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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Norio Imai and Tsuyoshi Maekawa's New York Debuts: Outside Japan, the Enduring Lure of Gutai

by [Edward M. Gómez](#) on March 15, 2014



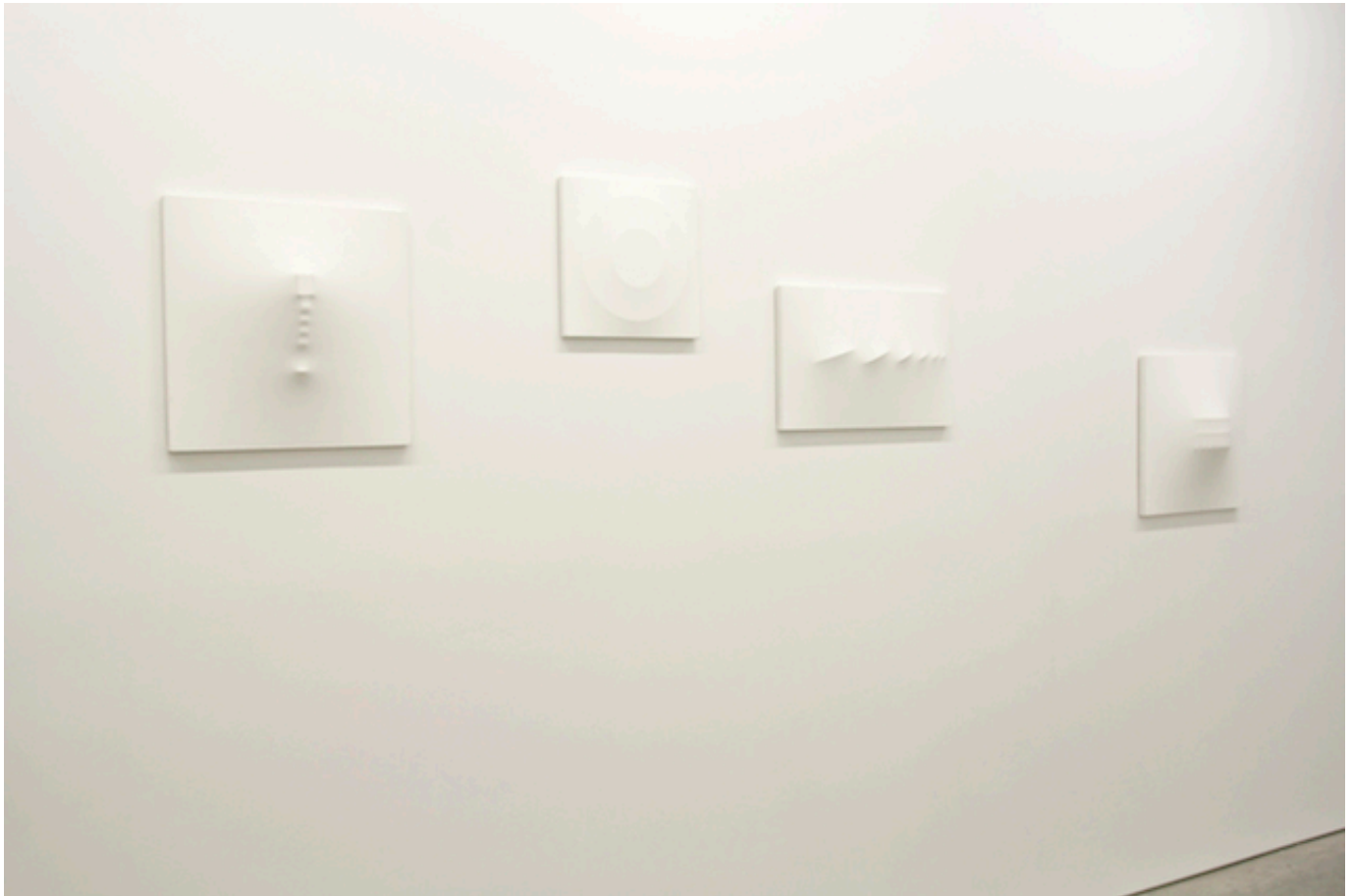
Tsuyoshi Maekawa, "Untitled (G S7)" (1963), oil on canvas and burlap (courtesy Dominique Lévy Gallery, New York)

In recent years, both within and outside Japan, interest in the post–World War II [Gutai](#) art

movement has increased considerably, with major museum exhibitions appearing at such venues as the Museo Cantonale d'Arte in Lugano, Switzerland, the National Art Center in Tokyo, and the [Guggenheim Museum](#) in New York, as well as solo and group shows at commercial galleries in New York (Paula Cooper, McCaffrey Fine Art, Hauser & Wirth, Galerie Richard), London (Hauser & Wirth), Antwerp (Axel Vervoordt) and elsewhere.

The Japanese word “gutai” can mean “concrete” or “tangible.” The artists associated with the movement produced paintings, sculptures, mixed-media installations and groundbreaking event-art and action-art activities that were staged in auditoriums or outdoors in the open air. (In retrospect, many modern-art historians now regard those latter events as prototypical performance-art works.)

In 1954, the Gutai Art Association, as the artists’ group was formally known, came together in the city of Ashiya, near Osaka, in southwestern Japan. At that time, sixteen younger art-makers joined with Jirō Yoshihara, a modernist painter and scion of a cooking oil-manufacturing family, to establish the Gutai group. Under Yoshihara’s tutelage, the artists followed a command he expressed in the group’s manifesto: “Do something no one else has ever done before!”



Works from Norio Imai’s ‘Shadow of Memory’ series (c. 2008–09), acrylic, canvas, mixed media (courtesy Galerie Richard, New York)

Responding to that call, artists such as Kazuo Shiraga made a “painting” in mud on the ground, using his body as a “brush” (his signature works were oil paintings made with his feet as he swung from a ceiling-suspended rope); Atsuko Tanaka fashioned her “Electric Dress” from countless colored light bulbs, a garment she actually wore on stage; and Shōzo Shimamoto

produced images by firing paint from a cannon at various surfaces. Yoshihara himself, after emerging from an earlier phase of making stiff, quasi-surrealist tableaux, went on to create austere, calligraphic circles set against solid black or colored backgrounds, paintings that remain among the most enigmatic and elegant images in all of modern art.

In the 1960s, more artists joined the Gutai group. They came to be known as its second generation. As a collective, Gutai was active until 1972. The association presented numerous group and members' solo exhibitions at its own venue in Osaka, as well as other locations.

Right now, in New York, solo exhibitions of the work of two second-generation Gutai artists, [Norio Imai](#) and [Tsuyoshi Maekawa](#), are on view, allowing for in-depth examination of their respective contributions to the thematic and technical issues their pioneering group explored.

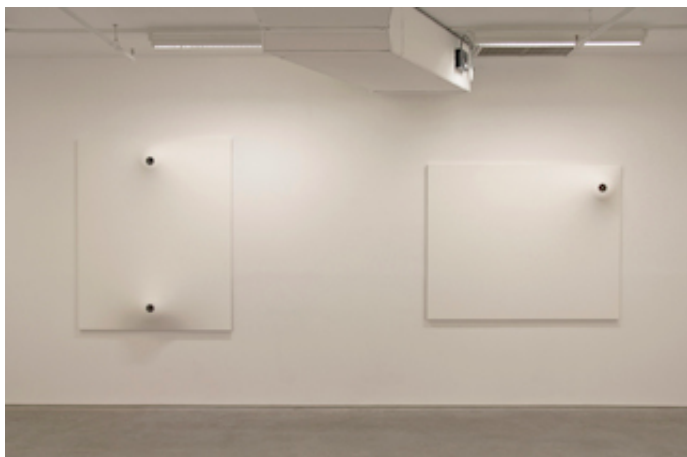
Norio Imai: Perspective in White, Galerie Richard (Chelsea)



Installation view, 'Norio Imai: Perspective in White' at Galerie Richard in Chelsea, Manhattan (courtesy Galerie Richard, New York)

Looking at Norio Imai's wall-mounted, three-dimensional painting-objects — are they paintings or sculptures or both at once? — brings to mind the mixture of audacity and optimism that pulsed through the bold, geometric-abstract works that turned up everywhere in the long-ago 1960s and 1970s. Think Ellsworth Kelly's shaped canvases, Buckminster Fuller's domes, Paco Rabanne's cocktail dresses made of mirrored discs, the Finnish designer Eero Aarnio's Pastil Chair ("pill

chair”), all those white-plastic TV sets shaped like globes, and many other playful-provocative essays in the pleasures of pure form.

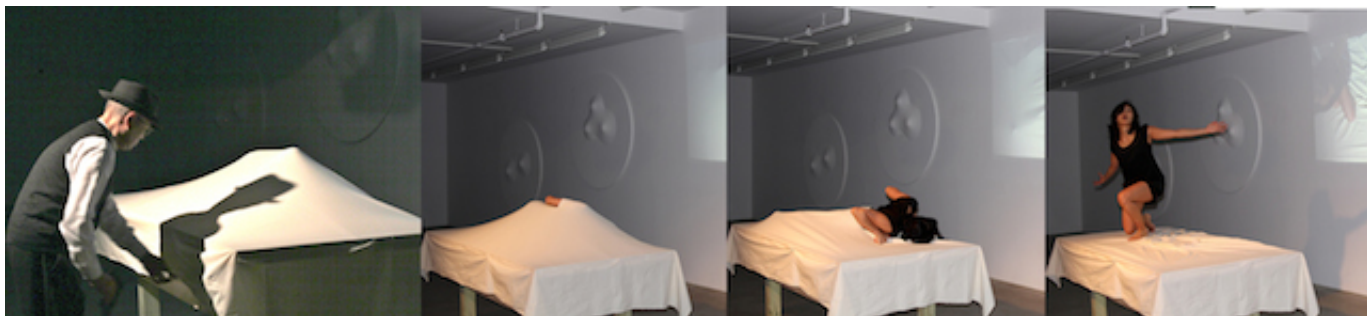


Norio Imai, “White Ceremony C” (left) and “White Ceremony D” (right), acrylic, canvas, plastic molds (courtesy Galerie Richard, New York)

Imai, who was born in Osaka in 1946, joined the Gutai group in 1965. Its youngest member, he developed all-white works in which, typically, he stretched canvases tautly onto frames, covering objects that were sometimes recognizable (a bicycle helmet, a boat propeller) and sometimes not. The odd-shaped forms that resulted from this mode of art-making seemed to throb with restless energy, as if the objects hidden beneath Imai’s swelling canvases were just itching to burst through his smooth, luminous surfaces. These works oozed a sense of self-contained, self-satisfied completeness.

“Something that is pure and simple — in my work, those are two important factors,” Imai observed in a recent e-mail exchange with Hyperallergic Weekend. In keeping with the spirit of the Gutai manifesto’s famous dictum to “do something no one else has ever done before,” he added, “even if the form, the materials and the techniques of expression change, those two points” have always been elements of his “consistent position.”

At Galerie Richard in Chelsea, the New York branch of a Parisian gallery of the same name, which has also shown the work of the Paris-based, former Gutai artist Takesada Matsutani, Imai is now offering a selection of recreations of more than a dozen works from the 1960s as well as several pieces from his “Shadow of Memory” series of the late 2000s.



Norio Imai and Melissa Guerrero performing Imai’s “On the Table” piece at his show’s opening in February (courtesy Galerie Richard, New York)

On the opening night of his current New York show, Imai and a young collaborator, Melissa Guerrero, performed his piece, “On the Table.” With Guerrero lying on a table under a sheet of muslin, the artist began by using a staple gun to tightly fasten the fabric to the top of the table, completely concealing — or trapping — the young woman once it was staple-sealed all around her body. According to Imai’s written notes about this performance-art work, once his collaborator is tucked into her cocoon, the resulting form resembles “a snow-covered mountain.” Inside her sealed-off chamber, she can perform “a dance that cannot be seen.”

Alas, some mountains are volcanic and can explode at any moment. As an overhead camera recorded the action, simultaneously projecting it on the wall above the table, Guerrero cut a slit in the fabric enveloping her and, like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis, slowly made her way out of her muslin shell, first revealing a hand, then an arm, then, at last, her full body. After a few moments of expressive shimmying on the tabletop, she was free.

Tsuyoshi Maekawa, Dominique Lévy Gallery (Upper East Side)

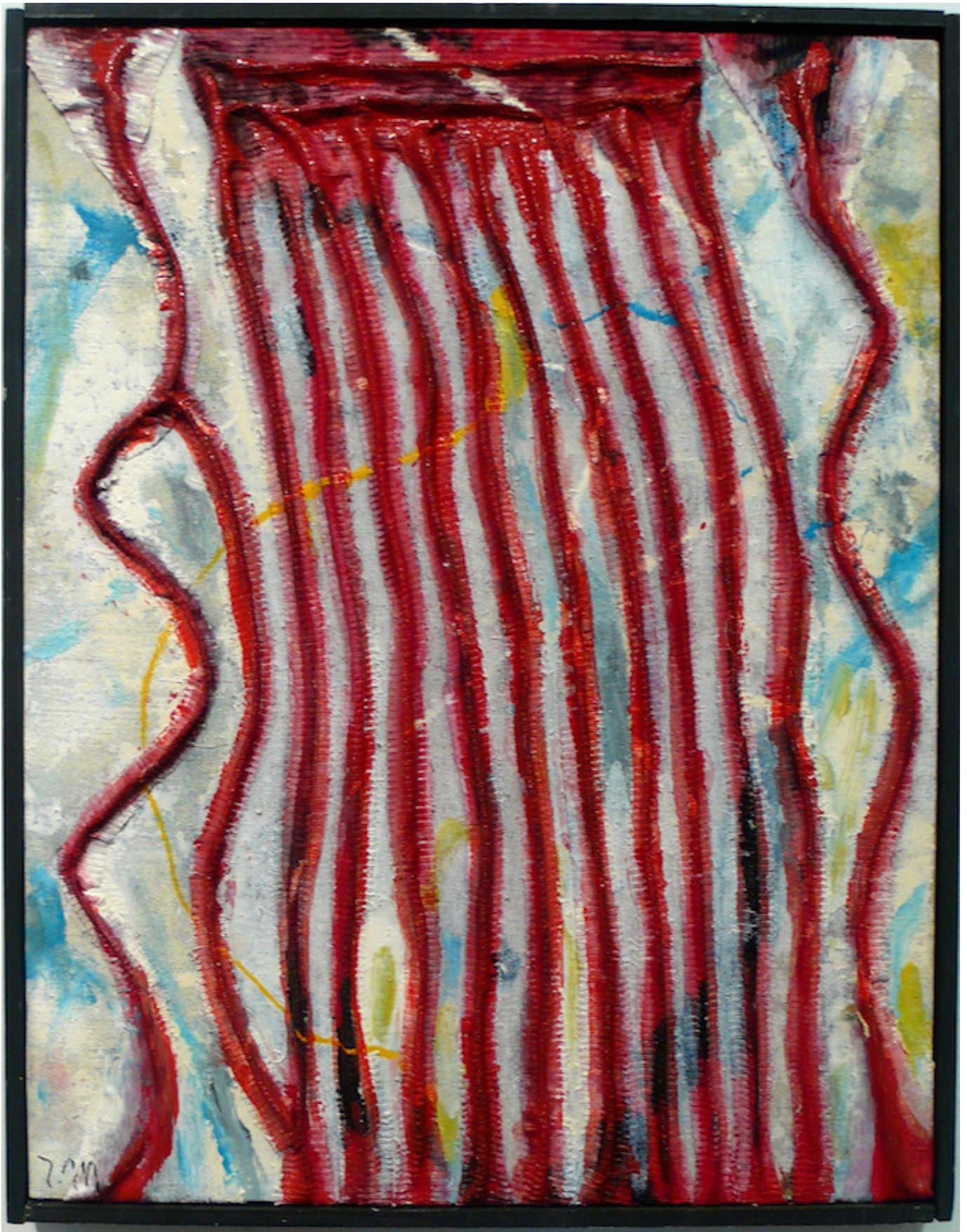


Tsuyoshi Maekawa, “Untitled (A5)” (1963), oil on canvas and burlap (courtesy Dominique Lévy Gallery, New York)

Tsuyoshi Maekawa, who was born in Osaka in 1936, took part in the *8th Gutai Exhibition* in 1959

and became a full-fledged member of the group a few years later. While many of Gutai's other talents employed performance-oriented techniques, Maekawa was more of a hands-on craftsman. His material of choice was oil paint on burlap, which he cut, folded, twisted and rolled into various forms.

Maekawa made the most of burlap's expressive textures. In painting after painting, the fabric's rough surface became a very active element. Other modernists, including Paul Klee and Alberto Burri, also used burlap in notable ways. As a surface for some of Klee's paintings, burlap provided a certain charm and underscored the artist's animating sense of invention, while the burlap scraps that made up Burri's earth-toned collage patchings exuded more terrestrial airs. By contrast, Maekawa's burlap concoctions, often slathered in bright colors, suggest otherworldly topographies or relief maps of the deepest, most unexpected regions of the soul. With their splotchy, crusty rivulets of paint and veiny, expansive, vaguely vegetal-organic forms, Maekawa's paintings are as powerful as any of the most emblematic canvases of the legendary postwar New York School.



Tsuyoshi Maekawa, "Work 131010" (1991), oil on canvas and burlap (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

On the occasion of Maekawa's first solo show at the Gutai Art Association's Pinacotheca in

Osaka in 1963, the Japanese critic Yoshikazu Nakamura, writing in a well-known Japanese newspaper, called attention to the “drama of planes and lines” in the artist’s paintings. He noted that his works “fully display[ed] the optimistic and experimental spirit that is peculiar to Gutai.”

Those qualities can be felt in the seven works on view in Maekawa’s current show in New York, including “Untitled (G S7)” (1963), a medium-small, mostly blue painting, whose two horizontal sections play off each other, with a bottom row of stiff, pillar-like lines pressing up against a jazzy breakdown of corresponding, three-dimensional wiggles directly above it. The effusive energy of Maekawa’s art could also be felt at last weekend’s Armory Show in Manhattan, where the Tokyo-based gallery Whitestone featured a selection of works by various Gutai artists, including a large offering of Maekawa canvases, some dating back to the Gutai era. All of them were in excellent physical condition, their colors bright and compelling.



Tsuyoshi Maekawa and his painting “Work 130916” (1991) at the Armory Show, New York, March 9, 2014 (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

At the fair, Maekawa greeted visitors to Whitestone’s booth and, as I examined several of his works up close, he told me, “Like some of the other Gutai artists, once I found the basic techniques and materials that really seized my attention, I stuck with them and experimented with them over time to see how much I could find in and coax out of them.” Maekawa, who said he is still making art today, pointed out that he continues to use burlap as one of his indispensable, signature materials.

Imai and Maekawa’s solo gallery shows in New York come at a time when the efforts of art dealers and scholars in Japan and the West have helped position the Gutai movement’s ideas and achievements appropriately — and deservedly — in modern art’s expanding historical canon. Not just for their freshness and novelty but also, irrefutably, for their imagination, intelligence and impact, Imai and Maekawa’s presentations should not be missed.

[Norio Imai: Perspective in White](#) continues at *Galerie Richard* (514 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan), through March 29.

[Tsuyoshi Maekawa](#) continues at *Dominique Lévy Gallery* (909 Madison Avenue, Upper East Side, Manhattan), through April 12.