

Wahaha Gutai No. 3 — Chiyu Uemae

Shozo Shimamoto

A House Where Every Door Is Different

There is a man who built a house by himself on a mountain in Maiko. He is a leading member of the Gutai Art Group. For many years, he worked as a day laborer and factory worker while painting, but he desperately wanted a home of his own. At last, in 1953, he managed to buy a plot of land of about 330 square meters. He was thirty-three years old.

On Sundays, in his spare time, he went to the mountain to clear the land. What a bulldozer could have done in no time took him an entire day just to pull out a single tree root. It took seven years before he finally completed the house. (Fig. 1.)

Naturally, he had no financial leeway for construction. He went to secondhand shops and bought old doors and windows, then built the house to fit them.

All this time, he continued painting major works. After joining Gutai, he held a two-person exhibition in Tokyo with Tsutomu Hiroi, organized by Nobuya Abe, and exhibited in the *International Art of a New Era* exhibition, the Gutai New York exhibition, the Asahi Newcomers Exhibition, and others. At the *International Art of a New Era* exhibition, Michel Tapié was so impressed that he placed Uemae's work between large-scale works by Riopelle and Klein, nodding in approval.

Freed at last from living with his family of six in a single eight-tatami-mat room, he next set about building a large tin-roofed studio beside the house. Modeled after Jirō Yoshihara's studio, it was designed to hold paintings several meters wide, with a mezzanine at the back from which they could be viewed. However, one could not enter it directly from the house. To get in, one slid down from a window of the main house on a slide; to return, one climbed up by rope. That was how the house was finally "finished."

He then began building a storage space for his large works. Having just retired from his company job, he used his retirement pay to commission a reinforced concrete warehouse from a local contractor. The contractor, taking advantage of Uemae's trusting nature, dug a deep trench along the side of the house and then demanded an outrageous price increase. If



Fig. 1. In 1956, he purchased woodland on the Maiko hillside and spent three years clearing and leveling the land, working every Sunday.

it rained and the ground softened, the house might collapse. In the end, Uemae built the underground painting storage himself with help from friends.

This story is not just about an amateur building his own home. It also involved Uemae's own unique ideas for viewing paintings while lying down, drying and ventilating stored works, and many other innovations. There were entrances where one had to squeeze in sideways, doors of many unusual kinds lined up, and eventually the entrance to the house ended up at the back of the storage room. That was how the house was finally "finished."



Even If You Can't See Beneath the Paint, It Is Still There

Fig. 2. Work by Chiyu Uemae (1965)

Around 1958, after Michel Tapié visited Japan, the Gutai movement stepped onto the stage of the international art world and came to fill the pages of numerous art magazines. Particularly in the later years, some who were adept at riding the currents of the times joined in, and forms of self-promotion began to appear that resembled the rise of pop stars. However, I believe that Gutai's true strength was born from the opposite direction—and that is what endures.

Though there were differences in the scale of outward gestures, at its core Gutai shared a spirit that rejected easy acceptance and sought something directly connected to human beings themselves. Yet this spirit was often misunderstood.

Chiyu Uemae's work was like the building of his house. He applied paint in dots, layering them again and again. When yellow is placed over red, the lower color disappears and might seem wasted, yet he continued layering countless dots on top. Though the earlier colors can no longer be seen, the work possesses a completely different power from something done efficiently or superficially. For twenty years, he has continued this modest labor within the flashy world of Gutai—and he continues still. (Fig. 2.)

Among his unusual works are those made with matchsticks. The effect is the same, but he attached painted matchsticks one by one to the surface. One work required about 60 kilograms of matchsticks alone. Imagine the labor. As with carving the Maiko mountain, the work became so heavy that the plywood he used instead of canvas could not support it, so he reinforced the back with wood, creating a structure like intricate marquetry. That same year, during a typhoon, this enormous work—stored under the eaves of his solitary

mountain house—was repeatedly slammed against the walls, cracking them.

When he went to show paintings to Yoshihara Jirō, he always carried a 100-go canvas (about my own height) onto the train. Once, a station attendant scolded him and refused to let him board. Still, he waited patiently at the station until late at night for a less crowded train.

When he moved to his home in Tarumi, Kobe, he carried all his belongings himself after work.

Gutai Means “Pass”

In 1956, during a Gutai exhibition at the Ohara Hall in Tokyo, a heated debate about new art broke out at the lodging house. Yoshihara Jirō was not fond of theoretical debate and was a man of action, so those who leaned toward theory tended to drift away. That night it was Motonaga, Murakami, Shiraga, Ukita, Uemae, and myself. The atmosphere grew tense, and the argument seemed to reach its peak.

At that moment, Chiyu Uemae let out a small “pasu”—a soft, airy little fart.

It was so perfectly deflating that everyone instantly lost their tension and burst out laughing. Everyone loved this “pass,” and like a Zen riddle, the phrase “What is Gutai?” was answered: “Pass.” Even now, I believe that is true.

This spirit of silent action was Uemae’s creed and also the spirit of Gutai. Yet when one learns about his life before joining us, it becomes even more astonishing. For twenty years he has refused to shift toward what sells, continuing to pursue his own path despite hardship. Knowing his past, one can only feel deeper wonder and admiration.

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Originally published in Mishō, March 1974

Reprinted in Koritsu no Michi (Solitary Paths), 1995