

PRESS RELEASE

MASAAKI YAMADA

Works from the 60s to the 80s

7 August – 6 September 2021

Stephane Simoens is delighted to present the first solo exhibition by Masaaki Yamada (1930-2010) in Belgium. This exhibition introduces a selection of works that focus specifically on his “*Work*” series from the 1960s to the 1980s – a series of ritualistic and meditative paintings that are considered the essential core of his oeuvre.

Masaaki Yamada (1929-2010) began his artistic career amidst the chaos and conflicts of post-war Japan, forcing him into a close fusion with painting in which he sought meaning and direction, with a sustained and introverted approach.

To follow the development of Yamada’s practice, it is possible to sort his works into the aforementioned three-tiered periods beginning with the “*Still Life*” series (1948-1955) that the artist himself referred to as having “been drawn from memory;” his “*Work*” series (1956-1995) consisting of stripes which then evolved into crosses, and grids; and finally the “*Color*” series (1997-2001) in which entire image planes are filled with one single shade of color.

“*Work*” — which began with abstracted deconstructions of Yamada’s earlier still life formats — eventually became solely composed of painted stripes. Stripes, like veins, that began to pulsate with a sense of new purity, a new sense of becoming. Indeed, these colored stripes are expressions that embody the concepts of “all-colors,” “the equivalence of colors,” and “totality” as cited in the artist’s own extensive collection of production notes written from 1949 to 1972. Rather than claiming their own individual presence, the colored lines create a mutual and fundamental sense of balance and harmony and, by painting them repeatedly in parallel to the image plane, serve to enhance the overall expression of the painting itself.

The consolidation of stripes previously depicted in multiple colors into two to three colors around 1965, is not considered a transition towards Minimalism, but instead, as a consequence of Yamada having strengthened the concepts of painterly expression that he had aspired towards within the overall context of his work.

The stripes can be understood as metaphors for space. We could almost view them as akin to the Morandi’s still lifes and consider them in terms of further meditations on existence in order to

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understand them more clearly. Like Morandi's paintings the same thing manifests itself, just in various forms and colour relationships. Paint was thickened or thinned, colours were harmonized or conflicted. Yamada's contrasting colour tones deliberately create light.

Yamada was determined to produce paintings on this very rhythmic continuum, the 'whole' being a work in progress where one painting followed another, repetitive, ritualistic and meditative. His stripes gradually evolved into compositions consisting of crosses and grids – and in his own words, this was a "self-generating" body of work. A body of work that exists in a realm of purity somewhere outside of where perhaps his "*Still Life*" series began— pure form, pure gesture, pure colour and pure space. Away from the meditations of mortality, these stripes convey more of a sense of life, whether they have a ragged or imperfect contour, they are restless, active, emotional and vulnerable.

To this day, Yamada remains somewhat mysterious in the history of modernism, but nevertheless remains ultimately timeless and universal at the heart of it all. Despite relatively undervalued, Masaaki Yamada is indeed due of reappraisal.