Takesada Matsutani was born in 1937 in Ōsaka, Japan.

From 1960 to the dissolution of the Gutai group in 1972, Matsutani participated in all Gutai exhibitions and officially became a member in 1963, the year he first showed his vinyl adhesive works at the Gutai Pinecoteca in Ōsaka.

In 1954, Matsutani enrolled in the traditional painting (nihonga) class at the Ōsaka Municipal High School of Arts and Crafts Arts (Ōsaka Shiritsu Kogei Gakkō). Suffering from tuberculosis from 1951 to 1959, he was home-bound for long periods of time. It was at that time he discovered Western contemporary art through books and magazines.

In 1959, Matsutani met Sadamasa Motonaga (1922-2011) at a municipal school for drawing. A friendship began and Motonaga soon introduced Matsutani to Jirō Yoshihara (1905-1972), the Gutai group’s founder and mentor. Following Yoshihara’s motto: “Do what has never been done before”, Matsutani experimented with a banal and newly developed material — vinyl adhesive — which would become his primary medium. He covered his canvases with reliefs or bubbles that spread, sometimes literally bursting over the surface, developing a unique technique of breathing air into the material. Matsutani explained that the forms were inspired by organic shapes observed through a microscope in a friend’s laboratory. These highly sensuous works are infused with a latent eroticism.

In 1966, Matsutani was awarded a grant by the French government as a result of winning the First Prize of the 1st Mainichi Art Competition, organized with the Franco-Japanese Society the same year. In Paris, he began printmaking at S. W. Hayter’s Atelier 17 and became an assistant to Hayter. He participated in numerous international print exhibitions in which he won several prestigious awards. In the late 1960s, Matsutani joined a silkscreen studio — keen to experiment with lively flat colors and forms that mirrored those of his new Hard-edge paintings.

By the mid-1970s, black and white dominated Matsutani’s work. Again, Matsutani sought a new approach. Hindered by a lack of funds, but with time to work, he began covering surfaces with graphite pencil strokes, exploring immobility and movement in time. Standard format drawings and canvases soon became a progressive series of ten-meter-long works. To finish these impressive “bands of blackness”, he frees the graphite with splashes of solvent.

Matsutani’s installations are elaborated with varying and different elements. With unexpected results his site-specific works enter into a silent dialogue with the surrounding space. The most spectacular were presented in 2017 in Viva Arte Viva, at the International Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, and in 2019 on the occasion of Matsutani’s first retrospective in Paris, at the Centre Pompidou, Musée national d’art moderne. In 2020, Matsutani participates in the STOA169 Project.

Matsutani’s is also regularly represented in major Gutai exhibitions around the world, particularly in Gutai, Splendid Playground, a groundbreaking exhibition presented at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 2013.
Matsutani’s work is present in major public and private collections around the world: the Tōkyō Museum of Contemporary Art, the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the Dallas Museum of Art and the Minneapolis Institute of Art, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi or the Long Museum in Shanghai among many others. The artist also made significant donations to the Centre Pompidou and the Institut National d’Histoire de l’Art in Paris. In 2002, he received the City Cultural Award in Nishinomiya, where he spent much of his childhood.

Matsutani has been represented by Hauser & Wirth since 2012.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2020
Takesada Matsutani, Hauser & Wirth Gallery, Hong Kong.

2019
Yōhaku, Hauser & Wirth Gallery, Zürich, Switzerland.
Matsutani, rétrospective, Centre Pompidou, Musée national d’art moderne, Paris, France.

2018
A Drop in Time, Hauser & Wirth Gallery, Somerset, UK.
Takesada Matsutani, Japan House, Sao Paulo, Brazil.
Takesada Matsutani: Selected Works 1972-2017, Bergamin & Gomide Gallery, Sao Paulo, Brazil.
Confluence, Takesada Matsutani & Aliska Lahusen, Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology, Poland.

2016
Takesada Matsutani, Hauser & Wirth Gallery, Zürich, Switzerland.

2015
Takesada Matsutani, Hauser & Wirth Gallery, New York, USA.
Matsutani-Currents, Ōtani Memorial Art Museum, Nishinomiya, Japan.

2013

2010

2002
Takesada Matsutani, Cairns Regional Gallery, Australia.
2000
Matsutani Waves, Ōtani Memorial Art Museum, Nishinomiya, Japan.

1999

1993
Takesada Matsutani: Works from the 1960s to Today, Ōtani Memorial Art Museum, Nishinomiya, Japan.

1992
Matsutani Stream-Ashiya-92, City Museum of Art and History, Ashiya, Japan.

1988
Takesada Matsutani : peintures, installations, Pablo Neruda Contemporary Art Center, Corbeil-Essonnes, France.

1983
Today’s Artists No. 12: Matsutani Takesada 1981-83, Contemporary Art Center, Ōsaka, Japan.

1978
Takesada Matsutani, Works on Paper, Don Soker-Kaseman/Upstairs Gallery, San Francisco, USA.

1968
Matsutani & Mittsu, Galerie Zunini, Paris, France.

1963
Gutai Pinacotheca, Ōsaka, Japan.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2018
Gutai, l’espace et le temps, Musée Soulages, Rodez, France.

2017
Viva Arte Viva, Biennale Arte, The 57th International Art Exhibition, Venice, Italy.

2013
Gutai, Splendid Playground, Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA.

2012
Gutai, The Spirit of an Era, National Arts Center, Tōkyō, Japan.

1960-1972
participating in all Gutai exhibitions.
SELECTED PUBLIC AND INSTITUTIONAL COLLECTIONS

Centre Pompidou, Paris
Institut National d’Histoire de l’Art, Paris
STOA169, Polling
Tōkyō Museum of Contemporary Art
Victoria & Albert Museum, London
Dallas Museum of Art
Minneapolis Institute of Art
Guggenheim Abu Dhabi
Long Museum, Shanghai

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Solo exhibitions

Abstract: Stream: The Possibilities of Black and White


Group exhibitions


PRESS REVIEW

Print articles


Janssen, Nadia. «Good artists know their responsibilities», Christine Macel on Viva Arte Viva. In: Metropolis M, April 2017


Online press articles

Lost (and Found) Artist Series: Takesada Matsutani
By Shira Wolfe · 2019 · artland.com

Takesada Matsutani
23 September 2019 · Wall Street International Magazine
https://wsimag.com/art/57690-takesada-matsutani

Takesada Matsutani on Glue and Gutai
By Jessica Saxby · 15 Aug 2018 · Elephant magazine
https://elephant.art/takesada-matsutani-on-glue-and-gutai/

Takesada Matsutani
November 2015 · The New Yorker
https://www.newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town/art/takesada-matsutani

Takesada Matsutani
15 July 2017 · Wall Street International Magazine
https://wsimag.com/art/27933-takesada-matsutani
TAKESADA MATSUTANI, LE DERNIER DES GUTAI ENFIN CÉLÉBRÉ EN FRANCE

Jeune membre du groupe japonais, l'artiste établi en France a droit pendant quelques jours encore à une rétrospective au Centre Pompidou à Paris et entre dans les collections de l'INHA, avant une grande exposition en Suisse chez Hauser & Wirth.
Par Alexandre Crochet

Dans l'atelier de Matsutani, une ancienne ébénisterie au bel escalier traditionnel, ce ne sont pas les outils habituels de l'artiste qui accueillent le visiteur. Les armes de ce Japonais à l'allure alerte et joyeuse? La colle et le ventilateur. Avec de la colle vinlylique, Matsutani crée des bulles sur la toile, guidant à l'aide d'une paille le cheminement de la matière, puis la séchant. L'artiste avait été marqué par les molécules humaines vues au microscope, l'étrange bouillonnement de cet inframonde. Son travail patient pour contrôler l'aléatoire, qui donne une œuvre étonnante en 3D, sensuelle et organique, lui a permis d'entrer dans le groupe d'avant-garde japonais Gutai, avec lequel il expose à partir de 1960. Mieux vaut tard que jamais, il a enfin droit à une rétrospective au Centre Pompidou.

Pourtant, se faire une place parmi les membres de Gutai n'a pas été chose facile. Tsunami dans le domaine des arts dans l'archipel, le groupe créé par Jiro Yoshihara en 1955, marqué par le Surréalisme et l'abstraction, ne jurait que par la performance et le travail de la matière. Pour être adoubé, il fallait apporter une démarche novatrice.

Contrairement aux États-Unis ou au Japon où, dans les années 1960, en plein boom économique, ses concitoyens l’ont fait entrer dans leurs collections, à Paris, où il vit pourtant depuis des lustres, son travail était resté en retrait, brillant avec discrétion dans une ombre toute tanazakienne. « Ce n’est pas une redécouverte, c’est une découverte ! », s’exclame Christine Macel, conservatrice au Centre Pompidou à l’origine de l’exposition, et qui l’avait invité à participer à la Biennale de Venise en 2017 dont elle a assuré le commissariat artistique. « En découvrant que ses œuvres n’étaient pas représentées dans les collections françaises, j’ai vu avec lui comment réfléchir à une exposition-donation. Matsutani nous a donné 22 œuvres de toutes périodes, qui ne sont pas toutes exposées ici, un corpus qui va nous permettre de l’incorporer dans d’autres présentations futures ». Pourquoi cette reconnaissance institutionnelle si tardive ? « Il était connu mais à travers les stream des années 1980, beaucoup de gens ignoraient ce qui précédait. Il était aussi très lié au Japon. C’est une commissaire japonaise qui l’a intégré dans la rétrospective Gutai du Guggenheim en 2013 », poursuit Christine Macel. Cette rétrospective fera date et encouragera la galerie Hauser & Wirth à faire entrer l’artiste dans son écurie… Cette même enseigne lui consacrera un accrochage dans son espace de Zurich à partir du 11 octobre, avec des œuvres allant des années 1970 à récemment.

Matsutani a aussi pâti d’avoir été l’un des plus jeunes du groupe Gutai et non l’un des fondateurs. Il a aussi été catalogué comme un graveur, développant à partir des années 1970 une importante production dont témoigne son deuxième atelier, à l’étage, rempli de ses œuvres sur papier. C’est pourtant dans l’atelier de gravure de Stanley William Hayter qu’il rencontrera sa femme, l’artiste américaine Kate Van Houten…

Illustré dans une vitrine du Centre Pompidou, son travail de gravure entre dans les collections de l’INHA grâce à son directeur, Éric de Chassey (chroniqueur de notre édition mensuelle). « Matsutani est un très grand graveur, qui a abordé l’aquatinte ou la sérigraphie avec bonheur, confie-t-il. Il y a chez lui une insistance sur le concrèt et la matière en permanence avec une dimension sexuelle, des mélange du masculin et du féminin dans les estampes, en vant de l’aspect biomorphique ». Et d’ajouter : « dans le prolongement du legs Doucet, nous avons décidé de nous concentrer sur les estampes des artistes étrangers travaillant ou ayant travaillé à Paris. Nous avons déjà acquis l’un dernier des œuvres d’artistes passés par le même atelier de gravure que Matsutani ». La donation totale consentie par l’artiste devrait comprendre plusieurs dizaines de pièces. Matsutani sera alors enfin dignement intégré dans les collections de son pays adoptif.


Matsutani, un Japonais à Paris

À venir

L’âge d’or de la peinture anglaise au Musée du Luxembourg, 15, rue de Vaugirard (VIIe). Tél. : 01 40 34 31 19.

Moderne

Maharajah, un méconnu des années 1930 au Musée des Arts décoratifs (M.A.D.I.), 107, rue de Rivoli (1er). Tél. : 0144 55 57 50. À partir du 26 sept.

Léonard de Vinci au Musée du Louvre, rue de Rivoli (1er). Tél. : 01 40 20 50 50. À partir du 24 oct.

I DIDN’T GO HOME


Hans Ulrich Obrist discusses influences, materials, and trajectories with Takesada Matsutani, a second-generation Gutai protagonist. Throughout his career, Matsutani has continuously developed his voice and discovered new potentials to express the inner subjective dimension. Spanning five decades, Matsutani’s work continuously redefined the relation between the artist and the substance of his practice—it has been a discipline against the grain.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST
Let’s begin at the beginning and talk about how it all started. How did you come to art?

TAKESADA MATSUTANI
When I was fifteen years old, I developed tuberculosis. At that time there were no medicines, as Japan was not so rich. We realized that if I wanted to go into business, my body would not be strong enough. So I elected for art. I decided before high school that I wanted to be an artist. Then during art school in Osaka, again the tuberculosis came back. I was thinking: What should I do? But my body slowly got better, and by that time there was medicine.

Many of my paintings from that time were about sickness or about slowly regaining health, and they were figurative. In high school I studied traditional Japanese art, nihonga. And at that time, in the 1950s, it was the abstract epoch, but I thought Gutai was not art. Impossible! I did figurative work, landscapes and things like that. But I was young, I didn’t have enough education. Then slowly, lots of information began coming from Europe and America, in photos and writing. I was influenced, logically, by Wassily Kandinsky, in realizing that art is not a copy of an object or a landscape or whatever. I came to think that there was something inside that I wanted to show.

HUO
Yes, they were one generation older. I lived in Nishinomiya, which is between Osaka and Kobe, 500 kilometers from Tokyo, very provincial compared to the capital. But Osaka people are close to Kyoto and Nara, and we have quite an old tradition that is important. We don’t think about it, but we feel it.

Gutai’s director, our fondateur, Yoshihara Jiro, was not always an artist; he was the son of a famous cooking oil company founder. His father said, “You like painting, so you can paint a lot. But you will never be an artist. Please follow in my footsteps.” So Yoshihara worked at the company and painted at the same time. When Yoshihara was young, Léonard Tsuguharu Foujita came back to Japan.

The famous Japanese-French painter who was then living in Paris.

TM
Yes, and Yoshihara wanted to show him his work. Foujita said, “Yoshihara-kun, this is like Matisse, this is like Miró. All these influences are not good. You should be original, invent it.”

HUO
Amazing.

TM
And meanwhile, his father was saying, “You can’t go to Paris, you must stay in Osaka.” It was an engaging time in Japan in the 1950s. At one point, everybody—graphic designers, sculptors, and painters—got together to have a discussion, and Yoshihara was one of the artists invited. A lot of young artists went to listen. At the same time Yoshihara organized a small show in Kobe.

HUO
And that was the beginning of Gutai.

TM
Yes. I was at high school at that time, so I knew of it.

HUO
Gutai was in large part a response to this conservative climate after the war.

TM
Exactly, Yoshihara was against the formality. But he was not against art, you understand.

HUO
Yes, Gutai was not anti-art; it was against formal art.

TM
Yes. In Japan there is not such a strict line between painting and craft, ceramics, woodworking. Well, sometimes it’s divided, but it’s more about how things are made than the medium per se. So Gutai was influenced by craft, by hand making. Also Japanese history—the Meiji period, after the Edo epoch—and literature, art, industry. Yoshihara understood many things intuitively, and he made people want to join him.

HUO
Like Andy Warhol, it was a factory. Could we say that Yoshihara was the Andy Warhol of Japan?

TM
Yes! [laughs] He was very good. He was a good painter, and a good navigator. I was objective then. I was figurative in my paintings, as I mentioned, but I was slowly changing my ideas. In my youth I loved to do figurative drawings, I was so proud of my talent. Because of my sickness I would have to lie down and all the illusions that I saw, I would draw. But art cannot only be surface. That’s why I used the sickness time for imagination as well.

In 1958 or 1959, Sadamasu Motonaga lived near my house. I asked him, “Can you introduce me to Gutai?” Gutai was so active, I was envious of that energy. So I started to participate in Gutai at the end of 1959. But the first time I showed my paintings, influenced by the style of the period, Yoshihara told me, “No, these are not good. Not these either.” This was something he had gotten from Foujita.

HUO
So he did to you what Foujita did to him?

TM
Exactly! Because I had an imagination, I liked some organic images, things that were in three dimensions, but not sculpture. I like the flat surface. That’s why, one day, I bought some vinyl glue (which today you can buy anywhere). It was a nice day, a little windy,
I put the vinyl glue on the canvas and turned it over, and of course vinyl is water-based and most of it dripped off, but some parts dried. Then I thought, “Aha, this is a good form, fairly controlled.” It was a very sexual form.

**HUO:** Was it the actions of Gutai that drew you to the group, or something else?

**TM:** Usually I explain it by saying that I was weak, then, conserving energy. And Gutai was energy. I felt that each person involved had originality. Everybody was good.

**HUO:** Fundamental to the workings of Gutai was a balance between individualism and community, a focus on the horizontal over the hierarchical. I am always interested in this idea of the collective.

**TM:** You have to see that in Japanese culture the collective and the individual go together, they are not opposite. And all Japan works that way. Also Gutai wouldn’t say “creative,” we say *jikken,* “experiment.” They don’t create; they experiment.

**HUO:** So the emphasis was on freedom? Freedom to experiment.

**TM:** Freedom from war. Freedom from our important traditions, from formality. My education was very short, and my family was very middle class, and I was a very sad boy. I hated myself, until I figured out how could I break with all that. I was a fortunate artist. I was influenced by a lot of Gutai people and abstract painters.

**HUO:** So Gutai helped you to find your own freedom. Originality seems to be an important concept for it, as when Foujita told Yoshihara not to do Matisse. It was important to do what no one else does. Do you know my book on Metabolism? It’s in English and Japanese. Rem Koolhaas and I worked on it for ten years. While researching that book we found out how much Metabolism had to do with the war. Do you talk about the war?

**TM:** I can talk about the war. I was very young then, though.

**HUO:** What are your memories of the war? And how do you think Gutai was a reaction to that? John Latham and Gustav Metzger worked on *Auto-destructive art* in the 1960s in London, and Latham told me that during the war he was on a ship that blew up, and that had a big impact on the work. Otto Piene and Günther Uecker, from zero in Germany, told me that the war explains the nails, the lights. I suppose it’s true also for your generation.

**TM:** It’s an interesting question, because everybody in Gutai had experienced a horrible time in the war. They were young. Yoshihara wrote about war, he saw a bad scene near Hiroshiki, but his paintings are not about war. I think that Yoshihara’s statement was more about refusing politics, story, sentimentality. Just objects, just material itself. He was also, let’s say, spiritual, as in, “shake hands.” His idea was that everybody should be respected.

**HUO:** Did you ever see any of Shozo Shimamoto’s performances?

**TM:** Some, yes. But I didn’t see the first ones in 1954.

**HUO:** Did you yourself ever do performances?

**TM:** I only did installations. Gutai showed only one time in a department store, a big space. On one side was a copy machine shop, and in between someone asked me to make a *frontière,* so I made a *porte.* I have a photo.

**HUO:** So you made a door?

**TM:** Yes, see in this picture. That’s the copy shop.

**HUO:** Copy machines and typewriters lead us to another aspect of Gutai, also connected to the American artist Ray Johnson, which is the idea of mail art. The Gutai artists used these *nengajo,* the New Year postcards, and I think you must have some because it was your friend Motonaga who did the first one. Is he still alive, Motonaga? He was fifteen years older than you, and certainly the one you were closest to.

**TM:** No, but he lived a long life.

**HUO:** Looking at the *nengajo*! Oh that looks amazing! These are the originals?

**TM:** Yes.

**HUO:** So you did one too? This one is yours?

**TM:** That’s mine.

**HUO:** Beautiful.

**TM:** Yoshihara said to each artist, “Come, you must make one.”

**HUO:** It’s like a portable museum. I’m so touched to see these cards, this is really incredible. I see they are very small. Who had the idea for these cards? They are all originals in a way.

**TM:** It was Yoshihara. We made a hundred, and every year, at the end of the year, we sent them all over the world.

**HUO:** One last question about Gutai before we move on. You were referred to as one of the “three M’s.”

**TM:** Motonaga, Maekawa, and Matsutani: we were the same generation, and became part of Gutai in the 1960s.

**HUO:** So Motonaga was the “father.”

**TM:** Exactly. Well, maybe more like the uncle or older.

**HUO:** Motonaga was a pioneer. Can you tell me more about him, and his influence? How do you think of his role in the Gutai movement?

**TM:** First of all, he was very charming, and a tall, handsome guy. And a nice guy. And his work was organic. I felt that it looked like the inside of an organ, the product of a mind that is sensual. Also, you have to understand, any artist in Gutai—of course they were artists, so they were all enemies of each other. Or, well, in competition. You know what I mean. When I made my first works, I asked Mukai and Maekawa, “Please look at them, I can’t decide if they’re good.” They came and said, “Matsutani, this is interesting; you must show Yoshihara.” Then, in 1970 in the Osaka international exposition, the world’s fair, they offered a big space to Gutai, and they had lots of funding for it from an investment company. That was the first time Gutai saw big money, and unfortunately it became political.

**HUO:** Did you participate in Osaka? You were living in Paris at the time.

**TM:** Good question. They told me, “Matsutani, if you don’t get on this ship, you will be late. Come home.” I didn’t go home.

**HUO:** You stayed in Paris?

**TM:** I stayed in Paris.

**HUO:** The movement split up not long thereafter. Were there any connections between you, Gutai, and Metabolism? Did you know the Metabolist architects? Kiyouro Kikutake, Kisho Kurokawa? They were all the students of Kenzō Tange. Did you know Tange?

**TM:** I think Tange was the top guy—like Yoshihara, but in the architecture world.

**HUO:** Tange played the role of Yoshihara—I mean, Tange was less


dictatorial, because he went to the United States and he just gave the young people his studio, so it was sort of laissez-faire. Did you know the architects at that time?

TM No. I knew Tadao Ando, but only as a friend. An old friend from Osaka. Sometimes I would go back to Japan, and he had a lavender Porsche and would take me around to show me all his new buildings.

HUO I wanted to ask you also about your first bigger exhibition, which you were invited to do in 1963 at the Gutai Pinacotheca in Osaka. I’ve read the pamphlet. You wanted to do something organic with the vinyl glue and learn from that material; dialogue with material was also a Gutai theme. You said a lot of people were repelled because it wasn’t a material one would normally use for art.

TM Yes, because I couldn’t make fresh, creative work, finally I found the glue material, and I made some three-dimensional, organic shapes. Now I say it’s an organic shape, but at that time I didn’t know anything. So as I mentioned, I made the first ones and showed them to Mukai and Murakami, and they said they were interesting.

I started the show, and from looking at the objects I made, I realized they were conversations of my thinking, and they expressed a consistent idea, so in that regard I think that in 1963 most of the work was fresh. Michel Tapié said he had never seen this kind of material, and of course he had never seen it—nobody had had the idea. I invented the artistic use of water-based vinyl glue. When it’s dry, it becomes skin-like, very organic.

HUO Art Informel was a lot about the gestural idea, which then became a one-way street one shouldn’t continue on, but with this work you introduced chance in a different way. What’s the role of chance in this work?

TM My mind is always on the academic side, like this, to draw something nicely. I still use chance, as I can’t control the glue one hundred percent, it’s impossible. There are no mistakes for me. Rather, I might make a mistake, but if I leave it alone for a day, then look at it again, my mind has changed. I’ve learned much from this.

HUO François Jullien said he had to go to China to understand France. You went to Paris to understand Japan.

TM Yes, and myself, and our culture.

HUO Then you arrived, and there is a beautiful photo of your studio in Rue Daguerre. It seems that you were neighbors with Louise Bourgeois and Joan Mitchell?

TM Joan Mitchell later became a good friend of my wife Kate, but at the time of this photo she, Louise Bourgeois, and Shirley Jaffe shared a big atelier in the back, and they would have nothing to do with us!

HUO Why? They were separate?

TM Very separate.

HUO And at that time you also started to do these copper plates.

TM The engravings.

HUO You were in Paris as a printmaker. It’s interesting that these copper plates are not so well known. Can you tell me a little bit about them? It sort of leads to the black, because the black color is so heavily pressed and strong, and sharper than a painted black.

TM Well, Atelier 17 was Stanley William Hayter’s studio. I went to study engraving, and the Hayter system is that everybody has the same color work, and the images are maybe different. The most important thing of all, I stayed in a small room and I couldn’t do vinyl work, and it was a culture shock. But I traveled lots, and in the engraving studio you can see lots of different artists from all over the world. [shows works] The shapes all come from vinyl.

HUO Wow. So basically you stood up the chance-related vinyl structures, then you drew them.

TM The vinyls were in three dimensions.

HUO Fascinating also that there are multiple engravings on one etching.

TM This is in 1967. I did most of them in 1970. This was the whole reason I came to Europe. I loved Kandinsky’s work.

HUO What is the reason for the box?

TM A box makes something tight. Whether it’s out or in.

HUO And why do you call it Propagation Box? I suppose as a reference to the material of propagation. An organic propagation. It’s also interesting because today there is so much art related to biology, and there’s almost something biological in this. Are you inspired by biology?

TM Yes. My friend who worked in the hospital made blood tests with a microscope, and I saw it one time and was interested. I drew it a lot by hand. It’s not biological, but only the shape. It is a study.

HUO So that friendship with the biologist gave you inspiration for the shapes. Because these are like microscopic views. And then you moved to silkscreen; what happened there?

TM Ah, silkscreens were from Hayter’s studio. And Kate had a silkscreen studio. I loved Ellsworth Kelly’s work.

HUO And then you started to paint the vinyl in a way.

TM In 1970, then I again went to vinyl.

HUO Black to vinyl.

TM All was based on this vinyl glue. [laughs]
So then out of the etching, at a certain moment you discovered this black material and graphite, and you eliminated color. Obviously black has a different connotation in the West than in the East, because in the West it is the color of death, but in Japan it’s not. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that move to graphite? As far as I understand, Joseph Beuys and ecology played a role.

Ecology for me means most of our human bodily senses, that’s eyes and ears, taste, everything that animals have, but human hands especially. That’s why I started to draw in pencil, to make the surface, line by line. Then it joined with vinyl because I liked this kind of idea. Black was automatic; black was just the easy way. When I was a kid, every New Year the family would sit down in a room to make calligraphy of “Happy New Year” or a simple poem. At school we had a calligraphy class.

Tadao Ando wrote that with graphite in the 1970s, you “created works in which the human being was symbolized in an abstract painting of lines and planes, with a pencil, so it’s very ascetic,” and you “repeat the act of just drawing with a pencil in such a common style, you apply these black lines, stroke by stroke.” It’s fascinating the way he describes it, because it’s a very repetitive activity. It’s almost like you are painting time, or something.

That’s the most important thing: I had a lot of time. Nobody knew me, and we didn’t work so much. I did wash the dishes as a husband, but I had lots of time, and everybody does calligraphy noir, and so by pencil was maybe different. Time can get inside.

It’s obviously covered all over. Where does that come from? You once said that you were inspired by Jackson Pollock, but Pollock was more the drips, rather than the fact that it was all over.

At that time I did some dripping, yes.

Here you do it in a much slower way, but it’s again all over, in a sense.

Yes, it’s a kind of repetition also. But you can look at one done by hand. I wanted to make five meters. This is a five-meter shape formed from vinyl.

So they are very big, like scrolls.

This is for a big space, so I made it big. But I am always a little bit against mechanizing it, so until I have a malady, I will still do everything by hand.

And then you also draw sketches.

A lot of sketches, yes. And smaller kinds of—

Experiments?

No, they are all ordinary.

And do you give your works titles?

Yes, the titles are sometimes streams.

And the streams come from the connection to water.

Water and light. ใบ้จำนำ here. This is— you can’t believe. All the antiques. Sometimes the title adds to the idea.

What is the biggest drawing you’ve made?

About thirteen meters.

But it is on canvas. It looks incredibly fragile, yet it’s stable.

I’ve kept everything since I started. I have everything.

Do you have any unrealized projects? For instance, projects that were too big to be realized, or dreams?

What do you mean?

I things you haven’t done yet. Are you dreaming of something you’d like to do that you’ve never been able to do?

No, I don’t think so.

One last question. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote this little book, Advice to a Young Poet. What would be your advice to a young artist?

Art is special, and it never goes away, I hope. When humans are finished maybe it will die, but while humans are alive, art is also.

But what would you tell a young artist?

Don’t be influenced so much by information.

Don’t be influenced by inside?

Inside yourself. Influence yourself. That is my advice.
A Conversation with Matsutani
by Ellen Turner Hall

Matsutani is a small neat man dressed in a charcoal wool sweater and trousers, a dark blue scarf tied at his neck. He sits on a small square wooden stool. His face is animated as he talks. His hands also: to illustrate his ideas he lovingly places an imaginary sheet of white paper on the low table in front of him and takes an invisible pencil in his hand. He pauses to ask, "You understand?" And of course you do because that is the essential Matsutani. To communicate the extraordinary with the simplest and most basic tools.

M: My work is mostly black and white. I use pencil on white surfaces. I use wood glue to fix it. Every day I work 4 hours. I make each line one at a time. A pencil in my hand changes physically. The point wears down as I use it. It takes a lot of time.

My work is an interrogation: What can I do with a pencil and paper? So I draw line upon line, line 2 and line 3 and 4 with time I have a huge band of black, the bigger the surface, the more interesting. It takes a lot of time, I feel so free in that time.

Children in Japan, at New Year, write wishes in Japanese calligraphy, water-based, matt surface on rice paper. I have lived in Paris for 30 years, but I think it is always a little Japan, its traditions and customs. I always loved drawing. When I was 13 I had tuberculosis. At that time in the 1950s in Japan, there was no medicine. So I had to stay in bed. I looked at the wooden beams on the ceiling and I drew. That's when I decided to be an artist. I copied masterpieces; I took a class in figure drawing. At 19 I decided to give up school, and I still have a complex about my lack of education, but I read a lot of literature and educated myself. Matsutani shows photographs of 3 of his early works. The first from 1950 is a figurative painting of sharply rising mountain cliffs and trees below. The second from 1959 is a series of abstract shapes dominated by a pair of eyes which Matsutani tells me is "the sickness," in 1959 we see a human figure, arms and legs pushing the borders of the canvas. "This is life breaking out."

M: I went to Osaka and joined the Gutai group which was against Japanese formalism, seeking freshness, new directions. Curiosity I learned from Gutai. My master told me, stop copying and make something never done before.

I discovered liquid glue and loved its organic look and feel. I could make my marks on paper. I made 3-dimensional shapes with the glue and then on their surfaces I drew my lines. People see just black, but there is white between the lines. The empty space is not empty. The flat surface is not flat. Matsutani's conversation is full of paradoxical statements. Within his self-imposed formal discipline, everything is organic and subject to change.

M: I lived and worked in Japan for 29 years. Something remains: One sheet of paper, one black mark on an empty space. This is the most important.

Here he takes my squared pad, turns to a blank page and makes a mark like an elongated "O" on its side. "This is "Yokaku," he says solemnly. "This empty space is important because of the mark I make." This declaration of faith approaches the essence of Matsutani's work. Like the lines from Wallace Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West":

But it was she and not the sea we heard.
For she was the maker of the sea she sang.
The ever-hoary, tragic-gusted sea
Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.

It is the act of marking the paper, scribing the notes, writing the poem which is important because it fills the emptiness. And the emptiness is important because it is filled with possibility.

In 1946 Matsutani won a grant to study in Paris. This was his first time away from home. Matsutani sought out the English engraver Stanley William Hayter who took him in and insisted he go to French classes. Matsutani worked in Hayter's studio for four years, eventually becoming his assistant. Hayter's reputation brought many artists from all over the world to his studio. There Matsutani met his American wife, Jane, a sculptor.

M: No money, no special materials, but we did important work with very simple things.

His simple things: Materials: paper and graphite pencil, Sumi ink, tin glue, Ferro: line and circle, blob and bubble. Color: black and white. Technique: repetition of gesture. Like the strict formal demands of a haiku poem or a Shakespearean sonnet. Matsutani's self-imposed rules lead to extraordinary freedom of expression and a dance with the music of chance.

In 2001 for "Sensum Kenishi House":

M: I rubbed Sumi ink (solid Chinese ink) over the top of a block of stone. I filled a cotton bag with water and suspended it over the stone. When the water drips onto the stone, the sound becomes part of the installation when people are watching. The drops cannot be calculated. Also by chance the floor was inclined, so the drips and splash of ink onto the canvas below started to flow away from the stone following the fall of the floor.

Communication of his ideas is the main subject of his installations. These performance pieces often involve children, whose spontaneity and lack of pretension: Matsutani always.

M: Kids just do it. They don't worry about art. There is no block to creativity.

In 2011 for an installation called "Around the Circle" at Galeria horizon in Colons on the Spanish coast, Matsutani collected stones from the beach. He placed each stone on a blank A4 paper set in a circle on the floor with him in the middle and children on the outside. Each one was given a brush dipped in ink and asked to connect the stones. Some youngsters used the rocks as percussion instruments. This kind of infectious creative event is a source of delight for Matsutani.

For the Venice Biennale in 2017 Matsutani created a work which reconstructs the traditional calligraphy of his youth. A suspended white canvas filled with black ink drips slowly onto a wooden sphere. The overall impression is of an ageless shrine.

M: One day I will be finished. When my life is finished the drops will go on. But this dropping is for the future, for another space. That's my idea. Dropping, dropping, drooping. That's my infinity.

In keeping with the theme of this edition of Outer Horizons, I ask Matsutani about his idea of the spiritual in art.

M: Spirituality? We are looking for a purpose. To make the ordinary so it's not so ordinary: I use myself, my life. I am very serious about myself. Drawing is a kind of meditation; it needs time and patience. Sometimes I listen to music: Schubert, Beethoven, Mozart. Trying to do - that is the idea. It's the idea that is important. No explanation, but some people feel it and that's more: you understand?

Installé à Paris depuis 1966 tout en restant profondément japonais pour conserver son identité dans « un état d’entre-deux », Takesada Matsutani s’est attaché depuis ses premières expérimentations au sein du groupe d’avant-garde nippon Gutai à favoriser la liberté de la matière pour tenir ensemble sa mise en ordre et son chaos. Alors que l’art spontané de Gutai suscite un regain d’intérêt depuis quelques années, son invitation à participer à la Biennale de Venise donne la mesure d’une symphonie monoton qu’il compose avec les seuls noir et blanc du graphite et de la toile.

Entretien avec Tom Laurent

En 1955, lorsque paraît le manifeste Gutai, celui-ci affirme que « la matière n’est pas assimilée par l’esprit. L’esprit n’est pas subordonné à la matière », mais surtout que « faire vivre la matière, c’est aussi donner vie à l’esprit ». Que représente Gutai pour vous ?

Jirô Yoshihara, le fondateur du groupe, a tiré ce précepte d’un commentaire de Foujita à qui il venait de montrer ses œuvres. Cela fait partie de mon travail, mais chacun d’entre nous a un caractère différent, comme dans tous les mouvements d’avant-garde. La plupart des artistes de la première génération étaient passés par les Beaux-Arts, ce n’était pas mon cas. La part organique, érotique voire sexuelle de mon travail m’est propre – on le voit déjà dans de petites aquarelles figuratives que j’ai réalisées en 1958, comme Résistance (Pressure), encore éloignées de l’abstraction de Gutai auquel j’ai été intégré en tant que membre en 1963. Jirô Yoshihara était doué d’une grande originalité et il incarnait une sorte de loi – c’est lui qui déterminait si la règle de la nouveauté absolue était respectée et on ne pouvait pas aller contre son avis. M. Yoshihara s’opposait à toute narration, à tout ce qui était d’ordre littéraire dans le tableau, mais s’intéressait de près à l’abstraction et surtout à la transformation de la matière. Pour lui, « matière et esprit se serrent la main ». Par exemple, il a un jour écrit un texte sur un tableau de Van Gogh : ce qui en est ressorti, c’est l’épaisseur de sa touche, la matière de sa peinture, en aucun cas l’histoire que raconte le tableau.

Comment en êtes-vous venu à faire dialoguer matière et esprit selon les préceptes de Gutai ?

mieux lorsque l’on regarde les années 1950 : Georges Mathieu en France, Pollock aux États-Unis, etc., travaillent aussi sur l’action, l’automatisme.

Dans les années 1970, je me suis à nouveau interrogé pour trouver quelque chose de nouveau, toujours dans l’esprit Gutaï. Pour faire le vide, j’ai alors pris une feuille de papier et un crayon, comme lors d’une interrogation : si on donne un crayon à un artiste, il va dessiner, et c’est ce que je me suis mis à faire. Au fond, je crois que ce geste (Il hachure rapidement un papier avec une mine de graphite.) contient l’histoire de la calligraphie de façon concrète, même si c’est inconscient. Enfant déjà, au Japon, on a la calligraphie, l’encre de Chine, le blanc du papier. On y est habitué. On les a toujours eus. Pourquoi j’ai choisi le crayon et le tissu ? Parce que ça me semblait nouveau, personne ne l’avait fait, dessiner avec un crayon noir sur 10 m de rouleau. Quand je l’ai montré, cela a suscité beaucoup d’intérêt... Donc Gutaï est comme l’école : il y a de bonnes choses et de mauvaises choses, mais elles sont difficiles à quitter (rires).

Cette expérience reste-t-elle prégnante dans votre installation à la Biennale de Venise ?

Il y a 40 ans que j’ai décidé de travailler avec ces rouleaux de dessin. À l’époque, j’avais beaucoup de temps pour les réaliser ! Pour Venise, je voulais encore créer quelque chose de nouveau : cacher le temps, car réaliser le rouleau m’a demandé six mois de travail. Dans cette œuvre, il y a une part de calcul et de maîtrise qui m’est propre, mais quand je verse la colle à bois, je ne peux savoir exactement le résultat – et j’en suis toujours surpris. Il y a toujours de nouvelles erreurs, et la perfection n’est pas intéressante, surtout pour un Japonais. Pour ce qui est de Gutaï, c’était surtout l’action et le hasard ! Et cela se comprend mieux lorsque l’on regarde les années 1950 : Georges Mathieu en France, Pollock aux États-Unis, etc., travaillent aussi sur l’action, l’automatisme.

Dans ces années-là, à la sortie de la guerre, comment vous situez-vous par rapport à la peinture occidentale ?

La situation du Japon est particulière car c’est une île, ce qui entraîne de l’isolement, mais heureusement il n’a pas été colonisé.

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La vaste installation qu’a réalisée Takesada Matsutani à la Biennale de Venise s’inscrit dans l’exposition organisée par Christine Macel à l’Arsenal au chapitre VIII, le « Padiglione dei Colori » (« Pavillon des couleurs »). Paradoxe, pensera-t-on, au vu ou au su de l’œuvre de cet artiste dont le noir, qu’il soit celui du graphite ou de l’encre, est une marque d’identification de son travail. Non point. Du moins pour ce que « le noir est une couleur », tout comme il en est du blanc, celui par exemple de la toile dont use Matsutani. Depuis plus de trente ans, l’artiste conçoit des installations dont le temps est le vecteur cardinal et qui donnent à voir notamment le lent écoulement d’un sac empli d’encre noire. Ainsi, à Venise, sur une sphère en bois posée en équilibre sur un tissu de lin blanc contenu dans un bassin en zinc. L’encre tombe goutte à goutte, comme le sable dans un sablier, métaphore d’un temps qui n’est pas ici compté mais simplement évoqué. — Philippe Piguet

La Propagation B (Bricol). 1963, acrylique, huile et colle polyvinylique sur toile, 158,8 x 133,4 cm. Courtesy de l’artiste et Hauser & Wirth.
Les Japonais se sont toujours nourris des autres cultures, les ont digérées lentement — comme le bouddhisme, qui a été amené par les Chinois — pour en faire leur propre culture. À cause des nombreuses catastrophes qui les frappent, les Japonais possèdent une grande sensibilité, et aussi beaucoup d'idées. Avant la guerre, le pays avait déjà été européanisé, mais il gardait sa propre culture. La guerre a tout détruit, y compris l’éducation européenne, mais pas notre esprit. La première génération de Gutai connaissait un grand mouvement de liberté, à l’image de ce qui se passait en Occident, et voulait rompre avec les traditions comme la calligraphie. Mais elle n’avait que peu de moyens — la colle vinyle que j’ai utilisée était hors de portée pour elle, par exemple. Il faut dire que nous ne vendions aucune œuvre, à l’époque. Jirô Yoshihara avait des liens avec certains critiques occidentaux et connaissait la peinture américaine. En 1953, il a publié un essai sur De Kooning, Hartung, Rothko et Jackson Pollock. J’aimais beaucoup Pollock – j’étais de la deuxième génération et sa peinture me semblait très fraîche.

J’ai d’ailleurs réalisé des œuvres à la colle vinyle dans son style Action painting, que Jirô Yoshihara refusa.

Votre femme Kate me disait que les Japonais sont radicaux : soit très fous, soit très sages, les codes leur permettent de se situer au milieu. Êtes-vous fou ou sage ? Très sage… (rires)

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Janssen, Nadia. «Good artists know their responsibilities», Christine Macel on Viva Arte Viva. In: Metropolis M, April 2017
Christine Macel is directing this year’s Venice Biennale. As curator at the Centre Pompidou, she stood out for her penetrating and compelling exhibitions. Macel is a typical ‘artist’s curator’ with a sharp eye for scenography. Do not expect any difficult concepts: the focus of Viva Arte Viva is on art and the artist. Nanda Janssen looked her up in Paris.

Christine Macel (born in 1969) might be fairly unknown in the Netherlands, but in Italy and France she already has a considerable record to her name. At previous Venice Biennales, she curated the national pavilions of France (Annir Sala, 2013) and Belgium (Eric Duyckens, 2007). At Centre Pompidou, where she started in 2000, Macel put together quite a number of strong exhibitions, such as the solo shows by Annir Sala (2011) and Philippe Parreno (2009) and the themed exhibitions Les Promesses du Pays (2007), concentrating on a neglected generation of artists from the former Eastern Bloc, and Arts de Paris (2007), which gave a podium to the French scene. The exhibitions were notable for their beautiful and sophisticated design. Moreover, contemporary art received greater emphasis at the Pompidou under Macel’s leadership. Not only did she set up a separate department for it, which she headed herself, she also opened Espaces J35, named after the square meters of floor space this museum room contains, and recently, Galerie Q, a room in the middle of the permanent collection. Both spaces are dedicated entirely to current art.

Yet none of this has led to the stature and fame of several of her illustrious predecessors in Venice, such as Harald Szeemann, Massimiliano Gioni and Okwui Enwezor, curators who had already had big international events under their belt before taking the Biennale. Moreover, they were not ‘just’ curators, but had headed up entire institutes as directors. Is Macel’s relative obscurity possibly a consequence of her manner of working, with her focus on the artist? She confirms this. ‘People often remember who the curator of a certain biennale was, but not who the artists that participated were. That is not normal. Hopefully, this time it will be the opposite. For the sake of my own egocentric satisfaction, of course, I hope people will not forget me immediately, but I would appreciate it tremendously if the artists that I should take their rightful place in today’s and tomorrow’s history; that people will indeed wonder why Sam Gilliam or Zilia Sanchez have remained in such obscurity under me; that broad recognitions will come for Rashid Johnson or Frant Erhard Walther, who have never been shown in Venice before.’

When asked about the reasons for appointing Christine Macel, Paolo Baratta, the president of the Biennale, remains vague. ‘This lack of openness breeds speculation. With the exception of the appointments of the Nigerian Okwui Enwezor (2015) and the American Robert Storr (2007), the Biennale is often directed by European curators. It has been a long time since the honour went to France (Jean Clair in 1995). Could the fact that France generates many visitors and that the Biennale sees Christine Macel as a snapshot of the public be of importance here? Or do thematic considerations play a role and this time, after Enwezor, an extremely politically and socially driven curator of grand statements, has the board decided to take a softer approach that puts the emphasis not on the cerebral but on the experience? Be that as it may, it seems in any case that it is becoming more and more usual for the Venice Biennale to go along with the times and appoint a woman. After Maria de Corral and Ross Martinez (2009), and Bee Cruiger (2011), Macel is now the fourth member of that company.'
Unique voices
Rather than employing a single theme, Macel uses the open-ended motto 'long live art'. Might this be seen as a reaction to the often-heard criticism, particularly expressed by artists, that biennales are too heavily curated and that the art is nothing more than the illustration of a theme? Christine Macel shares that view: 'Working with the artist has always been my starting point. I am not someone who is concerned with weighty ideologies. I consider ideology to be an aspect that limits life.' The motto is carried through on all sorts of levels. In the run-up to the Biennale, a short film about one of the artists' working method is placed online each week. In the catalogue there are no theoretical treataments to be found, but rather visual or written contributions from the artists themselves.

In her statement, Macel writes that the artist has a unique voice, that art poses fundamental questions and signifies freedom. The big and unique role ascribed to the artist here is not unproblematic. In the current political climate it is almost a romantic escape: the artist as an innocent and altruistic figure who wants to tell us the truth. Is Macel not overestimating the artists? She laughs at my question: 'Perhaps I do idealize artists. That is the result of passion galore!'

Then she answers seriously: 'Of course I know this is not always the case, but a good artist knows his or her responsibilities. I am speaking not only about political responsibility but also responsibilities as a person. A good artist often has the awareness to make other choices in society. Plato, the most accurate philosopher of all times, said that artists pose a threat to the stability of the city because of their awareness and ability to overthrow existing values. I do not find that normative at all. Artists have always played a role in society—although nowadays there is a lack of artists who speak out, and here I am referring to the younger generation.' Macel sees art as a destabilizing element and as the alternative in society.

So it is not just a party at Viva Arte Viva. Themes with a variety of worldviews are presented at nine pavilions. The first, The Pavilion of Artists and Books, is about the way in which artists in the post-internet age relate to the written word and to knowledge in the broader sense. The Pavilion of Jews and Pearls seems in on the ever greater role of emotions and impulses at a time when the world seems to be upside-down and the growing iniquity is stirring up populism. The other seven pavilions, which are not located in the Giardini but in the Arsenale, focus on such topics as the common 'earth', traditions, 'shaman', Dionysus (the woman), 'colour' and finally, time and infinity. Macel sees the pavilions as the chapters of a book. Rather than being individual buildings, the pavilions are themed sections that flow seamlessly into one another. These 'transpavilions' would seem to be a wink of the eye to the national pavilions in the Giardini. A little seductively, perhaps, as the central exhibition is in fact already a transpavilion because it includes artists from a wide variety of counties.

For those who read the newspaper regularly, this mix of topical and timeless themes is hardly new. The whole is not very cutting edge. The Diopolian Pavilion, for instance, celebrates the female body in all of its aspects. The art works supposedly cast a different eye on that body, one that is no longer stereotyped (male) desire, but an inner eye. The implicit male-female dichotomy this expresses is rather simplistic, certainly now that all kinds of other genders have come to the fore. Although this Biennale does not sound too exciting on paper, what is important in the end is the exhibition itself. Of course. Considering Macel’s reputation, the chances are that it will be convincing, generate new insights or even be surprisingly good.

Janssen, Nadia. «Good artists know their responsibilities», Christine Macel on Viva Arte Viva. In: Metropolis M, April 2017
The selection of artists is exceptionally balanced. With artists from more than fifty countries (out of a total of 120 artists), one can justifiably speak of a global line-up. Forty percent are women, and the intergenerational aspect is also noteworthy. Mased is even including some fifteen deceased artists, as a kind of homage. So this is certainly not a Biennale focused on hyped young artists or market leaders (125 of the artists are represented in Venice for the first time). Can this selection be considered a counteract to the fact that biennales often show the same artists and thereby contribute to the rapidly spiralling careers of artists? Macel says that it is indeed true that young or just discovered artists are often shown at biennales. But in the past few years we have also been seeing the opposite. Take for example the Venice Biennale directed by Massimiliano Gioni in 2013. He almost only presented the work of dead artists. His Biennale was a kind of return to history. That is an exception, however. I do not see my selection as a counteract, because
I have not reacted against anything, but instead have taken a positive point of view. I never have been busy with the latest fashions or with artists who circulate all over the place.’

Artists who give greater depth to the whole include the Syrian artist MARWAN, who died at an advanced age in Germany last year. Sheila Hicks, known for her colourful textile works; Ciprian Mureșan, one of the artists who put the Romanian city Chioj on the map; Perni Hallaj, with his wonderfully rancid world; the Albanian artist and minister-president Edi Rama, and Takesada Matsusumi, who was part of the Japanese Gutai group. And also some ten French artists — and no, that is not preferential treatment. Among them, naturally, are Anri Sala and Philippe Parreno; Kedar Attia, winner of the Prix Marcel Duchamp in 2016 with an intriguing film about phantom pain; and Pauline Carrier Jardin, who is in residence at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. The only Dutch artist in the company is a dead one: Bas Jan Ader. The ninth and last pavilion, the one about time and infinity, would not be complete without him. His disappearance during a sailing voyage across the Atlantic Ocean in 1975 is an inexhaustible source of mythmaking. In Venice his work is placed directly opposite the lagoon.

**NANDA JANSSEN**

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Translated from Dutch by Jane Bennett

‘Working with the artist has always been my starting point. I am not someone who is concerned with weighty ideologies. I consider ideology to be an aspect that limits life’
The Japanese artist Takesada Matsutani is one of the surviving members of the avant-garde Gutai group. He explains how its influence endures in his vinyl-glue paintings and calligraphy-based performance pieces.

By Matthew Wilcox
Portrait by Elizabeth Young

By the late 1950s, Matsutani had finally overcome both tuberculosis and also his initially conservative stance to Gutai. He had been studying silkscreen, traditional Japanese figurative art, but after embracing abstract art, he was determined to take part in Gutai. He was, however, prevented from doing so by Yoshishiba, whose control over the group was total. As Matsutani puts it: 'It was a hard person, in that sense it was an typical Japanese group – sexual and dictatorial – master and apprentice. His position was like that of the emperor, or a dictator.'

This initial rejection fueled Matsutani's experiment. A friend in medical school showed him some microscope slides of blood, and the artist responded by trying to recreate them using the industrial glass-polyvinyl acetate, a material he has been using for almost 60 years to achieve disconcertingly flesh-like forms and textures, which recall gelatines, prophylactics, and blister packs: 'I was experimenting with the glue outside, and by chance the wind made it dry like stalactites. It was an interesting effect, but you couldn’t control the process, so I thought about using a fan, which I had in my small studio. I peeled the glue on the canvas. It dried in the shape of mochi – a rice cake. Then when it was dry I cut into it. I realised that I had an organic side to my mind, un peu sauvage, un peu érotique,' he says.

'I discovered myself, by chance, in action.'

This development is exemplified by the sensuality of works such as Work 62-9 (1962) and Work 60-9 (1960), in which he immersed the glue with acrylic and oil paints, the colours mixing at decay. Michel Tapié, the French critic, curator and collector, happened to be in Japan at that time and was impressed: 'I have never seen such material used like this.' His endorsement did the trick and in 1963, Matsutani was finally admitted as a full member of Gutai (he had been allowed to exhibit alongside the group since 1960) and given a solo show by Yoshishiba (Figs. 2 & 4). By that time however, the group had undergone a shift in direction and less stress was placed on performance. 'I began bringing the paintings here to Paris, to a gallery, where they sold quite well,' Matsutani explains. 'But it was delicate balance. The fact that there was a market for Gutai paintings meant that the members had less time [for] action.'

In 1966 Matsutani was awarded first prize for his vinyl works at the first Munch Art Competition, and received a six-month scholarship from the French government to study abroad. 'I was told that Gutai would be waiting for me when I got back. I had no idea that 50 years later I would still be here. Soon after moving to Paris, Matsutani
‘France changed my thinking. In Japan the mentality had been: it is enough to be interesting.’

the wrinkles and protrusions of the vinyl glue on the black-and-white relief paintings. By photo-engraving the shadows, I realised I could give another expressive quality to the original vinyl-glue works.

Taken are the far side of his studio, where next to the other ancient-looking electric fans, at recent vinyl works, which he has covered in the lines of thousands meticulously applied graphite strokes. ‘Here’, he says, pushing me closer to a work, one of the more compact pieces from his Stream series (1977–present). ‘Look. It’s all one black, but because of the shadows it makes from another shade. That’s what I learned from Tanizaki!’

The work, with its use of black ink, and incorporation of negative space (me), is strongly reminiscent of traditional calligraphy, which Matsutani studied as a child. Indeed his performance pieces such as Stream (2013; Fig. 10), have often made use of dried–ink-blots, which the artist gauges against rough–cut stone. The performances embody the physicality so characteristic of Gutai, as Matsutani exhorts himself tirelessly, etching the ink block, until it is time for him to make his grand gesture and smear his ink-stained hands on the canvas in a circle around the stone, while the water continues to drip down from above.

Matsutani’s debt to calligraphy is present throughout his long run of Stream works. The series comprises a variety of pieces on which ink, ash and graphite appear to flow. Some of the most dramatic of these are scrolls – he completed a 3–metre-long piece, Stream Ashiya-yi, for his 1962 exhibition at the Ashiya City Museum of Art and History. The scrolls are filled with countless strokes of pencil, a physical act as much as an artistic labour. ‘When I started creating these, I had time and no money,’ Matsutani explains. ‘I asked myself what I could do with just a pencil and paper. I started with just sheets of paper and a black pencil, marking time, like a diary.’

He takes me down to a separate storeroom, where he picks up and begins to unroll a scroll, revealing a hand of black composed of tens of thousands of glistening individual marks. He lays the piece on the floor, the accumulation of his time and effort, a shimmering tangle of black time steadily unrolling before us until, finally, we reach the end of the piece. In aggregates that echo Gutai’s obsession with scale, Matsutani has showered his work with turpentine. The imprint of this destructive act has been captured by the paper, where the solvent has run off the work, dissolving the solid streams of black into frayed ribbons that recall streams of anti–success rain or smoke drifting – shadows cast long ago.

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