

# LÉVY GORVY

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## LÉVY GORVY TO PRESENT EXHIBITION OF KAZUO SHIRAGA'S PAINTINGS IN LONDON

*Kazuo Shiraga*  
3 February – 25 March 2017  
Lévy Gorvy  
22 Old Bond Street  
London, W1S 4PY

Lévy Gorvy is pleased to present an exhibition of Kazuo Shiraga's paintings in London, marking the artist's first solo exhibition in the city in a decade. A selection of Shiraga's forceful gestural canvases, mostly dating to the early 1960s, a period when the artist was gaining international attention, will be on view beginning 3 February 2017. This marks the inaugural London exhibition under Dominique Lévy and Brett Gorvy's recently announced partnership; this is the gallery's second exhibition of Shiraga's work, following the critically acclaimed 2015 exhibition, *Body and Matter: The Art of Kazuo Shiraga and Satoru Hoshino* in New York.

Shiraga emerged as one of the most prominent members of the avant-garde group Gutai with his sensational 1955 performance, *Challenging Mud*. In a work that has become one of the canonical touchstones of postwar Japanese art, the artist used his entire body to aggressively manipulate a plot of mud, enacting a struggle between human form and material. This performance followed Shiraga's foot painting practice, begun in 1954, in which the artist used his feet to paint powerful and energetic abstract forms. He would set a canvas on the floor of his studio and, suspending his body from a rope hung from the ceiling, push and kick paint applied by his wife, Fujiko Shiraga, in dynamic strokes over the canvas' surface. Shiraga continued to paint in this manner for the majority of his career, developing an entirely new form while engaging historical techniques of painting with the body rather than with brushes (finger-painting is a centuries-old technique developed in China). Displayed in a Western context, these works challenge preexisting notions of artistic creation and verticality assumed in the act of painting to emphasise the corporeal meeting of body and matter. As Shiraga described it: 'I want to paint as though [I were] rushing around a battlefield, exerting myself to collapse from exhaustion.'<sup>1</sup>

Many of the canvases on view at Lévy Gorvy were initially presented at Galerie Stadler, Paris. Rodolphe Stadler was introduced to Shiraga by the leading French art critic Michel Tapié, who visited the artist and the Gutai group in Osaka in 1957. Both Stadler and Tapié would have an important and lasting influence on Shiraga's work. Shiraga first exhibited work as part of the gallery's group exhibition *Métamorphisme* in 1959, and in 1962 his first solo show was presented there. *T32* (1962), a highlight of Lévy Gorvy's presentation, was made in the same year of this first solo exhibition and was sent directly to Stadler after its completion. During this time, as his work was gaining an international audience not only in Paris, but also in Turin, Italy, and New York, Shiraga began to enlarge his canvases and give them traditional Japanese names at the advice of Stadler and Tapié. In 1960, the artist embarked on a body of paintings called the Water

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<sup>1</sup> *Gutai journal no. 2*, 'Omou Koto'.

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Margin series, named after a Chinese saga dating to the fourteenth century. In this legend, 108 bandits are the heroes as they rebel against the senior officials of a government ruled by a corrupt emperor. The number 108 carries auspicious connotations in Buddhism, and the violent plot of *The Water Margin* echoes Shiraga's own energetic and spiritual battle with the materiality of the paint in his canvases. The exhibition features three paintings from this series, each titled after a character from the epic tale: *Chiyosei Mochakuten* (1960), *Chikisei Sesuisho* (1960), and *Chisuisei Tshuien* (1961). One of these, *Chikisei Sesuisho*, once belonged to Lucio Fontana.

*Kazuo Shiraga* will be on view in London until 25 March 2017. Concurrently to the exhibition, Lévy Gorvy will be collaborating with Saatchi Gallery in London to show a selection of paintings by another prominent member of the Gutai group, Tsuyoshi Maekawa, including important loans from Axel Vervoordt Gallery, Antwerp. This presentation will inaugurate a new exhibition space at Saatchi Gallery, SALON, a programme of selling exhibitions. Saatchi Gallery will partner with galleries to present an international platform dedicated to showcasing exhibitions by major established artists as well as artists' estates.

Lévy Gorvy will also be collaborating with Axel Vervoordt Gallery for an exhibition of works by Kazuo Shiraga at the latter gallery's new exhibition space in Antwerp, opening on March 8. The two galleries previously co-published the first ever comprehensive English-language monograph on the artist in 2015. By presenting simultaneous exhibitions by two Gutai masters across multiple venues in Europe, Lévy Gorvy will highlight the legacy of this influential avant-garde collective.

## About the Artist

**Kazuo Shiraga** was born in 1924 in Amagasaki, Japan. He studied *Nihon-ga* (a hybrid modern form of Japanese-style painting that emerged in the late nineteenth century in response to the rise of oil painting) in Kyoto and grew frustrated with the stylistic and material confines he found in the form. Following his studies, Shiraga participated in *Gendai Bijutsu Kondankai* (Contemporary Art Discussion Group) with several other students and began experimenting with making oil paintings using his hands and fingers. He found the viscosity of tube-ready oil paint more 'free' than the inconvenient and thin ink-based pigments he had used in painting school. In 1954, Shiraga joined the renowned Japanese avant-garde collective Gutai and was inspired by the group's leader, Jiro Yoshihara, to further push his performative, material-driven painting practice in order to 'make something that never existed before'. During his time as a member of Gutai, Shiraga simultaneously pursued oil painting and performance, often integrating the two practices in pieces such as *Challenging Mud* (1955), in which the artist used his entire body to manipulate mud as if it were thick, pliable paint, and *Ultramodern Sanbaso* (1957), in which he wore a dramatic red costume with elongated and wing-like arms, his movements creating slashes of colour against the stark black backdrop of the stage. Shiraga continued this exploration of the relationship between body and material over the course of his career, and is best known for the large-scale 'foot paintings' he made well into his eighties. The foot paintings explore themes of Japanese history, mythology, and Buddhism while preserving the explosive movements of an artist who continuously sought a dynamic and collaborative relationship with his medium.