



# Hello, Gutai

Prices for prime postwar Japanese works are reaching new highs, but are they sustainable?  
 BY ANGELA M.H. SCHUSTER

WHEN KAZUO SHIRAGA'S EXUBERANT and richly hued abstract oil-on-canvas *Keishizoku*, 1961, commanded nearly \$4 million at Phillips New York this past November, it set a record not only for the artist but for an entire body of work produced by the Gutai Art Association, whose members revolutionized the way art was both executed and perceived in postwar Japan. Perhaps more important, the sale seemed to signal a major gain in market traction for Gutai works in the wake of several important exhibitions—at the Museum Kunstpalast in Düsseldorf, at the 2009 Venice Biennale, and, last year, at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

Until recently, Gutai was a much-mediated genre, viewed as a distant cousin of the midcentury avant-garde rather than a critical agent in its evolution. Since the early 2000s, however, a renewed interest in international modernism in all of its forms has driven a curatorial reassessment of Gutai in the West. James Rondeau, head of contemporary art at the Art Institute of Chicago, says that the museum, in seeking to complement its Abstract Expressionist holdings, has deemed Shiraga's work "a priority because it completely reimagines the possibilities and meanings, physically and conceptually, of the expressive gesture."

Although much Gutai work was ephemeral or performance-driven, a prime example of the movement's experimental paintings, Sadamasa Motonaga's *Sakuhin 31*, 1963, utilizes synthetic resins and pebbles.



The museum recently added the artist's oil-on-canvas *Chikatsusei Maunkinshi*, 1960, to a suite of galleries showing artists ranging from Jackson Pollock, Joan Mitchell, and Willem de Kooning to Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Cy Twombly.

Founded in 1954, the Gutai association—its name means “embodiment” or “concreteness”—was the brainchild of Jiro Yoshihara, scion of a family that made its fortune in the cooking oil business. A quintessential impresario, Yoshihara was at once an artist, visionary, patron, gallerist, and publicist, who handpicked his collaborators and curated their output. Much of it—from 1962 on—was presented in a suite of renovated family-owned warehouses in Osaka that came to be known as the Gutai Pinacotheca. By the time the association disbanded following Yoshihara's death in 1972, the original 16-artist collective had grown to include 59 members, half of whom are alive today.

Yoshihara's guiding mantra was “Do what no one has done before,” and works produced by Gutai artists included just about anything and everything—from paintings and sculptures made of mechanical devices to happenings in public parks to performances in which artworks were sent heavenward, tethered to balloons.

Provocative as they may have seemed in

bucking convention, Gutai works were poorly received in Japan, particularly among Tokyo's cultural elite, who regarded them as bourgeois exercises aimed at seducing the West. Moreover, their often playful nature failed to reflect the nation's continued societal unease with American political policies in the wake of World War II.

A consummate promoter and not one to be dissuaded, Yoshihara underwrote the publication of the *Gutai Journal*, of which a dozen issues were produced between 1955 and 1965 under the watchful eye of fellow artist Shozo Shimamoto, who is credited with coining the group's name. The journal was instrumental in disseminating information about Gutai in international circles, piquing the curiosity of artists such as Pollock, de Kooning, and Allan Kaprow, who were clearly influenced by the group's activities.

Despite a philosophical emphasis on “concreteness,” many Gutai works were ephemeral in nature, performance-based pieces to be enjoyed in the here and now, leaving little tangible evidence of their existence. As a result, those that survive and are to be found on the art market tend to be parietal or sculptural, with works by Shiraga leading by ever-increasing margins following the recent retrospectives. At auction, prices for his prime pieces—paintings from the early 1960s, which he executed with his bare feet while suspended above a canvas, often as spectators looked on—have been in a steady climb since they first crossed the \$1 million mark at Sotheby's Paris in December 2007. The most pronounced jump in his market, however, has come in the wake of the Guggenheim show, “Gutai: Splendid Playground,” in the spring of 2013.

The record-breaking Phillips sale in November was followed by the sale of Shiraga's *Chinsei Hakukada*, 1961, for €2,113,500 (\$2.9 million) at Christie's Paris in December, and *Chitaisei Honkshin*, 1960, for HKD18,040,000 (\$2.3 million) at Sotheby's Hong Kong in April. The latter had traded at Sotheby's Paris as recently as December 2010 for a far more modest price of \$225,000. All of the sales reaching \$2 million or more have been achieved since June of last year.

“Shiraga is the barometer for Gutai, and he is the artist who has the most work out in the market,” says Fergus McCaffrey of New York-based McCaffrey Fine Art, noting

**Market leader**  
Kazuo Shiraga's oil on canvas *Keishizoku*, 1961, above, sold for \$3,973,000, a record for Gutai work, at Phillips New York last November. At right, Gutai works from the 1950s on view in Düsseldorf included a trio of paintings by Jiro Yoshihara, foot-steps on a path by Akira Kanayama, and a kraft paper work by Saburo Murakami.



FROM TOP: PHILLIPS; MATTIJS VISSER



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that awareness was fostered early on in Europe by Galerie Stadler in Paris, and then in the 1990s by David Juda in London and Georg Nothelfer in Berlin. A champion of Gutai in the United States for more than a decade, McCaffrey now represents the artist's estate as well as those of Sadamasa Motonaga and Saburo Murakami, whose works were among those of a dozen Gutai artists highlighted in "A Visual Essay on Gutai" at Hauser & Wirth in New York in the fall of 2012. Motonaga's *Water*, 1956–2013, a suite of polyethylene tubes filled with colored water, first presented in an Ashiya public park, was the centerpiece of the Guggenheim show.

Although these and other Gutai artists are in ascendance, prices for their works fall short of Shiraga's highs. Yoshihara's oil on canvas *Untitled*, 1966, set an artist record when it sold for a triple-estimate HKD5,360,000 (\$690,000) at United Asian Auctioneers in Hong Kong in May 2012. McCaffrey notes that although Yoshihara is "an incredibly important figure as the leader of the group, his works do not exhibit any of the innovation that he pushed his students to strive for."

Motonaga has a lower auction record of ¥19,550,000 (\$195,000), achieved last July at



SBI Art Auction in Tokyo, when his oil on panel *Untitled*, 1959, sold for more than twice its ¥8 million (\$80,000) high estimate. Still, he recently cracked the \$1 million mark in private sales: Several large, rare, early canvases have changed hands in the low seven figures, says McCaffrey. Impastoed paintings by Murakami—who is best known for performance pieces in which he burst through a frame covered in kraft paper—have hovered in a slightly lower range, between \$250,000 and \$600,000. Several significant works have gone to the Museum of Modern Art in New York and M+ Hong Kong.

Some of this demand is also attributable to private collectors, including former hedge fund manager Howard Rachofsky, who this past spring presented a dozen Gutai works alongside those of noted Arte Povera artists in "Parallel Views: Italian and Japanese Art from the 1950s, '60s, and '70s" at the Warehouse, his not-for-profit exhibition space in Dallas. Guided by art adviser Allan Schwartzman, Rachofsky and his wife, Cindy, have acquired some three dozen Gutai pieces, including important pieces by Shiraga, Murakami, Motonaga, Shimamoto, and Atsuko Tanaka.

One of the most important European private collections of works by Shiraga is held by Antwerp-based dealer and designer Axel Vervoordt, who began collecting Gutai pieces after being introduced to them in 2005 by curator Mattijs Visser, now director of the Zero Foundation in Düsseldorf. "At that time," says Vervoordt's son, Boris, "Mattijs was putting together his 2006 Zero exhibition at the Museum Kunstpalast, in which he planned to present Gutai works along with those of Jef Verheyen, Günther Uecker, and Lucio Fontana, which were on loan from our collection." It was then, he says, that they realized the seminal importance of the Gutai movement, and Shiraga in particular, having befriended the artist before his death in 2008. "At that moment," says Boris, "my father's vision and mine were forever changed." Since 2011 the

Vervoordts have staged selling exhibitions of works by Sadaharu Horio, Shimamoto, Norio Imai, and Shiraga. This past spring, they showcased tactile, multilayered canvases by Tsuyoshi Maekawa, which were on offer for \$200,000 to \$400,000. "Most recently," says Boris, "the gray-blue geometric plaster reliefs by Yuko Nasaka, one of the few women in the Gutai group, have caught our eye. They are quite rare, as she went through a period of depression during which she destroyed many of her works."

Several galleries, too, are focusing on the 78-year-old Maekawa, who saw a new auction high when his oil and burlap on canvas *Work*, 1963, sold in July at SBI Art Auction

From top: Shozo Shimamoto's oil on newspaper *Untitled*, 1950, demonstrated affinities with Arte Povera in a recent show at Howard Rachofsky's Warehouse exhibition space in Dallas; Tsuyoshi Maekawa's dual-sided burlap, string, and oil-on-canvas *Strings II*, 1959, in the Vervoordt collection in Antwerp.

FROM TOP: KEVIN TODORA; JAN LIEGEOI AND AXEL VERVOORDT GALLERY, ANTWERP, AND HONG KONG



Shiraga's *Chitaisei Honkshin*, 1960, recently found a taker at Sotheby's Hong Kong for \$2.3 million in the April 5 evening sale of modern and contemporary Asian art.

for ¥11,500,000 (\$115,000). The Tokyo-based Whitestone Gallery brought a selection of his works to the Armory Show in New York in March, and at her Madison Avenue space this past spring, Dominique Lévy presented seven paintings executed shortly after Maekawa joined the Gutai group in 1962.

Despite the initially chilly reception in its native Japan, Gutai is at last beginning to gain favor among local buyers, judging from recent auction results at the Tokyo houses Mallet Auctions and SBI. The latter sold a relatively late Shiraga, *Deishaku*, 1987, for ¥86,250,000 (\$842,000) on an estimate of ¥20 million to ¥30 million (\$195–293,000) on April 19. “Like the auction record-setting Maekawa last summer,” says SBI manager Rei Kagami, “it was sold to a Japanese collector in the room, which is an encouraging fact for us.” (In commenting on the price for Shiraga’s later works, McCaffrey says that “By comparison, in 2007 a large, high-quality Shiraga from the 1990s would have sold for \$250,000.” Today the artist’s later works can command more than \$2 million—as evidenced by *Kosha*, 1992, which brought \$2.1 million at Sotheby’s London this past February.)

Shikiko Ikegami, a director of Mallet Auctions in Tokyo, however, warns of oversaturation. “While sales remain strong,” she says, “we have seen a slight

weakening in the market, due in part to the substantial number of works that have recently come on the block.”

In light of Gutai’s recent successes, August Uribe, worldwide co-head of contemporary art at Phillips New York, says it is important to note that only a third of the artists belonging to the movement have appeared at auction; most remain relative unknowns, their works (when available) selling for less than \$10,000.

There may still be room for growth even at the top end. According to McCaffrey, even Shiraga remains undervalued relative to Western peers like Yves Klein, Twombly, Rauschenberg, and de Kooning. “I don’t think we are going to see \$30 million Shiragas in the near future, as most of the material that could possibly drive the market that high is already in museum collections,” he says. “But if something special were to appear, I think the market could push eight figures.”

A show dedicated to Shiraga and Motonaga, organized by Gabriel Ritter and slated to go on view at the Dallas Museum of Art next spring, is sure to reinforce the principals of Gutai deeper into the United States geographically and perhaps deeper still into the American psyche. As to how the market will respond, in McCaffrey’s estimation, “It is simply too soon to tell, as there is still much material awaiting discovery.” 田