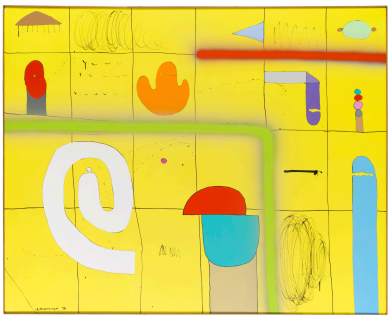
Fergus McCaffrey is pleased to present *Sadamasa Motonaga: Amida Da Da Da*

Fergus McCaffrey Tokyo

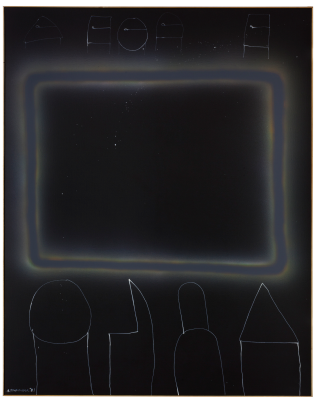
February 8–March 14, 2020
Opening Reception: Saturday, February 8, 6–8pm

Fergus McCaffrey is pleased to present a solo exhibition of Sadamasa Motonaga (1922–2011), focusing on seven paintings created between 1980–85, a groundbreaking period of innovation and reflection for the artist.

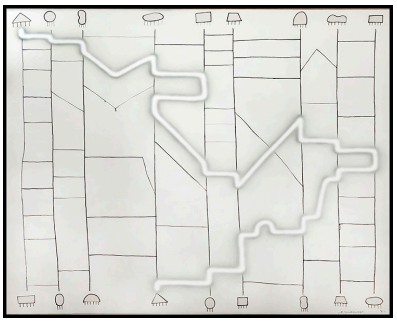


Motonaga was self-taught, beginning to make work in the late 1940s as a cartoonist and manga illustrator for local periodicals and newspapers. Entering the '50s, his oil paintings reflected a developing language of simple pictograms and embryonic, anthropomorphic forms. As the decade passed he became a central figure in the legendary Gutai Art Association (1954–72), renowned for its radical innovations across performance, painting, sculpture, and installation art. Alongside other first-generation Gutai members such as Atsuko Tanaka, Kazuo Shiraga, and Saburo Murakami, Motonaga forged an ethos of originality, experimentation, freedom, and play in the wake of the Second World War—seeking to "do what has never been done before." Around 1957, Motonaga's style turn to more abstracted and flowing forms, from which he developed his "high Gutai" style of painting, manipulating viscous layers of highly pigmented paint onto large-scale canvases. At the beginning of the 1960s Motonaga entered the height of his period of formalist abstraction, introducing unexpected materials like gravel and pebbles to his paintings.

Motonaga spent time in New York City from 1966–67, a period that had a profound impact on the evolution of his work. The artist's second son was born during this time, broadening his earlier interests in children's art and illustration. Although still participating in Gutai, he abandoned his heavily layered approach to paint and transitioned to a flatter and more modeled style, similar to popular Japanese anime. Motonaga began developing his distinct gradient airbrush technique, expanding his practice into imagery created specifically for children, and releasing his first children's book in 1973. Motonaga and his wife, Etsuko Nakatsuji, published thirty-three early learning books in total, with millions of copies in circulation. The impact of his distinct aesthetic on the children who grew up reading these works—a generation that includes artists like Takashi Murakami—cannot be overstated.



The 1980s saw Motonaga's revolutionary amalgamation of his artistic innovations. He combined to the splashed and poured forms of his works from the '60s with the anthropomorphic shapes found in his earliest works, adding scratchy freeform masses and grids beneath the framing devices of brilliant airbrushed lines. Many of these works directly evoke children's art and games—as is prominently featured in *Amida Da Da Da* (1980), inspired by a children's game called "Amidakuji," which relies on a



method of chance decision-making using a cross-braced ladder form. The artist's use of a loose grid format recalls his earliest manga work, filled with bold colors such as yellow, black, white, green, and red. By this time Motonaga was entering his late 50s, and yet these works are truly astonishing as precursors to and catalysts for the global zeitgeist that was emerging between street art, high art, and abstraction across younger generations, prompting a pivotal exchange between high and low culture worldwide.

The artist's influence on the evolution of Japanese art of the 1980s is analogous to that of Philip Guston and Cy Twombly in the United States; he opened up new permissions for the generations that followed. He paved the way for what would become known as 'Superflat' in Japan in the 1990s, and it is astonishing to compare these paintings from 1980–85 with those of artists two and three decades his junior from Europe and the United States like Albert Oehlen, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Elizabeth Murray, who too were crossing pure abstraction with graffiti and scratchiti.

Ever committed to originality, Motonaga continued to make work on a daily basis across painting, children's books, and sculptural installations, persistently refining his jubilant vision from within. At age 86 he reflected, "I have not graduated from Gutai's way of thinking. I still want to do something new, that which has not existed before."

Sadamasa Motonaga was born in 1922 in Mie Prefecture, and died in October 2011 in Takarazuka, Japan. Motonaga's work has been the subject of many retrospective exhibitions in Japan, most notably at the Hyōgo Prefectural Museum of Art, Kobe, 1998; Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003; Nagano Prefectural Shinano Art Museum, 2005; and Mie Prefectural Art Museum, Tsu, 2009. The first retrospective of his work outside Japan was held at the Dallas Museum of Art in 2014, alongside that of his Gutai colleague Kazuo Shiraga. Retrospectives of the Gutai Art Association have been held at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Rome, 1990; Jeu de Paume, Paris, 1998; Lugano Cantonal Museum of Art, 2010; National Art Center, Tokyo, 2012; and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2013. His awards include Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres from the French government and the Japanese Medal with Purple Ribbon; he was the first abstract artist to receive the latter. This exhibition follows the gallery's presentations of Motonaga's work in 2012, 2015 and 2018. In 2016 Fergus McCaffrey released the first English-language monograph on the life and work of Motonaga, written by the Gutai scholars Ming Tiampo and Kōichi Kawasaki, alongside the manga specialist Tomohiko Murakami.

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

2020 program features solo exhibitions by Martha Jungwirth, Richard Serra, and Patti Smith, among others.

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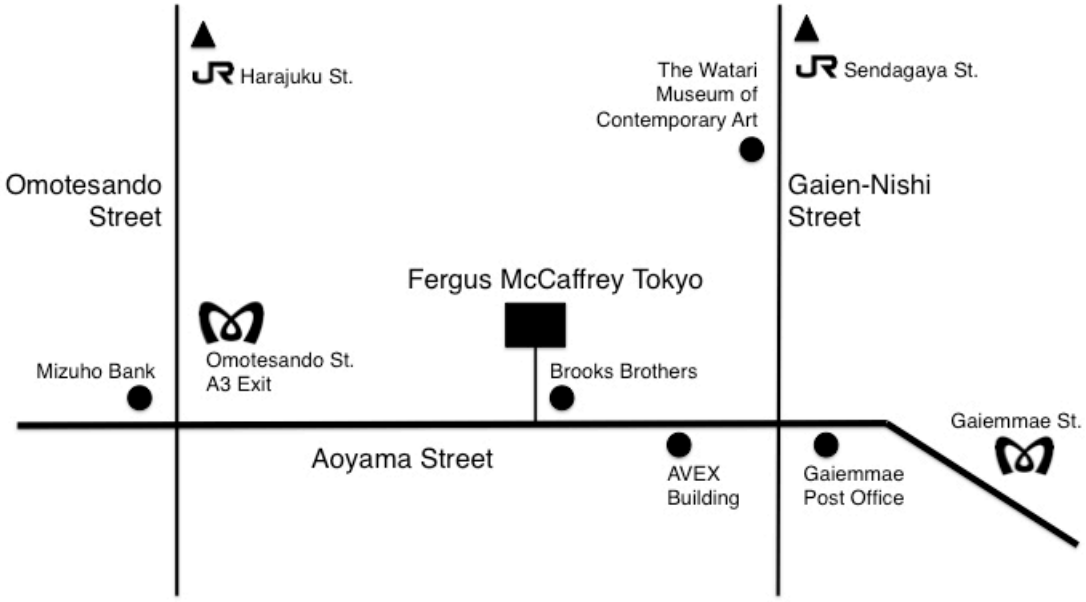
Images:

1. Sadamasa Motonaga, *In Yellow*, 1981. Acrylic on canvas, 71 1/4 x 89 3/8 inches (181 x 227 cm) © Motonaga Research Archive Institute Ltd.
2. Sadamasa Motonaga, *Big Square of Gray*, 1981. Acrylic on canvas, 89 3/8 x 71 1/4 inches (227 x 181 cm) © Motonaga Research Archive Institute Ltd.
3. Sadamasa Motonaga, *Amida Da Da Da*, 1980. Acrylic on canvas, 71 1/4 x 89 1/2 inches (181 x 227.2 cm) © Motonaga Research Archive Institute Ltd.

Map:
(Omotesando station A3 exit)