraga explained, "became my subjects." Yoshihara considered a 1956 work by Shiraga that evoked sacrifice and cruelty (cow livers in a cloudy liquid) too grotesque to exhibit. But Shiraga's two 1963 paintings on a bristly boar's hide reveal his penchant for rawness. "My art needs not just beauty but something horrible," he said in a 1998 interview. "All of my works more or less express some sort of gruesomeness." The Dallas Museum of Art's exhibition includes *Wild Boar Hunting II*, in which red and brown paints soak the hide like clots of dried blood on a wound. Ritter describes it as "jaw-dropping, incredibly visceral, very violent, quite bloody."

One can also read many early works that feature a vortex of red and orange paint,

heavily impasto-ed in the center and spreading outward in swooping swaths, as an allusion to flames. “I just saw war victims and Osaka burnt to the ground,” Shiraga said in 1998. “These aspects of my memories were materialized in my work.”

Throughout a fifty-year career, Shiraga consistently made paintings of high quality, which makes his prior absence from the official canon all the more egregious. And, although he continued to paint with his feet, his style developed in harmony with Japan’s transformation and his own maturation. “Every period has its own distinctive voice,” Tiampo says of his evolution. “The content of the work changes.”

In Shiraga’s earliest period (1954-59), the work was about his response to war, violence, experimentation, and youthful energy. At first, his movements were rather limited, resulting in a choppy, aggressive effect, and his palette was overwhelmingly red. Both composition and palette are less exuberant than in his mature style, and the paint application is thinner (seen in *Untitled* of 1959).

In the 1960s, he used his body more freely and acrobatically, combining red with blue, yellow, or white, as in WorkBB85 (1961), where the red doesn’t read as blood so much as paint. “The compositional quality of some of the later oils surpasses that of the early work quite dramatically,” McCaffrey says, noting that the aesthetics were always very important to Shiraga. “The act of painting with his feet wasn’t sufficient in itself in terms of his creative process. It was a means to an end,” which was “to create objects of beauty.”

His unusual method gave Shiraga the advantage of painting with more vigor, as well as the capacity to move large amounts of paint. “When you’re swinging from a rope with your arms, torso, and legs extended,” McCaffrey explains, “your stroke is that much longer.” Shiraga’s revolutionary abstractions have a dynamic compositional style of criss-crossing, blended colors and almost volcanic tactility. Looking beyond the shock value of someone painting with his feet – seeing it not as a gimmick but a productive innovation – allows one to appreciate the singular aesthetics and emotionally charged power of the paintings.

In 1971, Shiraga faced questions of how to reinvent himself after attaining a level of success in Japan and Europe. He began the arduous process of studying to become a lay monk of the Tendai sect of esoteric Buddhism. In 1974 he was ordained as *Sodō (Simple Way)* and resumed his career as an artist. Praying to the god Fudō and chanting the heart sutra became part of Shiraga’s preparation before painting.

Although works from 1973-76 have titles naming Buddhist deities and incorporate a circular motif akin to the Buddhist wheel symbol, Shiraga never literalized Buddhist teachings in his work. The different facture is due to his use of fluid, alkyd paint in pastel colors. The 1972 alkyd painting *Daikokuten (God of Wealth)* has a lush liquidity and splashes, with paint spiraling out from a central vortex. In relation to the material, grace has replaced brutality. Tiampo finds a “sense of sublimity and calm,” that turns the

that turns the violent energy of the 1950s and '60s into an explosion of poetry, as in the woven streaks of paint in Daiitokuson (1973).

Balletic tension rather than brutal rawness persists in the 1980s middle style. Shiraga was continuing to discover himself, often using a single color (black or white) on unprimed canvas, as in Tokkō (Self-Reliance), 1989. In the 1990s, bold colors like black and blue appear atop a bright red ground (see Ususama, 1999).

In his final years, works like Imayō Ranbu (Modern Dance, 2000) have a joyous vigor. The pastel colors are applied playfully in a circus-like riot of color, as if prior demons have been exorcised.

In his late-period work up until 2007, when he was 83, Shiraga's motions were more contained – the movements of an old man exploring fragility, aging, and the disintegration of the body. The yellow and white palette of Chimōsei Hakujitsuo (Daylight Rat incarnated from Earthly Wasted Star) of 2001 evinces continued vitality, even though his signature is tenuous, shaky with tremors.

Now that the American artworld is making up for past negligence, undoubtedly more museum and gallery exhibitions on Gutai and Shiraga will occur. The movement, born amid ruins, has continuing relevance in today's war-torn world, especially in light of what Gutai aimed to achieve.

"By painting with his feet Shiraga explored freedom of the mind," Tomii says. "Because the Gutai artists came out of a totalitarian regime of wartime Japan, freedom was a key concept. If each individual thinks on his own, they hoped to stop repeating the same mistakes."

In the contemporary moment's globalized artworld, American curators, collectors, and art historians are taking a transnational approach, acknowledging the merit of artists whose radical innovations were once overlooked. Hence, an "aha moment" has arrived for Shiraga. His work is acknowledged as expanding the impact of abstract painting. Its visually compelling merger of craft, form, thought, and content deepens our insight into history and humanity.

Kazuo Shiraga, "Daikokuten [God of Wealth]," 1972.

Kazuo Shiraga, "Imayō Ranbu (Modern Dance)," 2000.