

# A LASTING IMPRESSION

Though **Kazuo Shiraga** was one of Japan's most influential modern painters, he remained relatively unknown stateside. That's about to change thanks to a blockbuster show at Dominique Lévy Gallery in New York and a retrospective at the Dallas Museum of Art.

BY JONATHAN GRIFFIN

Kazuo Shiraga was known for his unorthodox style of painting. Here, he is shown at work in his studio, 1960.



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## Improbably, it was in a 15th-century Venetian palazzo

that gallery owner Dominique Lévy first encountered the work of Japanese painter Kazuo Shiraga. During the 2007 Venice Biennale, Belgian designer and antiques dealer Axel Vervoordt mounted the exhibition, “Artempo. Where Time Becomes Art,” in the Gothic Palazzo Fortuny. Lévy, visiting from New York, was bowled over by the dizzying mix of antiques and scientific instruments, ancient and contemporary art and rich furnishings.

Yet one painting leaped out from the melee. Near a punctured canvas by Lucio Fontana was a black, red and white painting so forceful, so visceral, says the Swiss-born Lévy, that, “It completely kicked me in the insides.” That was the beginning of a journey that would lead her, eight years later, to present a major exhibition of Shiraga’s paintings in her New York gallery in a joint show with artist Satoru Hoshino (through April 4). At the same time, Shiraga is being paired with his compatriot artist Sadamasa Motonaga in a joint retrospective at the Dallas Museum of Art (through July 19).

In the timeless rooms of the Palazzo Fortuny, where Giorgio de Chirico rubbed shoulders with Anish Kapoor alongside African tribal masks, Shiraga’s remarkable painting left Lévy at a loss. Who was this mysterious artist? “He could have been contemporary, or he could have been from the time of the postwar Abstract Expressionists,” she says. “He could have been European or American. There was no association with a school, no nationality, no time.” Back in New York, she began to study.

She discovered that Shiraga was once an important member of one of Japan’s most radical artistic movements. After World War II, when the defeated and humiliated country had seen proud centuries of tradition and culture shattered in an instant by the atom bomb, some of Japan’s artists began a quest for a new measure of truth and authenticity. Shiraga studied first traditional Nihonga painting, then Western-style painting, and in 1952, formed a group with some other Osaka-based artists called Zero-kai. Their object, he explained, was to rebuild art from the ground up, from zero.

Despite its successes, Zero-kai was soon eclipsed by a group from the nearby town of Ashiya called Gutai, a word that translates as “concrete” or “embodiment.” Shiraga and the fellow members of Zero opted to join forces with Gutai, and in 1955, exhibited their work in the “First Gutai Art Exhibition,” a makeshift show in a hall usually used for ikebana flower arranging. Shiraga’s contribution—still perhaps his most iconic work—was titled *Challenging Mud*, and was presented in the yard outside the hall. For 20 minutes, wearing only his undershorts, the artist kicked, flailed, pummelled and punched a deep pile of mud that he had deposited there. He emerged from what Lévy calls “a battle with matter,” cut and bruised, the abject mess on the ground his answer to traditional painting.

*Challenging Mud*, though iconoclastic, was in a sense a stepping stone to the mature paintings on canvas that Lévy is exhibiting in New York. Also transitional, according to the gallerist, are the paintings that Shiraga did on wild boar hides in which smeared red paint resembles blood and viscera, and shotgun pellets embedded in its surface equate painting with a violent, destructive act. All these works were created with Shiraga’s unorthodox method for painting: he placed his canvases on the floor and manipulated thick paint with his hands and feet, often while hanging onto an overhead rope for support. He wanted his paintings, he said, to be as slippery as “a sea cucumber, or konnyaku jelly, or a jellyfish.”

The quality Shiraga valued above all else in his work is what the Japanese call *shishitsu*; this is the essence of an artist’s identity, his handwriting or his corporeal fundament. In order to achieve this, Shiraga believed he had to put behind him all his influences and everything that he had ever learned. Historians still debate to what extent Gutai was influenced by, or prefigured, the developments of postwar painting in the West. Lévy argues that it doesn’t matter. In the years between the 1960s and his death in 2008, Shiraga moved beyond all art movements to find his own *shishitsu*, arriving at what she sees as “something completely unique, freed from any lineage.” His rediscovery in the United States, after years as “an artist’s artist” mainly confined to European collections, is well overdue.

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Kazuo Shiraga's *Izuminokami-Kanesada*, 1962