

Fergus McCaffrey's Sadamasa Motonaga exhibition presents the artist's revolutionary late paintings, which established him as the godfather of Japanese manga art.

November 6, 2015 – January 30, 2016

Fergus McCaffrey is proud to present the gallery's second solo exhibition of the work of Sadamasa Motonaga (1922–2011). The exhibition features works created after the artist's residency in New York in 1966 and the dissolution of the Gutai group in 1972.



Not only was Sadamasa Motonaga one of the central figures in the Gutai Art Association (1954–72), but he also broke down the barriers between manga, graffiti, and fine art to open up a dialogue between high and low culture in Japan, preparing the ground for the Superflat generation of the 1990s.

Motonaga's late works have taken decades to come to the attention of the West; however, the influence of these post-1966 works in Japan has been extremely profound, and his images are

among the most recognizable in Japanese pop culture. Motonaga considered his paintings, children's books, public artworks, and sculptural installations to be equal, and his work was critically and commercially embraced. The first of his twenty-six children's books was released in 1973, and several of these have been in print continuously since their publication. Included in our 2015 exhibition are his original drawings for *Moko MokoMoko*, a children's book with more than one million copies in circulation in Japan.

A self-taught artist, Motonaga was a cartoonist and manga illustrator for local magazines and newspapers in the late 1940s. In 1953, his oil paintings began to reveal a language of cartoon-like anthropomorphic pictograms; he continued to create them until 1957, when the French art critic Michel Tapié suggested that Motonaga should pursue abstraction. The artist then developed his "high Gutai" style of large-scale paintings made up of multiple layers of viscous, brightly colored pigment that were carefully poured and manipulated into abstract forms.

In 1966, Motonaga moved to New York City for several months and discovered airbrush technique, which led him to abandon his heavy layers of poured oil paint in favor of a return to his 1950s style of pictograms and anthropomorphic forms, which he modeled thoughtfully in luminous colors and Japanese ink. The later 1970s saw the artist adopt a more expressive stroke in which he rendered his familiar multi-legged triangle and animal-like heads in bold compositions bisected by grids and overlaid with large gestural loops, squares, and cubes.

The 1980s saw the return of poured and splashed abstract forms reminiscent of the early 1960s, in concert with his then highly developed style and visual vocabulary. Motonaga worked daily right up until his death in 2011, evolving a body of work of great individual style, bold energy, and infectious positivity. He offered no explanation of his personal iconography and neither accepted nor rejected the narrative interpretations projected onto his work. Throughout his life, Motonaga paid little attention to prevailing trends or new styles, preferring to refine his own work from within.

Of particular note in Fergus McCaffrey's exhibition will be an installation of Motonaga's *Mizu* (Water), which he first enacted in 1956 at the legendary *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition* in Ashiya, Japan. Made from colored water and plastic tubing, *Mizu* will be installed along the gallery's entire 26th Street facade; it is a variant of the acclaimed *Mizu* installation that entirely filled the atrium space at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum during its 2013 Gutai retrospective.

Motonaga's work has been the subject of many retrospective exhibitions in Japan, most notably at the Hyōgo Prefectural Museum of Art, Kōbe, 1998; Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003; Nagano Prefectural Museum of Art, 2005; and Mie Prefectural Art Museum, Tsu, 2009. This year, the Dallas Museum of Art organized the first survey of Motonaga's work outside Japan, alongside that of his Gutai colleague Kazuo Shiraga. Retrospectives of the Gutai Art Association have been held at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Rome, 1990; Jeu de Paume, Paris, 1998; Lugano Cantonal Museum of Art, 2010; National Art Center, Tokyo, 2012; and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2013.

Concurrent with the exhibition, Fergus McCaffrey will release the first English-language monograph on the life and work of Sadamasa Motonaga, written by the Gutai scholars Ming Tiampo and Kōichi Kawasaki, as well as the manga specialist Tomohiko Murakami.

About Fergus McCaffrey

Founded in 2006, Fergus McCaffrey is internationally recognized for its groundbreaking role in promoting the work of postwar Japanese artists, as well as a quality roster of select contemporary European and American artists. Fergus McCaffrey's rigorous, thoughtful approach is marked by a commitment to discovery, often presenting the work of artists previously unrepresented or misrepresented. Dublin-born founder Fergus McCaffrey has been instrumental in introducing postwar Japanese art to a Western market: works by Gutai artists Sadamasa Motonaga and Kazuo Shiraga; Hi-Red Center members Jiro Takamatsu and Natsuyuki Nakanishi; and Noriyuki Haraguchi and Hitoshi Nomura from the Mono-Ha era. The gallery also exhibits the work of emerging and seminal Western artists such as Jack Early, Marcia Hafif, Birgit Jürgenssen, Richard Nonas, Sigmar Polke, Gary Rough, William Scott, and Andy Warhol.

Fergus McCaffrey opened a second gallery location on the Caribbean island of St. Barthélemy in November 2014.

Image:

Sadamasa Motonaga, *Moko MokoMoko*, 1976. Acrylic on illustration board, 18½ x 24½ inches (47 x 62.2 cm)
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