

KEY HIRAGA: WORKS 1958-1993

September 6 - November 9, 2019

Opening Reception: September 6, 2019

Ortuzar Projects is pleased to present *Key Hiraga: Works 1958–1993*, the first comprehensive exhibition of Japanese painter Key Hiraga in New York. A self-taught artist, Hiraga (1936–2000) is best known for canvases that fuse traditional Japanese techniques with Pop debauchery.

The exhibition features a series of early works on paper, a selection of canvases from the decade the artist lived in Paris (1964–1974)—where he came in contact with European artists and developed his signature style—and a small group of late works produced after his return to Japan. Emerging in an era of increased global internationalism, Hiraga’s oeuvre eluded categorization within his own lifetime, either through clear-cut art-historical movement or cultural identity.

Raised in Morioka, north of Tokyo, Hiraga graduated from Rikkyo University in 1958 but was quickly drawn to a nascent artistic milieu that emerged during the social reorganization of postwar Japan. His works from this period experiment with line and color, tracing the anomie of contemporary urban life. These calligraphic outlines of abstract forms intersecting with figures have been compared to Dubuffet’s work, delicately executed in ink. They anticipate the artist’s later canvases featuring emotionally entangled and ambiguously gendered characters.

In 1964 Hiraga participated in several exhibitions for young artists and won a yearlong study grant in Paris. Two paintings were included in *The New Japanese Painting and Sculpture* (1965–67) organized by the Museum of Modern Art, one of which was purchased for the museum’s collection. These works—reminiscent of *Window*, 1968, on display here—juxtapose compartmentalized scenes, recalling a comic strip, and perhaps also the voyeuristic possibilities offered by the high-rise buildings sprouting up throughout Tokyo at the time.

Arriving in Paris in 1965, Hiraga’s affinity for *burai*—a loose group of Japanese writers critical of the conventions of consumer society—soon descended into a delirious decadence, encouraged by the nightlife of the European capital and relaxed sexual mores. This transition is indicated by a decisive shift from calligraphic line to vibrant pattern and color. In temporally overloaded scenes a dissipated figure with purplish, speckled skin—a comic double for the artist, as in *Untitled*, 1967—strokes, grasps or else infiltrates supple breasts, voluptuously splayed limbs, and blooming orifices. Several canvases in this significant series, often titled *The Elegant Life of Mr. K* or *The Elegant Life of Mr. H* may also riff on the 1963 Yamaguchi Hitomi novel mocking the aspirations of 1960s Tokyo society, *The Elegant Life of Mr. Everyman*.

After returning to Japan in 1977 the psychological and figurative intensity of Hiraga’s compositions subsided, while his use of strong color remained. *Kiya-Machi*, from 1993, presents a comparatively sedate night-time scene in Kyoto’s red-light district during cherry blossom season.

Key Hiraga (1936–2000) has been the subject of retrospective exhibitions at Studio Gariboldi, Milan (2015) and Hiratsuka Museum of Art, Hiratsuka (2000) and has featured in multiple survey exhibitions including *Japanese Anti-Art: Now and Then*, The National Museum of Art, Osaka (1991), *Japanese Ways Western Means: Art of the 1980s in Japan*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia (1989), *The 1960s: A Decade of Change in Contemporary Japanese Art*, Tokyo National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo (1981), *Japanese Artists from Europe*, National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto (1972), 10th São Paulo Biennial, São Paulo (1969), *The New Japanese Painting and Sculpture*, Museum of Modern Art, New York (1966), *La Figuration Narrative dans l'Art Contemporain*, Galerie Creuze, Paris (1965). He died in Hakone in 2000.