

# In New York, the Guggenheim goes Gutai

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By now, the looks, character and history of Gutai, the post-World War II Japanese art movement born in 1954 in Ashiya, between Osaka and Kobe, are familiar to regular viewers of modern-art exhibitions in Japan. Last summer’s “Gutai: The Spirit of an Era,” a survey of the movement’s evolution and its participants’ diverse accomplishments, which was shown at the National Art Center, Tokyo, was the largest presentation of its kind to date in Japan. Early last year, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, also included some superb Gutai works in a show of abstract paintings; in 2011, it presented a solo exhibition of founding Gutai member Atsuko Tanaka’s works.

Now, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York has opened “Gutai: Splendid Playground.” While last year’s big Gutai exhibition in Tokyo focused on the creatively, even spiritually liberating effects the movement’s approach to art-making had on its participants and paid attention to its hitherto overlooked last phase, the late 1960s through its demise in 1972, the Guggenheim’s survey positions the ideas and achievements of the artists’ group, whose self-imposed goal was to create what had never been created before, in a broader, international context of modern-art history.

Ming Tiampo, one of its the exhibition’s co-curators, notes: “We show how Gutai was one of modern art’s first ‘transnational’ movements, for its participants made a conscious effort to use the mass media to publicize their activities, to travel abroad and to establish dialogs with artists in other parts of the world.” Tiampo, an associate professor of art history at Carleton University in Ottawa, is the author of “Gutai: Decentering Modernism” (University of Chicago Press, 2011). She organized the Guggenheim’s show in collaboration with Alexandra Munroe, the museum’s senior curator of Asian art.

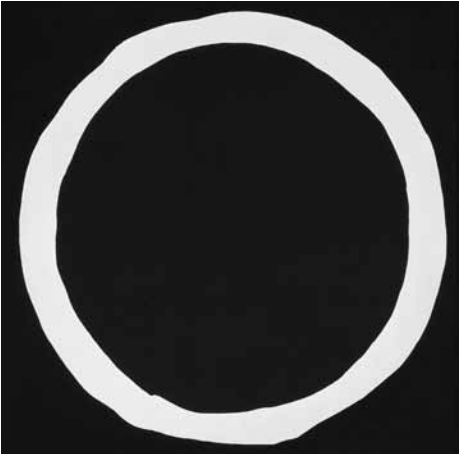
Tiampo explains that a “transnational” view of modern art’s history looks back beyond its familiar Western centers of development — Paris, Berlin, London, New York — to recognize that a new kind of artistic expression also emerged in different ways, derived from varied and indigenous sources, in other parts of the world, including in Japan.

Like Tiampo’s book, the Guggenheim’s

exhibition takes this more expansive, center-periphery approach to analyze the ideas and activities of one of Japanese modern art’s most important movements. The Gutai Art Association, as it was formally known, was founded by Jiro Yoshihara, a businessman and scion of a family that owned a cooking-oil company, along with a group of young, Hanshin-region artists. A former maker of surrealist pictures, Yoshihara had taught Western-style painting before becoming Gutai’s leader. Under his tutelage, its members created innovative abstract paintings and sculptures, as well as what are now regarded as prototypical performance-art events and mixed-media installations. The group disbanded in 1972, after Yoshihara died. Tiampo notes that, as early as 1955, through its self-published Gutai journal, the group began “to transform its distance from art world centers into new possibilities for expression.” “Gutai: Splendid Playground” reconsiders the assumption that, as Tiampo writes in her book, “modernism was a closed system, located in the West and relentlessly disseminated to its territories with no reciprocal exchange.”

In 1951, Yoshihara saw paintings by Jackson Pollock and other Western abstractionists in the “Third Yomiuri Independent Exhibition,” which was shown in Tokyo and Osaka. In her essay in the Guggenheim exhibition’s catalog, Munroe notes that, in the years before he cofounded Gutai, Yoshihara had “avidly consumed” Japanese and foreign publications that documented and promoted novel art forms that were being made overseas. In the manifesto he penned for Gutai, which spelled out its rebellious aesthetic principles, Yoshihara dismissed traditional art forms as “hoaxes” and “monsters.” “Lock up these corpses in the graveyard,” he demanded, adding: “Gutai Art imparts life to matter. Gutai Art does not distort matter.”

His young charges got the message — and in the Guggenheim’s show, many of their creations, half a century later, still appear fresh and audacious. Tanaka’s dazzling “Electric Dress” (1956), a thicket of colored light bulbs, is here (did she really wear it on stage that year during a Gutai event in Tokyo?), as are Shozo Shimamoto’s crusty, paint-on-newspaper tableau, “Work” (1954); Kazuo Shiraga’s “Wild Boar Hunting II” (1963), which he painted with his feet, mixing oil paint, a boar hide and spent bullets on a wooden panel; and Takesada Matsutani’s “White Circle” (1966) and



Jiro Yoshihara’s “Circle” (1971), from the collection of Miyagi Prefectural Museum of Art, Sendai. COURTESY OF THE SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEWYORK

“Work 66-2” (1966), whose oddly organic, raised round shapes were made with vinyl glue and painted black or white or left to yellow with time. (Matsutani’s work is also the subject of two back-to-back solo shows at New York’s Galerie Richard, which will run through April 20.) Sadamasa Motonaga’s vigorous splashes of oil and gravel on canvas, Akira Kanayama’s wiry felt-tip pen drawings on paper (made with an electric toy-car device that held a pen), and Yoshihara’s signature oil paintings of white circles on black grounds are also on view.

Munroe says: “We strived to select the most emblematic Gutai works but we also borrowed some that rarely have been seen before.” Among the less well-known pieces on display are “Work” (1959) by Michio Yoshihara, the Gutai leader’s son, a richly textured, abstract concoction of small stones and sand on wood panel, and Minoru Yoshida’s psychedelic “Bisexual Flower” (1969), an installation made up of ultraviolet light, gurgling colored water, churning motors and moving, transparent-plastic parts tucked into a beehive-shaped dome.

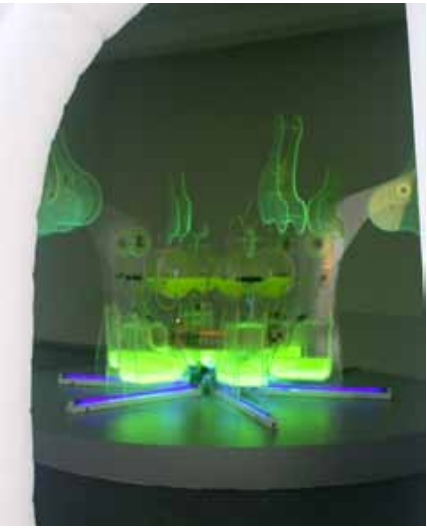
Outside Japan, the Guggenheim’s presentation comes on the heels of recent Gutai painting shows at such New York galleries as McCaffrey Fine Art and Hauser & Wirth, a Gutai survey at the Cantonal Art Museum in Lugano, Switzerland, and “Tokyo 1955-1970: A New Avant-garde,” an exhibition now on view at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. Currently, the San Francisco Art Institute is showing a selection of Gutai paintings (through March 30), and last March, Tokyo’s Whitestone Gallery filled its booth at the Armory Show, one of New York’s annual art fairs, with Gutai works.

The Guggenheim’s Gutai show provides a fitting complement to last summer’s National Art Center, Tokyo, exhibition; perhaps just by being seen in one of the leading modern-art venues in the West, Gutai art will gain a deserved foothold in international modernism’s still mostly Euro- and America-centric canon.

Ironically, over time, much of this art, whose impact originally was more visceral than cerebral, has come to look elegant



Bright lights in New York City: Atsuko Tanaka’s “Electric Dress” (above) of painted incandescent light bulbs, electric cords and a control console (1956, refabricated in 1986), from the collection of the Takamatsu City Museum of Art. Left: Minoru Yoshida’s mixed-media installation work, “Bisexual Flower” (1969). EDWARD M. GÓMEZ



(Yoshihara’s circles), sophisticated (Tanaka’s early calendar works) or, enticingly, obsessive and refined (Shuji Mukai’s all-over, graffiti-like symbols). The Guggenheim’s exhibition, whose title comes from a remark by Shiraga — the artist once compared the Gutai group’s art-making spirit to that of a playground — shows that the best Gutai works can still titillate their viewers’ senses, lift their spirits and, aesthetically, give them a good punch in the gut.

“Gutai: Splendid Playground” at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York runs till May 8. For more information, visit [www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/on-view/gutai-splendid-playground](http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/on-view/gutai-splendid-playground).

Edward M. Gómez has written about Japanese modern art for the New York Times, Art in America, ARTnews, Art + Auction, Raw Vision and Art & Antiques.

Tsuruko Yamazaki’s “Tin Cans” (1955, refabricated 1986), from the collection of Barbara Bertozzi Castelli, New York. EDWARD M. GÓMEZ

