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Samadmasa Motonaga and Etsuko Nakatsuji

Afterimage of Memory

BLUM Tokyo

February 14–April 4, 2025

Opening Reception: Friday, February 14, 5–7pm

February 5, 2025, Tokyo—BLUM is pleased to announce the representation of the estate of Sadamasa Motonaga and the artist Etsuko Nakatsuji coinciding with their two-person exhibition, *Afterimage of Memory*, at BLUM Tokyo opening Friday, February 14. Solo exhibitions for the artists will follow in Los Angeles and New York.

Partnered from 1960 until Motonaga's passing in 2011, husband and wife pair Motonaga and Nakatsuji have jointly and individually made strides in the advancement of the postwar Japanese avant-garde practices for the better part of a century. A long-revered original member of the 1950s Gutai group, Motonaga is best known for his unique ability to express life's pathos through the playful tenor of his vibrantly colored paintings, his experimentation with found materials, and his work on illustrated children's books. Though Nakatsuji studied art, for much of her adult life she supported her family as a graphic designer in the advertising department at Hanshin Department Store to allow space in their home for her husband's practice. She did, however, consistently maintain an artistic practice of painting and making fabric *objets* called *poco-pin*. While both artists' painting practices are primarily abstract, each engages human perception and the body in a profound manner. Motonaga's later work, in its graphic orientation, possesses strong resonances with searching for an "ambivalent illusion of vision," a theme that Nakatsuji also grappled with for decades.

In 1957, Nakatsuji attended classes at Nishinomiya Art School, studying under Suda Kokuta and Waichi Tsutaka. It was through school that Nakatsuji met Motonaga who was already a member of Gutai, and Nakatsuji became inspired by the ideas of the group's leader, Jiro Yoshihara. "Do something no one has ever done before," Yoshihara famously said about artmaking. In 1960, Motonaga and Nakatsuji moved in together. Their first son was born two years later.

Having created his well-known installation *Work (Water)* (1956), which was featured in the *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition* at Ashiya Park in 1956, Motonaga's career was already taking off when he met Nakatsuji in 1957. In 1962, with the opening of the Gutai Pinacotheca, a gallery exhibiting work by Gutai artists, the Gutai movement gained an international presence with global artists and critics such as John Cage, Clement Greenberg, Isamu Noguchi, Yoko Ono, and many more. At a time when abstraction was thought to have taken painting to its logical conclusion, Gutai's pioneering installations and performative experimentations onto the canvas were unprecedented, unafraid of violating sacred boundaries. Motonaga's own multidisciplinary oeuvre benefited from this with features in *Assemblages*

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Environments and Happenings by Allan Kaprow in 1966 and museum exhibitions such as *The New Japanese Painting and Sculpture* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York also in 1966.

While working as a designer full-time, Nakatsuji began sewing objects from leftover bedspread fabric. The result were *objets* in human-like shapes, and by hanging them from the ceiling of their apartment, she created the first *poco-pin*. Nakatsuji's work was discovered by Takashi Yamamoto of Tokyo Gallery while he was visiting Motonaga. Nakatsuji had her first-ever exhibition at Tokyo Gallery in 1963, comprised of an installation of *poco-pins*. It was well received, grounding and defining the artist's creative position for years to come. The figures from this exhibition evoke the immersive Surrealist installations of the 1920s that defy childish charm and, instead, possess an organic mysticism that lies between the threshold of life and afterlife. Nakatsuji notes, "I'm always thinking about objects that reflect someone who is filled with a strange and interesting quality. . . One's form, color, line, and shape are tied to the changes in one's brightness, humor, and peaceful image."

In Nakatsuji's later series, when she returned to painting, the artist echoes and expands upon the investigations behind her early *poco-pins*. Her 1983 group exhibition at Sogetsu, *Toward Space*, comprised an installation of suspended cloth with eyes paired with actual geta sandals, exuding psychological symbolism and corporeality. The work *Running Works 3 x 6 #1* (1990) deals with exactly this—simple marks to indicate eyes, a single camouflaged rope along the painted red surface, and the geta sandals on the floor below the plywood, unified as effective signals of personification, together projecting the mind and body. Likewise, Nakatsuji's *[Aizu]—eyes—* and *hitogata* (human form) series convey part objects and geometric silhouettes with bold, exuberantly winding lines that form a human image, and unmistakable cartoonish legs that appear to walk without a torso atop them. Nakatsuji's signature eyes accompany these, at times possessing a halo-like glow.

Motonaga's *Red Circle and Circle* (1992) depicts two bulbous circles perched atop a wash of the artist's distinctive, abstract billows of vivid paint—bridging the artist's early work in poured abstractions that he made as a member of Gutai with the graphic style of his later career. Comparing Motonaga's early work with his later periods, the viewer will note a transition from abstraction alongside installation work, into using more fluorescent colors and gradients after his residency in New York from 1966-1967, to his late works which often feature large, hard-edge, color-gradated shapes and forms. *Yellow Veil and Group of Shapes* (1993), for instance, includes many personified shapes with distinctive portions for a body with limbs beneath it to hint at that which is alive.

While Gutai was a major presence through Motonaga's involvement, it was Nakatsuji's graphic design practice including her own illustrated books and collaborations with Motonaga as a producer of illustrated children's books, that ultimately integrated their styles. With Motonaga's evolution into the representational and Nakatsuji's return to painting, the two produced undeniably resonant work around the turn of the century. As Nakatsuji said, "As I had been imprinted with the spirit of Gutai, it was impossible for me not to be aware of Sadamasa Motonaga. Although each of us worked in different formats, our sense of values did not differ significantly."

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Sadamasa Motonaga (b. 1922, Mie Prefecture, Japan; d. 2011, Takarazuka, Japan) was a key figure of the Gutai Art Association (1955–71), renowned for its radical contributions to performance, painting, and sculpture. Rejecting the somber tone of postwar existentialism, Motonaga embraced a playful, vibrant approach, producing works that fused tradition with innovation. Motonaga's practice evolved from early experiments with cartoon-like forms to his groundbreaking *Water Sculptures*, which used vinyl bags filled with colored water to create dynamic installations. By 1957, he began exploring abstraction, using poured and dripped pigments in fluid, luminous compositions that defined a new relationship between artist and materials in global modernism. In the late 1960s and 1970s, particularly after a residency in New York from 1966 to 1967, his style incorporated airbrush techniques, graffiti-like forms, and spray paint, blending postwar avant-garde aesthetics with contemporary sensibilities. In addition to his visual art, Motonaga authored beloved children's books, cementing his legacy as an artist whose creativity transcended disciplines and generations.

Motonaga's work has been the subject of numerous retrospectives, including at the Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX (2015); Mie Prefectural Museum of Art, Tsu, Japan (1990 and 2009); Nagano Prefectural Shinano Art Museum, Nagano, Japan (2005); Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, Hiroshima, Japan (2003); and the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art, Kobe, Japan (1998). His work is represented in public collections worldwide, including the Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX; Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates; The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo; The National Museum of Art, Osaka; Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, Hiroshima, Japan; Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art, Kobe, Japan; Mie Prefectural Museum of Art, Tsu, Japan; Museu de Arte do Rio, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan; Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; Pinault Collection, Paris, France; The Art Institute, Chicago; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT; among many others.

Etsuko Nakatsuji (b. 1937, Takaishi, Osaka) began her career working in graphic design while simultaneously pursuing her passion for art. In the early 1960s, she gained recognition for her unique human-shaped forms, which became a recurring motif in her work. Her creations, often playful yet peculiar, have appeared in various mediums, including paintings, sculptures, and illustrations. These works invite viewers to reflect on the essence of humanity and the body as a functional vessel. At the same time, they evoke the limitless nature of human consciousness, suggesting a boundless capacity that transcends physical form.

Nakatsuji's work has been the subject of numerous retrospectives, including at BB Plaza Museum, Hyogo, Japan (2022); Takarazuka Arts Center, Hyogo, Japan (2021); Hyogo Guest House Prefectural Government Museum, Hyogo, Japan (2017); Otani Memorial Art Museum, Nishinomiya, Japan (2000); and Itami City Museum of Art, Hyogo, Japan (2002). Her work is represented in the permanent collections of the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art, Kobe, Japan; Hyogo Guest House Prefectural Government Museum, Hyogo, Japan; Osaka Contemporary Art Center, Osaka, Japan; Otani Memorial Art Museum, Nishinomiya City, Japan; Toyama Prefectural Museum of Art and Design, Toyama, Japan; among others.

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About BLUM

BLUM represents more than sixty artists and estates from seventeen countries worldwide, nurturing a diverse roster of artists at all stages of their practices with a range of global perspectives. Originally opened as Blum & Poe in Santa Monica in 1994, the gallery has been a pioneer in its early commitment to Los Angeles as an international arts capital.

The gallery has been acclaimed for its groundbreaking work in championing international artists of postwar and contemporary movements, such as CoBrA, Dansaekhwa, Mono-ha, and Superflat, and for organizing museum-caliber solo presentations and historical survey exhibitions across its spaces in Los Angeles, Tokyo, and New York. Often partnering with celebrated curators and scholars such as Cecilia Alemani, Alison M. Gingeras, Sofia Gotti, Joan Kee, and Mika Yoshitake, the gallery has produced large-scale exhibitions focusing on the Japanese Mono-ha school (2012); the Korean Dansaekhwa monochrome painters (2014); the European postwar movement CoBrA (2015); Japanese art of the 1980s and 1990s (2019); a rereading of Brazilian Modernism (2019); a revisionist take on the 1959 MoMA exhibition, *New Images of Man* (2020); and a survey of portraiture through a democratic and humanist lens (2023); among others.

BLUM's wide-reaching program includes exhibitions, lectures, performance series, screenings, video series, and an annual art book fair at its base in Los Angeles. BLUM Books, the gallery's publishing division, democratically circulates its program through original scholarship and accessible media ranging from academic monographs, audio series, magazines, to artists' books.

Across the three global locations, BLUM prioritizes environmental and community stewardship in all operations. In 2015, it was certified as an Arts:Earth Partnership (AEP) green art gallery in Los Angeles and consequently became one of the first green certified galleries in the United States. The gallery is also a member of the Gallery Climate Coalition, which works to facilitate a more sustainable commercial art world and reduce the industry's collective carbon footprint. BLUM is committed to fostering inclusive and equitable communities both in its physical and online spaces and believes that everybody should have equal access to creating and engaging with contemporary art.

Press Inquiries

Nicoletta Beyer
Communications and Editorial Director, New York
nicoletta@blum-gallery.com

Christie Hayden
Communications and Social Media Editor, Los Angeles
christie@blum-gallery.com