



Gutai: The Spirit of an Era

NATIONAL ART CENTER, TOKYO, JAPAN

Shiraga Kazuo *Challenging Mud*, 1955

Formed in 1954 in the affluent municipality of Ashiya, located between the port city of Kobe and the industrial-mercantile centre of Osaka, the Gutai Art Association launched their organized activities in January 1955 not with an exhibition or manifesto (that came a year later), but with a slender, hand-printed volume of black and white reproductions of works by the 17 members. Despite its humble beginnings, the Gutai journal was part of the strategic vision of the group's leader, Jiro Yoshihara, to increase their visibility in the Japanese art scene. Documenting events such as 'The Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Midsummer Sun', held in Ashiya Park in 1955, and 'Gutai Art on the Stage', held in Osaka and Tokyo in 1957, later editions would end up in the hands of people like Allan Kaprow and Michel Tapié, who each saw in Gutai confirmation of their respective ideas about performance and happenings on the one hand and Art Informel on the other.

But Gutai's narrative is more complex – operatic even – than the prevailing image of a group of collaborators who broke through academic and social conventions to explore new relations between artist, work and viewer. A generation older than the others, and scion of a cooking-oil company, Yoshihara was a patriarchal figure (literally, his son Michiowas also a key member) who chose which works would be shown in the Gutai exhibitions, even as he exhorted the artists to develop their individual self-expression. The group's relationship with Tapié, the French critic, who first visited Japan to research Gutai in 1957, led to exhibitions in New York and Paris and a convergence with the Informel sensibility, but also saw the group's members collectively turn their focus to painting – in part because canvases could be easily transported, displayed and sold internationally. By the mid-1960s, there were concerns that the group were succumbing to mannerism; several early members left and were replaced with new recruits. Gutai disbanded for good in 1972 after Yoshihara's sudden death.

The first comprehensive survey of the group in Tokyo, 'Gutai: The Spirit of an Era' laudably attempted to tease out such complications behind the Gutai myth. With some 150 works and ephemera spanning the entirety of the group's active years, the exhibition unfolded more or less chronologically, hinged around a central collection of paintings from 1923 through 1953, charting Yoshihara's artistic evolution from still life to surrealist imagery, geometric abstraction and gestural abstraction.

In the first half of the exhibition, the curators restaged the sense of exuberance and anarchy informing such early works as Tsuruko Yamazaki's *The Shape of Mosquito Net* (1956/86), a gigantic, floating cube of vivid red vinyl stretched over a wooden frame, made for the 'Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition' of 1956; Saburo Murakami's *Work* (1956/81), a clock inside a wooden crate inviting visitors to listen for its ticking; and the signature pieces by Atsuko Tanaka, *Work (Bell)* (1955/85) and *Electric Dress* (1956/86), which periodically interrupted the stillness of the gallery with a delirious synecdoche of clamour and blinking lights.

Amid the early mixed-media pieces and paintings, Fujiko Shiraga's sheets of off-white washi paper from 1955 – marked only by wrinkles, tears and discolourations – stood out with minimalist aplomb, while Tanaka, Yamazaki, Akira Kanayama and Sadamasa Motonaga were spotlighted with expanded selections of work. These flowed into an alcove with videos documenting Gutai's exhibitions for theatres, which combined an element of pageantry with violent actions, as in Shozo Shimamoto's *Destruction of Object* (1957), in which the artist used a stick to bash open a container suspended in mid-air, releasing cascades of ping-pong balls.

Entered through a partial re-creation of the façade of Gutai's dedicated art space, the Pinacotheca, opened in Osaka in 1962, the back end of the exhibition condensed more than a decade of activity into a long, contiguous circuit. The zenith of Gutai painting in the late 1950s and early '60s was represented by powerful, large-scale abstractions by Kazuo Shiraga, Motonaga and Shimamoto, among others, with dense streaks and scabrous accretions of colour applied by feet, pouring and projectile, respectively. These gave way to works such as Takesada Matsutani's relief painting *Breeding 65-24* (1965), with its arrangement of vaginal shapes made of vinyl glue protruding from a neutral ground, and those by a younger generation of artists exploring hard-edge abstraction, Op Art and kinetic art.

Impressive in its thoroughness and its theatrical flourishes, 'The Spirit of an Era' underscored the unique challenges that arise in evaluating Gutai. Given the sheer quantity and diversity of material to work with, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that Gutai were just one aspect of the Japanese postwar avant-garde. Indeed, toward its conclusion, the exhibition began to feel hermetic. If, as curator Shoichi Hirai states in his catalogue essay, Gutai latterly reflected an 'era marked by a universal belief in a brilliant future supported by technology', it also seems far removed from the violent student movements and anti-war protests that embroiled Japanese society at the time. More archival materials might have better elucidated the shifts in tone between the early, middle and later periods, and given a clearer sense of the group's transnational milieu. Even so, what this exhibition made apparent was that Gutai still contains the possibility for a multiplicity of narratives to be told from different perspectives – surely the mark of an enduring legacy.

Andrew Maerke