

The Gutai moment

The other modernism

The rise and rise of an important 20th-century modernist movement from Japan

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IN AVANT-GARDE art, as in polar exploration, it's getting there first that counts. The history of modernism is often viewed as a series of discoveries with the glory going to whomever made the next conceptual breakthrough. As that story is usually told, for the first half of the 20th century the innovative centre was Europe, before the old world was overtaken in the aftermath of the second world war by America.

In recent years that comfortable narrative has been disrupted. In the 1950s and 1960s some of the most daring work began to come not from cities like Paris or New York but from near Osaka, a second-tier city in a nation already considered marginal to the modernist project. The source of this innovation was a movement known as Gutai (meaning something like concreteness). It was founded in 1954 by Jiro Yoshihara, a Japanese painter who encouraged his followers to challenge the conformity that had contributed to the authoritarianism of the preceding decades. In place of the wartime slogan, "one hundred million hearts beating as one", Yoshihara championed an art of radical individualism summed up by his battle cry: "Create what has never been done before!"

Like Dada, an artistic and literary wave that began in Switzerland in 1916, Gutai was a movement formed in response to the trauma of war. The radical approaches it favoured—including a preference for non-art materials, spontaneity over mastery, ephemeral performances, exhibiting in non-traditional spaces such as city parks and department stores, and a general rejection of tradition—were intended to undermine art's complicity with systems of wealth and power. "Let's bid farewell to the hoaxes piled up on the altars and in the palaces," Yoshihara urged, "the drawing rooms and the antique shops...Lock up these corpses in the graveyard."

Given Gutai's Utopian philosophy, the current market buzz about its work is not without irony. Stimulated by two shows in New York in 2013, "Gutai: Splendid Playground" at the Guggenheim Museum and "Tokyo 1955–1970: A New Avant-Garde" at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), as well as a new exhibition now at the Dallas Art Museum, "Between Action and the Unknown: the Art of Kazuo Shiraga and Sadamasa Motonaga" (until July 19th), prices for work by the best-known Gutai practitioners have increased dramatically.

The most spectacular example has been Shiraga, who died in 2008 and whose paintings have recently become the object of something of a feeding frenzy. Since 2009 the average price of Shiraga's work has risen more than six times. Last June one of his most famous paintings, "Gekidou Suru Aka" ("Dynamic of Red"—pictured), which served as Gutai's manifesto when it was unveiled at Expo 70, the world fair in Osaka, sold at Sotheby's in Paris for \$5.3m. Not surprisingly, blue-chip galleries have begun to take notice: two New York dealers, Dominique Levy and Mnuchin Gallery, featured Shiraga's work in their shows earlier in the spring; Fergus McCaffrey follows suit this month.

The sudden star power of Shiraga is both understandable and a little disquieting. His paintings are an almost perfect combination of radical aspiration and traditional form—high-mindedness that can easily be packaged and hung on a wall. Dispensing with the manual skill normally associated with painting, Shiraga adopted a technique in which he painted with his feet, manipulating gloopy puddles of pigment while suspended by ropes over paper, canvas and (on occasion) more exotic materials like the hide of a wild boar. The results recall the action paintings of Jackson Pollock—a major inspiration for Yoshihara and his disciples—as well as other members of the New York school, such as Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning.

But Shiraga pumps up the volume, turning Pollock's ethereal drips or Kline's slashing brushwork into cosmic geological formations that writhe and bubble as if extruded from a volcanic caldera. They have a presence that blows away much of today's thin, ironic, media-saturated confections. They not only ooze, they ooze authenticity—a precious commodity in an increasingly jaded global art world.

The spectacle of a Utopian movement seduced by market capitalism is an old one. The chasm between Gutai's antimaterialist goals and the world of luxury commodities that has become ubiquitous is made explicit by a video (included in both the Dominique Levy show and at the Dallas Museum of Art) of Shiraga's famous performance, "Challenging Mud", which was first realised in 1955. In it the almost naked artist battled with a recalcitrant pile of sticky goo to create a work that was both temporary and emphatically unmarketable.

Here was an inspiring affirmation of an artist refusing to succumb to the demands of capitalism, throwing himself fully into something that could not possibly be bought or sold, that offered nothing but the spectacle of a heroic struggle against meaninglessness. It seems that many well-heeled collectors today find such total commitment irresistible.