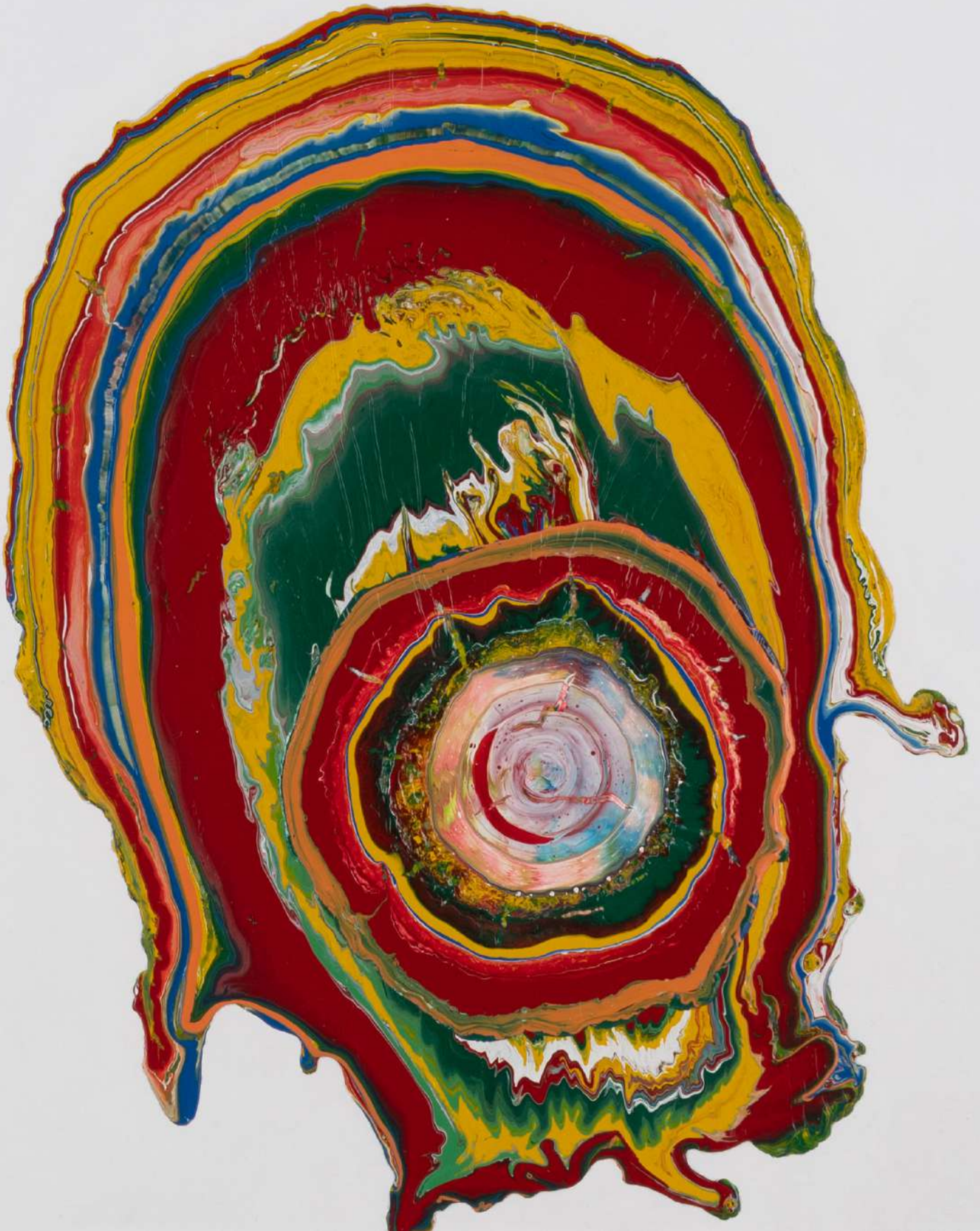


# SHOZO SHIMAMOTO

*Beyond Gutai*

Curated by  
Piero Tomassoni and Denise Di Castro





## **Shozo Shimamoto. *Beyond Gutai***

Piero Tomassoni

The advent of post-war tendencies in the visual arts can be considered among the earliest instances of true globalisation. World War II had acted as a catalyst, with artists everywhere beginning to reject the traditional concepts of “form” and “artwork” in favour of radical methods of transcendental experimentation, leading to diverse and surprisingly parallel results.

While Abstract Expressionism and Art Informel were taking over in the Western world, a group of Japanese artists lead by Jiro Yoshihara united under the name “Gutai”, meaning ‘embodiment’ or ‘concreteness’, to challenge the traditional ways of cultural production in their country. Kazuo Shiraga, Shozo Shimamoto, Saburo Murakami, Akira Kanayama, and Yoshihara, author of the Gutai Manifesto, were the original components of the radical group who proposed a form of holistic, syncretic, innovative art. Embracing painting, performance, installation, and conceptual practices, its formal results were not dissimilar to what had been seen at that time in Europe and North America while maintaining a very distinctive character. In a sense, it was as if the shared experience of war had to result in radical reactions, which manifested simultaneously in similar manners in the countries most impacted by the war.

This widespread modus was then interpreted, classified, and historicised as several ‘local’ movements, each with their specificities, largely determined by their cultural terroirs, yet all characterised by unprecedented experimentation in both the processes and the materials of artmaking. Some artists used traditional instruments and materials in original ways to achieve novel results (action painting, abstract expressionism, and gesture-based art informel), while others used materials and settings entirely outside of classical norms and devised new techniques that had never been seen before. The Gutai group did all the above, placing no restrictions on the extent of their experimentation, considering art no longer as an end but as a means to provoke wider change, a journey of awareness re-defining Eastern practices of naturalist meditation.



Shimamoto, in particular, advocated a ban on the paintbrush (Gutai Bulletin, Osaka, 1957) to free colours from their enslavement to the traditional tool, of which the Asian calligraphers were great masters. The new breed of artists united under Gutai was armed with different tools, even weapons: first and foremost, their own body (in itself a weapon in the martial arts, another element of local tradition), but also brooms, umbrellas, and toys. Shimamoto built his own cannon for the first Gutai theatre performance. By making holes and cuts in his drawings at the end of the 1940s, Shimamoto significantly challenged the notion of bidimensionality of the painted artwork from the very outset, foreshadowing or at least running parallel to Fontana's spatialist experiments. Kazuo Shiraga brought a new vertical dimension into his paintings by laying the canvas flat on the ground and standing on it (like Pollock) to paint with his entire body (unlike Pollock); his contemporary Saburo Murakami burst violently through sheets of paper mounted on stretcher-like supports, symbolising the disruptive actionist force within Gutai and the compenetration of different art forms.

Gutai's body-as-instrument approach materialised the inner meditation and iconoclastic inclinations typical of Zen culture into artistic practice, alongside traits taken from martial arts, reinforcing the sense of naturalist forces merging Japanese traditions with widespread revolutionary attitudes. Shimamoto's experimental attitude never abandoned him, bringing him to explore new modes of expression from the 1940s to the 2010s, when chance had become his inseparable co-author, making him a spectator and physical actor in his art making. The ancient, cultivated, and revered tradition of the calligraphic gesture morphed into a liberated embrace of pathos and controlled chaos echoing the intelligence of nature.

The Bottle Crash series uniquely exemplifies the essential traits distinguishing 20th century art from many centuries of preceding artistic tradition, namely the shift from the representation or symbolic presence in an artwork of a certain content or idea to its actual physical existence transmuted within the artwork: dynamism and movement, gesture and action, inhabitable spaces, matters and materials, objects trouvés, and political engagement.

Shimamoto was also amongst those artists able to continue in the tradition of choosing Italy as a privileged destination for artistic creation. Not just a nostalgic inspiration for Romantic grand tours, the Italian cultural atmosphere continued attracting major international artists throughout the last century and to this day, not least thanks to the patronage of a number of enlightened collectors. From Beuys to Abramović, LeWitt to Kosuth, Nitsch to Shimamoto, and from Jenkins to Tremlett, these important figures of the contemporary era have found in Italy and in their Italian friends the ideal, and perhaps necessary, environment to produce some of their most significant works. It comes as no surprise that the works presented in this exhibition, all produced in Italy, can be considered amongst the best and most recognisable examples of Shimamoto's production. The commitment of curators, patrons, and institutions in supporting such counter-cultural endeavours confirms Italy's continued role as a driving force in groundbreaking contemporary art. This role has been maintained not solely thanks to its own artists, but also to an ecosystem that, for the most part, tends to avoid the influence of passing trends and continues focusing on culturally and historically relevant research and experimentation. Whether rooted in the genius loci or emerging from distant corners of the world, Italy remains dedicated to fostering enduring and meaningful contributions to the global art landscape.





## ***Shimamoto at the Di Castro Gallery***

Denise Di Castro

Alberto Di Castro is a gallery with an enduring history spanning almost 150 years. Each family member who contributed to the development of the gallery over the past five generations brought an element of innovation and personal taste. Whether it was my great grandfather Alberto specialising in decorative arts, my grandfather Franco who, in post-war Europe, embarked on extraordinary travels to acquire the finest paintings and works of art, or my father Alberto, who developed a taste for coloured marbles and museum-quality objects, propelling the gallery onto the international scene through major international fairs.

Recently, we began a journey to expand the gallery's programme towards modern and contemporary art, with an exhibition on the Italian painter Corrado Cagli, shedding light on his post-war productions, and with *Time Future*, a group show that presented new works by contemporary artists inspired or reacting to the past and to the gallery's collection. In both cases, a dialogue was established between the past and the present, where the works embraced each other in a perfect orchestra that saw no barriers between the ages.

The exhibition *Shozo Shimamoto. Beyond Gutai* marks a groundbreaking moment in our history. For the first time, we present the work of a historicized contemporary artist and luminary of the avant-garde Japanese Gutai movement. The striking work of Shozo Shimamoto (1928 - 2013) disrupts this orchestra, completely breaking with the past and aiming to create art never seen before.

Some of Shimamoto's most iconic performances involved the crashing of bottles filled with paint on canvas. With dramatic gestures, he hurled the paint-filled bottles toward the canvas, releasing explosive bursts of color that splattered across the surface, creating spontaneous and unpredictable patterns. The act of throwing the bottles was performed in front of an audience, making it a spectacle that engaged viewers both visually and emotionally, emphasising freedom of expression and the breaking of conventions.

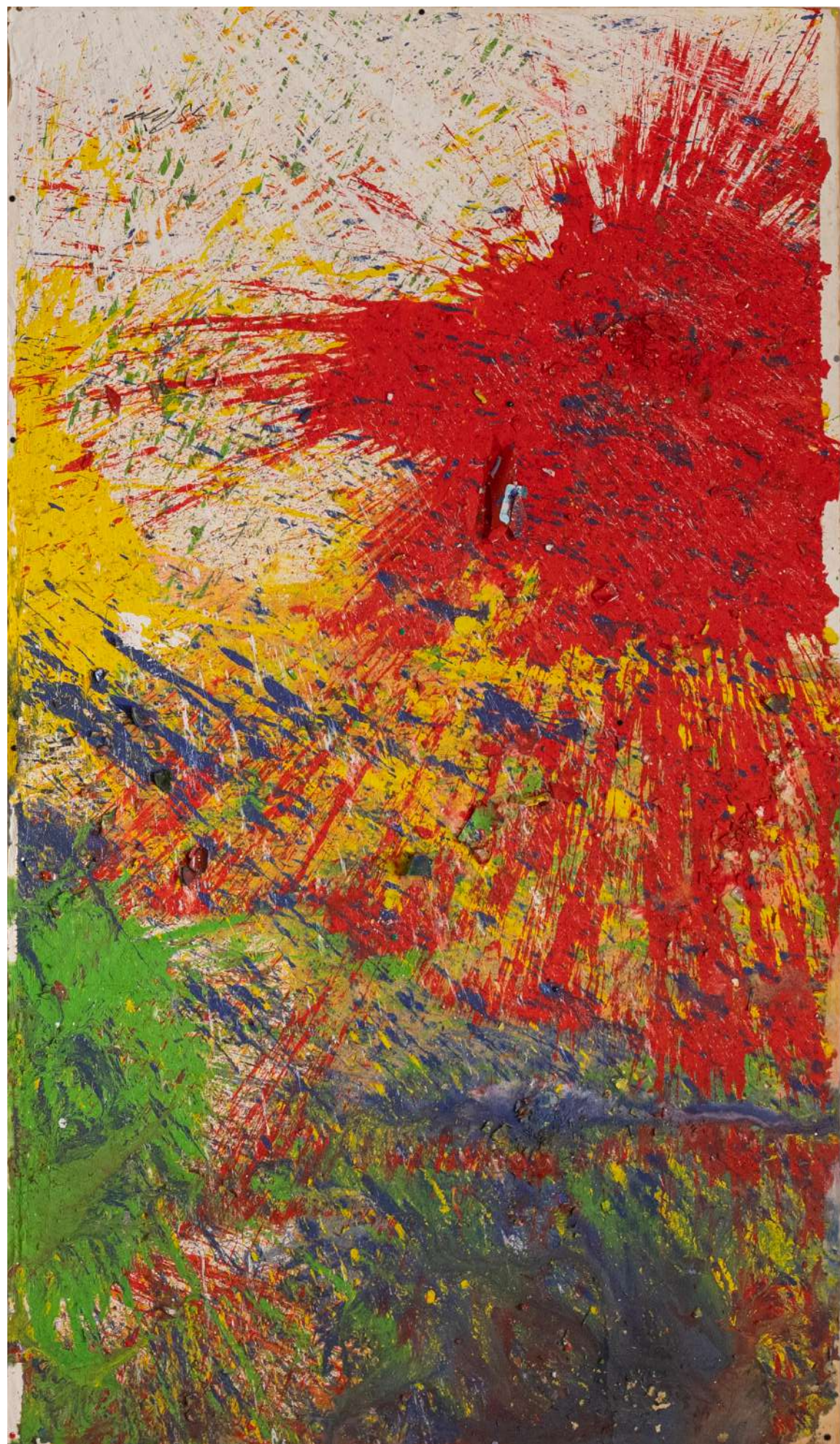
If our previous generations had encountered Shimamoto, a memorable conversation would have sparked.



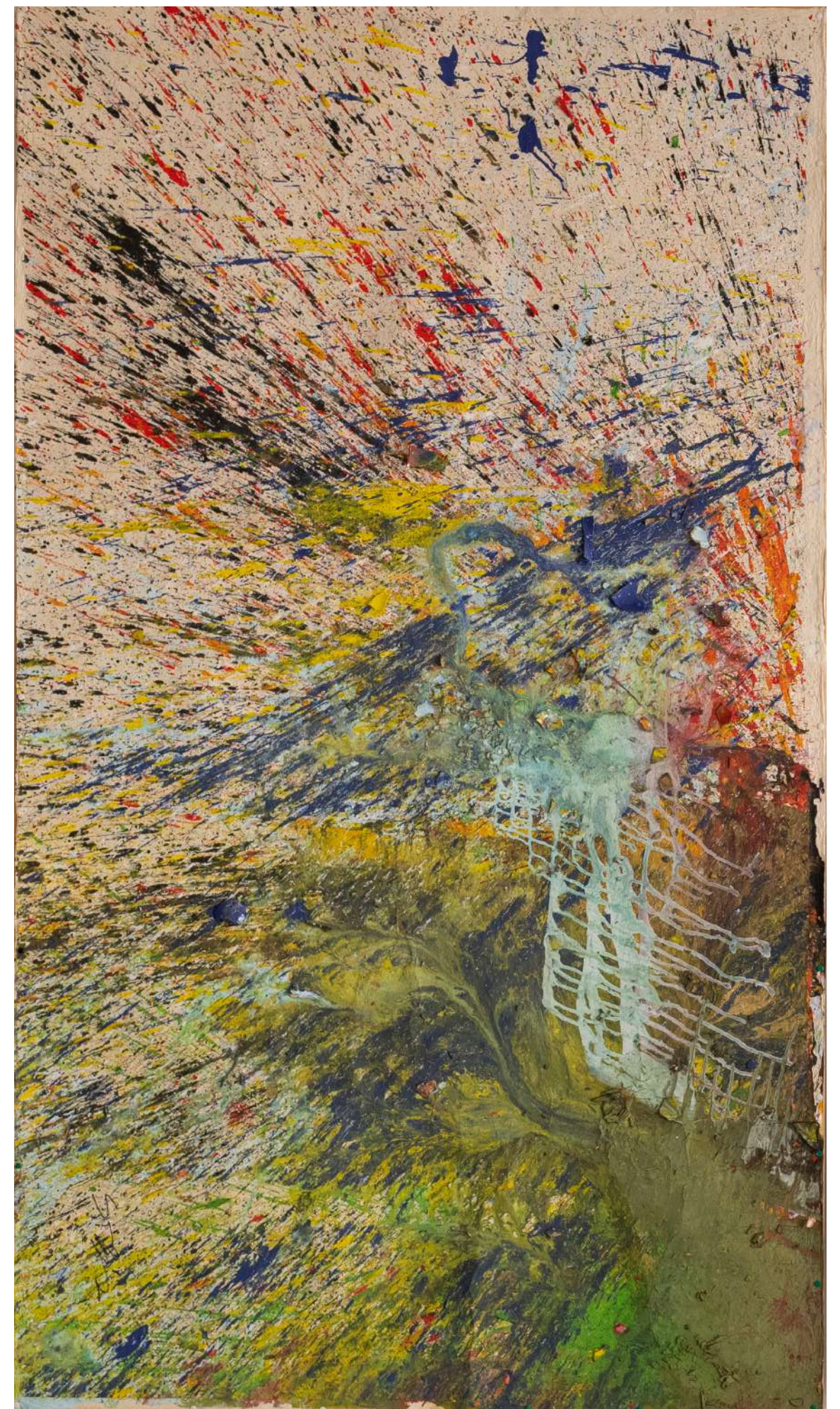


Crane Performance, Naples, 2006  
Mixed media on canvas, 104 x 140 cm





*Bottle Crash in Venice 22, 2007*  
Mixed media on paper applied on panel, 130 x 230 cm



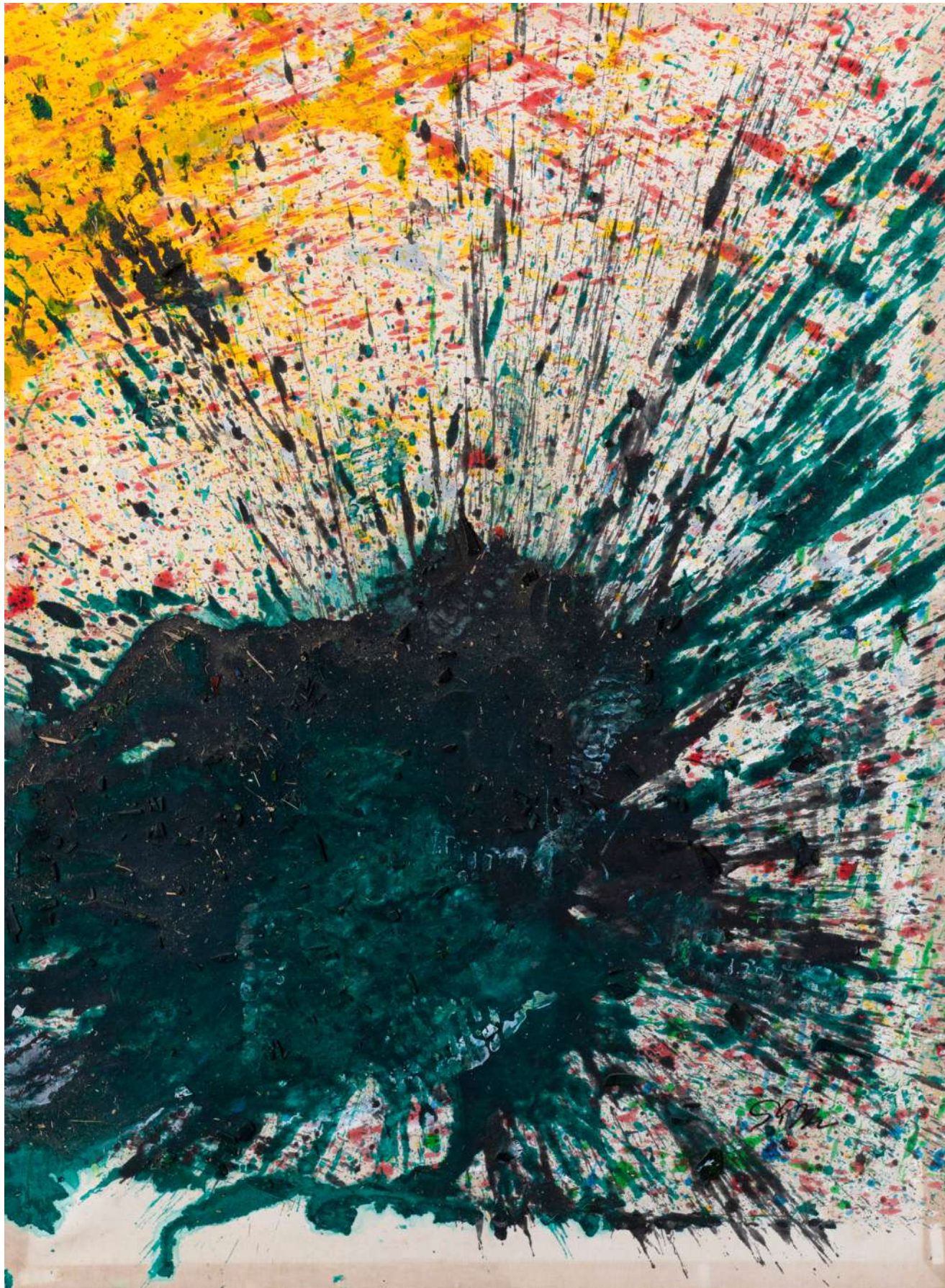
*Bottle Crash in Venice 23, 2007*  
Mixed media on paper applied on panel, 130 x 230 cm





*Punta Campanella 41*, 2008  
Mixed media on canvas, 199 x 247 cm





*Punta Campanella 47, 2008*  
Mixed media on canvas, 134 x 98 cm



*Palazzo Ducale 27, Genova, 2008*  
Mixed media on canvas, 171.5 x 129.5 cm





*Uzumaki No Sakuhin*, 2010  
Mixed media on canvas, 90 x 90 cm





**Shozo Shimamoto** (1928 – 2013, Japan) was one of the founders of the Gutai group, the first radical post-war artistic group in Japan. Shimamoto, with Jiro Yoshihara, Akira Kanayama, Saburo Murakami and Kazuo Shiraga, challenged the boundaries of traditional artistic practices while promoting the individual approaches of its members. The group aimed to investigate the reciprocal connection between matter and physical action. Gutai artists expressed the desire to be part of a new, liberal-minded Japan and strongly rejected representative art. They collaborated with other artistic groups based in Europe and America.

Three years after its creation in 1954, the group produced the Gutai Stage Exhibition: it was the first time a theatre stage was used as a living artistic space. During the performance, enriched by sounds, cranes and weapons, works were created by a shooting cannon, which Shimamoto himself manufactured. Artistic performances were themselves part of art exhibitions, and some of Shimamoto's works were purchased by the Centre Pompidou in Paris. In 1972, when the group split up, Shimamoto started developing an interest in Mail and Networking art. In the 2000s, his practice focussed on his distinctive technique, the 'Bottle crashes', visiting many landmark sites and buildings to perform actions which resulted in his iconic abstract paintings. In 1996 he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, and in 2007 he participated in the Venice Biennale. Shimamoto died in Osaka in 2013 at the age of 85.

### **Selected Collections**

Tate Modern, London; The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago; Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome; Walker Arts Centre, Minneapolis; Nara National Art Museum, Nara; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo; The Rachofsky Collection, Dallas.

### **Selected Recent Exhibitions**

CIAC Centro Italiano Arte Contemporanea, Foligno (2021); Fondazione Sant'Elia, Palermo (2018); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2013); Hauser and Wirth, New York (2012); Moderna Museet, Stockholm (2011); Jeu de Paume, Paris (1999); MOCA Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1998); National Art Center, Tokyo (2004); The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (1998); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (1997).



# ARTVISOR ALBERTO DI CASTRO

## SHOZO SHIMAMOTO

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7 - 31 May 2024 | Piazza di Spagna 5, Rome

Cover image: Shimamoto's live performance at the second Gutai Exhibition, Ohara Kaikan, Tokyo, October 1956  
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