

Wahaha Gutai No. 4 — Chiyu Uemae (continued)

Shozo Shimamoto

A Portrait Unlike Any Other in Gutai

I do not believe that avant-garde art is something “cool.” The Gutai movement, too, was awkward, ridiculous, and yet possessed a charm that could never be discarded. No matter how much effort and hardship were poured into it, the works did not sell rapidly, nor was this appeal easily conveyed to others. Rather than being appreciated, it often ended up being dismissed with a label of frivolity. As a result, many who entered this world quickly shifted toward directions that sold more easily or appeared more stylish. In other words, one might call it the hobby of hobbies.

Thus, when life became difficult, it was easy to be blown away at once. Yet here is a man who continued with Gutai precisely because life was difficult.



Singular Figure in Gutai

Mixing Ash into Rice

Chiyu Uemae was born in Kyoto in 1920. His father died when he was one year old, and because his adoptive father was a charcoal burner, he was raised in the mountains. At age four, he suffered an ear illness that left him hard of hearing for the rest of his life. At six, his mother fell ill and entered the Tenrikyō religious order. During this time, the great Okutango earthquake struck, and just before their house collapsed, a ninety-year-old shaman woman carried him out, saving him miraculously.

Because his adoptive father was Korean, he was treated as a Korean child. Thereafter he moved repeatedly from one household to another—first the Hori family, then the Yamashita family, then another Hori household, and later the household of Nagahama Chiyozo. Later, when his mother left on a Shikoku pilgrimage with the ascetic Tani Ichizō, he was entrusted to the head priest Tani Sonin of Busshinji Temple. There, he was subjected to harsh discipline: struck on the head with a long pipe by the priest and his wife, made to carry a baby on his back, and thrown out into the dark. It was a sullen and oppressed life.

At eleven, he went to live with his mother and Ichizō Tani. Under Ichizō's religious practices, he recited sutras before a large household altar amid the sounds of conch shells and ritual staffs, was doused with cold water in winter, forced to eat rice mixed with incense ash, and had a sacred sword hurled at him. He fled barefoot through the town of Naka-Maizuru,

crossed mountain paths, and stood alone by the sea, gazing at the dark horizon in tears. At thirteen, he became an apprentice at a Kyōzome Shikkaiten (a Kyoto dye-finishing shop), working until late at night, eventually developing severe beriberi. He later moved from one workplace to another—Ōizumi Banner Dye Shop, Nishiyama Washing and Re-dyeing Shop, Fukuiya Cleaning Shop, Sugino Washing and Re-dyeing Shop, Ōsakaya Washing and Re-dyeing Shop. Around this time, he became interested in copying paintings and portraiture, and studied Southern-style painting through correspondence lessons by Suiun Komuro. At eighteen, after drinking too much at a New Year's party, he collapsed on the street vomiting blood. A doctor declared he had only a day to live and handed him over to crematorium workers. The following day, he regained consciousness at the crematorium, astonishing everyone. That year he changed jobs to become a stevedore. Each morning he was kicked awake in leather shoes, dragging his exhausted body to work. When he asked his foreman to return a gold watch he had lent him, he was beaten instead. That same year he rampaged through a nearby bar called "Venus," smashing the interior and being taken to the police station.

A Love Letter Written in Blood

At twenty-four, he worked as a messenger at the Maizuru Maritime Accounting Department. With no money, he often skipped lunch. A beautiful woman named Umeyo Okada sat beside him, the envy of everyone. Enchanted by her, he wrote a love letter in his own blood and proposed marriage, but she was frightened and rejected him.

At twenty-seven, he made his first submission to the Niki Exhibition, studied under Kuroda Jutaro, and began painting in earnest.

At twenty-nine, he married a nurse from Ohta Hospital in Miyazu City, but they lived separately as she had to care for her mother.

At thirty, he underwent nasal surgery without anesthesia and fainted from cerebral anemia. Around this time, he boarded the first train each morning, got off at an intermediate station to paint, then rushed to work and labored late into the night. On May 10 the following year, while trying to board the first train, he clung to the door after it closed, struck a utility pole, fell, and suffered fractures to his jaw and collarbone.

He worked at Kawasaki Heavy Industries, operating a crane. It was dangerous, physically demanding work at great heights, yet he continued to paint.

Later he became a demolition worker. Though shunned by others, he chose this job himself. Flying debris pierced his eyes, and vibrations from the air hammer caused his hands to tremble. While welding, a thinner explosion burned his face.

He continued creating art between harsh jobs. Recently, after parting from me in Osaka, he

missed his train and went as far as Akashi. On the way back, he missed his stop again. Finally reaching his station, he rode home on an unlit motorcycle, crashed on a dark curve, and severely injured his left leg. He later developed gastritis and had to recuperate while receiving intravenous drips.

If one were to write it all down, there would be no end. Amid such a life, he single-handedly cleared a mountainside, built a house and an atelier, and continued to pursue a pure form of painting. In 1953 he knocked on the door of Jiro Yoshihara, and from 1954, after joining the Gutai movement, he devoted himself entirely to this path.

As mentioned in the previous issue, his work gradually began to receive high praise. In Japan as well, artists such as Nobuya Abe and Tsutomu Hiroi, along with several galleries, took notice, and opportunities arose for his paintings to sell more widely.

However, Yoshihara advised him to turn those offers down, and once again he chose a severe path — one that continues even now, though his creative energy has only grown stronger. His work lacks the flamboyant gestures often associated with Gutai, such as performance or action painting driven by vigorous bodily movement. In that sense, he is a quiet presence. Yet the way he lives — wearing a wristwatch with only a minute hand and remaining utterly unconcerned with appearances — is the greatest performance of all.

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Work created by layering paint on a wooden board (1972)

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