

Masaaki Yamada (1929-2010)

Born in Tokyo in 1929, Masaaki Yamada began his artistic career amidst the chaos of postwar Japan. Being a self-taught artist, his works were first publicly exhibited in February 1949, at the first Japan Independent Exhibition. He held annual solo exhibitions in Tokyo from 1969-1997, which were noted for their influence and brought him artistic recognition. His works were also displayed at the 'The 1960's: A Decade of Change in Contemporary Japanese Art' at The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo and Kyoto in 1981, which increased his fame, and his paintings were shown at a number of exhibitions both at home and abroad, including the Biennale de São Paulo held in 1987.

Yamada's large body of work is divided into three periods: *Still-Life*, *Work*, and *Color*. Fascinated by the symbolism of still life as vanitas representing ephemerality and death, he began his first series: *Still-Life* (1948-55). In this series, Yamada depicted objects such as vessels and fruits in a style influenced by Giorgio Morandi and Paul Cézanne, instilling in him a focus on shape and flatness that would define his entire career. He gradually disassembled the forms into its basic components of lines, shapes and colors, which developed into his second and most influential period: *Work* (1956-95).

Yamada's *Work* series consists of abstract paintings using motifs such as stripes, crosses and grids. These paintings, particularly the striped ones, seem mechanical and flawless at first sight. However, on close inspection, the colored bands show subtle variations in texture and brushstrokes, sometime deliberately, at other times accidentally, unveiling a world of sensitivity within the canvas. In spite of the rich palette used within a single work, the colors do not interfere with one another, giving a sense of evenness to the canvas that anticipated his final period: *Color* (1997-2010). Yamada undertook his last series in constant pursuit of the flatness of the painting, filling the entire plane with a single shade of color.

Yamada's philosophical approach to artmaking, which centered on an internal logic based on form and color, challenged the fundamentally visual experience of painting. He devoted his life to painting for 50 years, and some 5,000 pieces he created during his lifetime are recently being re-evaluated for their unique position in Japanese modern art. In the years following his death in 2010, his fame continued to increase, and his first large-scale retrospective was held in 2016 at The National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo and Kyoto.

Biography

- 1929 Born in Tokyo
- 1945 His home in Yodobashi, Tokyo, burns down in an air raid
Experiences two other air raids in Tanashi and Hachioji
- 1950 Graduates from Tokyo Metropolitan College of Industrial Technology
Joins Jiyu Bijutsuka Kyokai (Free Artists Association)
- 1953 Studies painting under Saburo Hasegawa
- 1964 Establish his atelier in Kamikitazawa, Tokyo
- 1970 Establish his atelier in Yoyogiuehara, Tokyo
- 1973 Sojourn in London
Returns to Japan
- 1982 Establishes his atelier in Kokubunji, Tokyo
- 2010 Dies from bile duct cancer

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1958 First solo exhibition at Kyobunkan Gallery, Tokyo
- 1962 Solo exhibition in Yoseido Gallery, Tokyo
- 1964 Solo exhibition Nantenshi Gallery, Tokyo
- 1965 Solo exhibition in Tsubaki-Kindai Gallery, Tokyo
- 1966 *1966 Summer*, Muramatsu Gallery, Tokyo
- 1978 *Masaaki Yamada 1957-1978*, Koh Gallery, Tokyo
- 1979 *Late '60s paintings*, Satani Gallery, Tokyo
- 1980 *Oil pastels new works*, Satani Gallery, Tokyo
- 1981 *Early '60s paintings*, Satani Gallery, Tokyo
- 1982 *Yamada Masaaki 1950-1980*, Satani Gallery
- 1983 *Recent works by Masaaki Yamada*, Satani Gallery, Tokyo
- 1984 Solo exhibition, Galerie Denise René, Paris
- 1985 *Mid '60s Monochrome Period*, Satani Gallery, Tokyo
- 1986 *Masaaki Yamada New Works Exhibition 1985-86*, Satani Gallery, Tokyo
- 1987 *Works on Paper 1950-67*, Satani Gallery, Tokyo
- 1988 *Masaaki Yamada 1986-87*, Satani Gallery, Tokyo
- 1989 *Early '70s paintings*, Satani Gallery, Tokyo
- 1990 *New Works 1989-1990*, Satani Gallery, Tokyo
- 2005 *The Paintings of Masaaki Yamada from Still Life to Work to Color*, Fuchu Art Museum, Tokyo
- 2016 *Endless: The paintings of Yamada Masaaki*, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo;
The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto
- 2017 *Form on the Borderline*, Sakurado Fine Arts, Tokyo

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1949 1st Japan Independent Exhibition
- 1952 4th Japan Independent Exhibition
- 16th Jiyu Bijutsu Exhibition
- 1963 Jewish Center Hall, Los Angeles, CA
- 1974 *Contemporary Japanese Art: Tradition and Present*, Kunstmuseum, Düsseldorf
- 1981 *The 1960s—A Decade of Change in Contemporary Japanese Art*, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo; The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto
- 1985 *Japanese Contemporary Paintings*, Museum of Modern Art, New Delhi
- 1987 19th São Paulo Biennale
- 1994 *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky*, Yokohama Museum of Art, Yokohama;
Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY; San Francisco Museum of Modern Arts, San Francisco, CA; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA
- 2000 *Japanese Art in the 20th Century*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo

Publications

- 1990 *Works Yamada Masaaki*, Japan, Bijutsu Shuppansha
- 2016 *Endless: The paintings of Yamada Masaaki*, Japan, Bijutsu Shuppansha
A Contract with Paintings, Japan, Suisei Bunko