

Born again with a new Language

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By Robert Reed

An award-winning artist disappears into the mountains and three years later, reemerges from his self-imposed seclusion with a cache of canvases to show the world. The scenario behind Kuniichi Shima's large-scale exhibition on view this weekend at three locations in Tamagawa, Setagaya Ward, Tokyo, conjures up visions of Gauguin's return from Tahiti or, perhaps more aptly, the Oriental "sennin," the mountain. recluse who seeks perfection of the soul in solitary meditations.

Analogies aside, what awaits visitors to Shima's exhibition is an important and fundamental experience in abstract painting on a scale rarely seen with most artists short of a full-scale retrospective.

More than six years in the making, this exhibition also marks the debut of one of Japan's leading contemporary artists of the '70s and '80s as a painter.

Artist reborn as painter? Certainly it seems an odd progression, but then Shima is the product of an exceptional era.

In the '70s, Shima's installations, body art, prints, videos and sundry constrictions won prizes at major international art biennale from Tokyo to Sao Paulo. Like so many artists of the day, he was constantly on the move, constantly inventing-collaborating in performances with Butoh artist Min Tanaka in Paris, pioneering methods of mechanically executed printmaking in New York.

"I guess I really believed the canon of the '70s, that media is message," admits Shima. "But now I know nothing of lasting value is created in that way." At 60, Shima has found his life work, the work that he hopes will create something worth leaving behind as his legacy. It is pure abstract painting executed in a series which he titles "**Birth of Language.**"

Like music, it is composition in its most essential, intuitive form. "As the neurons fire, the steady pumping of the blood creates rhythm and the hormones work their subtle ways, the unique entity residing in these organs creates in my imagination a progression of yellows, reds, blues, all flowing out in uninhibited metamorphosis" the artist writes.

All the paintings of this series-now totaling 152 works in the same 1.9 x 1.3 meter canvas size are composed by the same process that begins with a charcoal drawing, followed by studies in watercolor and oil paint on smaller canvases before the final large canvas.

Nineteen of these large finished works will hang in Arena Hall of Tamagawa

Takashimaya Shopping Center's West Wing until Sunday. The selected paintings, which range from No. 48 painted in 1992 in Tokyo before the artist's move to Nagano Prefect, to No. 152 finished just last month, offer a rich symphony of moods and rhythms, as well as a glimpse of the artist's stylistic development over the last four years. Three more canvases will hang on the Art Wall in the atrium of the Center's South Wing until next April, and eight of the smaller canvases will be on display at the nearby Gallery Earth Vision until May 28.

Asked how long this series will continue, Shima replies with a quiet smile, "For life, I hope." Clearly he has found a creative process that, in the artist's own words, "is the same as life itself."

The day after the show's Tuesday opening the painter was back on his mountain in Nagano.

For more information, call the shopping center at (03) 3709-2222 or Gallery Earth Vision at (03) 3707- 2654.