

MATSUTANI'S MOMENT

by *edward m. gomez* 12/31/69



[VIEW SLIDESHOW](#) Takesada Matsutani reworking a “Stream” drawing, 1984, graphite on paper, approx. 33 feet long. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura and Hayama.; View of Stream 88-C (left), 1988, two parts, and The Push, 1990.;

NEW YORK Long before Takashi Murakami shot to global fame, Japan’s Gutai movement managed to achieve a measure of international renown—even as its activities were still unfolding. *Life* magazine featured the Gutai artists in 1956. A year later, the French critic and *art informel* proponent Michel Tapié traveled to Japan to meet the group and later brought news of their activities back to Europe. That might not seem so impressive in the know-it-instantly Internet age. But for experimental artists working in what felt like isolation, in a country still emerging from the ashes of war, such critical recognition was remarkable.

In Japan, the Paris-based, Osaka-born Gutai artist Takesada Matsutani has recently been featured in several exhibitions, including “Stream” at the Kamakura venue of the Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura and Hayama, which surveyed his production from 1984 to the present. Meanwhile, in Tokyo, from early February through late April, Kaneko Art Gallery and Tsubaki Modern Art Gallery presented three separate shows that collectively offered a summary of Matsutani’s art from the 1960s through today. All of this attention to Matsutani’s distinctive oeuvre reflects substantially growing interest in Gutai—in Japanese, the word *gutai* means “concrete”—on the part of art historians, curators and dealers (see box).

Now 73 years old, Matsutani (born 1937) represents the so-called second generation of Gutai artists. Because of his productivity, relative visibility and longevity, Matsutani is more widely represented on the market today than many other Gutai artists; the first generation’s art is largely held by museums and private collectors in Japan. In its technical characteristics and thematic concerns, Matsutani’s work offers a kind of deeply personal—and still evolving—case study of the movement’s esthetics. The Gutai Art Association, as the group was formally known, was founded in the summer of 1954 by Jiro Yoshihara and 17 other young Osaka-area artists who looked to him as their leader. Scion of a family that owned a cooking-oil wholesale company, the mostly self-taught Yoshihara had made paintings in a surrealist mode but later became interested in abstract art; he had read about and seen reproductions of Western modernist works in the press, and he saw examples of foreign abstract paintings in the early 1950s in Japan. “Don’t copy anyone!” he ordered his youthful charges. “Do something no one’s ever done before!”¹

The Gutai Art Manifesto, which Yoshihara composed and signed, assailed familiar forms of art. Published in a Japanese art magazine in December 1956, the manifesto declared, “Let us take leave of these piles of counterfeit objects on the altars, in the palaces, in the salons and the antique shops. . . . Lock these corpses into their tombs. Gutai art does not change the material but brings it to life. Gutai art does not falsify the material. In Gutai art the human spirit and the material reach out their hands to each other.”² Some of the Gutai artists’ events-as-art and onstage art actions, and their preoccupation with process as content and with the art object (especially a painting) as a tangible document of its production, have been regarded, at least by Western observers,

as prototypical performance art forms. Gutai also has been seen as Japanese modernism's answer to European and American Abstract Expressionism, although today, in Japan, some art historians are beginning to reconsider that notion.

As a young man, Matsutani took private lessons in *Nihonga*, a traditional Japanese painting genre. He showed works of this kind in local exhibitions, and in 1959, while taking part in a community art program in Nishinomiya, near Osaka, he met Sadamasa Motonaga, one of Gutai's founding members. "At that point, I had not yet seen any of the group's exhibitions in person," Matsutani recalled during an interview soon after the opening of his show in Kamakura. "But I had read about its activities in Japanese magazines and newspapers, which described them as 'scandalous.'"³

By that time, the local media had provided colorful reports about such emblematic Gutai works as Shozo Shimamoto's untitled abstract painting made by shooting paint from a cannon at a large sheet of fabric (1956); Motonaga's *Work (Water)*, 1956, with its puddles of colored water resting in wide ribbons of polyethylene fabric stretched like hammocks between trees; and Atsuko Tanaka's *Electric Dress* (1956), a cascade of colorfully painted, bulb-shaped and straight incandescent light tubes. Matsutani explains, "I liked the energy in the Gutai artists' works. To me, it suggested that, although we had lost the war, our creative mentality and culture had not been destroyed. This energy seemed to come from their hearts."

Turning away from *Nihonga* as his paintings became more abstract, Matsutani began experimenting with vinyl glue, which, he notes, Japanese manufacturers started producing after the war. Allowing the glue to drip slowly, he created stalactitelike forms on the surfaces of canvases. Motonaga introduced the younger artist to Yoshihara, to whom Matsutani showed his dripped-glue concoctions, but the Gutai leader was not impressed. Had Matsutani intervened too much in the making of his experimental works and not allowed the materiality of his glue to reveal or express itself in its own ways? Had he somehow failed to grasp and convey the true spirit of Gutai art? These were the questions Matsutani asked himself as he returned to his studio to experiment some more. Inspired, in part, by the organic shapes in blood samples he had viewed under a microscope at a friend's laboratory, Matsutani went on to develop circular, bubblelike forms from blobs of vinyl glue that he deposited on the surfaces of canvases. In these experiments, he noticed that the outer surface of the glue became a thin, stretchy film as it slowly hardened. With a narrow straw, Matsutani could pierce the drying glue bubbles and blow air into them, crafting bulbous shapes that sometimes popped and collapsed. Once dry, these elements suggested the shells of strange sea creatures or the curves of the human body—or, more precisely, female genitalia. "Working with vinyl glue, I quickly discovered its sensual quality and from then on I would always strive for a certain sensuality in my work, coming from the materials themselves," Matsutani recalls.

In 1960, he took part for the first time in a Gutai group exhibition and in 1963, on the occasion of his first solo presentation under the association's aegis—at the Gutai Pinacotheca, the group's own venue, which had opened in Osaka in August 1962—he became a full member. He would participate in each of the association's collective exhibitions until its breakup in 1972. Three years after that career-launching one-person show, Matsutani won a fellowship that allowed him to travel to Europe. He headed to Greece, Italy and southern France to trace the paths of European art history, ending up in Paris, where he settled for good in the late 1960s and began making engravings at Stanley William Hayter's renowned printmaking workshop, Atelier 17. Later, he met and married Kate Van Houten, an American-born Abstract Expressionist painter who was also based in Paris.

In the early 1970s, Matsutani began using graphite as the main element of his work, sometimes mixing it into his glue. Faithful to his Gutai roots, the artist strove to identify and convey something of this material's essential character. Tapping a deep vein of ritualized, even obsessive, repetitive gesture in the arts of Japan, Matsutani created vast expanses of metallic black graphite on mural-size sheets of paper. Each non-image was built up painstakingly, one small patch of thick pencil or graphite-stick strokes at a time. Over the years, roughly 33-foot long drawings of this kind have become Matsutani's signature works. (Most bear a variation of the title "Stream.") He terminates each drawing with a splash of turpentine against the top at one end of the massive black line, allowing the chemical to carry the graphite in drips down the sheet.

If that gesture smacks of the early Gutai era's action-makes-artwork ethos, its abruptness also recalls the confrontational esthetics of Mono-ha, a homegrown modernist movement that flourished in Japan from the late 1960s through the early 1970s. Mono-ha artists (roughly translated, the movement's name means "school of things") were interested in bringing together natural and industrially made materials whose physical characteristics obviously differed. The overall impact of each Mono-ha work derived from the juxtapositions of materials an artist used—for example, in Lee Ufan's *Relatum* (1968), a heavy stone is placed atop a sheet of broken glass. Similarly, Matsutani's turpentine-flinging gesture charges each mural-size drawing with a dramatic energy—some might call it Zen-like and impulsive—that disturbs its apparent serenity.

Ultimately, Matsutani combined the all-over graphite mark-making and the forms made with vinyl glue to create three-dimensional wall-mounted works that are a labor-intensive hybrid of drawing and sculpture. His Kamakura exhibition focused on these works, calling attention to the sensual textures and contours that have become hallmarks of Matsutani's formal vocabulary. "I liked Mono-ha's sensibility," he notes, "but it was too cold. I wanted something warmer and obviously sensual in my work." That warmth can be

sensed in such works as the black graphite *Joint 2-86* (1986), with its nearly symmetrical forms that resemble two large breasts meeting nipple to nipple, and *Circle 98-3-7* (1998), in which a luminous black graphite oval is set against a somewhat off-white ground; a broad, drippy lip in this work's lower-left quadrant brings to mind the enticing smoothness of fine, unblemished skin. By contrast, the spirit of Gutai's unconventional production methods could be felt in the newest version of a mixed-medium work Matsutani has been presenting for several years. Called *Relation*, it consists of a cloth-covered plastic bag filled with black ink that is suspended about 6 feet above a sheet of canvas stretched on a rectangular frame, which also hangs from the ceiling, about 4 feet above the ground. Beneath it is a shallow, water-filled metal pan the same size and shape as the canvas. To start the piece, the artist pricks small holes in the bag, allowing the thick ink to drip onto the canvas. As the fabric becomes saturated, the ink drips through it into the pan below, darkening the pool of water. Nearby, one of Matsutani's enormous graphite drawings cascaded down to sprawl along the floor, setting up a contrast—or “relation”—between its blackness (and the manner in which it was achieved) and the black-splattered, self-creating painting-in-progress. The side-by-side pieces, which functioned both separately and together, gave viewers a sense of the inherent drama and discipline that are to be found in Matsutani's art, from the predictably unpredictable nature of a work that can be seen creating itself to the daunting size of a handmade piece whose craftsmanship is as obsessive as it is precise.

A vivid testament to the current surge of interest in Gutai, Matsutani's Kamakura exhibition served as a reminder of the movement's enduring influence. “I know that I have gone beyond Gutai's esthetic rules, such as they were, and, the truth is, they always were somewhat vague,” Matsutani reflects. “But,” he adds, “I have always kept in mind Yoshihara's command to be original and to honor the spirit of my materials. I feel that I have come to understand so much about graphite and glue. At the same time, I still have so much to learn about my materials. So much to learn.”

Gutai East & West

While Matsutani's exhibitions were on view in Japan, so, too, was “Kazuo Shiraga: Painting Born Out of Fighting,” a major traveling retrospective of the works of Shiraga (1924-2008), a Gutai founding member best known for making boldly colored oil paintings with his feet while swinging from a rope suspended over canvases placed flat on the ground. Meanwhile, McCaffrey Fine Art, in New York, presented a smaller show of Shiraga's paintings [Oct. 8, 2009-Jan. 23, 2010; see *A.i.A.* review, Mar. '10]. This gallery is the authorized seller outside Japan of a limited-edition facsimile set, issued by Geika Shoin in Tokyo, of all of the Gutai Art Association's historic publications.

In recent years attention also has been directed toward the work of Atsuko Tanaka (1932-2005), another first-generation Gutai member. Her paintings and mixed-medium works were the subject of major retrospectives in 2001 at the Ashiya City Museum of Art & History, near Osaka, and in 2004 at New York University's Grey Art Gallery. At the time of the NYU exhibition, new and old Tanaka works were shown by the Paula Cooper Gallery, which now represents the artist's estate [see *A.i.A.*, Nov. '04].

From Oct. 22-Dec. 16, 2009, the Harold B. Lemmerman Gallery at New Jersey City University presented “‘Under Each Other's Spell': Gutai and New York,” which examined the relationship that evolved between the Gutai group and certain New York-based artists in the 1950s and 1960s. It featured material from the collection of the Pollock-Krasner House & Study Center in Springs, N.Y. (Shozo Shimamoto sent Jackson Pollock some of the Gutai group's publications) and paintings the American artist Paul Jenkins received as gifts from Gutai members when he did a guest residency at the Gutai Pinacotheca in 1964.

Altogether, the influence of these shows has been notable. Mizuho Kato, a curator and research-section chief at the Ashiya City Museum of Art & History and a leading Gutai scholar, noted in a conversation last February, “Although no university or art college in Japan really offers a comprehensive course in Japanese modern art history, Japanese art students and young artists continue to discover Gutai on their own.”

1 “Mr. Gutai: Hoshihara Jiro,” in Hirai, Shoichi, 「具体」ってなんだ? (What's Gutai?), Tokyo, Bijutsu Shuppan-sha, 2004, p. 23.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 84. 3 This and all subsequent quotes of Matsutani are from a Feb. 7, 2010, interview with the author.

“Takesada Matsutani: Stream” was at the Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura, Feb. 6-Mar. 28. A two-part exhibition of Matsutani's work appeared at Kaneko Art Gallery, Tokyo, Feb. 15-Mar. 6 and Mar. 15-Apr. 3. Tsubaki Modern Art Gallery presented a solo show Apr. 12-26.

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