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This Is How an Unknown Japanese Artist—Who Painted With His Feet—Became a Star

Kazuo Shiraga's posthumous works have climbed from \$200,000 to \$2.5 million in five years

By James Tarmy, March 25 2015

In 2011, five American art collectors were traveling across Japan in search of artists associated with a postwar avant-garde movement known as Gutai.



Kazuo Shiraga placing paint with a palette knife, ca. 1965.

Source: Amagasaki Cultural Center/Mnuchin Gallery via Bloomberg

The group—influential collectors [Howard Rachofsky](#) and his wife, Cindy; their adviser, [Allan Schwartzman](#); New York dealer [Fergus McCaffrey](#); and Jeffrey Grove, a senior curator at the Dallas Museum of Art—viewed art stored in attics, studios, and vaults. In a small town near Osaka, the abstract paintings of [Kazuo Shiraga](#), who was little known in the U.S., caught their attention at a private showing.

“Not only did we get to meet Gutai artists,” said Howard Rachofsky, who is a former hedge fund manager. “We were also exposed to some of the important work.”

Four years later, two of the biggest dealers in New York have works by the artist on view, and his paintings have been included in major exhibitions in New York and Los Angeles. Artwork by Shiraga was offered earlier this month at the [Armory Show](#), the largest contemporary art fair in New York, and the artist will get a third New York gallery show next month. Want to buy a Shiraga? Two sold at Christie's on March 15 for almost double their high estimates. Shiraga's rise in the West is a tutorial in how art market insiders band together to promote an under-recognized artist they consider deserving of a wider audience. In the process, the value of the works, including those owned by the backers, is catapulted to the upper echelon of the market.



Kazuo Shiraga, Untitled, 1964
Source: Tom Powel Imaging/Mnuchin Gallery via Bloomberg

Rising Prices

“He was an appropriate artist to become the focus of a meaningful rise in interest and in price,” said Schwartzman, co-founder of Art Agency, Partners, an art advisory firm in New York.

Shiraga, who died in 2008, has had a dedicated following in Europe for the past 50 years. Born into a prosperous family in 1924, he was associated with Gutai in 1955, a year after the group was founded. In 1954, as part of his performance-based artistic output, he began creating works by suspending himself over the canvases with a rope and painting with his feet.

Paris-based gallerist Rodolphe Stadler began representing Shiraga in the early 1960s, and as a result, a disproportionate number of his paintings were in European collections.

More recently, another major supporter has been Axel Vervoordt, a Belgian dealer, collector, and interior designer who lives in a 12th century castle outside Antwerp. He met Shiraga in Japan in 2004, and since then has bought—again, mainly for European clients—“every Shiraga that came onto the market,” he said in an interview.



An undated photo of Kazuo Shiraga with his wife, Fujiko, after painting with his feet. Source: Amagasaki Cultural Center/Mnuchin Gallery via Bloomberg

Good Clients

“I was so enthusiastic about all of it,” Vervoordt said about Shiraga’s work. “I told all of my good clients and friends: ‘You have to buy it.’”

Still, fewer than 10 works appeared at auction houses globally before 2003, according to New York-based database Artnet. Prices for even Shiraga’s largest works rarely topped \$300,000, said art adviser Schwartzman.

Only in 2007 did a Shiraga break \$1 million at auction. “It was a Paris-based phenomenon, though,” says McCaffrey, the dealer whose New York gallery represents the artist’s estate.

McCaffrey, who speaks Japanese and represents a number of Japanese artists, held a solo show of Shiraga’s works in 2010. His next Shiraga show starts on April 30 and will feature works by Fujiko Shiraga, the artist’s wife.

Overlooked Movements

“My mandate with the estate is to place works in major institutional collections,” he said. It was a large task: The Walker Museum of Art in Minneapolis had acquired a work in 1998 but otherwise Shiraga was unrepresented in almost every major U.S. museum.

Rachofsky, who co-owns an 18,000-square-foot exhibition space called The Warehouse in Dallas, focuses on what he considers overlooked pockets of postwar European and Asian art movements. That has included Italian artists such as Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni. He said he turned his attention to Gutai artists more than nine years ago but was originally interested in the artist Shozo Shimamoto.

“We didn’t know Shiraga from 42 other gestural painters,” he said. “The interest in Shiraga was triggered by Fergus McCaffrey.”



Kazuo Shiraga, *Daiitokuson*, 1973
Source: Dallas Museum of Art via Bloomberg



Kazuo Shiraga, *Chikusei Shohao*, 1961
Source: Tom Powel Imaging/Mnuchin Gallery via Bloomberg

Rachofsky bought his first Shiraga in 2010 from McCaffrey and now owns more than 100 works by Gutai artists, including at least four by Shiraga.

“With Fergus working in the estate, it made it possible for us to have access early on at very attractive prices,” said Schwartzman, the art adviser to Rachofsky.

Two Dealers

The Shiraga movement is being fueled now by two of the biggest dealers in New York, Dominique Levy and Robert Mnuchin, who both have shows by the artist on view. Mnuchin is a former partner at Goldman Sachs Group who switched to dealing art in 1992. Swiss-born Levy founded the private sales department at Christie’s, which she ran from 1999 to 2003. In 2005 the two formed a blue chip gallery, L&M Arts, in a townhouse on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, which lasted for eight years. They parted ways and opened their own galleries.

Both said they separately arranged their Shiraga shows. “Dominique was surprised to hear I was doing a show. I was surprised to hear she was doing a show,” Mnuchin said. “They were both well under way when we found out.”

Their interest in Shiraga has “driven the market,” McCaffrey said. “To have both shows put together in such a public way, it’s created a lot of attention.”

Varied Collectors

Levy said Shiraga’s work ranges from \$1.5 million to \$6 million, and her collectors are spread across the globe.



Kazuo Shiraga, *Zuisohen*, 1986

Source: Tom Powel Imaging/Mnuchin Gallery via Bloomberg

Kazuo Shiraga, *Chimosei Hakujitsuso*, 2001

Source: Tom Powel Imaging/Mnuchin Gallery via Bloomberg

“It’s very much an international market,” she said. “The paintings I sold in my exhibition were as much to Europeans and Americans as Asians.”

Mnuchin, whose 17 works are priced at a similar range, said his sales are doing reasonably well. “I wouldn’t like it if it was a runaway success,” he said. “Because that would suggest hype.”

Museum curators also have taken notice. Since 2012, Shiraga’s paintings have been included in major exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and the Guggenheim in New York, in a show called “Gutai: Splendid Playground.”

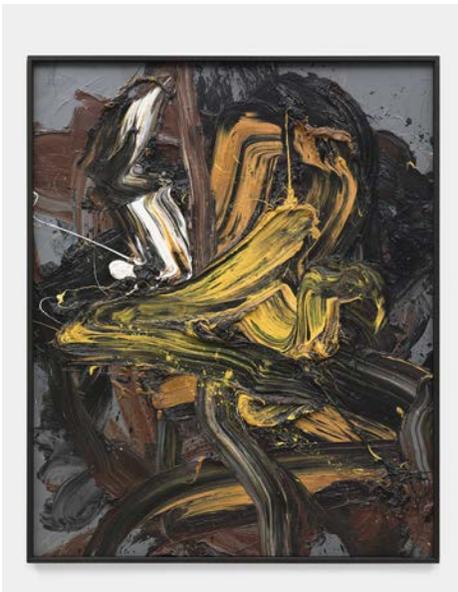
The Art Institute of Chicago bought a work by Shiraga in 2013. Now showing until July 19 at the Dallas Museum of Art is “Between Action and the Unknown: The Art of Kazuo Shiraga and Sadamasa Motonaga,” which features several Shiragas from Rachofsky’s collection along with works on loan from the Japan Foundation in Tokyo.

True Depth

The Dallas museum will eventually be the primary recipient of the Rachofskys’ overall collection of more than 800 artworks.



Kazuo Shiraga, *Seiran*, 1996
Source: Fergus McCaffrey Gallery via
Bloomberg



Kazuo Shiraga, *Gusoku Jintsuriki*
(*Armed with Divine Power*), 1982
Source: Tom Powel Imaging/Mnuchin
Gallery via Bloomberg

There's no definitive tally of the number of Shiraga's works that exist, which means it's impossible to assess the true depth of the market. Estimates range from 350 works to 800.

Schwartzman said he has sold more than a dozen Shiraga works to U.S. collectors. McCaffrey said Shiraga enthusiasts are concentrated in New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, and the Midwest.

"The people who seemed the most interested in his work are pretty sophisticated," Rachofsky said. "It's not what I characterize as the 'pump and dump' club."

Yet rising prices may prove too tempting for some collectors. Vervoort said he's bought several of Shiraga's works from clients who purchased them only five years ago.

"What was worth 200,000 euros is now worth 2 to 2.5 million," he said. "The masterpiece-level works command much more, up to \$12 million."

Auction Record

Shiraga's auction record was set in June when a large red painting from 1969 sold for \$5.3 million at Sotheby's in Paris. On March 15, Christie's in Hong Kong sold a Shiraga for \$269,420, above its high estimate of \$155,435. A second work fetched \$77,717, above a high estimate of \$33,677.

"These works are in private homes, but they might come out now, because people are tempted to sell," said Levy, the New York dealer.

Dealers are now promoting Shiraga's work from the late 1980s until just before his death, which consist of similarly bold, heavily dramatic paintings.

“Shiraga made great art in every decade of his production,” Schwartzman said. “There aren’t that many artists who remain meaningfully productive in every decade.”