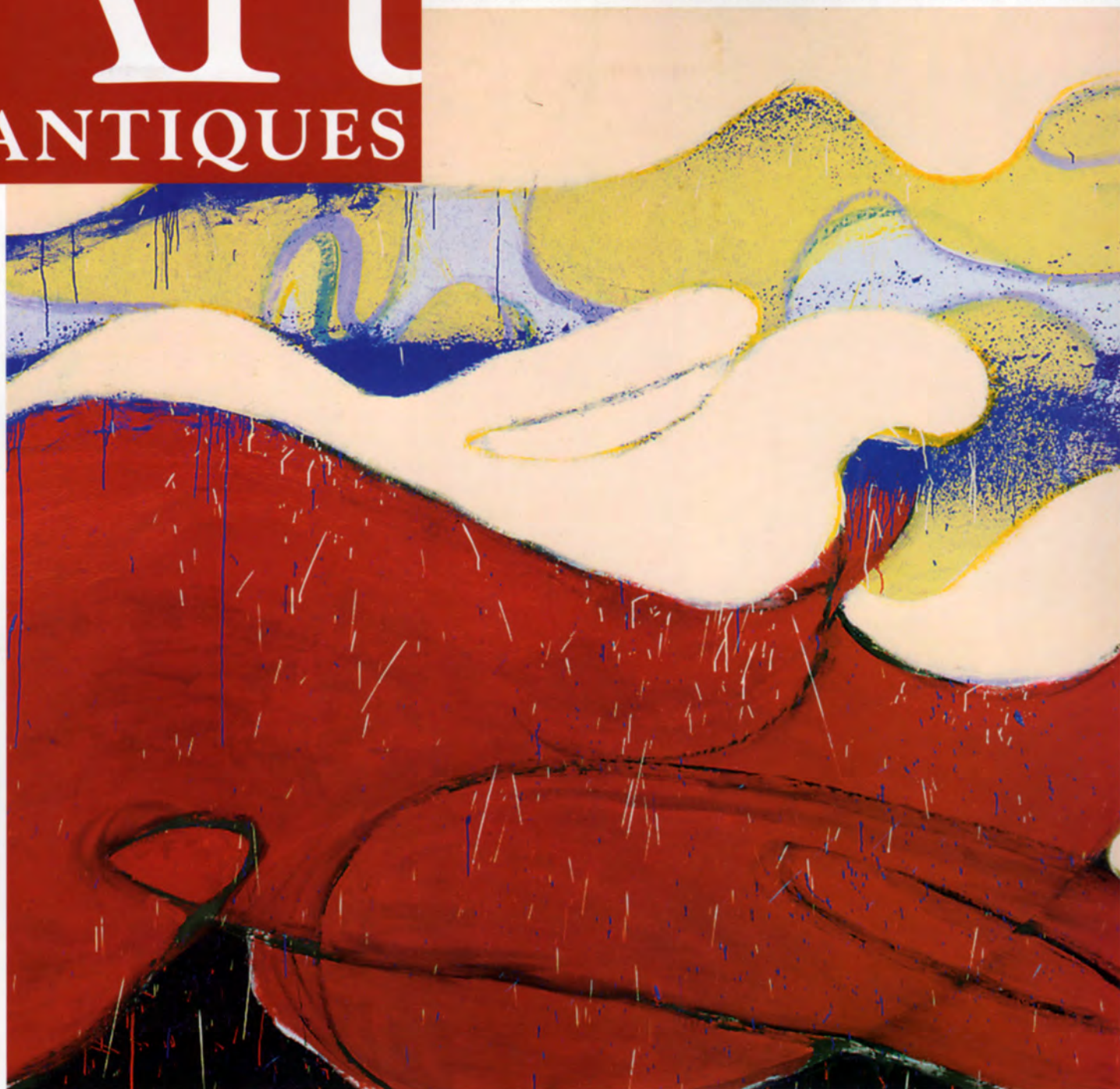


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Art & ANTIQUES

FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS



LATIN AMERICAN MASTERS | VINCENT VAN GOGH | THE JAPANESE AVANT-GARDE

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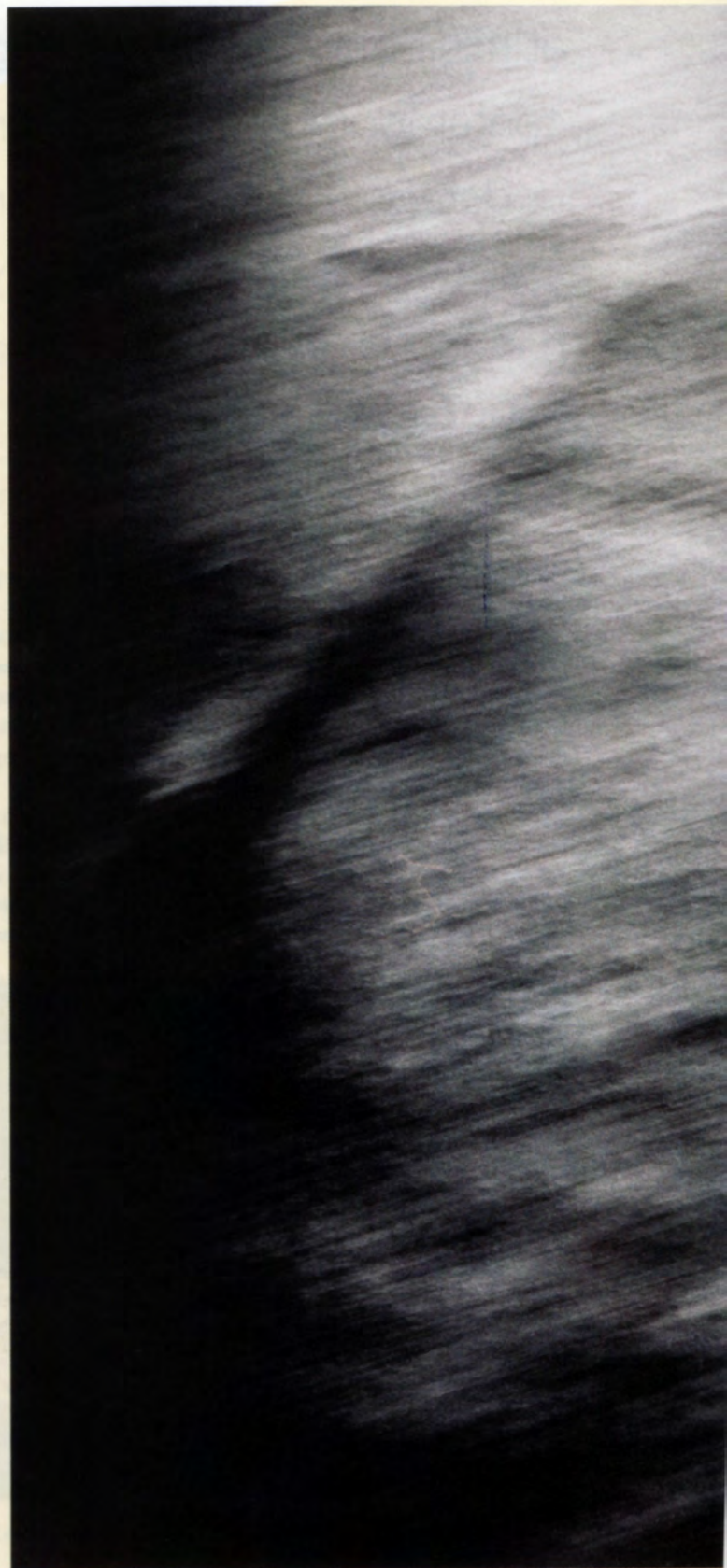


DISCOVERING NORMAN BLUHM

made in Japan

Postwar avant-garde movements like Gutai and Mono-ha are now getting some serious attention from Western museums and galleries.

By Edward M. Gómez





Either a lot of museums and dealers outside Japan have received the same memo, or something's in the air—but for now, in the United States in particular, classic Japanese modern art is enjoying a spotlight moment at some high-profile venues. Together, these presentations of a range of Japanese artists' creations and ideas from the period immediately after World War II through the 1970s are making it clear that, at last, room is being made in modern art's familiar canon for some significant art-makers from beyond the West and for their achievements in modernism's multifaceted evolution.

Normally, the established telling of modern art's history has focused on its development in Europe and North America. However, some Western art specialists and institutions have for some time been paying attention to Asia's—and especially Japan's—contributions and have been leading the perception-altering charge. Among them, in New York: the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, which in recent years has presented numerous exhibitions of Asian modernism, and McCaffrey Fine Art, a small, blue-chip gallery on Manhattan's Upper East Side. On November 18, the Museum of Modern Art in New York will open "Tokyo 1955–1970: A New Avant-garde," an exhibition examining one of the liveliest periods in Japan's modern art history (through February 25, 2013), and on February 15, 2013, the Guggenheim Museum's survey, "Gutai: Splendid Playground," will open to the public. (It will run through May 8, 2013.)

As in the West, the unfolding of post-World War II Japanese art history is marked by the activities of numerous stylistic or theory-driven schools and artists' movements. Two of the most important were Gutai and Mono-ha. In 1954, Jiro Yoshihara, the scion of a family that controlled a cooking oil company and a painter who had worked in a surrealist mode and taught younger artists, established the Gutai Art Association along with more than a dozen younger art-makers. All of them, like



Yoshihara, who was based in the city of Ashiya, lived in the Hanshin region between Osaka and Kobe.

Dramatically breaking with his own past approach and pledging to follow a radical new one, Yoshihara commanded his Gutai colleagues: "Don't copy anyone else!" and "Make something that's never been made before!" Those mottos became rallying cries for a new kind of art-making that yielded some vigorous forms of abstract painting: sculptures to be walked on or otherwise interacted with by viewers, exhibitions mounted in a pine-filled park or in the air (with artworks suspended from helium balloons) and presentations on stage of what might now be regarded as prototypical pieces of performance art. The Gutai movement evolved through three discernible phases and lasted 18 years. The group disbanded after Yoshihara's death in 1972.

In Japanese, the word *gutai* means "concrete" and refers to the materiality of a thing. As Shoichi Hirai, the former curator of the National Art Center, Tokyo, and

organizer of "Gutai: The Spirit of an Era," a recent, movement-surveying exhibition presented at that venue, wrote in its catalogue, for Yoshihara and his collaborators, "destroying preconceived notions and developing original and innovative expressions was an act of freeing the spirit." Today, Hirai added, Yoshihara's ideas would be considered "a synonym for 'self-actualization.'"

Previous spread: Shomei Tomatsu, *Untitled*, from the series "Protest, Tokyo," 1969; This page: Nobuaki Kojima, *Untitled (figure)*, 1964.



If the spirit of Gutai at the movement's peak was "hot" and expressionistic, Mono-ha works exuded a cooler allure. Mono-ha (which means "school of things") was more of a catch-all label to describe the common sensibility and austere appearance of the works of a group of artists who were active in Japan from the late 1960s to the early '70s. Their mixed-media, sculptural creations usually brought together man-made materials, such as sheets of glass, metal plates or plastic sponge foam, and natural materials including stones and dirt. Their arresting juxtapositions of materials were intended to provoke heightened awareness of the characteristics of each one and also of the "energized" real space in which they were situated. The Korean-born artist Lee Ufan, who has long been based in Japan and was inspired by modern European philosophy, including the phenomenological studies that influenced existentialism, was a leading Mono-ha theoretician.

Earlier this year, Blum & Poe, the Los Angeles gallery that has long worked with Takashi Murakami, Yoshitomo Nara and other contemporary Japanese artists, presented an exhibition of representative Mono-ha works. Last year, the Guggenheim Museum in New York mounted a career-spanning survey of Lee Ufan's art.

In Japan, through November 11, the Museum of Modern Art, Saitama, on the northern outskirts of Tokyo, is presenting "The '70s in Japan: 1968–1982," an exhibition whose many posters (including innovative pop gems by Tadanori Yokoo), magazine and record album covers, photographs and artifacts provide a sense of the social-cultural mood and artistic currents that prevailed during the period it examines. It includes a few Mono-ha

Clockwise from top left: *Hi Red Center* poster (Verso), Fluxus Edition, Edited by Kubota Shigeo, designed and produced by George Maciunas, 1965; Tatsuo Ikeda, *Arm (Ude)*, 1953; Natsuyuki Nakanishi, *Compact Object*, 1962.

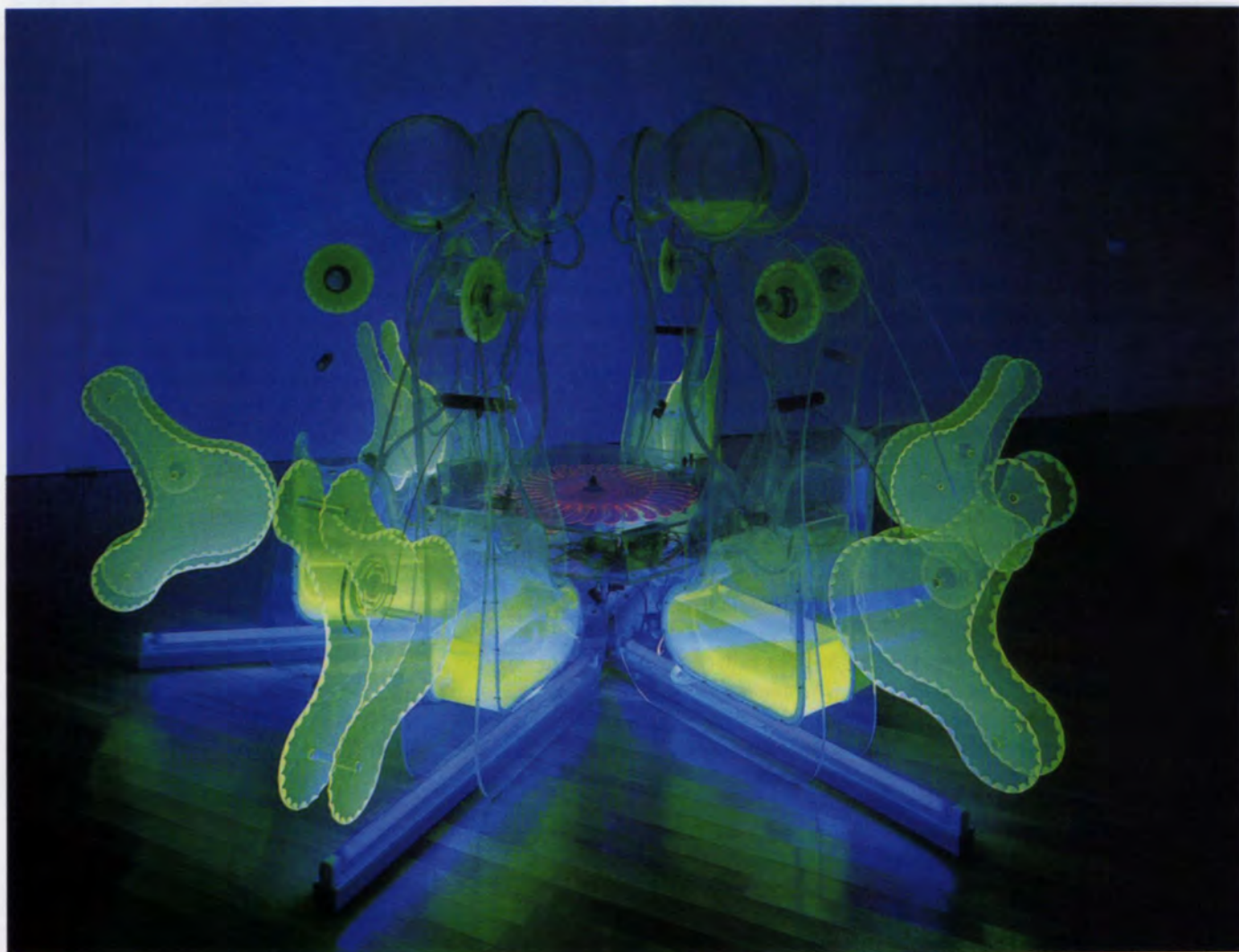


works or documentation of them, such as Nobuo Sekine's iconic "Phase-Mother Earth" (1968), in which a nearly nine-foot-deep hole was dug in the ground in a park in Kobe; the earth that was removed from it was packed into a cylindrical form the same height and more than seven feet wide. That stout dirt column was displayed next to the hole, suggesting, perhaps, that it had magically been plucked right out of the ground.

Some notable exhibitions in the West that focused on Japanese modern art were presented in the not-too-distant past and offer reference points for those that are appearing today. For example, in 1986 the Pompidou Center in Paris mounted "Japon des avant gardes, 1910–1970," a vast survey that explored how Japanese artists had assimilated or otherwise made use of modernist styles and ideas imported from the West, and also how certain distinctly Japanese modern art forms had emerged at home. "Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky," which opened at the now-defunct Guggenheim Museum SoHo in New York in 1994, looked more

specifically at those distinctly Japan-born art tendencies, including mixed-media assemblage works by artists like Tetsumi Kudo, whose dark, unnerving send-up of materialistic consumer culture in the only country ever to have been attacked with nuclear weapons considered the social-psychological price of its postwar "economic miracle." That show, which was organized by Alexandra Munroe, now the Guggenheim's senior curator of Asian art, also looked at Japanese conceptual art and performance art practices.

Why, though, does there appear to be so much attention to postwar Japanese art now? In addition to already mentioned examples, the Axel Vervoordt Gallery, in Antwerp, Belgium, just closed a show of abstract canvases by the Gutai artist Kazuo Shiraga, whose work is also represented by McCaffrey Fine Art, and who made his gutsy tableaux, with their thick crusts of oil paint, by hanging from a rope and painting with his feet. In Los Angeles, through January 14, 2013, the Museum of Contemporary Art's exhibition "Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void, 1949–1962" is featuring



Minoru Yoshida, *Bisexual Flower*, 1970.



works by such Gutai artists as Shiraga, Saburo Murakami and Shozo Shimamoto. In New York, Hauser & Wirth just closed a group exhibition of representative Gutai paintings.

"With the shift in economic power in recent decades to Asia has come increasing interest in its modern and contemporary art and culture," says Midori Nishizawa, a Nagoya-based private dealer and independent curator of gallery exhibitions who organized Hauser & Wirth's New York show. "Plus there's a sense of excitement and discovery about this high-energy, high-quality work that until now has mostly been overlooked; when collectors, curators, critics and dealers share such a sense of excitement, it builds and spills over into the broader art world." Irish-born Fergus McCaffrey, the founder of the New York gallery that bears his



Clockwise from top left: Saburo Murakami performing *Passing Through* in Ohara Kalkan Hall, Tokyo, 1956; Dido Moriyami, *Baton Twirler*, 1967; Elko Hosoe, *Sickle-Toothed Weasel No. 5*, ca. 1968.

name, studied at Kyoto University in the early 1990s and developed a deep interest in Japanese modern art. He says, "A lot of this is cyclical, as museum shows like the ones we're seeing now have taken place in the past few decades. However, what makes this go-around different is that a generation of curators at major institutions has come into leadership positions at the same time, and they're driving their museums to add works to their permanent collections. That didn't happen in the past."

These curators tend to take what they call a "transnational" approach to examining the activities of modern artists around the world who exchanged ideas and information between major creative centers, such as Paris, London or New York, and the "periphery," a category that includes the provincial part of Japan where Gutai flourished or even, despite its size and dynamism, Tokyo, which was geographically far from modern art's familiar Western breeding grounds. These art historians consider central and peripheral creative centers with equal seriousness and respect. Munroe and Ming Tiampo, a specialist in Japanese modern art history from Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, are organizing the Guggenheim's Gutai exhibition and are taking this approach to their subject. Tiampo's 2011 book, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism*, explored the ways in which the movement's artists used the media to publicize their ideas and how easier, faster modes of international travel allowed postwar artists in different parts of the world to take part in hitherto unprecedented information exchanges.

The ebb and flow of ideas, styles, goods and technology in which





Japan has engaged with the West ever since Commodore Perry's "black ships" steamed into the bay at old Edo in 1853, effectively ending the country's self-imposed isolation of more than 200 years, is one of the subthemes that will pulse through the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition, "Tokyo 1955–1970: A New Avant-garde." Looking at how artists working in various fields were inspired by the energy of the dynamic Japanese capital itself during a period of ambitious growth and reconstruction, it will include works by artist collectives such as Jikken Kobo (Experimental Workshop), Hi

Red Center (Jiro Takamatsu, Genpei Akasegawa, Natsuyuki Nakanishi) and Group Ongaku (Group Music). It also will feature works by such important Japanese modern artists as Taro Okamoto, Hiroshi Nakamura, Ay-O, Yoko Ono, Mieko Shiomi and Kudo Tetsumi; the photographers Daido Moriyama, Eikoh Hosoe and Shomei Tomatsu; and the illustrators and graphic designers Tadanori Yokoo, Kohei Sugiura and Kiyoshi Awazu.

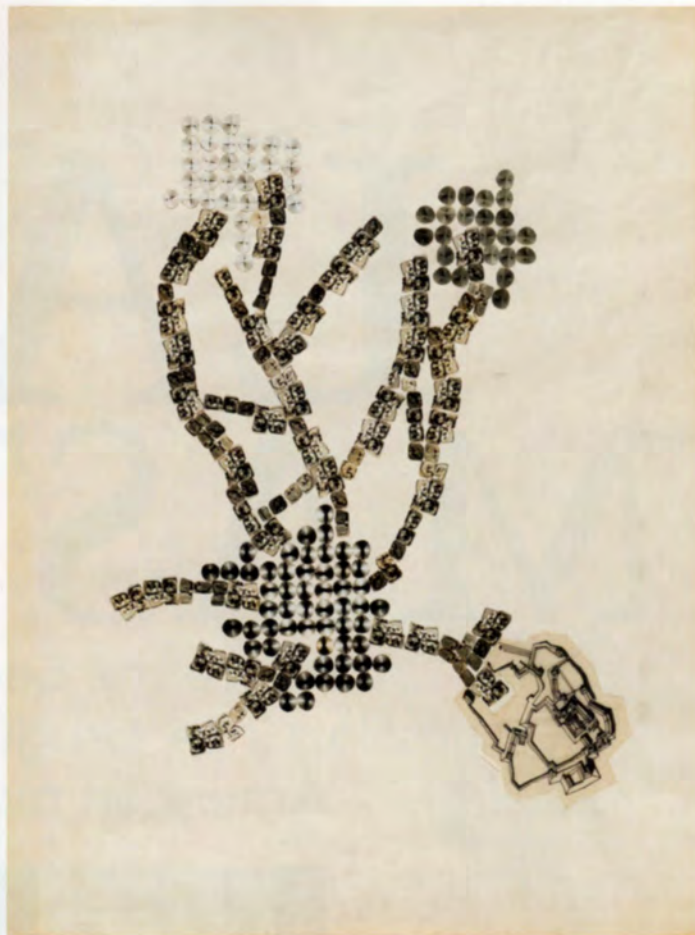
In MoMA's painting and sculpture department, associate curator Doryun Chong and curatorial assistant Nancy Lim organized the museum's Japan show. Chong says, "The period from 1955 to 1970 was a criti-

cal, transitional one, not only in postwar Japanese art but also in the life of Tokyo and the nation. The transformations were astonishing: Tokyo's population passed the 10 million mark, Japan became the second-largest economy in the world, Tokyo hosted the 1964 Summer Olympics in 1964."

Chong also notes that, although Tokyo is "unquestionably one of the greatest cities in the world," unlike, say, New York or Paris, it "has been understudied as an artistic center." He points out that, with regard to the period MoMA's exhibition examines, "By that point, Japan had had a history of modern art for almost 80 years, and there was also a vibrant tradition of avant-gardism before the war. Although there was a significant disruption during the final years of the war, these prec-



Clockwise from top left: Kazuo Shiraga, *Tenshosei Botsuuen*, 1960; *Challenging Mud*, 1955 (Shiraga making an artwork with his body in mud); Hitoshi Nomura, *Time on a Curved Line*, 1970.



Clockwise from top left: Tadanori Yokoo, *Diary of Shijuku Thief (Sozoshō)*, 1968; Kisho Kurokawa, *Helix City Plan for Tokyo*, 1961; Yayoi Kusama, *No. 19 H.S.W.*, 1956.

edents were there as undercurrents, which postwar generations tapped." "Tokyo 1955–1970" also makes clear, Chong says, "that Tokyo and its art scene were part of an international network of circulations and exchanges of ideas between cities and artists."

McCaffrey says he finds "integrity" in the work of the best Japanese modern artists, like Shiraga's bold abstract paintings or the conceptualist Hitoshi Nomura's projects that focused on the passage of time. The dealer suggests that viewers who come to this art for the first time can recognize this consistency of quality and singularity of vision, too. He observes, "As prices and scarceness have driven prices of masterworks of Western art from the 1950s through the 1970s to stratospheric levels, collectors are looking at Japan and seeing equivalent quality for a fraction of the price." McCaffrey also notes that "much of this work is scarce, with artists and estates preferring for it to be entrusted to institutional rather than private hands." That means museums—another reason, logically, for such institutions to continue to pay attention to and to make room for art from Japan and other parts of the world that have made significant contributions to modernism's broad and diverse history. 

