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Japanese artists in the Lehigh Valley pay tribute to late mentor, Guggenheim exhibit

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on February 14, 2013 at 8:00 AM, updated February 14, 2013 at 10:48 AM

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Takada Yuhei of the Kansai Region of Japan greets patrons Sunday during a public meet-and-greet at the Allentown Art Museum. In conjunction with the exhibit "Gutai: Splendid Playground" opening Friday at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, a group of artists has set up residence in the Lehigh Valley to present their own work in "Lollipop: Gutai Influences," put on by Fuse Art Infrastructure of Allentown through March 3. Express-Times Photo: KATHY ESMACHERBERGER

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More than 25 Japanese artists have descended on the Lehigh Valley and brought with them the spirit of their mentor, Shozo Shimamoto.

"It's destiny," performance artist Miyuki Nishizawa says through a translator. "I have to come for Shimamoto."

The late artist's work is part of an exhibit, "**Gutai: Splendid Playground.**" (<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/upcoming/gutai-splendid-playground>) opening Friday at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City.

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Surrounding that event, the group of artists has set up residence in the Lehigh Valley to present its own work in “**Lollipop: Gutai Influences,**”

(http://www.allentownfuse.org/fuse/News/Entries/2013/1/2_LOLLIPOP_GUTAI_INFLUENCES.html)

put on by Fuse Art Infrastructure of Allentown through March 2.

The artists’ inspiration, Shimamoto, is credited with co-founding the Gutai arts movement in postwar Japan.

“The art is about experience, being original and doing something with it,” Kiki Nienaber, director for **Fuse** (<http://www.allentownfuse.org/fuse/FUSE.html>), says while supervising hangings of some of the works Tuesday at the Cigar Factory Studios in Allentown.

Conceptual art constructed from abstract materials, items that normally would have been thrown away or interactive works where the art viewer can get involved by pulling strings or transcending into works, make up the range of pieces being shown.

The work is also filled with Japanese art tradition, including ink work, Nienaber says.

“There is a method to the madness,” she says.

Many of the artists studied with Shimamoto, who died Jan. 25, before he could see the first Gutai exhibit to be displayed at the Guggenheim and after the plans were set for the Lehigh Valley events. But they hope to honor his memory through their performances.

“People actually believe he is here,” Shinko Konishi, coordinator for the group of Japanese artists known as Art Unidentified, says as they prepared for their Cigar Factory exhibit Tuesday. “People believe he died on purpose.”

Konishi says Shimamoto’s health and frailty wouldn’t have allowed for him to travel to the U.S. for the Guggenheim exhibit or to support his students. Now that he is believed to be in the spirit form, however, he will be able to attend, and that would have been the only way he would have been able to be present, she says.

Performance artist Nishizawa, or “Newspaper Woman,” is a fashion designer by trade and a close disciple of Shimamoto’s who, she says through a translator, was like a father to her. She visited Shimamoto when he was sick and helped his family.

She attended the meet and greet to kick off the “Lollipop” series Sunday at the Allentown Art Museum of the Lehigh Valley and hung from a crane over Allentown Art Park on Monday to display a newspaper dress that stretched five stories. She will perform at the Guggenheim on March 8.

Nishizawa is not the only artist who credits Shimamoto as a parental figure.

Yuhei Takada helped Shimamoto create his work after a stroke left him virtually paralyzed last December. Takeda’s work in newspaper sculpture will also be part of the “Lollipop” events. He says, through a translator, that of course he is sad for Shimamoto’s passing but feels a duty to exhibit the work he has created with his influence.

“I am very motivated now because I want to represent him,” he says.

Not only is he looking forward to the Guggenheim exhibit to pay tribute to his mentor but to see Gutai art from all over the world that he would never get to see unless it were all housed in one place, he says.

Nienaber sees the entire experience in the Lehigh Valley as beneficial not only to the artists but for the area to expand its artistic horizons. She coordinated the “Lollipop” events with the help of her husband, artist Gregory Coates, who met Konishi working in Japan. Coates’ work is on display at the Soft Machine Gallery in Allentown where the Japanese artists will also perform.

“I think the Lehigh Valley needs it,” Nienaber says of the “Lollipop” exhibits, “the diversity and the need to start thinking outside the box.”

She says even if you don’t like the art, other influences come into play and offer exposure to other worlds and cultures.



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"You don't have to get it," she says. "You just have to have an open mind."

IF YOU GO

"Lollipop: Gutai Influences" events in the area include:

2:45 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. Feb. 21 - Cedar Crest College, Harmon Hall - Workshop and performance by Miyuki Nishizawa and friends

5 to 7 p.m. Feb. 22 - Cigar Factory Gallery - Opening reception for "Lollipop, Shimamoto Meme," works created in the Cigar Factory studios

5 to 7 p.m. Feb. 23 - Soft Machine Gallery in Allentown - "Stage" dance performance by Aya Iida in conjunction with installation by Gregory Coates

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