

# The Telegraph

## The Japanese radicals taking the art world by storm

Once thought to be unsaleable, Gutai art is now booming, says Colin Gleadell

Sixteen years ago, the first UK exhibition for the Japanese action/performance artist Kazuo Shiraga, then 77 years old, was staged at the Annely Juda gallery off Bond Street. There was a fascination for an artist who would enter a Buddhist-like trance before suspending himself from the rafters to paint swirling abstracts with his feet. But buyers weren't moved, and none of the paintings, priced at up to £20,000, were sold.

However, when Juda showed his work again in 2007, it was a sell-out, at prices of up to £140,000. In one year his auction record leapt from \$40,000 to \$1.1 million (£537,000); the next year he died.

Juda stopped exhibiting Shiraga's work because it became too difficult to assemble, he says. Certainly the competition was hotting up. The main buyer at his second exhibition was Belgian dealer Axel Verwoordt, who had met Shiraga in 2005 and began to buy and sell his work. Verwoordt had become enamoured with the Gutai group of Japanese artists who, after the war and the bombing of Hiroshima, abandoned traditional art practice, using their bodies to make a performative kind of art.

Of all the 60 or so artists associated with Gutai, Shiraga has been the most marketable due to the visual impact of his thickly impastoed work and its plentiful supply. Many of the other group members produced ephemeral work that did not last.

Verwoordt understood this and established himself as a tastemaker, showing Shiraga at a palace in Venice during the Biennales, and each year at the Maastricht TEFAF fair.

Then America began to take note. The New York dealer Fergus McCaffrey secured representation of the Shiraga estate; advisor Allan Schwartzman, now a director of Sotheby's, involved US collectors in the hunt; and dealers Robert Mnuchin and Dominique Lévy competed to show his work.



The key turning point was a retrospective exhibition for the Gutai group, *Splendid Playground*, held in 2013 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. By 2015, Shiraga prices had reached a high of £3.2 million at auction. Other Gutai artists to reach record levels at that time were the group's founder, Jiro Yoshihara



(\$690,000); Atsuko Tanaka (\$1 million); Shozo Shimamoto (\$993,000); and Sadamasa Motonaga (\$939,000) – all in Hong Kong, reflecting a similarly swift increase and a shift towards Asia.

However, all of these records were set before 2016, suggesting that the price rush may now be over. There are less than a handful of Gutai works in the next London auctions, but a test will come in Hong Kong in April, when a vivid 1963 abstract painting by Motonaga carries the highest estimate yet for the artist at £400,000.

This month, the first Shiraga exhibition in London since 2007 is being staged at the Lévy Gorvy gallery in Mayfair. Prices here range from \$500,000 to \$3 million, showing no increase since Lévy's New York show for Shiraga in 2015. Among the paintings are *Chikisei Sesuicho*, the name of a mythological Ming Dynasty Robin Hood character. It once belonged to Europe's leading postwar avant-garde artist, Lucio Fontana, and was bought in Hong Kong last year for \$2.7 million. "After prices have been stable for a while, they'll go up again," predicts Verwoordt.

Above, *Chikisei Sesuicho*, 1960, by Kazuo Shiraga. Below, *Untitled*, a 1963 work in oil on burlap, by Tsuyoshi Maekawa

Meanwhile, there is plenty of scope for discovery. Currently on show in London is 83-year-old Tsuyoshi Maekawa, at the new commercial Salon space at the Saatchi gallery where Lévy and Verwoordt are working in collaboration. Maekawa's abstract and textile paintings only began appearing at auction in 2014, peaking last October with a £275,000 price for a Sixties painting. At the Saatchi Salon, the paintings are priced from \$75,000 to \$400,000.

The two dealers are also collaborating on a major Shiraga retrospective in Verwoordt's new gallery space outside Antwerp. Here, only a few works will be for sale with a starting price of €2 million.

The most affordable Gutai artist is 77-year-old Sadaharu Horio. Although he has fetched £53,000 at auctions, he is working with Verwoordt to produce drawings on demand for just \$1 each at The Armory Show in New York next week. Expect long queues.