

Voices from Artist to the World

No.5

Chiyu Uemae

Chiyu Uemae at 92, an artist who started his full-scale artistic career from Gutai, is active even now. Currently, he draws great attention from America, where his exhibition is scheduled next year in art museum.

Uemae, who will show his work at Gutai exhibition, Guggenheim Museum, USA, 2013, has been working in his studio with a fine view of the Great Seto Bridge, Setonaikai. Regardless of recent changes of circumstance, the artist calmly follows the path same as before. His firm attitude as a contemporary artist enables him to create highly recognized artworks. His art making is thus continued.



--We hear that this year, you have had a great success in "Painting the Void: 1949-1962" (MoCA, Los Angeles) and art fair "Art Platform." How are you impressed about that?

Uemae (hereafter referred to as U): I feel so glad. I'm always ready to exhibit my work, and I still have been working on new works. I'm glad if overseas people will have more chances to see them.

--This spring, your work was greatly featured in "Wind of Karuizawa Japanese Contemporary Art 1950 - 2012" at Karuizawa New Art Museum. Following the sensation, the success in overseas was a busy development for you. What do you think about that?

U: I appreciate it very much that viewers had a chance to see my work, but honestly speaking, I didn't particularly intend to expect this to happen, only devoting myself every day to thinking about how I could put my artistic idea into real artworks.

--So you are very busy making your work.

U: I only would like to make artworks that are fit for me. As you see here, I had been making works with wood chips and a bond, but I can no longer do such a work. All that I can do now is making prints. Previously, I'd go to a print workshop and make prints by myself, but since it takes much time for corrosion and various procedures, I usually ask printers to work based on my instructions -- for more than 20 years, I've collaborated with 2 printers. They each specialize in etching and silkscreen and are familiar with my way of thinking.

--Do you get ideas for works one after another?

U: Yes, even now I can get ideas, because a genre of print art has a room for evolution of expression as a contemporary art. Sometimes I cannot sleep thinking about so many things I want to put into art. Flexible ideas about print making make me try various things.

--For you, being active now, the postwar art movement Gutai happened in the distant past, but in the connection that Gutai has now drawn



Work 1963-1967

international attention, you, as a former member of it, also have come into the spotlight. Did the encounter with Gutai mean much to you?

U: Yes. I was much influenced by Gutai Art. In the postwar period, there occurred new tendency of art, and of course, there was a growing consciousness of it in my mind. Firstly, I was selected for the 1st exhibition at Nikikai in 1947. Then, I went to Kyoto from Maizuru to attend to the class of my teacher Jutaro Kuroda. But, going to Kyoto, rather than learning at the class, brought about a great change for me: I saw large works exhibited in a large-scale Jiyubijutsu show at a department store in Kyoto, and I was deeply impressed with them. This experience made me think that I should not stay any longer in Maizuru. I was then a holder of a crane operator's license, so I decided to work and live in Kobe for the first time.

--You mean that you secured job and made perfect preparations to start in earnest your artistic career.

U: Then, I began to exhibit semi-figurative works in Nikikai, but among them, 5 or 6 pieces, including 100-gou sized large ones (160cm X 100 ~ 130cm), were all rejected. Feeling resentful at the result, I was greatly worried about how to challenge something new. It was around that time when I encountered unusual

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works by Jiro Yoshihara. At first glance, I wondered if they could be art. I thought that his work, displayed at an exhibition organized by a company dealing in pastel crayon, almost made fun of viewers. I had known him by name, but I wondered why such a famous artist made such a completely absurd painting. Nevertheless, I thought I'd like to talk with Yoshihara once, and visited alone his house to see him.

--Was that before the foundation of Gutai?

U: It was in 1952, 2 years before the foundation. Those days, I had been always criticized by teachers as that my work lacked foundation of dessin, so I was afraid that I would be criticized again by Yoshihara. But, actually, his words were not so easy as that. He said from the beginning, "Don't bring me such a rubbish here!"

--Was that a great shock to you?

U: Since I had already known that Yoshihara was an odd person but respected him as an artist, I would visit his house 1 or 2 times a week to show my work, not discouraged by his severe criticism. Then, I gradually became to understand what Yoshihara said, which provided me with a clear direction in my art making.



Cubic Sewing Work 1983



Untitled 1975-1980

of my career: all that I saw there were a non-figurative design work rather than abstract art, and I naturally had an interest in the design of that kind, rather than consciously learning design. For example, Kyozone has various patterns such as vertically striped Yagasuri (arrow-shaped pattern). In the course of nature, I became interested in kiji (raw fabric), orimono (textile), and so on. Those days, we even didn't have a word "fiber art" popularly in use now.

--You mean that you naturally learned from the traditional environment before you were conscious of art making.

U: That's right.

--I think that for most of your works, you take much time and great care, but your sewing works, other than tableaus, also occupy very significant position among others. Do you think that they reflect something you naturally learned from the apprenticeship in youth?

U: I'd like to emphasize the importance of sewing work to me. It has a great many variations, and I'm glad that viewers are strongly impressed with them. Also, the methods of production variously change. Although I have a basic concept about sewing work, it often accepts changes through the process of sewing. Basically, I'm conscious that sewing work is different from fiber art, so I always fix it to a frame. It takes much effort to make a frame and fix the work to it. Mere small distortion of the frame could spoil my whole effort. That's why making sewing work hurt my neck. Last year I went for regular visits to a bonesetter's to receive treatment, which, though, was not effective. Soon, finding that I couldn't raise my arm, I saw a doctor at Kobe University Hospital and claimed that I couldn't raise up my arm due to making sewing work. The doctor said, "It cannot be." My arm is not yet restored. With this and that, I currently have to see a doctor about my arm and have nerve block shots in the neck, but I keep making sewing work while enduring the pain.

--I'm surprised that you work hard under such a severe physical condition.

U: Well, that's because joy fills my heart every

time I complete a work however much it might take time. I understand from the start that it takes much time, but that occurs in the course of nature -- I work saying, "That's a little different," "That's no good, not too bad," or anything...After all, these make me try this or that, and time naturally passes.

--I knew that you have devoted much time and effort to make tableau or sewing work. I wonder if you sometimes get weary of doing so?

U: No. That's why I can keep working now. (laughter)

--I agree with you. Though you are very busy for exhibitions and other things, but please take care of yourself. Thank you very much for your time, today.



"Beyond His Ninetieth Birthday"

at BB Plaza Museum of Art

1st period Nov.3 - Dec.24, 2012

2nd period Jan.5 - Feb.17, 2013

--Were there any other artists who would come there?

U: Yes. I remember that their works were often inclined to action-based work. Though Yoshihara said my work of that kind got better to some extent, I later realized that such a work was different from something that I intended. So, I started to make work in my own way.

--You mean you made works unlike Kazuo Shiraga's performance art or something.

U: I anyway wished to express something within myself, trying various combinations of dots and colors unique to me, for example.

--I think that among Gutai members, you especially are an artist who has continued to treasure and deepen your own artistic expression. In Nikikai, you changed your style from figuration to semi-figuration, and in Gutai, you made the inclination clearer.

U: Rather, I think it more important that I served my apprenticeship as a dyer of Kyozone (Kyoto-style dyeing) after graduating elementary school and rarely saw a figurative pattern in that period



Profile: Chiyu Uemae

- 1920 born in Okuonomura, Nakagun, Kyoto
- 1924 had trouble with his ears and had difficulty in hearing for his life
- 1947 accepted for the first time for the 1st Nikikai exhibition
- 1952 1st solo exhibition of pictures in pastel and sketches, Nishimaizuru Public Library
- 1954 participated in forming the avant-garde art group "Gutai Art Association" (exhibited every time till Gutai broke up in 1972), and exhibited in Modern Art Association (every time till 1970)
- 1958 "The International Art of a New Era -- Informel and Gutai," Takashimaya Department Store, Osaka"
- 1964 "A Trend of Contemporary Art Painting and Sculpture," annex Kyoto to National Museum of Modern Art
- 1985 "Action and Emotion, Paintings in 50s, Informel, Gutai, Cobra," National Museum of Art, Osaka
- 1986 "Homecoming from Spain and Yugoslavia: Gutai Action and Painting," Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art
- 1990 "The Japanese Avant-Garde: The Group Gutai in the 50s," National Gallery of Modern ART, Rome
- 1991 "Adventurers of Painting: Gutai," Fukuoka Art Museum
- 1999 "Cosmology on Aggregation and Meticulousness Chiyu Uemae Exhibition," Osaka Contemporary Art Center and "Gutai Triumphant Homecoming from Paris, Chiyu Uemae Exhibition," Maizuru City Memorial Hall. awarded "Blue Mail Prize," "Dark-Blue Ribbon Medal," and "Hyogo Prefecture Cultural Prize"
- 2001 "Chiyu Uemae at 80 -- A Mystery of his Work," Itami City Craft Center
- 2008 "Dots Talk: Chiyu Uemae, Yoshikazu Yamanaka, and Masahiko Tsubota," Museum of Modern Art, Wakayama
- 2012 "Wind of Karuizawa Japanese Contemporary Art 1950 - 2012," Karuizawa New Art Museum), "Gutai: The Spirit of an Era," National Art Center, Tokyo, "Painting the Void: 1949-1962," Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and "Beyond His Ninetieth Birthday," BB Plaza Museum of Art