

Action painting: The body electric

Kazuo Shiraga, James Nares, and Hugo McCloud acknowledge their relationship with their artworks — and subsequently the viewer — by laying their flesh bare, as William J. Simmons explains

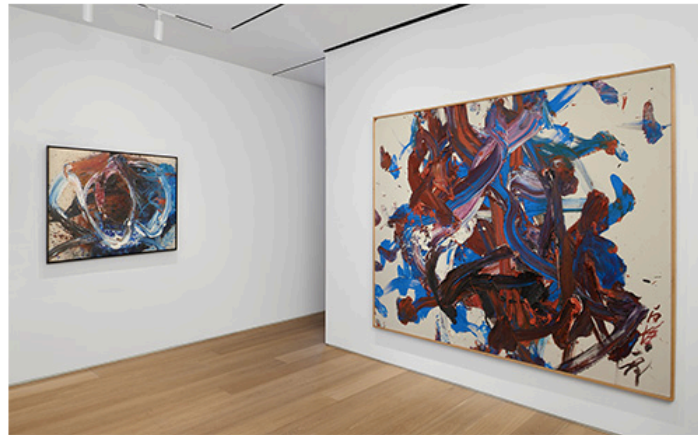
Pushing the body in the service of art making has a storied history: Yves Klein's exemplary *Leap Into the Void* (1960), fakes a photographic depiction of the artist in flight, while contemporary practitioner Adam Putnam straps himself to ceilings like a macabre Christ figure, creating gestures that challenge the viewer's understanding of performance.

As performance art increasingly achieves notoriety as a genre of contemporary practice, thoughtful consideration should be given to artists whose work offers an exemplar for the possibilities of body-based plastic objects. The examination of the tradition continues with three artists, two of whom are currently enjoying exhibitions, and all of whom rather than seeking cold objectivity or hermetic detachment use their bodies to reach a conceptual place beyond the physical, perhaps indicative of a human obsession with just how far we can extend ourselves before breaking.

Kazuo Shiraga



Kazuo Shiraga, the 1950s Gutai master is having a moment with three exhibitions — *Body and Matter* at Dominique Levy Gallery until April 4 and Mnuchin Gallery until April 11 in New York, as well as at the Dallas Museum of Art's *Between Action and the Unknown* up through July 19. Beyond the curatorial and scholarly recognition, the artist is proving to be a star on the auction block, fetching \$4,869,000 for *BB56 (1961)*, at Christie's New York in November, followed by *Yugi (1994)*, which brought £818,500 at Christie's London last week.



Installation view of *Body and Matter: The Art of Kazuo Shiraga and Satoru Hoshino, 2015*
at Dominique Levy Gallery

Shiraga initially studied traditional Japanese painting before taking his work in the avant-garde, abstract direction of the Gutai movement. For *Challenging Mud* (1955), the artist immersed himself in a pile of cement, gravel, clay, and plaster, moving the mixture into fascinating shapes using only his body as a brush. This performance was in the same vein as Shiraga's foot paintings, for which he would lay canvas on the floor, and swing from the ceiling to use his feet in the creation of astounding abstract entities.

'While the term action painting was first coined by American critic Harold Rosenberg to describe the gestural abstraction of artists such as William de Kooning and Jackson Pollock, Shiraga's foot paintings were the result of a more direct, violent struggle between body and material,' says Dallas Museum of Art curator Gabriel Ritter. Throughout his 40-year career, the late artist achieved a layered tactility, suggesting interior space akin to the body as seen in *Suiju* (1985). According to Ritter, the violence of the gestures is 'synonymous with the fight for individuality and creative freedom in post-war Japan in which the body itself became the site and literal embodiment of emancipation.'

Top image: Installation view of *Body and Matter: The Art of Kazuo Shiraga and Satoru Hoshino, 2015*. Photo: Tom Powel Imaging. Courtesy of Dominique Lévy Gallery



London-born, New York-based former downtown scenester James Nares had a rash of gallery shows after his film Street won raves during its outing at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2013 and subsequent appearance at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. last year. Like many contemporary artists, Nares trafficks in a variety of mediums and styles, but foremost among his films, photographs, and painting projects, are his single-stroke brush works for which he suspends himself over the picture plane to create a single movement with special brushes he makes by hand.



James Nares, *Descriptor*, 2011.

Oil on linen 78 x 65 inches 198.1 x 165.1 cm

The results exhibit the delicacy of a fresco. *Freight* (2010), for example, evinces none of the heftiness the name implies, due to the iridescent pigment and wax Nares used for the composition — a term used here in a holistic way because Nares's paintings mirror the structured fluidity of a musical score. (Nares put in time playing in punk bands in the late 70s and 80s.)

'Deep within our bodies lies the origin of all language,' says the artist. 'The spoken word is nothing but the crude gesticulations of the whole body curtailed into the throat.' The trapeze-like apparatus Nares uses to create large-scale works — basically the size of his own six-foot-frame — renders a painterly dance of seamless gestures. Collectors are catching on: the artist's *Take 118 Blue Black* (1997), soared past its \$15,000 high estimate to achieve \$87,500 at Christie's New York in July 2014.

Top image: James Nares © Percy Washington, courtesy of [Paul Kasmin Gallery](#).

Hugo McCloud



Hugo McCloud, whose work is on view at New York's Sean Kelly Gallery through March 14, uses industrial materials such as aluminum sheeting and roofing tar that require intense physical dexterity and labor to manipulate. These are combined with paint and the self-taught artist's own spin on woodblock printing to create pieces with a surface relief that seem to lie halfway between painting and sculpture.



Hugo McCloud, *Phaeton*, 2015.

Aluminum foil, aluminum coating and oil paint on paper. 49 1/4 x 70 3/16 x 2 in. (125.1 x 178.3 x 5.1 cm.)

© Hugo McCloud. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York

‘The work really requires movement,’ says the 25-year-old. It ‘requires a lot of physical effort in order to get that tactility.’ The sizable wall pieces — currently selling in a range between \$18,000 and \$35,000 — flaunt visually arresting 3-D patterns that are some times punctuated by colorful paint, the remnants of abstract compositions studiously created on the object’s ground. The artist mars the underpainting with the sheeting that is adhered to the surface with a blowtorch and then marked with artist-carved branding plates while still pliable. The paint merges with the industrial material, sometimes consumed by it; other times pumping beneath the topmost layer.

The visual analogy created is similar to markmaking on skin. ‘Sometimes you have all the energy in the world, but there is definitely a physical battle,’ says McCloud. ‘But that’s what makes the work the work. When the viewer comes in, they are definitely drawn to the energy that is put into these pieces.’

Top image: Hugo McCloud’s studio, photo by Zoe Weber. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York.