

# Fancy Footwork

A new monograph on the preeminent Gutai figure Kazuo Shiraga gets elbow deep into new scholarship



The year is 1954. Thick splashes of paint are poured from a bucket onto a canvas lying on the floor in the center of the atelier. A lone rope hangs from the ceiling. Grasping the rope tightly with two hands for balance, he glides across the canvas, swirling the paint with his feet, pushing off with the weight of his body. Soon his actions quicken, and with more force exerted from his legs, he glides through the paint, pivoting in deliberate strokes. When he is finally content with the outcome, Kazuo Shiraga jumps off the canvas.

Over 60 years later, Kazuo Shiraga (1924–2008), a longstanding member of the Gutai Art Association, is recognized as one of the most important artists of postwar Japan. While research on the preeminent artist has been ongoing for many years in Japan, scholarship and material published in English remain considerably limited. To redress this imbalance, the Dominique Lévy and Axel Vervoordt galleries have co-published what is only the second monograph on Shiraga, on the occasion of an exhibition at Dominique Lévy's New York space of Shiraga and ceramic installation artist Satoru Hoshino.

This sturdy hardcover monograph contributes to current literature on Shiraga and the Gutai collective at

large by endeavoring to, as art historian Koichi Kawasaki writes in his introduction, “discuss Shiraga’s work from a variety of perspectives,” through the compilation of nine selected writings—including four newly commissioned essays—interspersed with full-color plates, archival photographs and two short texts penned by the artist. But the real gem of this book is a facsimile of Shiraga’s personal scrapbook—the original is held in the collection of the Amagasaki Cultural Center—which has been photographed, digitized and reproduced cover-to-cover for the first time.

Shiraga maintained the scrapbook between 1953 and 1965, covering his most active years, from the time of his first foot paintings and his most vigorous years of involvement with the Gutai group. Bound in red leather with gold spiral binding, the scrapbook shows Shiraga’s meticulous approach toward recording his own artistic endeavors. All of the photos are labeled and dated; images are arranged sequentially with arrows pointing to their order. One set of images exposes the behind-the-scenes orchestration of a *Life* magazine photoshoot capturing one of his painting demonstrations. Betraying his acute awareness of the mass media’s importance,



Shiraga captured the photographer and the camera in the frames—his documentation of their documentation.

The monograph provides an in-depth look at the artist's pictorial language. Alongside vibrant reproductions of his artworks is extensive photographic material drawn from the Amagasaki Cultural Center. These archival images show him in action at his studio, at social gatherings and among friends, providing a reflection of the artist beyond the artworks. They conjure up the quotidian, as well as spiritual, aspects of his life—Shiraga was ordained a Buddhist monk in 1974 after several years of rigorous training, adopting the name Sodō, meaning “Simple Path.”

The son of traditional kimono merchants, Shiraga was born in the city of Amagasaki, west of Osaka, where he would live almost his entire life. At the age of 20, he was drafted by the Imperial Japanese Army. Although never deployed, the artist witnessed the devastation and destruction of World War II—visual memories that would leave a lasting effect on his future paintings. In “Not Just Beauty, But Something Horrible: Kazuo Shiraga and Matsuri Festivals,” one of the four newly commissioned essays for the publication, curator and art historian Ming Tiampo convincingly argues that Japanese *matsuri* culture—purification festivals of Shinto or Shinto-Buddhist beliefs that occur on a cyclical calendar—equipped Shiraga with “a metaphor of trauma that he used to engage with the past war, challenging everything that came before him.” Tiampo explains how, according to Shiraga’s own recollections, *matsuri* festivals in Amagasaki are instilled with violence, bloodshed and death. In an interview with Tiampo (from 1998), the artist calls it “a festival of fresh blood” and gives a detailed account of the accidental deaths he witnessed of local fishermen partaking in the *danjiri matsuri*. These ideas became both a visual vocabulary and a conceptual framework for Shiraga and other Gutai artists, also based in Osaka, in their early outdoor performances and exhibitions.

The Treaty of Peace between the United States and Japan went into effect in 1952, officially reinstating Japanese sovereignty and ending foreign occupation of the country. Around the same time, American art critic Harold Rosenberg (1906–1978) coined the term “Action Painting,” heralding American abstract artist Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)’s drip-painting technique. It was two years later that Shiraga would arrive at his own technique of foot painting. Angled from a Western-centered perspective, another commissioned essay, “Thinking with Shiraga,” by Columbia University’s John Rajchman, analyzes Shiraga’s artistic exploration through its materiality and methodology. Rajchman argues that the artist took the concept of action painting further than Pollock, who, despite ditching the paintbrush and easel, remained bound by his constant awareness of his actions. Shiraga, Rajchman asserts, reached a new level of action painting in the utilization of his feet, which ultimately permitted him to find a higher state of being, a disposition the artist called *shishitsu* (which translates to “innate characteristics and abilities”).

Taking a wider perspective, Rajchman reiterates a recent theory among scholars of Asian art proposing that the experimentation of Shiraga and the Gutai artists developed separately from European and American avant-gardes, allowing for what he considers a new art history. Rajchman additionally discusses Shiraga’s works in relation to the Italian artist-theorist Lucio Fontana

(1899–1968) and British painter Francis Bacon (1909–1992) to illustrate his view, all the while connecting the three figures’ sensibilities to the philosophical studies of Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995), Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) and Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677).

Following a similar thread, Alfred Pacquement, former director of Paris’s Centre Pompidou, examines Shiraga’s foot paintings within the theoretical context of the American avant-garde in “Kazuo Shiraga: Painting as Ritual,” an essay previously published in a 2009 catalogue for a major travelling retrospective within Japan. Drawing a comparison to the practices of Pollock and Yves Klein (1928–1962), Pacquement demonstrates why “formal similarities to Western painting are bound to lead to [a] superficial and necessarily inadequate vision.” The postwar art world of Japan was eager to reform its identity and gained rapid momentum with a collective spirit. Rooted in such beliefs, Gutai was formed in 1954, spearheaded by Jirō Yoshihara (1905–1972). It would go on to become one of the most long-lived, stable and influential avant-garde groups of postwar Japan. Pacquement persuasively presents a case outlining the acute differences between Shiraga and his Gutai peers, and the Euro-American avant-gardes that emerged contemporaneously, but independently.

Pacquement observes that Klein, who settled in Paris in 1954 after spending some time in Japan, was aware of the work of the Gutai artists. Referring to his “Anthropométries” paintings that are made by female models rolling in paint, Klein made the claim that the Gutai group “used [his] method in a very strange way.” He further added that “personally, [he would] never try to daub [his] body and become a living brush in that way.” Pacquement notes that it was in 1960—well after the Gutai artists were producing radical art—that Klein began the “Anthropométries” series.

The monograph also includes an interview between Shiraga and curator Jean-Hubert Martin from 1987; art historian Reiko Tomii’s account of her 2011 restaging at MoMA New York of Shiraga’s seminal 1955 performance piece, *Challenging Mud*, in which the artist had writhed and wrestled in mud; a previously published essay by curator Shoichi Hirai, which serves as a biographical entry on the artist; and two short pieces penned by Shiraga taken from *Gutai no. 3* (1955) and *Gutai no. 4* (1956), two issues of the in-house journal produced by the Gutai collective. Lastly, an essay by the Spanish artist Antoni Tàpies (1923–2012) recalls a personal encounter with the artist in Kyoto and proposes that Shiraga’s unconventional use of his feet to paint is a legacy he has left behind for the contemporary art world; on the page opposite this, Tiampo writes a short analysis of *Suijū (Drunken Beast)* (1985), a painting in the private collection of Tàpies. In her piece, Tiampo captures the essence of Shiraga’s paintings—in her words, “a maelstrom of centripetal energy.”

A definitive monograph exploring Shiraga’s six-decade career from several angles—philosophically, historically and aesthetically—the volume contributes new English-language material on the postwar artist, as well as provides an illuminating visual survey of his works. The offerings in this volume, together with a comprehensive presentation of archival photographs, sumptuous color plates and the unveiling of Shiraga’s private scrapbook, set it apart from previous publications, making it required reading of growing scholarship on the distinguished Gutai artist.  
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#### KAZUO SHIRAGA

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