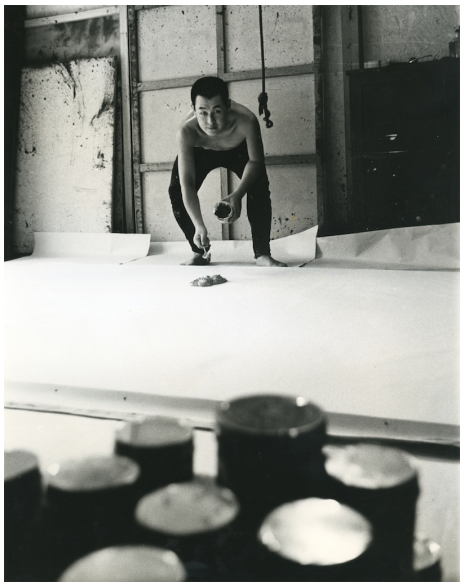
ART BASEL, JUNE 15–18, 2017
FERGUS McCAFFREY, Hall 2.0, Booth D2

CAROL RAMA & KAZUO SHIRAGA: *LITERATURE OF THE FLESH*

Over the past half decade, the art world has come to celebrate the work of Carol Rama (1918–2015, b. Turin, Italy) and Kazuo Shiraga (1924–2008, b. Amagasaki, Japan). The world gained an appreciation of Rama through her traveling retrospective *The Passion According to Carol Rama*, which coincided with her death in 2015. Shiraga's work has risen to prominence in the private and auction markets, alongside major recent shows such as *Tokyo: 1955–1970* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Gutai survey at the Guggenheim Museum.

In both cases the honors were overdue, one of many qualities they shared. At Art Basel 2017, Fergus McCaffrey gallery (hall 2.0, booth D2) will bring together these two masters for the first time in **Carol Rama & Kazuo Shiraga: *Literature of the Flesh***. Inspired by the Gutai scholar Gabriel Ritter's notion of *nikutai bungaku*, or "literature of the flesh," which conveys the pleasures of the carnal body and human physicality after the repression of the Japanese people during the 1930s and 1940s, the booth draws strong comparisons between Rama and Shiraga. Their pairing at Fergus McCaffrey's Art Basel 2017 booth allows us to plumb the depths of the topics their work explored. Among the themes examined:



***Art under fascism*:** Both artists began their careers in traditional societies dominated by totalitarian regimes, which suppressed individual expression for the greater good of the nation. The artists shared the need to reclaim and express their individuality—and emancipate the body by discarding societal norms and following their creative instincts, wherever they led. "Painting is my transgression," Rama once declared. Shiraga's nonconformity famously took the form of painting with his feet while swinging from a rope, resulting in arguably the most gesturally dynamic paintings of the postwar period. Fergus McCaffrey's booth will show four remarkable, large-scale foot paintings made between 1959 and 1997.

***Under the skin*:** Fergus McCaffrey will juxtapose two paintings that feature animal skins—Rama's *Bricolage*, 1966, and Shiraga's *Wild Boar Hunting II*, 1963—which speak volumes about the character of each artist. Rama's fox fur pelt spray-painted silver represents an attack on the urbane world of bourgeois Turin, and references her mother's shame at having to be a seamstress to support her family. Whereas Rama's work appears personal in scale and intent, the monumentality of Shiraga's boar's pelt saturated in the pigment crimson lake seems to reflect the trauma of an entire nation; it speaks of violence, butchery, and sacrifice. Encounters with Buddhist monuments while he hunted in the forest inspired his decision to study Buddhism in 1972.

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***The interior on canvas*:** In later years Shiraga reflected on how his "penchant for vulgarity shows its face," particularly before 1963, and Fergus McCaffrey's presentation at Art Basel features several of these works. He created his 1953 painting *Crack* with his hands in blood-red crimson lake. The sculptures *Red Liquid* and *Red Bottled Object*, both from 1956, present casts of animal organs suspended in red liquids. The 1956 sculpture *16 Individuals* resembles congealed fat, flesh, and excrement. This obsession with the grisly guts of existence is seen in Rama's work too. Her 1967 *Bricolage* features dolls' eyes in thick, blood-red paint. Other *Bricolage* works feature parts of medical syringes and metal shavings. In 1970, she attached brown-, black-, and flesh-colored bicycle inner tubes to canvases of white or black. Rama's father owned a rubber tire factory before his suicide, and her use of corroded, patched rubber in *Movimento e immobilità de Birnam*, 1977, calls to mind worn human intestines and bandaged wounds.

***Near misses*:** Rama was an eccentric, self-taught artist largely ignored by the Torinese art world. After art school, Shiraga became the poster boy of the Gutai Art Association (1954–72). Gutai had a very visible presence in Turin between 1959 and 1962, thanks largely to its Western promoter Michel Tapié's operation of the International Center for Aesthetic Research there; it hosted Gutai shows, even a solo Shiraga exhibition—shows likely seen by Rama, a friend of Tapié's. But Shiraga never visited Turin, and Gutai leader Jiro Yoshihara censored Shiraga's most transgressive works; there is no evidence they were shown in Turin. Likewise, Rama's sexually explicit watercolors showing amputated limbs and bestiality were censored upon exhibition in 1945 and not seen for decades. The impossibility of direct inspiration of either artist by the other makes the parallel threads of their work all the more remarkable to examine.

Carol Rama's retrospective *The Passion According to Carol Rama* was on view in 2014–17 at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; and Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Torino, among others. Exhibitions in 2017 include *Carol Rama: Antibodies* at the New Museum, New York, and *Carol Rama: Spazio anche più che tempo* at Palazzo Ca' nova in Venice. She was awarded the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale in 2003.

Kazuo Shiraga's work was shown in group exhibitions such as *Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void, 1949–1962*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2012–13; *Tokyo 1955–1970: A New Avant-Garde*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2012–13; and *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2013. Solo retrospectives took place at the Musée d'Art Moderne, Ville de Toulouse, 1993; Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art, Kobe, 2001; and Yokosuka Museum of Art, 2009. A retrospective of his work and Sadamasa Motonaga's was held at the Dallas Museum of Art in 2015.

Founded in 2006, **Fergus McCaffrey** (booth D2, hall 2.0) is internationally recognized for its groundbreaking role in promoting the work of postwar Japanese artists such as Sadamasa Motonaga, Natsuyuki Nakanishi, Kazuo Shiraga, and Jiro Takamatsu. The gallery also exhibits the work of emerging and seminal Western artists such as Anna Conway, Jack Early, Marcia Hafif, Birgit Jürgenssen, Richard Nonas, Sigmar Polke, and Carol Rama.

Images: 1. Carol Rama. Photograph: © PEPE fotografia; Courtesy PEPE fotografia
2. Kazuo Shiraga placing paint with palette knife, ca. 1965. © The Estate of Kazuo Shiraga; Courtesy Amagasaki Cultural Center

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