

# CHRISTIE'S

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## *Action painting: The body electric*

Kazuo Shiraga, James Nares, and Hugo McCloud acknowledge their relationship with their artworks — and subsequently the viewer — by laying their flesh bare, as William J. Simmons explains

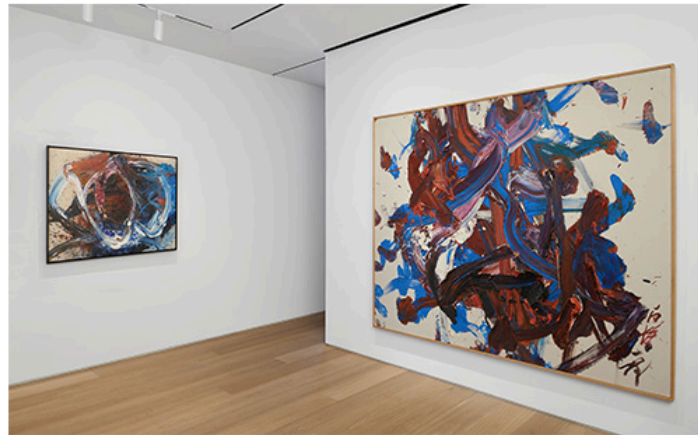
Pushing the body in the service of art making has a storied history: Yves Klein's exemplary *Leap Into the Void* (1960), fakes a photographic depiction of the artist in flight, while contemporary practitioner Adam Putnam straps himself to ceilings like a macabre Christ figure, creating gestures that challenge the viewer's understanding of performance.

As performance art increasingly achieves notoriety as a genre of contemporary practice, thoughtful consideration should be given to artists whose work offers an exemplar for the possibilities of body-based plastic objects. The examination of the tradition continues with three artists, two of whom are currently enjoying exhibitions, and all of whom rather than seeking cold objectivity or hermetic detachment use their bodies to reach a conceptual place beyond the physical, perhaps indicative of a human obsession with just how far we can extend ourselves before breaking.

### Kazuo Shiraga



Kazuo Shiraga, the 1950s Gutai master is having a moment with three exhibitions — Body and Matter at Dominique Levy Gallery until April 4 and Mnuchin Gallery until April 11 in New York, as well as at the Dallas Museum of Art's Between Action and the Unknown up through July 19. Beyond the curatorial and scholarly recognition, the artist is proving to be a star on the auction block, fetching \$4,869,000 for BB56 (1961), at Christie's New York in November, followed by Yugi (1994), which brought £818,500 at Christie's London last week.



Installation view of Body and Matter: The Art of Kazuo Shiraga and Satoru Hoshino, 2015  
at Dominique Levy Gallery

Shiraga initially studied traditional Japanese painting before taking his work in the avant-garde, abstract direction of the Gutai movement. For *Challenging Mud* (1955), the artist immersed himself in a pile of cement, gravel, clay, and plaster, moving the mixture into fascinating shapes using only his body as a brush. This performance was in the same vein as Shiraga's foot paintings, for which he would lay canvas on the floor, and swing from the ceiling to use his feet in the creation of astounding abstract entities.

'While the term action painting was first coined by American critic Harold Rosenberg to describe the gestural abstraction of artists such as William de Kooning and Jackson Pollock, Shiraga's foot paintings were the result of a more direct, violent struggle between body and material,' says Dallas Museum of Art curator Gabriel Ritter. Throughout his 40-year career, the late artist achieved a layered tactility, suggesting interior space akin to the body as seen in *Suiju* (1985). According to Ritter, the violence of the gestures is 'synonymous with the fight for individuality and creative freedom in post-war Japan in which the body itself became the site and literal embodiment of emancipation.'

Top image: Installation view of *Body and Matter: The Art of Kazuo Shiraga and Satoru Hoshino, 2015*. Photo: Tom Powel Imaging. Courtesy of Dominique Lévy Gallery