

Puncture the Picture: Gutai and the Unraveling of Linear Modernism

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Contrary to longstanding belief, Modernism did not arise solely in Europe, nor did it unfold, as is also commonly believed, in a linear fashion. Rather, it was a swarm of conceptual meanderings taking place across the globe. A



Shozo Shimamoto, Hole, 1950

key case in point is Japanese Gutai. The movement, which began in 1954 and ended in 1972 with the death of its financier and founder, Jiro Yoshihara, originated with a bold edict: “Do something never seen before.” His followers, rising from the radioactive ashes of WWII, did just that, in media ranging from painting to sound, and with an influence on the global art dialog that has only recently been recognized and properly documented.

One thread of the Gutai story that’s migrated into legend concerns Shozo Shimamoto, who, after many failed attempts at winning Yoshihara’s approval, made a painting that captured the master’s positive notice. Unable to afford canvas, Shimamoto layered together sheets of newspaper, which “regretfully” had been torn while over painting. But that is what drew Yoshihara’s praise. The picture plane had been punctured. A new dimension was added to the work. And that was something new.

But was it? Shimamoto’s painting, *Sakuhin (Ana)* (Work Holes), made around 1950, before Gutai formally got underway, was certainly new to Japan, but it turns out that contemporaneous works were being created by post-war European *Arte Povera* and *Art Brut* artists Lucio Fontana and Alberto Burri. All this would be recapitulated in dramatic exhibitions curated by Paul Schimmel, arguably America’s finest curator. Schimmel debuted *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1977* at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, in 1998, followed by *Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void, 1949-1962*, in 2012, at the same venue. Several Gutai artists, including Shimamoto, were shown in both exhibitions, the later exhibition featuring Shimamoto’s work hanging next to a Robert Rauschenberg “black painting” produced in 1952. These exhibitions, along with the horribly titled 2013 Guggenheim Museum exhibition, *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, brought Gutai artists to a larger audience, demanding a reexamination of the overlooked aspects Modernism’s lineage. Reviewing the exhibition in *The New York Times*, Roberta Smith wrote that it “reveals little-known precedents for all kinds of seemingly Euro-American-centered developments, including Happenings, Minimalism, specific objects and various strains of land art, installation art, Conceptual Art and relational aesthetics.”

The show created a serious stir in cultural circles, and we are currently in its wake. Excellent books on the subject include Ming Tiampo's, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism* (University of Chicago Press, 2011) and the recently published work by Japanese art scholar, Reiko Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan* (MIT Press, 2016).

Gutai has lately been all over San Francisco. At the Fog Design + Art Fair (January 12 to 15), Lévy Gorvy, which has galleries in New York and London, featured Kazuo Shiraga. He joined the group in 1953, a year after Shimamoto, and was represented at the fair by T32 (1962).

Shiraga's attempt at "something new" was to paint with his feet while hanging from an overhead rope, while his wife, Fujiko, also a Gutai artist, assisted by spilling paint before him, enabling him to work without interruption. (Her role as an accomplice has yet to be fully explored.)

Lévy Gorvy also displayed an IKB (International Klein Blue) sponge by Yves Klein, and sponsored a rare performance of Klein's *Monotone-Silence Symphony* at Grace Cathedral on January 12. It's a telling pairing, as some have speculated that Klein saw Gutai art during his 1952-1954 sojourn in Tokyo to study judo, and that encounter led to the performative paintings in which he dragged naked women across canvases lathered in IKB. (See Ming Tiampo's book, *Gutai: Decentralizing Modernism*, p. 127.)

Shiraga's mid-period Gutai work at the Lévy Gorvy booth was valued at \$1.5 million, a vastly larger price than his work fetched before the 2013 Guggenheim exhibition. At the same time Shiraga's work was on display at Lévy Gorvy, four similarly priced Shiraga pieces, dating from 1960 to 1962, went on view at Ever Gold Projects—a staggering leap for a gallery that not long ago occupied a Tenderloin storefront before moving to Minnesota Street Project last year.



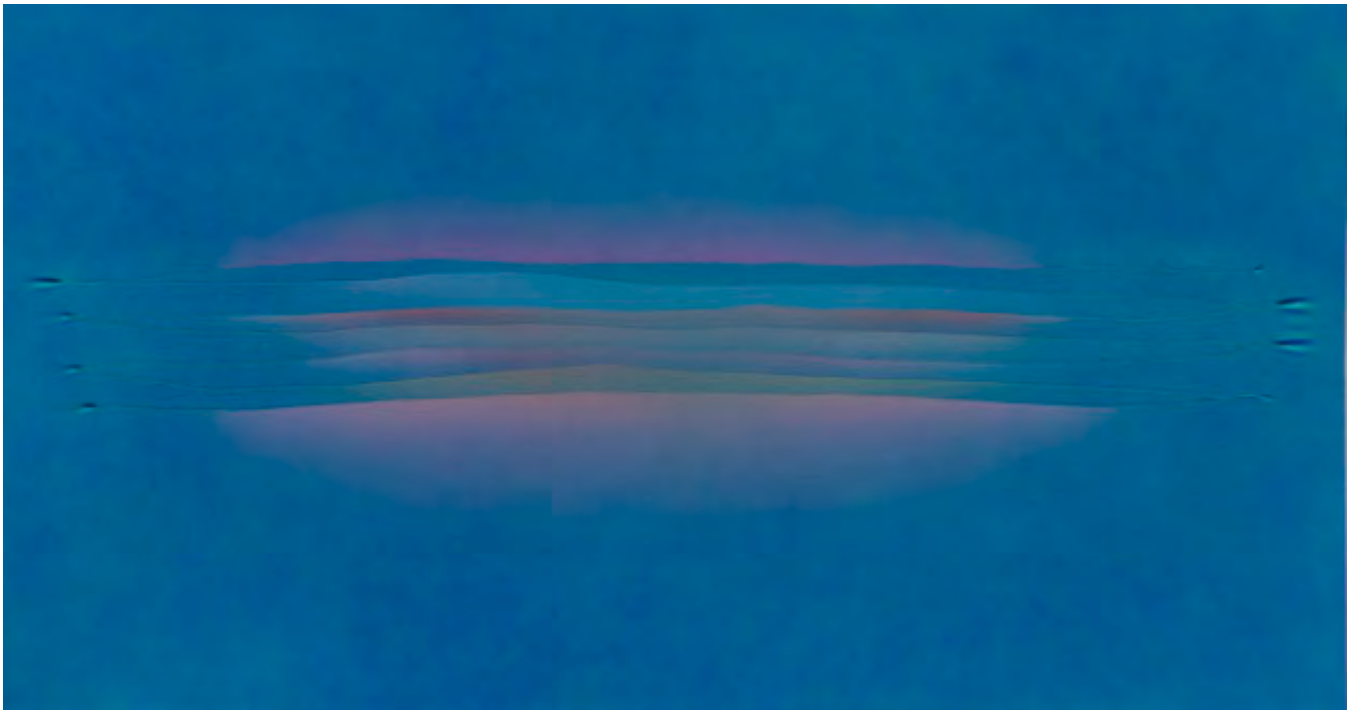
Kour Pour, Landscape Painting, 2016,
Block printing ink on canvas, 81 x 71"
@ Ever Gold Projects



Kazuo Shiraga, Chinsonei Isshika, 1960,
@ Ever Gold Projects

Ever Gold Director, Andrew McClintock—co-curator of a 2013 Gutai exhibition at the San Francisco Art Institute and publisher of San Francisco Arts Quarterly—paired the Shiraga works with those of Kour Pour, a young LA artist who he presented, “as an inheritor of Gutai’s and Shiraga’s quest for unfamiliar territory that comes as a result of cross-cultural exchange and the combination of traditional ideas from different periods and places.” Both artists, McClintock continued, challenge us to “cease viewing art as a linear narrative, to become more inclusive, and to continue to re-think the ideas of individuality and Western dominance in a global art world.”

Gagosian Gallery, newly arrived in SF, but with an empire numbering 13 venues worldwide, featured the work of Tsuyoshi Maekawa, a second-generation Gutai artist who joined the group in 1962. The second wave differed in several respects from the original membership. Early Gutai featured raw performative actions: Shiraga hanging from a rope, as well as crawling through concrete; Shimamoto firing bottles of colored paint with a homemade cannon, for example. That sort of work was curtailed in the early 1960s, when French art critic and exhibition organizer, Michel Tapié, encouraged the association to become more “professional” by using better materials, robbing them of the primitive energy that fueled their earlier works.

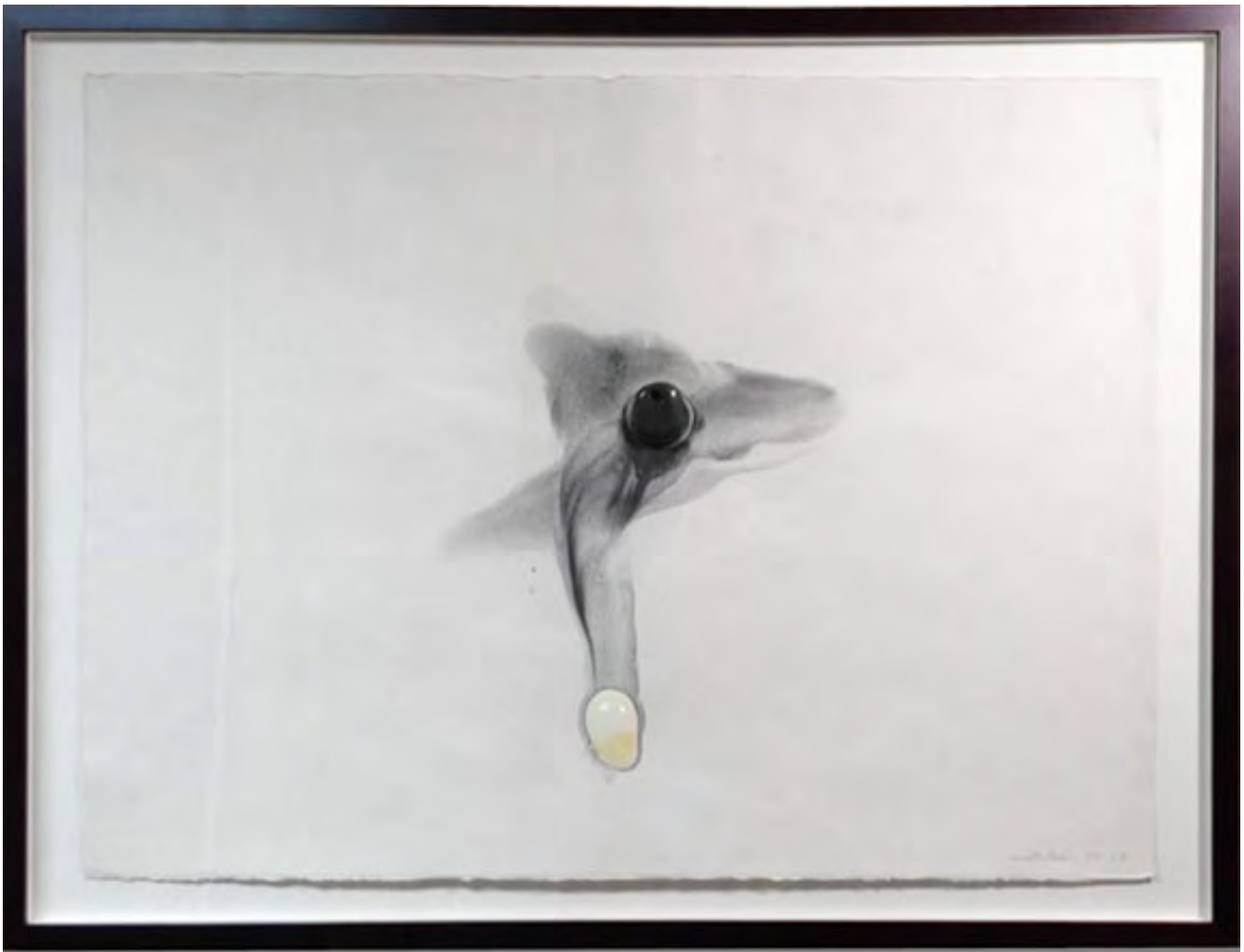


Tsuyoshi Maekawa Untitled, 1977 Sewn burlap, cotton cloth, and acrylic 36 x 72"

This is apparent in the works by Maekawa displayed at Gagosian. He, too, punctures the pictorial surface, but in an elegant, rather than subversive manner as is typical of the second generation. To its credit, Gagosian has paired 13 post-Gutai works (1975-1977) by Maekawa with earlier works by Lucio Fontana (*Concetto Spaziale, Attese*, 1967) and Alberto Burri (*N.7*, 1954), along with work by the path-breaking Italian conceptualist, Piero Manzoni.

Gagosian’s recent arrival stands in sharp contrast to that of Don Soker Gallery, which, having dodged the bullet of the skyrocketing real estate costs, has served SF in various venues since 1971. With the recent death of Paule

Anglim and Ruth Braunstein, his may well be the longest continuously operating gallery in The City. His relationship with Japanese artists has been longstanding, and the current exhibition, Japanese Art of the 1970's and 80's: Works from the Gallery and Bay Area Collections, reaffirms that commitment.



Takesada Matsutani, SF Stone, 1984, sumi ink, vinyl and stone @ Don Soker Contemporary Art

Included among the Japanese artists he has represented over the years is Takesada Matsutani, who, like Tsuyoshi Maekawa, comes from Gutai's second-generation. One characteristic of that group was its experimentation with new materials. Matsutani choose industrial glue, previously unknown as an art medium. Stone SF, a work created during a previous exhibition at the gallery in 1984, combines sumi ink, vinyl and stone. A personal friend, the 80-year-old artist, informed Soker that he has been invited to exhibit in the Arsenal at the 2017 Venice Biennale, where he will install a piece called The Pavilion of Colours and Mystical Joy.

It's an apt title, for Gutai was concerned with a joyous approach to art linked with a reverence for the materials. Gutai, which coincided with the international avant-garde of the day, continues to inform contemporary artists only recently exposed to its innovative explorations at the outer edge of art.