



SAORI (MADOKORO) AKUTAGAWA

CENTENARIA

February 24 – April 20, 2024

6917 Melrose Ave. Los Angeles, CA 90038

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Nonaka-Hill is pleased to present Saori (Madokoro) Akutagawa (1924 – 1966), a Centennial celebration of the artist's birth, marking her first solo exhibition in the United States, spanning an extensive and multi-faceted career from 1955 - 1966. The exhibition opens February 24th and will be on view through April 20, 2024. An opening reception will be held for the artist on Saturday, February 24, from 4-8 pm.



Trained in the arts, initially in music and vocals, in post-war Tokyo, Saori (Madokoro) Akutagawa turned her focus to painting, drawing and batik practices in the early 1950s. Making her first professional appearance as an artist in 1954 at the 6th Japan Independent Exhibition; a year later Akutagawa was feted with the newcomer award at Nika Association and effectively launched publicly, a rare and rapid rise for a woman even in burgeoning egalitarian post-war Japan. 1945 – 1955 saw radical and broad changes not just for women overall, but also for aspiring artists, as educational opportunities improved and non-membership, non-juried exhibitions were initiated by flourishing media conglomerates who sponsored and reviewed these presentations. Akutagawa was singled out among both critics and influential artists - Shuzo Takiguchi, Taro Okamoto, Art Life Magazine among others - throughout her career, and was the subject of several posthumous exhibitions and articles in Japan, upon her untimely death in 1966.

I had a really good dream. It was New Year's. There was a ship about to set sail from a port. I was on board. My heart was bouncing up and down, burning with hope.

February 1954

Social, political and economic shifts in Japan during Akutagawa's tenure as an artist made for dramatic effect on women (who received the right to vote in 1947) and paved the way for this married, mother of two, to forge an independent orbit that proved dynamic amongst those of her contemporaries. Akutagawa travelled extensively with her composer husband early in their marriage, even venturing to off-limits Russia, where she would surely have witnessed first-hand the state-sponsored social realist activities of her artist peers. In 1955, The Mexican Art Exhibition at Tokyo National Museum generated mounting interest among artists and the public alike, and initiated what was referred to as "Mexico Boom" for the illustrious political and nationalist muralists Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco, yet it was Rufino Tamayo who became especially influential on Akutagawa. Rufino and Akutagawa shared a keen interest in European modernist models as formed by Cubism, Dada and Surrealism and both drew liberally on their own country's folklore and myth, historic symbolism and iconography. While Akutagawa trained in batik practice with Michikata Noguchi, the impact of Tamayo - now seen in person, and studied eagerly in publications - cemented a visual language dense with demonstrative graphic gestures and a fierce palette coupled with a commitment to traditional craft and experimental, unconventional techniques. Akutagawa's international dialogue had begun in earnest at the studio.

I don't care about technique. What matters more is the thing that breaks the rules and floods the image. Whatever happens, I'm going to make my personality come alive on the canvas. There's no need to try to make something complete. I want it to be fierce. Intense. I want it to burn!

April 1954

In 1959 Akutagawa (who had separated from her husband and children) arrived in Los Angeles and enrolled in graphic design classes at Art Center (1956 saw the External Trade Recovery Organization supporting Japanese students at Art Center). What would the artist have encountered upon arrival? Would Akutagawa have visited Virginia Dwan gallery in Westwood before it moved east to New York? Could she have been curious about Ferus Gallery with its roster of pre-pop artists who rejected the drama and inner reach of Abstract Expressionism to explore more conceptual, performative interests? She traveled to New York the following year and studied oil painting at the Art Students League with Will Barnet, participating (under her maiden name Saori Yamada) in the 14th Women Artist Association Japan-U.S. Exchange Exhibition at Riverside Museum with Yuki Katsura, Takaei Murao, and Yayoi Kusama. Enthused by this new chapter, Akutagawa (as she was still known, despite remarrying architect Yukio Madokoro – a collaborator of Isamu Noguchi) now embraced abstract oil painting, reducing her biomorphic narratives into increasingly geometric compositions, using a minimal palette reminiscent of Russian Constructivist interests from a decade earlier and curiously in step with the movements from a former influential teacher (and champion of Mono-ha students) Yoshishige Saitō. In 1962 Akutagawa returned to Japan where she continued to work and exhibit this new body of work extensively until her death four years later.

What is art, I wonder? Why do I draw and paint? Sometimes questions like these overtake me.

November 1953

The exhibition at Nonaka-Hill features several of the artist's signature vivid drawings, late painting and unique dyed linens spanning the decade Akutagawa devoted herself to exercising, exhibiting and traveling as an artist. Recognized initially for her "Woman" series, it is curious to consider if, as in Rufino and Picasso, Akutagawa was paying attention to the 1950's notoriety Willem de Kooning was earning for on the same subject. Akutagawa's emotive, active, radically rendered women – conceptual, characterized – exude a profound insight that moves beyond per scripted formalism. The same can be said of her *Kojiki* (Japanese ancient chronicle) animated figures in landscapes and later minimalist abstractions. The late paintings to which she was firmly committed, present silhouettes that strain together to generate a tension of push-pull, an active figure ground exchange that aligns more demonstratively with the time-based actions of her contemporaries Yoko Ono, Yayoi Kusama and Atsuko Tanaka.

Public Collections

Itabashi Art Museum
Kariya City Art Museum
M+ Hong Kong
Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo
Nagoya City Art Museum
National Museum of Modern Art Tokyo
Setagaya Art Museum
Takamatsu Art Museum
Taro Okamoto Museum of Art Kawasaki
Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts
Toyohashi City Museum of Art and History
Yokosuka Museum of Art

Nonaka-Hill is indebted to the collaboration of the artist's family in realizing this exhibition.