

Fergus McCaffrey is pleased to present *Jiro Yoshihara: The Persistence of Form*

Fergus McCaffrey, Tokyo

June 29–August 7, 2019

Opening Reception: June 29, 6–8 PM

Fergus McCaffrey is pleased to present a solo exhibition of paintings and works on paper by Japanese artist and founding member of the Gutai Art Association, Jiro Yoshihara (1905–1972). The exhibition is on view at the gallery's Tokyo location beginning June 29, 2019. Yoshihara's innovation and impact on the Japanese postwar art scene is well-recognized—*Jiro Yoshihara: The Persistence of Form* examines the artist's legacy, exploring the circle as an influential composition and subject he studied closely for several decades.

At first glance, Yoshihara's composition is reminiscent of *ensō*, a Zen Buddhist practice whereby the Buddhist priest sweeps one or two uninterrupted brushstrokes in an annular motion to produce a circle. The completed form is a meditative invitation, representing an opportunity for contemplation bereft of the physical body. Yoshihara's circles, however, refrain from this automatic connection to spiritual enlightenment. Rather, they are leitmotifs that pursue the formal relationship between the foreground and background, the negative and positive space. Of the circles, the artist writes:



These days I draw only circles. It's because it's convenient. However large the space is, one circle will very easily conclude it. I'm also relieved from the burden of thinking about what to paint on every canvas. I just need to think about what kind of circle to draw, or what kind of circle I would like. I must admit, however, that at times I find myself unsatisfied with all the circles I draw, and that I feel like I cannot even draw a single circle, satisfactorily. At the same time, not being able to even draw a single line that satisfies me means that that is precisely where I must begin. And finally, I realize that in this single line, which I cannot draw as I wish, therein lies the infinite possibility, like a bottomless swamp.

—Jiro Yoshihara, *Texts for solo exhibition*, 1967

Beginning in the late 1930s, Yoshihara underwent several decades of experimentation with abstract forms. He studied linearity intensely throughout the 1950s, creating compositions out of simple strokes. His persistent dissection of the circle followed from these earlier works. By the 1960s, after many trials and tribulations, he arrived at this purest of gestures. Yoshihara was captivated by its simplicity, and provoked by its immense possibility.



Yoshihara's sustained study of the circle was tied to the establishment and empowerment of the Japanese art scene. This national challenge, embraced by many postwar Japanese abstract painters, was integral to challenging their Western counterparts and securing a position in the global art scene.

In 1952, amongst other Japanese artists, Yoshihara participated in *Salon de Mai* in Paris. Upon his return to Japan, however, art critic Atsuo Imaizumi wrote a negative review of the show—he claimed the artworks exhibited did not resemble what 'Modern paintings' should look like. He asserted that the Japanese works lacked strength and seemed undetermined, even ambiguous, in comparison to the other artworks on view. This was a turning point for Japanese artists and critics. Moving forward, participants in the Japanese art scene combined their efforts to gain international recognition while retaining the core characteristics of the Japanese aesthetic language. Yoshihara's linear marks played a significant role in this effort.

The challenge of seizing the international spotlight whilst retaining the uniquely Japanese aesthetic was a delicate balance, particularly evident in practicing artists from the Kansai region including Yoshihara and the Gutai artists. Calligraphers from the area concurrently explored creative methods that liberated them from the fundamental elements of their practice. Experiments in *sho* [Japanese calligraphy] were detached from pre-existing contexts of words, as well as the materiality of brush, ink, and washi paper. From 1953 to 1955, Yoshihara engaged in frequent discussions with Japanese calligraphers including Morita Shiryū and other members of the *Bokujin-Kai*—a group of artists who used ink as an artistic medium to investigate modes of art production. These conversations often took place in the Modern Art Discussion Group, a monthly forum held in Osaka, and via writing in *Bokujin*, a magazine for the members of *Bokujin-Kai*, or *Bokubi*, a monthly journal edited by Shiryū. Yoshihara's affinity for the principles of calligraphy are evident in his abstract paintings, composed solely of straight or curved lines which reflect his innate sense of the Japanese aesthetic and his appreciation for the relationship between lines and empty space.



Yoshihara's progression from the line to the circle was influenced by Minimalism and hard-edge painting produced by his Western counterparts. His shift from linear expression to circles, however, allowed him to go a step beyond his predecessors. The spherical form was in dialogue with the bold developments in Western art—such as Adolph Gottlieb or Cy Twombly—while maintaining the postwar Japanese aesthetic, speaking poignantly to an international audience.

By the late 1960s, Yoshihara's works received international acclaim. In 1967, one of his abstract paintings won first prize at the 9th International Art Exhibition in Japan. Four years later, he received a gold medal for his paintings at the Indo-Triennale in New Delhi, India. In the later years of his life, Yoshihara shifted his direction away from circles toward *kanji* [Japanese writing] in search of a new mode of expression. These works depicted *kanji* as linear compositions that

occupied the pictorial ground. His untimely death in 1972 put an end to this exploration. The rise of conceptual art that preceded his passing, however, alludes to his progressive mind, evident in the current exhibition.

About the artist

Yoshihara holds an unrivaled position in the development of postwar Japanese art as a teacher, critic, and art entrepreneur. He began his career experimenting with various modernist styles, and gradually veered toward gestural abstraction. He read passionately about Post-Impressionism, Surrealism, Art Informel, and Abstract Expressionism, drawn to modern art and the theoretical discourse of his peers. His thorough comprehension of contemporary art history influenced his role as the founder of the Gutai Art Association, where he also served as a teacher and mentor.

After viewing Jackson Pollock's works in 1951, Yoshihara realized that the act of performing and creating an original work was his starting point. A deep thinker with a visionary mind, he believed that an artist should express their individuality but also persistently test the quality of their expression. This belief became the canon by which Gutai artists persevered, and a core tenet Yoshihara brought to his practice when he began a series of circle works in the 1960s. Yoshihara created works on paper and paintings with the circle motif—occasionally, he purposefully experimented with adding drips of paint, exploring how the form responded to alterations in size, width, and symmetry. Towards the end of his artistic career, he refined his aesthetic to simple circles and linear forms that evinced an immediacy of gesture tempered by quiet contemplation.

Yoshihara has been featured in several Gutai retrospective exhibitions, including *Gutai*, Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris, 1999; *Art, Anti-Art, Non-Art: Experimentations in the Public Sphere in Postwar Japan, 1950–1970*, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2007; and *Gutai: The Spirit of an Era*, The National Art Center, Tokyo, 2012. Yoshihara died in 1972.

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 including 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 and Jasper Johns, among others.

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Images:

1. Jiro Yoshihara, *Untitled*, 1965 - 70, Acrylic on paper, 14 7/8 x 17 3/4 inches (37.5 x 45.3 cm)
© Estate of Jiro Yoshihara
2. Jiro Yoshihara, *Untitled*, 1965 – 70, Watercolor on paper, 13 1/4 x 9 5/8 inches (33.5 x 24.5 cm) © Estate of Jiro Yoshihara

3. Jiro Yoshihara, *Untitled*, Acrylic on paper, 14 ¾ x 17 ¾ inches (37.4 x 45 cm) © Estate of Jiro Yoshihara

Map:

(Omotesando station A3 exit)

