

**SIMON
LEE**

RYUJI TANAKA

**23 June – 25 August 2017
Simon Lee Gallery, London**

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23 JUNE – 25 AUGUST 2017

PRIVATE VIEW: THURSDAY, 22 JUNE, 6 – 8 PM

Simon Lee Gallery is proud to present a concise survey exhibition of paintings by Japanese artist Ryuji Tanaka, his first posthumous solo presentation in the UK. A recognised member of two avant-garde groups that are synonymous with post-war Japanese art: the Pan-real Art Association and Gutai Art Association, Tanaka's legacy lies in his desire to evolve a unique artistic style that is at once experimental, and yet deeply rooted in the traditional Japanese-style painting - *nihon-ga*.

Spanning work made between the 1960s and 1990s, this survey traces the evolution of Tanaka's style from his dark and intense early paintings, which demonstrate abstract experiments with *nihon-ga* materials, to the refinement of his later works that display a fresh and profound lyricism through the use of colour.

Like many artists of the time, Tanaka studied *nihon-ga* painting at the Kyoto Municipal School of Painting where he became deeply committed to traditional materials: mineral pigments, *sumi* (Chinese ink) made from soot mixed with glue, *washi* (Japanese paper) and silk. Upon graduating in 1948, Tanaka together with a number of friends who also majored in *nihon-ga*, founded the avant-garde group Pan-real. The group was established to challenge and revolutionise the conservative *nihon-ga*, searching for freer structures and new forms of expression. While Tanaka's involvement with Pan-real was short-lived, it reveals the ways in which the artist drew from and challenged the conventions of his training to develop a new method of painting:

'With nihon-ga materials like natural mineral pigments and sumi ink, I am constantly exploring the potential of the contemporary in the traditional.'

In the 1960s, Tanaka entered a highly productive period of his art, submitting artwork to numerous exhibitions that focused primarily on *nihon-ga* painting. In early works, such as *Sei (3)* and *Sei (6)* (1962), he evolved a unique style that consisted of large heaps of natural pigments placed in the centre of dark canvases. At variance with standard *nihon-ga* practices, Tanaka expanded the natural pigments by adding pebbles, powder and adhesive, and used a feather to blur the hard edges of the colour plane, increasing the intensity and spatial depth of his paintings. Tanaka continued to pursue the style he developed during this period for the rest of his life.

The year 1963 marked a turning point in Tanaka's career. His friendship with renowned Gutai artist Kazuo Shiraga grew closer and upon invitation, Tanaka began participating in Gutai meetings eventually leading to official membership in 1965. Tanaka easily related to the ideologies of Gutai art: authenticity, individualism, and freedom of expression. Conceived at this critical moment, the large diptych *Sei (12)* (1963) demonstrates a clear departure from the darker hues of earlier works. In this work, the scale, abstract gestures, and use of vibrant colour illustrate the influence of Gutai art on Tanaka's work during this period.

Following his chapter with Gutai, the artist's work from the 1970s and 1990s shifted from a dark, earthy and intense palette to cool, airy and brighter tones. Natural mineral pigments thinly coat the entire picture plane, augmented by organic forms articulated with spray-like gestures. Multiple fields of colour are introduced, and often minute scratches agitate the surface. Throughout his career, Tanaka continually sought to address the challenges he felt faced a Japanese and nihon-ga painter during this period, and these later works imbue a poetic sense of personal and creative resolve.

Ryuji Tanaka was born in Higashi Futami, Hyogo Prefecture, Japan in 1927 and received both his BFA and postgraduate diploma from Kyoto Municipal School of Painting, Kyoto, Japan. He was a founding member of the Pan-real Art Association in 1949 and later joined the Gutai Art Association between 1965 and 1967. He has been the recipient of numerous awards including the Kobe City Cultural Contribution Award, Kobe, Japan (1997). Significant solo exhibitions include *Ryuji Tanaka*, Axel Vervoordt Gallery, Antwerp, Belgium and Hong Kong (2016); *Painting/Passion and Sharpness, Ryuji Tanaka Exhibition*, JR Osaka Service Gallery, Osaka, Japan (2002); *Ryuji Tanaka Exhibition*, Hyogo Prefectural Citizens Hall Special Gallery, Kobe, Japan (1991) and *TANAKA RYU peinture - suibokuga*, Espace Japon, Paris, France (1987). Major group exhibitions include *12th nihon-ga Exhibition*, Himeji Citizen Gallery, Himeji, Japan (2014); *Ryuji Tanaka and Yoshiko Kamei: Art as an Interior*, Kansai Electric Power Kobe Branch Elle Galley Noppo, Kobe, Japan (2003) and *Gutai III: 1965-1972*, Ashiya City Museum of Art & History, Ashiya, Japan (1993). His work is held in major private and public collections including Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art, Kobe, Japan; Ashiya City Museum of Art and History, Ashiya, Japan; Osaka City Museum of Modern Art, Osaka, Japan and Tate, London, UK.

This exhibition is presented in collaboration with the Estate of Ryuji Tanaka and Axel Vervoordt Gallery.

Image: Ryuji Tanaka, Untitled, 1962-66, Mineral pigments and mixed media on canvas, 195 x 135 cm (76 3/4 x 53 1/8 in.).