

Gutai Revival: Tsuyoshi Maekawa's Tactile Canvases at Saatchi SALON

By Naomi Sparks -

April 13, 2017

The Gutai movement set about to embody human creativity in material form. With an emphasis on radical experimentation, the movement has come to be associated with North America's [Abstract Expressionism](#) and France's Art Informel movements.

This Japanese avant-garde collective, which arose with the liberal mood of post-war Japan, is experiencing something of a resurgence. Works by associated artists, which have until recently been overlooked by the art market, are being featured in a number of European exhibitions and are fetching high prices at auction.

Gutai, which translates variously as 'concrete' or 'embodiment', originated in Osaka, Japan, and came into being in 1954 with the founding of the Gutai Art Association (GAA). The movement's guiding principle was two-fold, with an emphasis both on the autonomy of the individual artist to be creative and on an international outreach. The global influence of Gutai is evident in the inclusion of works by artists such as Enrico Castellani, Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni in the recent [Tsuyoshi Maekawa exhibition](#) at the Gagosian Gallery in San Francisco.

Born in 1936 in Osaka, Maekawa belongs to the second generation of Gutai artists, having joined the movement in the early 1960s. Following the group's disbandment after the death of its co-founder Yoshihara Jirō in 1972, Maekawa shifted his focus from a radical rejection of artistic practices to a focused experimentation with his chosen materials: oil paint and hessian (burlap).



Tsuyoshi Maekawa, '1963 G 100-2', 1963. Oil and burlap on canvas. 63 3/4 x 51 1/4 inches (162 x 130 cm). Signed and dated 1964 (on the reverse). © Lévy Gorvy.

Maekawa's work proved to be among the most popular from the Gutai movement. His first solo exhibition was held at the Gutai Pinacotheca, Osaka, as early as 1963, with his work having previously been featured in every Gutai group exhibition since he joined the collective. More recently, Maekawa's work has appeared in major exhibitions such as 'Splendid

[Playground'](#) at the Guggenheim Museum, New York in 2013 and his work now features in the permanent collections of international institutions including the Tate Modern.

A solo show comprised of Maekawa's work from the 1950s and 1960s, at the height of Gutai, is currently on display at the [Saatchi Gallery](#), London. The selection of works forms the inaugural exhibition of the Saatchi's new space SALON, launched in February of this year with the aim of showcasing international artists to new audiences.



Exhibition view. Image courtesy of Lévy Gorvy.

The exhibition, a collaboration between Saatchi Gallery and [Lévy Gorvy](#), presents a group of works from Maekawa's most productive period, including two pieces originally shown at Maekawa's first solo exhibition, 'Untitled (A5)' (1963) and 'Mountain with Lines' (1963) and a selection of his work on loan from the [Axel Vervoordt Gallery](#), Antwerp.

The canvases are presented uniformly in the windowless lower-ground floor of the Saatchi Gallery. No context for the works is offered to the visitor because none is needed: Maekawa's creations can be enjoyed on a purely visual level.

The artist's work is preoccupied with the dichotomy between flatness and three-dimensionality. The viewer is confronted with undulating folds of hessian cloth and ejaculatory spatters of paint in an explosion of colour, which call attention to the surface of the canvas

and undermine the notion of a painting as a two-dimensional plane. That said, Maekawa does not wholly reject the representational, and the viewer could be forgiven for picking out recognisable forms in his Pollock-like canvases.



Tsuyoshi Maekawa, 'Untitled', 1967. Oil and burlap on panel, 10 5/8 x 8 7/8 inches (27 x 22 cm) . © Lévy Gorvy.

Many of his compositions seem biological, evocative of flesh wounds or of the human circulatory system. Nonetheless, Maekawa's primary concern is with the materiality of his work. In the case of an untitled piece from 1967, the smooth surface of the painted hessian rolls is abruptly interrupted by a gap in the composition, emphasising the tactile physical nature of the fabric. Maekawa's visceral works, punctuated by rips and tears which are sewn and stuck back together again, raise questions about temporality as well as space. The experimental cut-and-stick creation process, resulting in works comprised of fragmented parts, has led his work to be likened to that of Joan Miró, Paul Klee and Alberto Burri.

This Tsuyoshi Maekawa exhibition represents just one facet of the resurgence of interest in Gautai, with exhibitions featuring the work of Kazuo Shiraga (b. 1924) at [Lévy Gorvy](#), Old Bond Street, in February and March, and at the [Axel Vervoordt](#) gallery, running concurrently with the Maekawa show at the Saatchi SALON.

Tsuyoshi Maekawa is on display at **SALON, Saatchi Gallery**, Duke of York Square (London) **until 14th May 2017**.