

Text by Shozo Shimamoto

Chiyu Uemae

It has been more than ten years since I first met Uemae, and I still remember being overwhelmed by the extraordinary energy hidden inside that small man, barely five feet tall. Where does the vitality that wells up from his small body like a spring come from?

Back when he was showing work at the Niki Exhibition, he would get off the train on his way to work every morning to sketch. He always took the very first train and never once missed this daily routine. At the time, his life was far from easy. After working overtime, he would go home and paint late into the night. For most people, such a schedule would be unimaginable. Yet one day, even Uemae was forced to bring this record to an end. As he stepped onto the platform that morning, the train doors closed and it began to move. Meticulous as ever, he grabbed onto the guard's cabin at the rear, but before he could pull himself fully inside—with a rucksack full of paints and a heavy easel on his back—he struck a utility pole and lost consciousness. This same determination shone even more brightly after he joined Gutai.

Until then, he had been painting realistic works and was well regarded, but he boldly broke with that path and entered the demanding world of abstraction. Even while working overtime in a factory filled with gas and dust, he refused to paint pictures that would sell easily, choosing instead to pursue painting in its pure form. In the midst of a busy life, he developed—through astonishingly patient methods—his own distinctive Uemae-style pointillism, and continued painting with unwavering persistence.

While supporting his elderly mother, his wife, and three children, he also looked after friends, bought a piece of mountainside land and leveled it himself, and built a house of such original design that it might well become a local landmark in Maiko—complete with a studio. In what little spare time remained, he created these densely worked paintings. We sometimes wondered if he ever slept. His work came to be recognized by his mentor Jiro Yoshihara, by fellow members of Gutai, and by critics and art professionals both in Japan and abroad. He was recommended as a judge for the Modern Art Association, received awards on several occasions, and was invited to important exhibitions at home and overseas. His work was featured repeatedly in foreign art journals as well as in newspapers, magazines, and on television. Today, among young people in the Kobe area who aspire to paint, there is hardly anyone who does not know his name. From among the younger artists he has guided, promising talents have begun to emerge.

He is not a man of many words. This is a firm stance—he believes in letting his paintings

speak for themselves. The fact that many people at his workplace have no idea of his standing as an artist says much about his modest character.

Once, when a Gutai exhibition was held in Tokyo, the members got into a heated discussion about new art, and the debate began to go nowhere. Uemae, who had been listening quietly until then, suddenly broke the tension with an unmistakably human interruption — a brief, irreverent pffft. With that single moment, even the seasoned Gutai members found the conclusion to their debate. In today's art world, full of socializing and eloquent talk, Chiyu Uemae—who believes in action over words—is a rare and valuable presence.

Shozo Shimamoto

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