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M O T O

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Published on the occasion of

Sadamasa Motonaga. The Energy of Infancy

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Repetto Gallery

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SADAMASA

MOTONAGA

Curated by
Carlo Repetto

Texts by
Takesada Matsutani
Paolo Repetto

Magonza

I first met Sadamasa Motonaga in 1958 or 1959. He was already extremely active in the Gutai association. He was tall and strong with a great sense of humour. But something else we didn't see went into his work. From 1960 it began to appear as a violent coming together of organic shapes evoking human entrails. Floods of reds, yellows, greens, blacks and whites spread across the canvases.

Referring to his intense fluid forms on canvas, Motonaga said that he changed this mode of expression during his year in New York, 1966–1967, because the paint he had used in Japan was not available there. Perhaps he had also ex-torted certain demons.

He might have renewed his work in the face of the contingencies of the times: Abstract Expressionism had given way to thriving Pop Art, Hard Edge painting and Kinetic Art. Inevitably, or seemingly effortlessly, Motonaga who loved flowers, animals and children's drawings turned away from a painting open to the unexpected. He left behind the abstract mountains and upturned bowls splashing paint that he had developed during the early Gutai days. The time when curved organisms in white, reds, yellows and blacks flowed with drama to resemble an elephant's trunk or the nose on a face was gone. Still in a Gutai spirit, Motonaga took on a new feisty dimension, developing a landscape of fantastical images reflecting his warm, powerful humour and humanity.

Takesada Matsutani

THE JOY OF METAMORPHOSES

Paolo Repetto

“I still want to do something new, that which has not existed before.”

Sadamasa Motonaga

In the spring of 2013 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, many of us had the chance to see the most beautiful and famous work by Sadamasa Motonaga (Ueno City 1922 – Kobe 2011): *Work (Water)*, a wonderful installation conceived in 1955, displayed once more on the occasion of that major exhibition dedicated to the Gutai group. Stretching between one corridor and another of the great and spacious central cone of Frank Lloyd Wright's masterpiece, a dense and lyrical series of transparent plastic tubes each hold an enormous drop of coloured water within them. In the magical vortex of the Guggenheim, the elegance and transparency of the interweaving tubes conversed with the archetypes of red, blue, green, purple and yellow. Of all the great works of art history, never had we seen such a grandiose and at the same time so lyrical a work, so monumental and yet so very light. Once again, even this side of the threshold of the 21st century, art provided us with strong emotions: it offered us its highest sense once again: the intimate and yet glorious ability to be astounded (in keeping with the Greek notion of *thauma*, *thaumàzein*, in its most malleable and positive sense).

Among the leading protagonists of the joyful and restless Gutai group, Motonaga has always been pervaded by the magic of childhood. Like all the components of that famous group, he has always sought out new things, unprecedented forms, freeform and cheerful experimentation. When in 1955 he was

invited by Jari Yoshihara (the Gutai founder) to create one of his works at their first open-air exhibition, in the pinewood of Ashiya – a rich and cultured coastal town near Osaka – he was too poor to be able to come up with anything ‘institutional’. But walking through the pinewoods, he had a revelation: water is free! Water belongs to everybody! And so he took a few sheets of transparent plastic (vinyl), and glued them together to make long tubes, into which he poured water coloured with ink, and hung them high up between one tree and the other. A feast of colour freed from the constrictions of the brush! A ceremony of shapes, beyond any academic limit. “Gutai art is created by a group of individual artists who use all possible techniques and materials, whereby they do not restrict themselves to the two or three-dimensional, but also use liquids, solid matter, gases and even clay, electricity and time itself to reveal everywhere all possible forms of beauty in its original freshness” (Motonaga). More than half a century since the furore of those irreverent and noble Zen gestures, beyond a non-definable confine – which was also that of the Futurists and the Dada movement – we are still amazed by such richness, experimentation and strength. Shozo Shimamoto was also convinced that colour had to be emancipated from all traditional constrictions, from the paintbrush first and foremost. For this reason, throughout his life, he threw bottles full of paint against sheets of paper and canvases, on which they would explode.

It was for this purpose that he came up with a special cannon firing bullets of pigment, and, like Fontana, pierced the surfaces of decorated sheets. For the deepest and most authentic meaning of the word *gutai* (concrete) is personification, incarnation, the incarnation of the spirit through matter: a testimony of the passage of primordial energy from the invisible to the visible state. In their new vision of time and space: "Time has never participated in the spatial. The enthusiasm of the Gutai group for discovery requires the time factor as well as the space factor in order to convey their whole aesthetic emotion. They say farewell to picture frames, lead down from the walls and try to move out of an immobile time into a living time and thus to form a new style of painting. They differ completely from that time-place-union of conventional theatre plays with their literary content, such as have always been presented in the past. The continuous changes taking place here arouse emotions and will last. Space for time, time for space. These will be the pictures of new importance" (Murakami).

Beyond every limit, like happy children, the Gutai artists have always played, setting themselves both real and impossible goals. It is said that one day, Saburo Murakami shouted at his two-year-old son, who, greatly offended, let off his anger by using his own body to tear down one of the traditional paper walls to be found in Japanese houses. Inspired by that extreme gesture,

Murakami produced one of the most famous performances in the world, and by hurling himself through a thin layer of cardboard, came up with the work *Passing Through* (1956). The ineffable Saburo Murakami, who even before James Turrell, defined a part of the sky as a real work of art, as seen through the round window at the top of a conical tent (*Work Sky*, 1956). An art which was free, beyond any limit, in which the arrow of chance strikes the target of destiny every time: in which the Muse feeds 'the strongest dart'. There was an explosion of inspiration and gesture: Kazuo Shiraga hanging from a rope, painting with his feet, in a wild, ritual dance. Kazuo Shiraga fighting, rolling around a great pit of mud, sand, stones and cement (*Challenging Mud*, 1955). Yasuo Sumi, following in Pollock's footsteps as well as the ancient Japanese technique of *tarashikomi*, multiplying a variety of paint drippings, elaborating them with brushes, brooms and spatulas. Akira Kanayama painting using the trickle spread by a remote-controlled toy car. Akira Kanayama blowing up great plastic balls. Jiro Yoshihara, among the first in the world to use neon lights in a marvellous work of solemn light columns (*Light Art*, 1955). Atsuko Tanaka, creating and wearing a sumptuous dress made of neon lights (*Electric Dress*, 1956). Atsuko Tanaka hanging a large pink silk drape and making it flutter with a fan, or painting air and space directly with the invisible colours of the sound of bells (*Work Bell*, 1955). Minoru Yoshida conceiving the first mobile

sculpture, made of plastic, phosphorescent fluids, motors and lights (*Bisexual Flower*, 1970). Takesada Matsutani playing with time and space: the slow time of the dripping vinyl glue forming broad curves, the rhythmic time of a random yet precise trickling: the space of broad sheets or canvases that host joyful blocks of colour, at times three-dimensional, at times patiently embellished with a fine trace of graphite. Lastly, Sadamasa Motonaga playing with stones, wood, earth, water and inventing a machine that produces enchanting smoke rings... In the theatre of nature, against the backdrop of trees, on a stage of grass. For Gutai art does not transform matter, but rather it “brings matter to life.” Nothing is represented or shown anymore, but everything is, living off its own enigmatic, astounding (*thauma*), surprising apparition.

We are reminded here of the beautiful words of Ortega y Gasset with regard to Velázquez: “Art would make no sense if it consisted in the mere reproduction of the things which, art aside, man is already bogged down in, oppressed and led to ruin by. What sense would there be in the mere duplication of reality? Of that which is already there, which is more than enough for us, and which is already too much in terms of its lacking, for reality as a whole, the real world, this whole great thing, not hermeneutically but metaphysically, is nothing but a *fragment*, and as such is bereft of sense, painfully forcing us to seek out the missing segment, which is never there, which is the eternally Absent

– and which we know as God, or the hiddenness of God: *Deus absconditus*. In art, it is always a matter of making reality disappear, for it overwhelmingly oppresses, torments and bores man, turning him into something else.”

Gestures, characters, places, works that interweave with a vast, archaic, Zen horizon: “Following his visit to the Emperor, Kakua disappeared and nobody knew any more about him. He was the first Japanese to study Zen in China, but since he revealed nothing more than a single note, he is not remembered among those who introduced Zen to Japan.

Kakua went to China and received the true teachings. During his stay there, he did not travel. Meditating ceaselessly, he lived in a remote place on a mountain. Every time someone found him and asked him to preach, he would utter a few words and then move to another part of the mountain where it would be even more difficult to find him.

When Kakua returned to Japan, the Emperor heard about him and asked him to preach Zen for his own benefit and that of his subjects.

Kakua stood in silence before the Emperor. Then he pulled out a flute from the folds of his robes and played a single, short note. He then bowed deeply and disappeared.”

Later on, after that impetuous incipit, almost all the components of the Gutai group went through a phase of reflection and moderation. None of them, from

keen firestarter, quite turned into firefighter, yet they all came to seek a historical definition. In 1966, when Motonaga arrived in New York, supported by Martha Jackson, he started painting again in a 'traditional' manner, discovering acrylic paints and the airbrush, and limiting his inspiration to classical two-dimensional surfaces. Thus he went back to conceiving shapes once more: those shapes that come before colour, the shapes that can withhold red and green, his favourite hues. The exhibition in London testifies to this later stage of his work, displaying a great number of his acrylic canvases, many paper-based works and a number of sculptures, from the '70s through to the early 21st century.

The energy of infancy is always decisive in the various pictorial outlines in which the organic is transformed into mineral and the mineral dissolves into the vegetable; an extreme imagination is always paramount, one in which the vision of metamorphosis is captured in both real and impossible forms and presences, such as where a phosphorescent shadow of Pop Art enters an unprecedented alliance with transfigured Oriental kimonos. A vast and various merry-go-round of signs, colours, characters and images: two cheerful gentlemen, soft and metallic – one perhaps with a pipe? – converse in an incomprehensible language... Four cylinders stick out from a great green bronze and resin rock like crooked antennas. Encased within ceramic, pure pigments of

dense colour, like generals on a military parade, stand on tiny solemn pedestals. A splendid wooden structure, hemmed in by two white triangles, offers a lively chorus of coloured sticks. Paper plans for both domestic and spatial temples define his own horizons. From a tall black palace-cum-tower with segmented sides, curious and surreal figures peer at us. A delightful miniature on paper, in acrylics and watercolours, evokes Pinocchio's Talking Cricket.

Against a light blue background, two hypothetical stairways descend along the sides from a triangular white roof: *gradus ad Parnassum*, the stairway to the gods? The heads of two anthropomorphic animals are illuminated by a white phosphorescent blot, like a new kind of halo. Electric neon colours and spatial constellations converse against an austere black background. A hypothetical spaceship-cum-beetle, with a great number of green tentacles and a large white body, protrudes above an informal chromatic nebula of dripping stars. A geometric and coloured ribbon completes its own metamorphosis, taking on the likeness of a serpent. The sails of a presumed, metaphysical windmill come together in a large, irregular body: a white centre which, little by little, reverberates with orange and red. Other segments of simple and enigmatic shapes are embedded in the same body. From a cheerful red and yellow anchor, against a brown-grey background, a possible eye peeks out: memories of a nearby Klee converse with space fantasies... A dense green takes the shape

of an impossible parachute drifting across a lighter green sky. Joyful shapes – like the surreal characters of early electronic games – exchange hypothetical smiles or greetings or grins in a rationalist rainbow. Potential toy spaceships transport simple childhood gifts on the outside. Two dense and circular drippings of white acrylic paint, against brown bases, wear a multitude of hats on their heads, like original question marks. A stool sports a multiple seat, in steadily diminishing scale, for its fair, joyful sharing. Ancient memories of informal painting in chromatic drippings, conversing with geometrical shapes. An uninterrupted metamorphosis, through vivid phosphorescence and timbral drips; a close interchange between likely and impossible shapes; an intimate dialogue between dreams and geometry, the unconscious and the defined, game and reason. For “the universe never ceases for a single instant to change and we experience this. Transformation is nothing other than renewal, so it is only natural that we should try to create new phenomena or that we discover these with astonishment” (Motonaga).

The quotations by Motonaga and Murakami are taken from: *Gutai, dipingere con il tempo e lo spazio*, M. Francioli, F. Namioka, T. Visser, B. Della Casa (eds.), Milan, 2010, p. 242 and onwards.

The quotation by Ortega y Gasset is taken from: G. Ceronetti, *Tra pensieri*, Milan, 1994, p. 128.

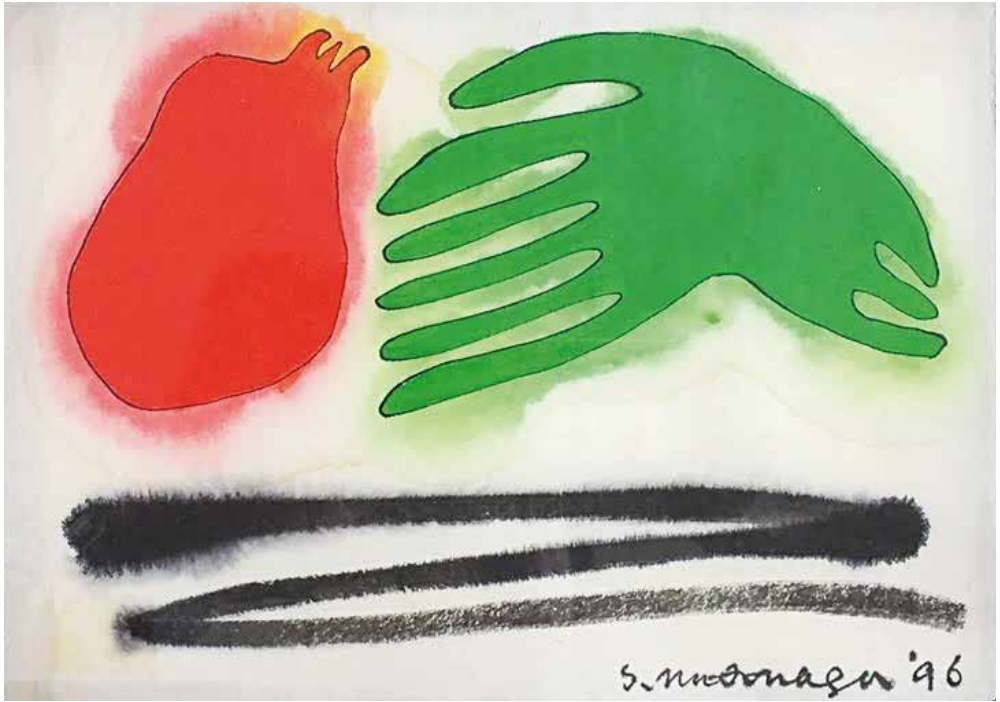
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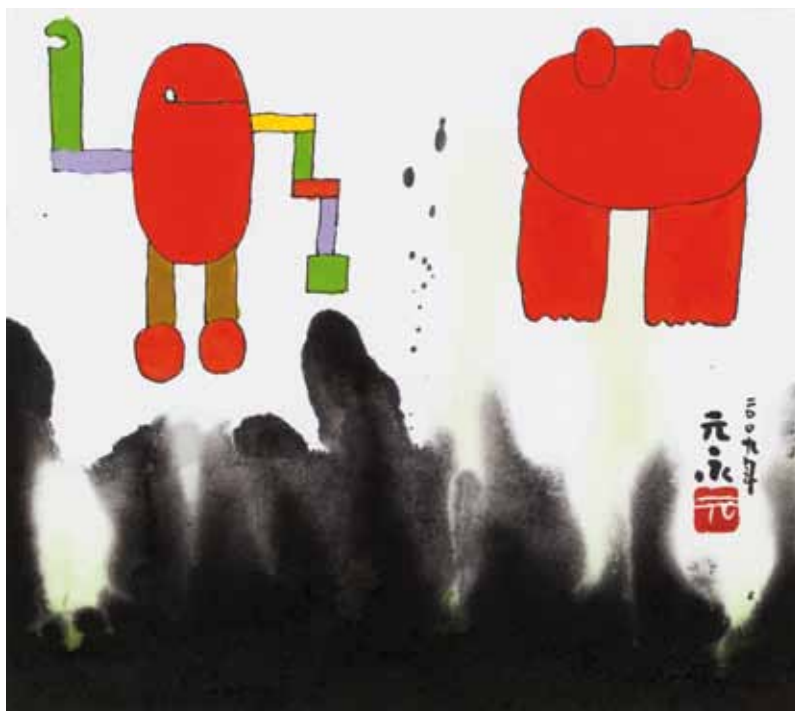
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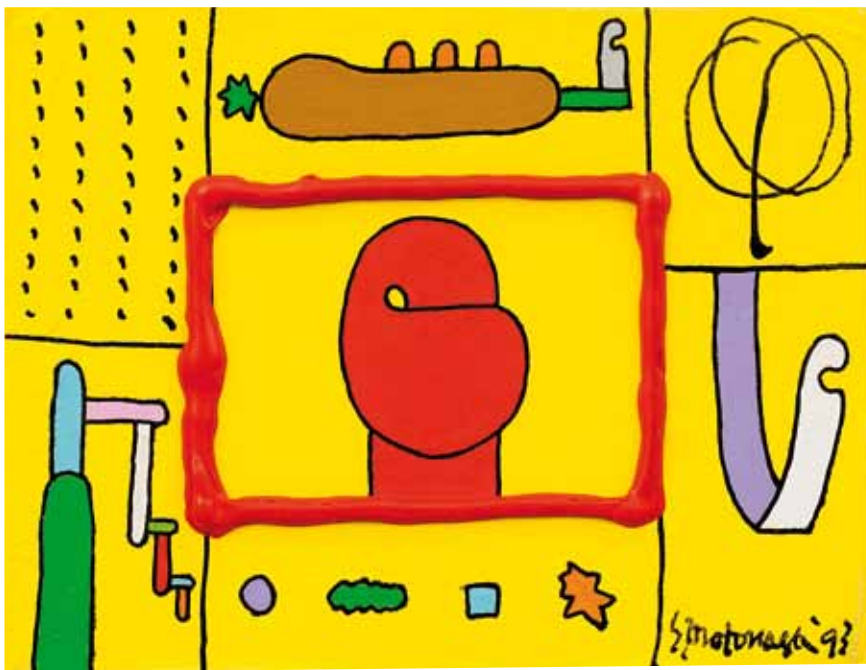


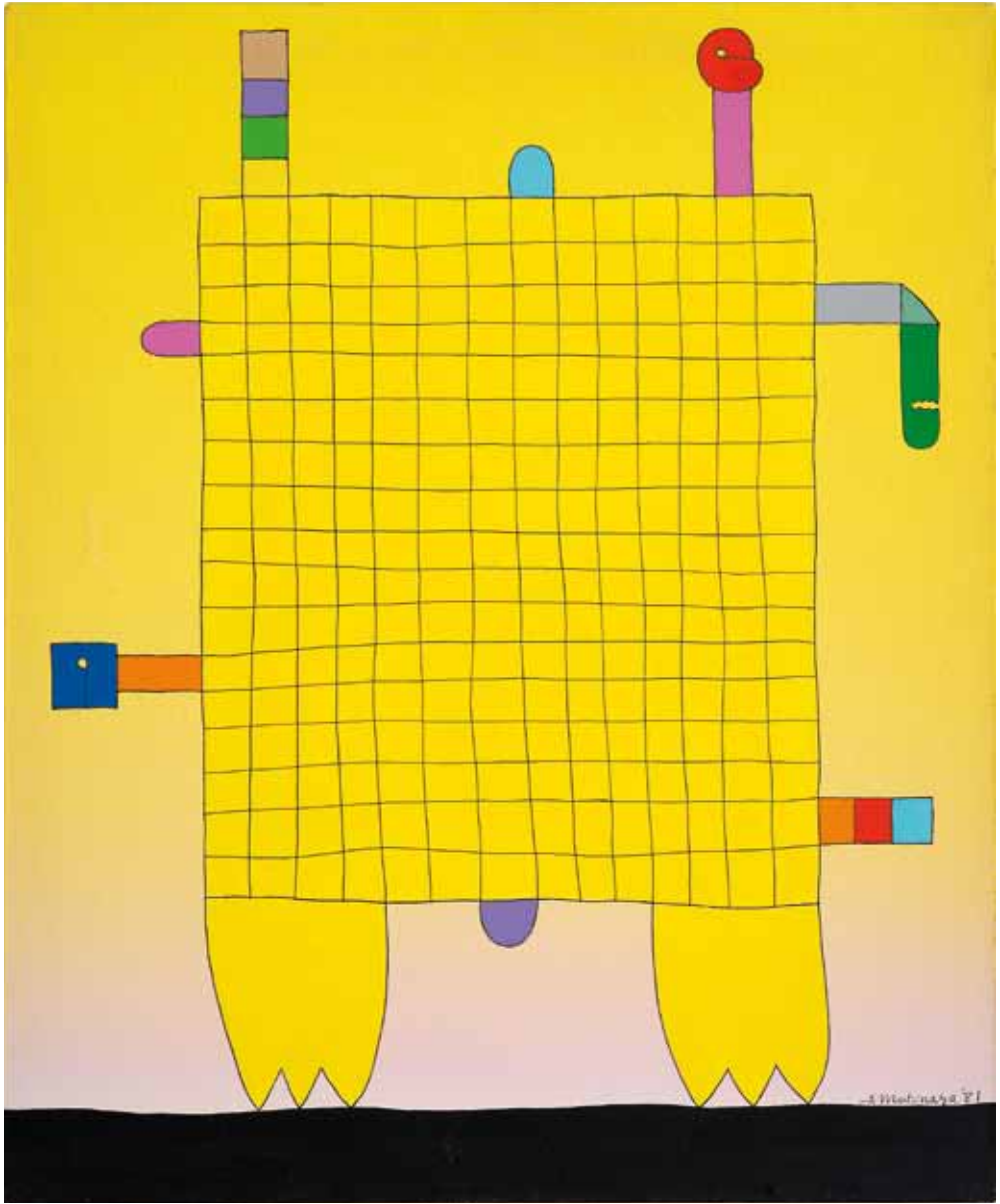










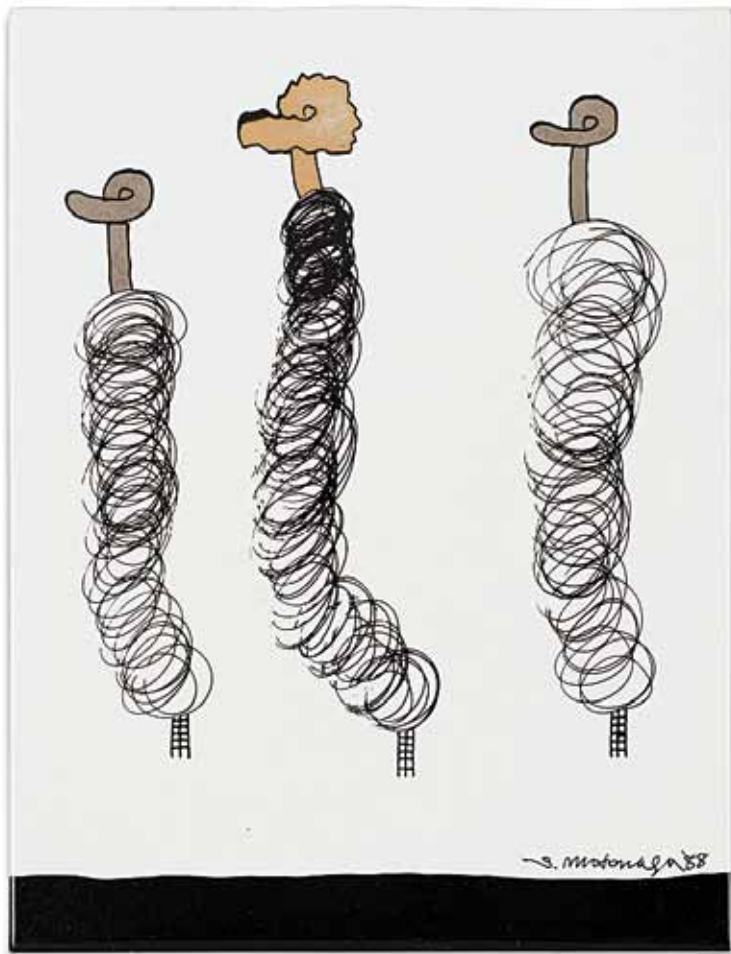


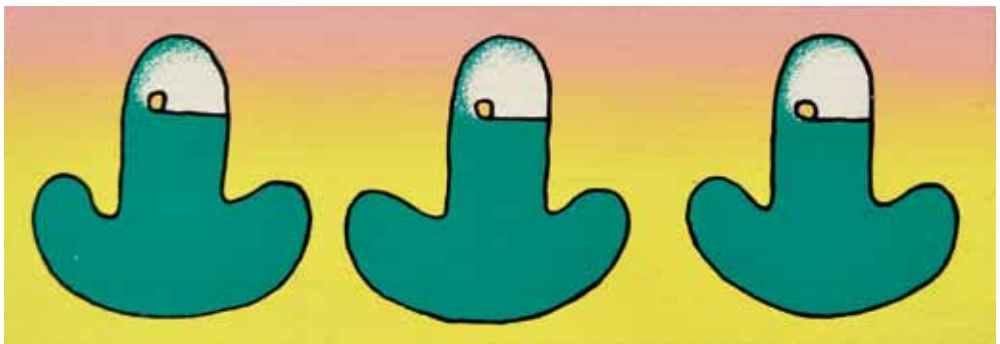






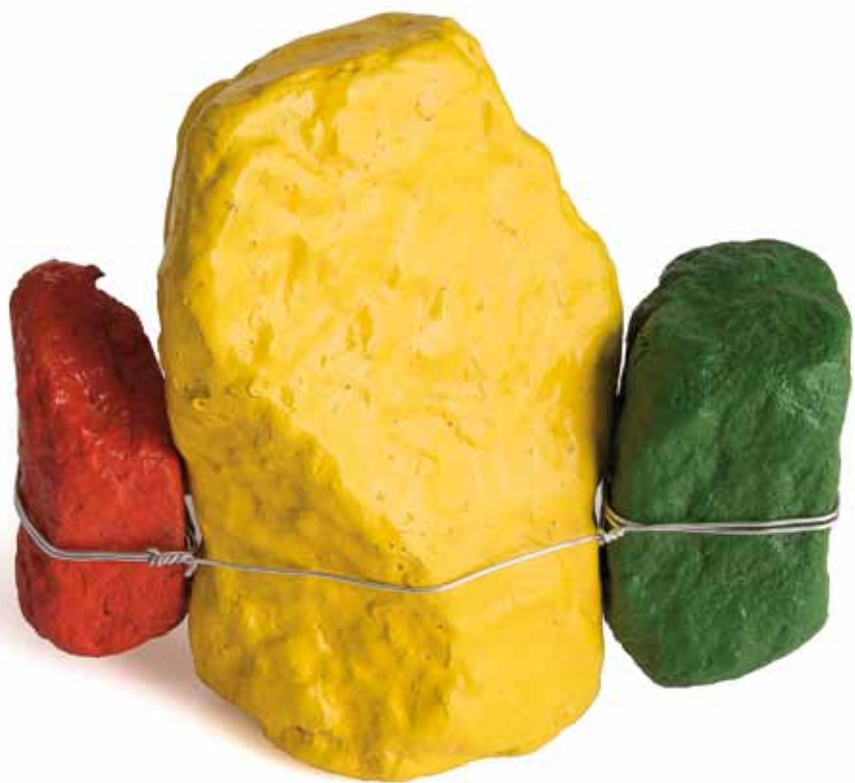






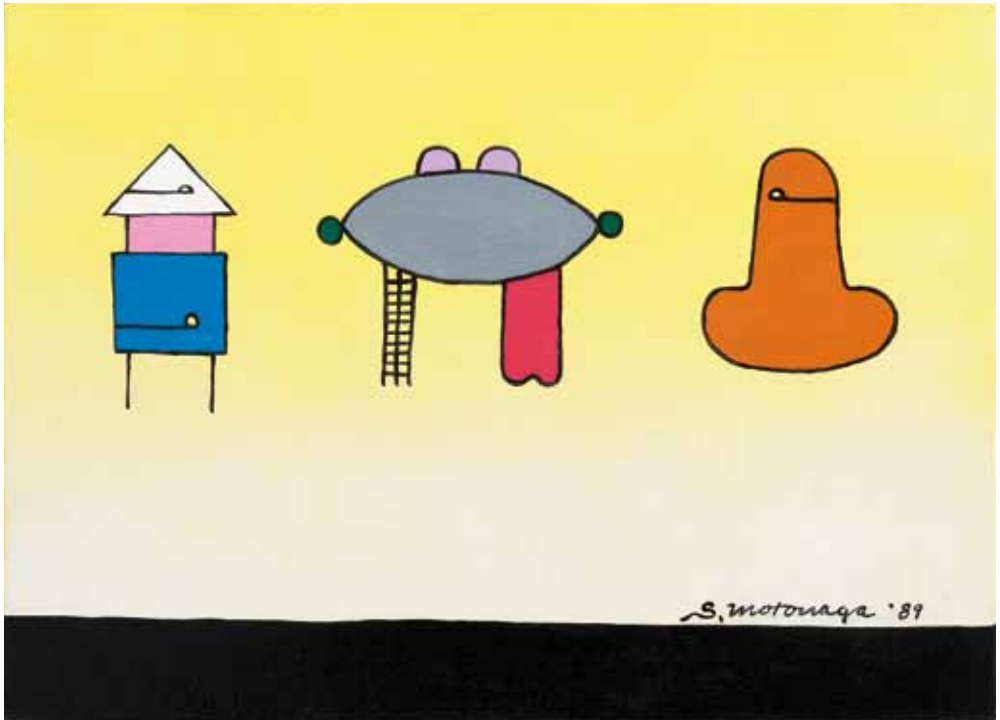


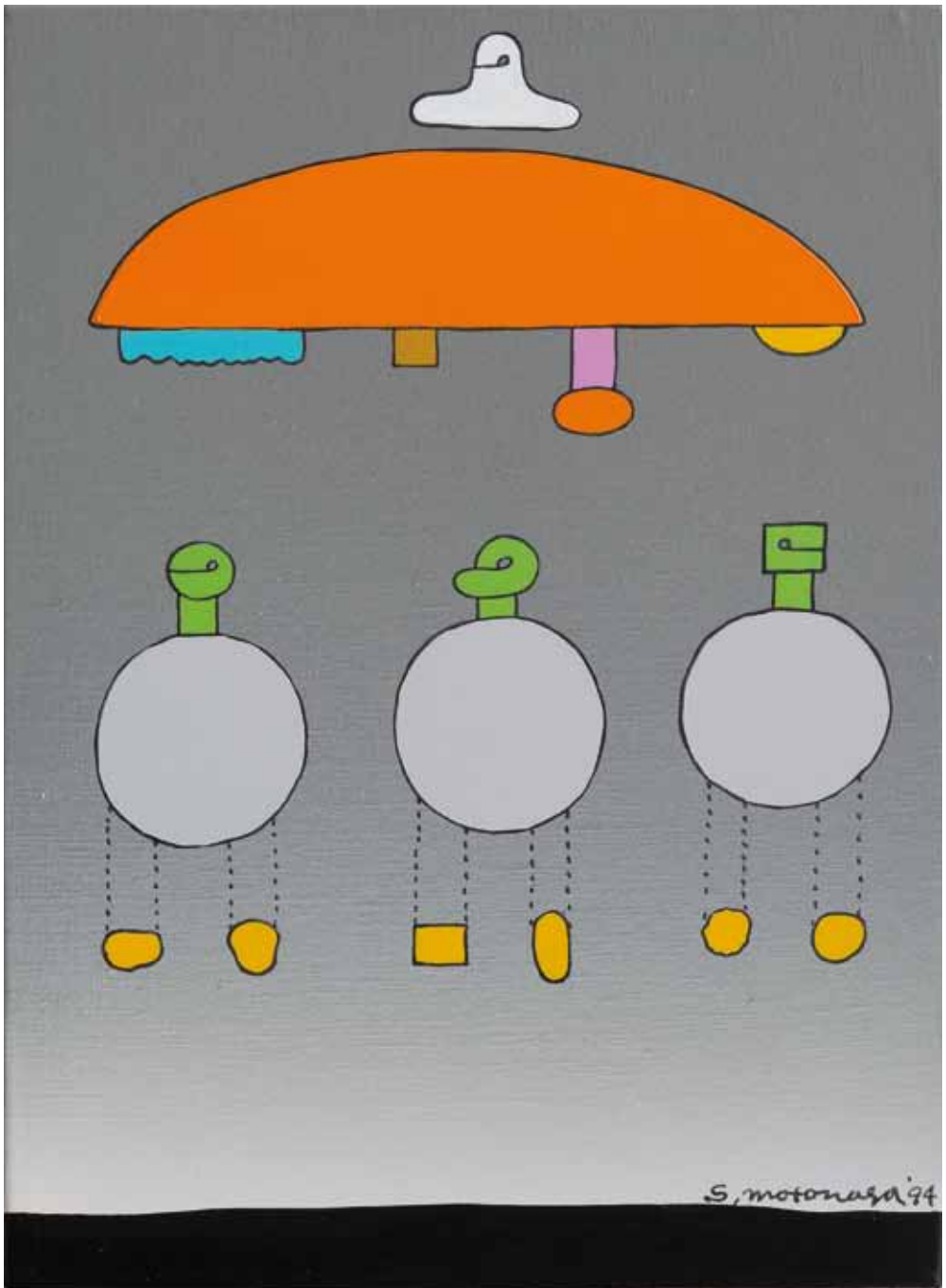
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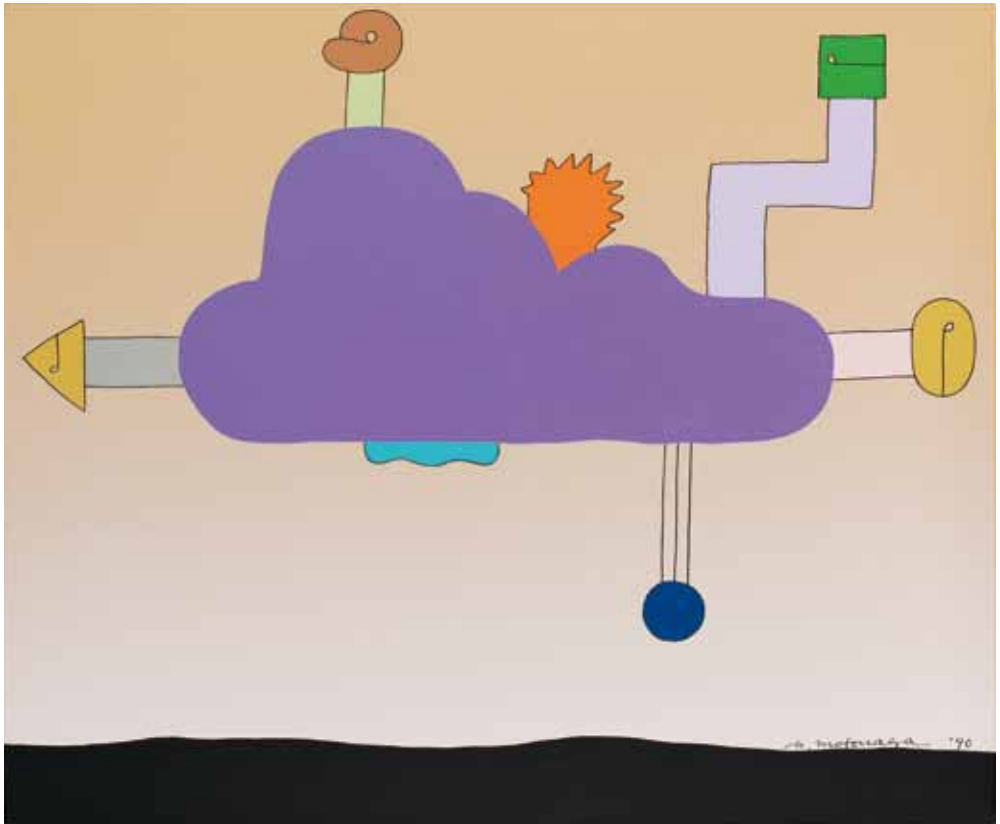


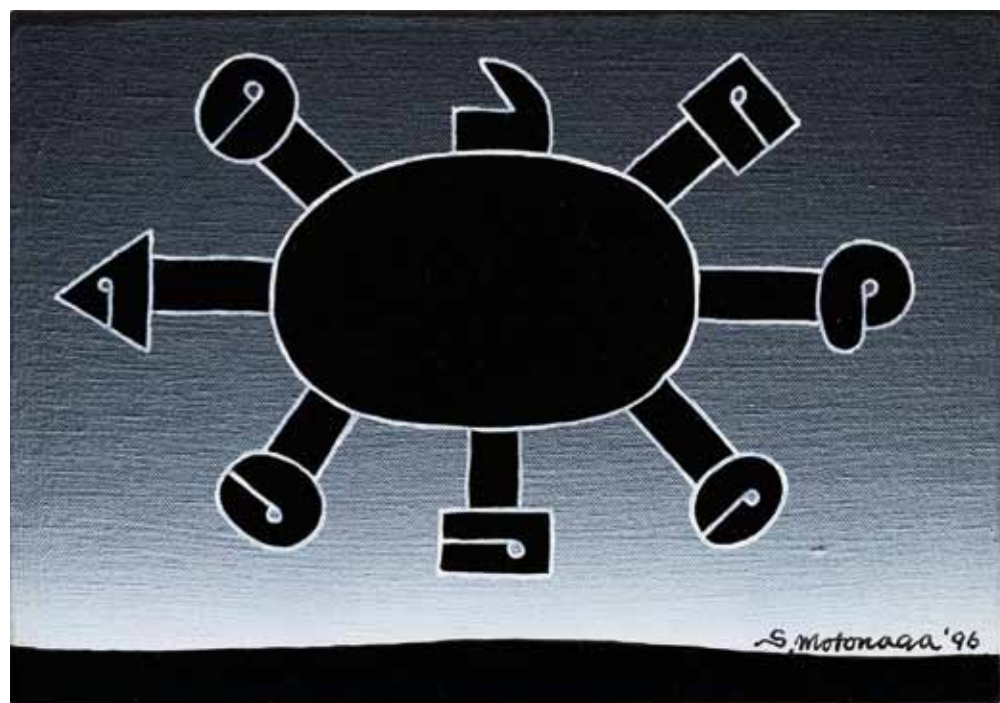












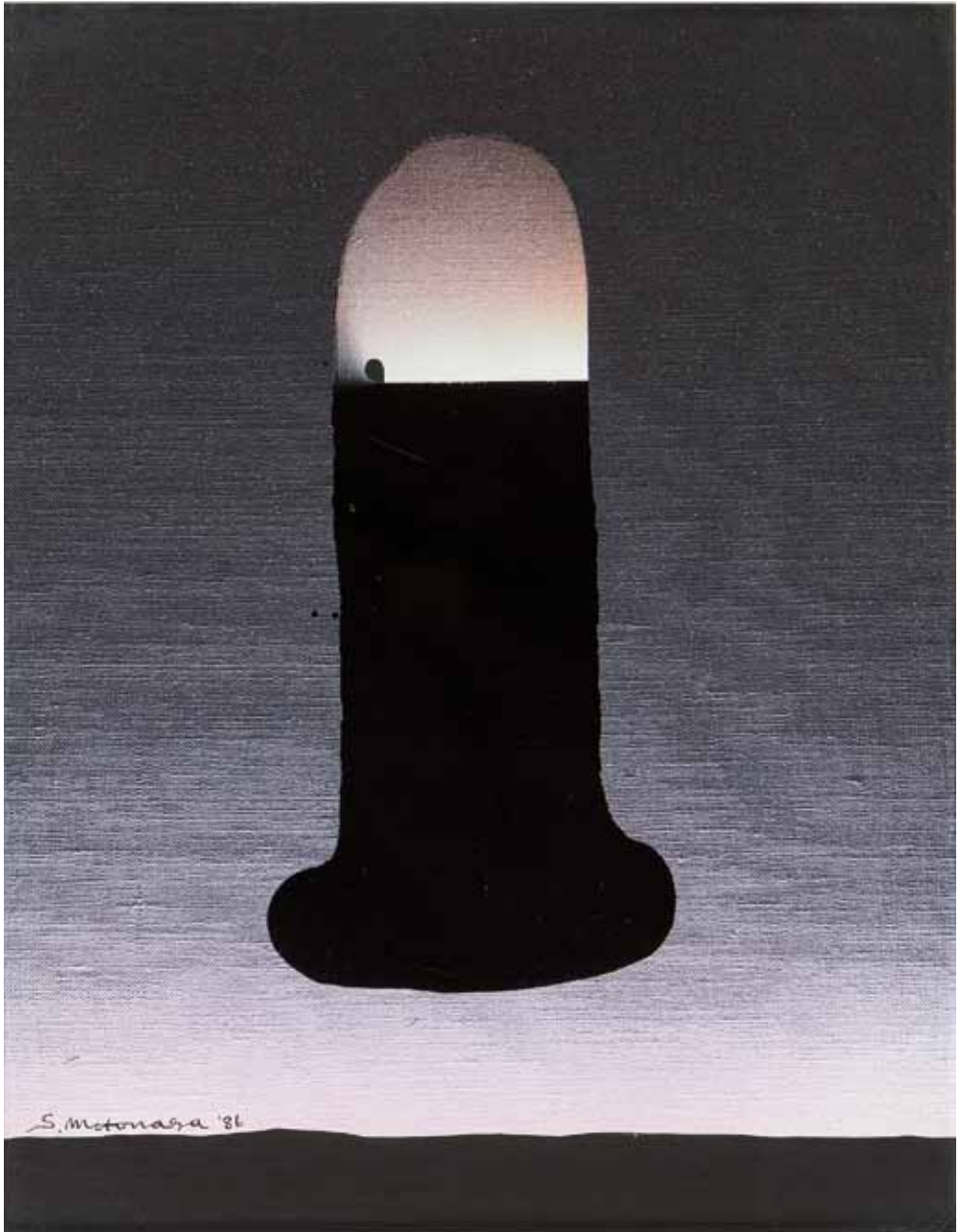


•84
S. Mohammada





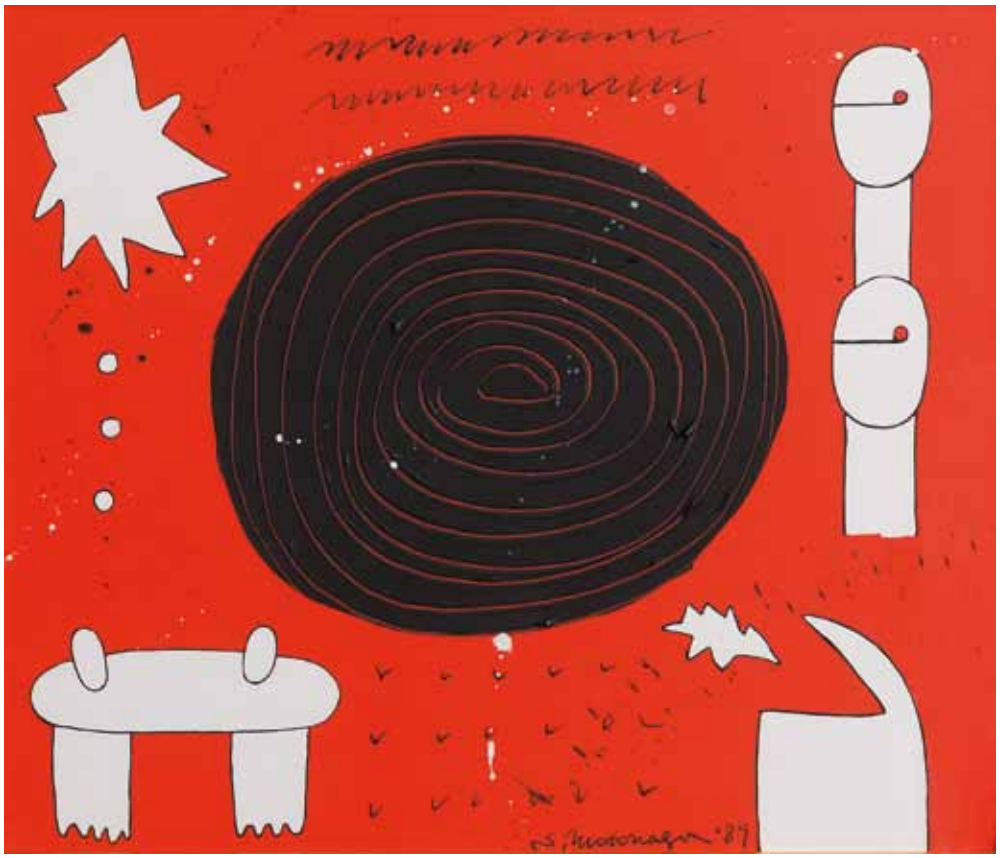




S. Motonaga '81



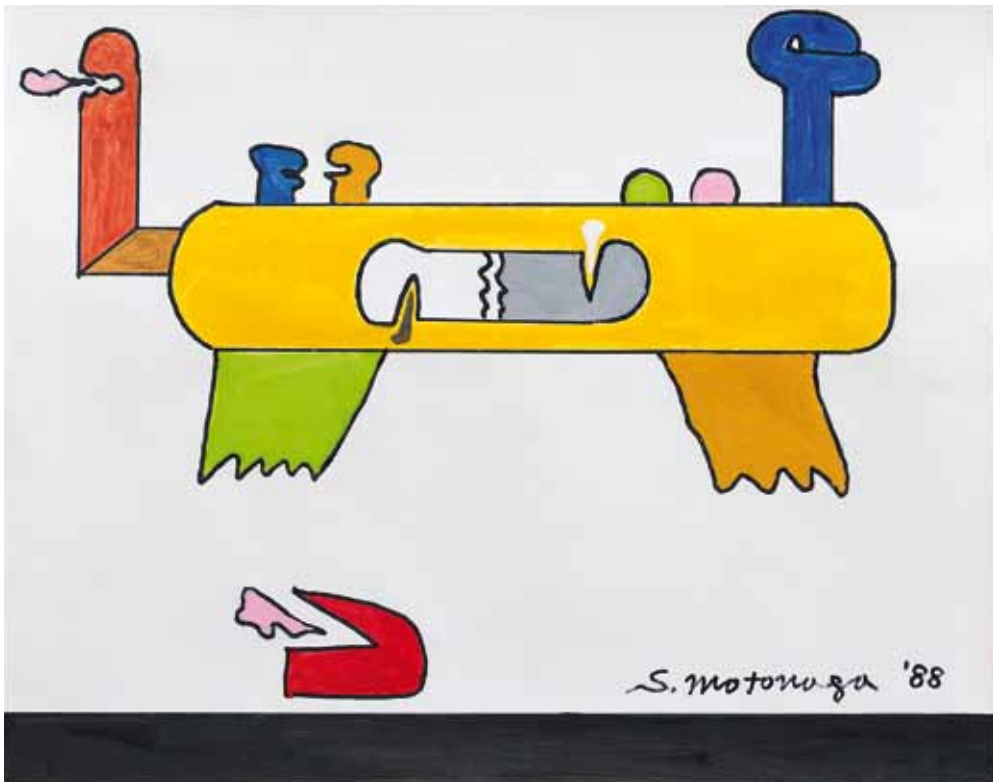


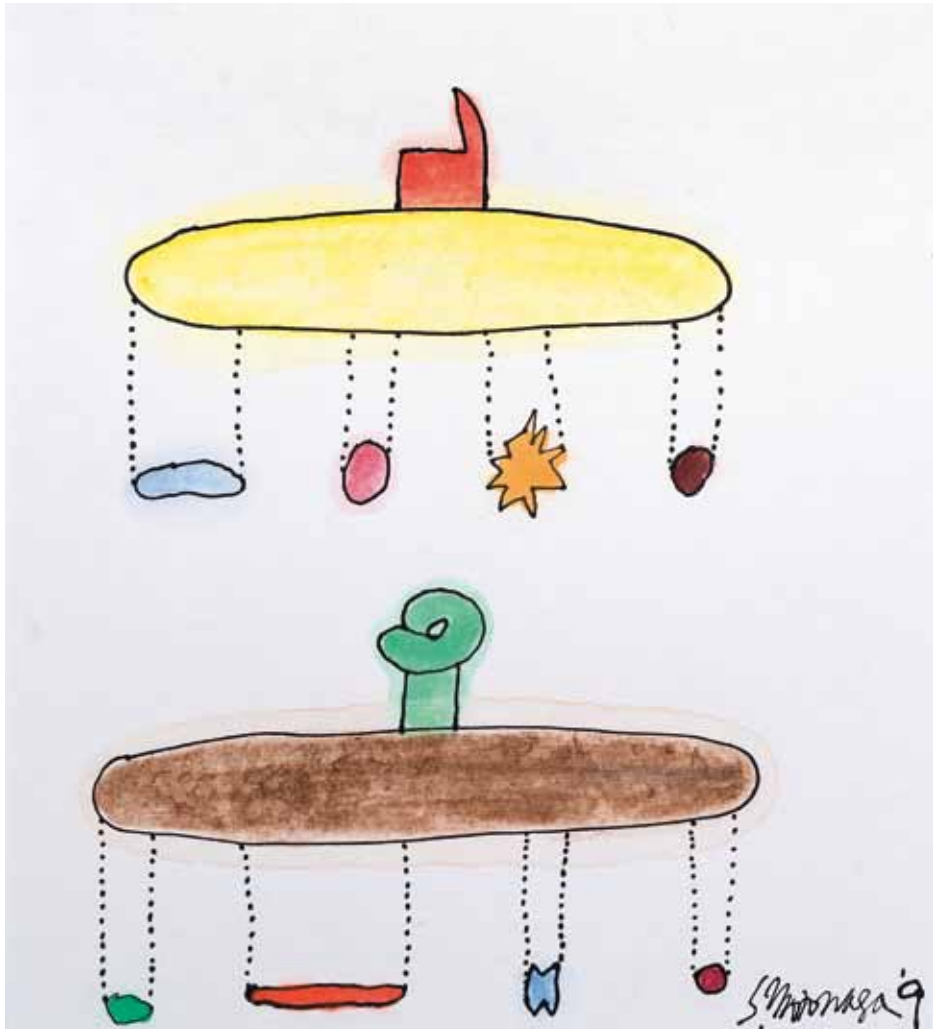


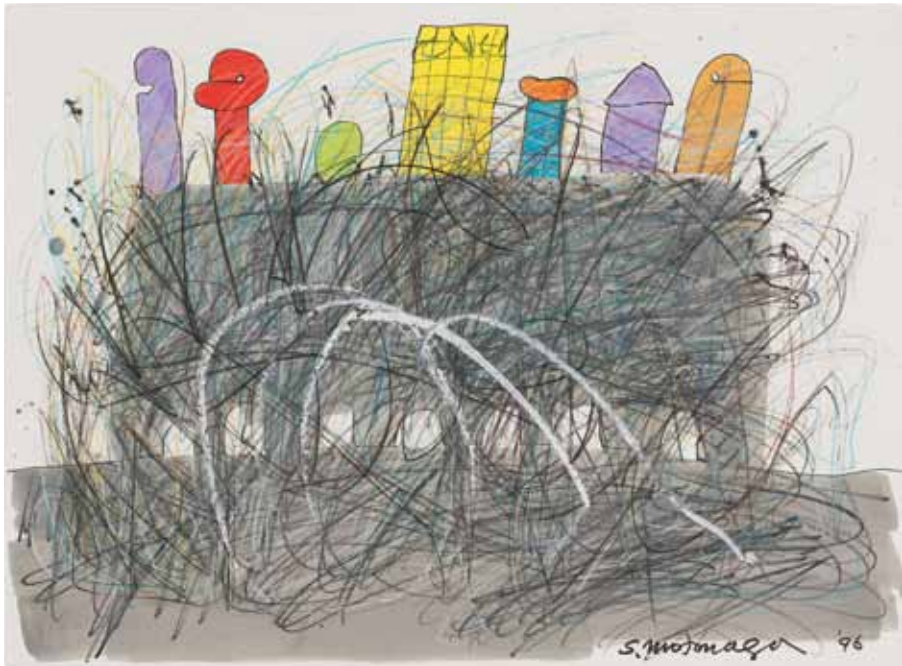


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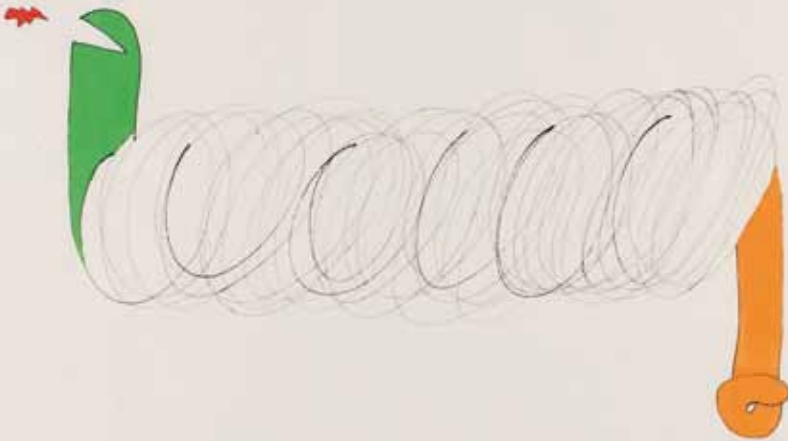




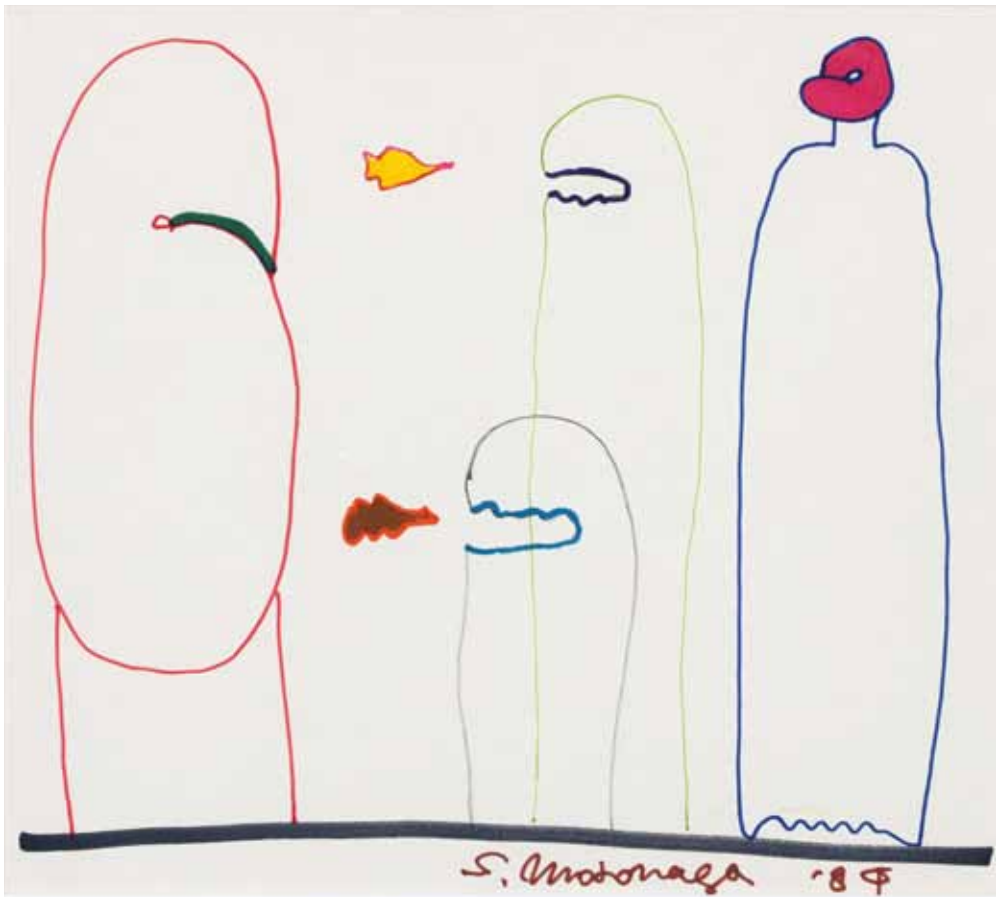




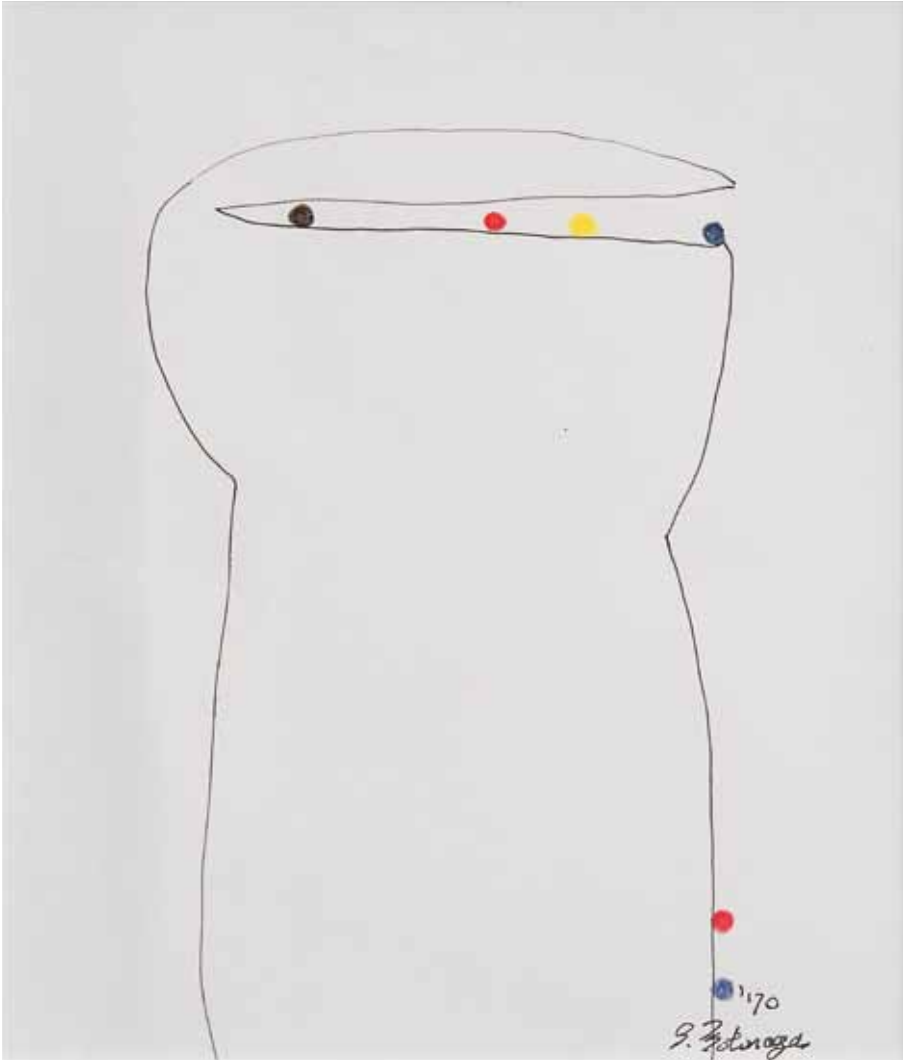
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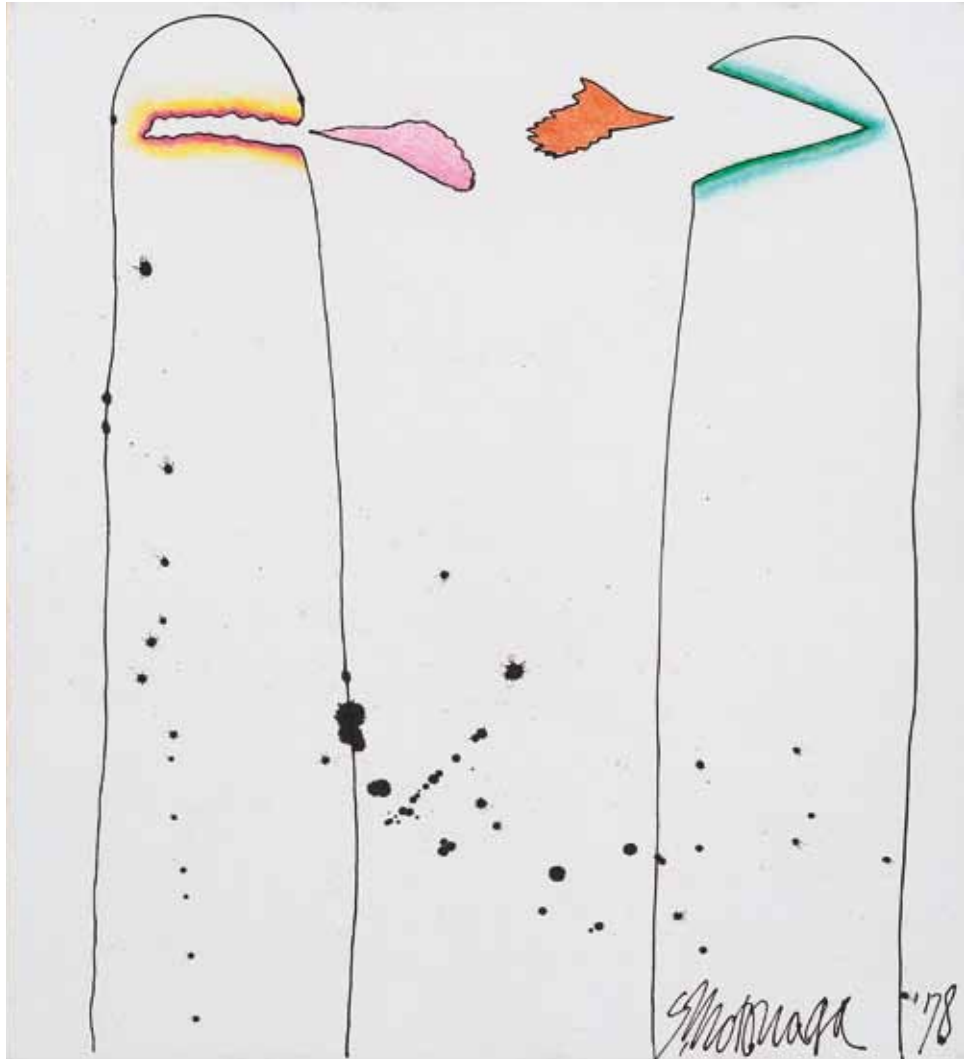


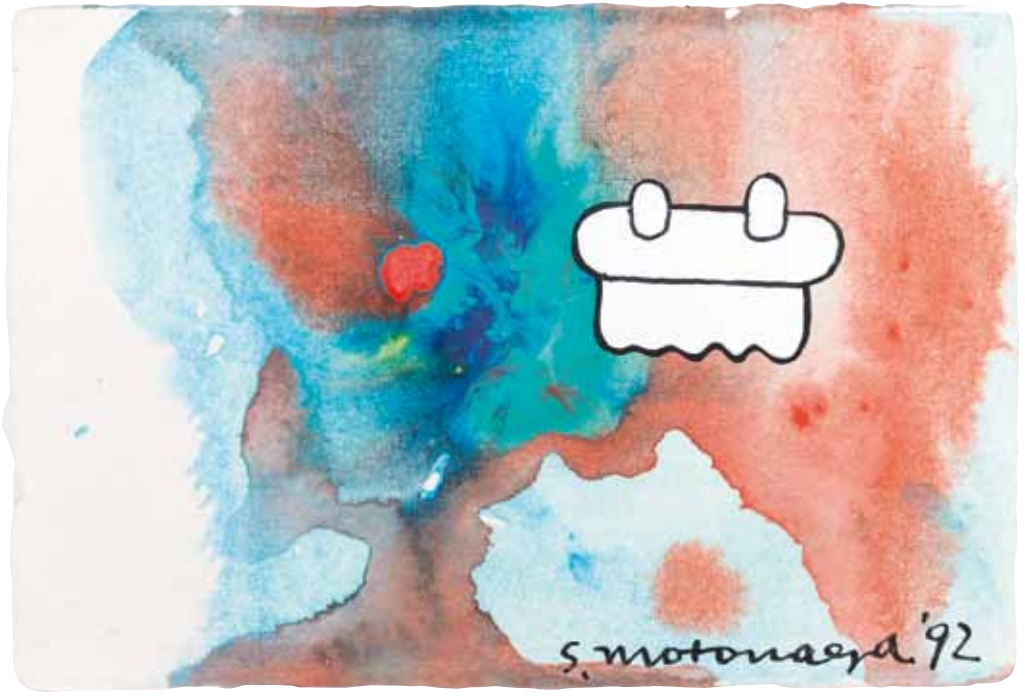
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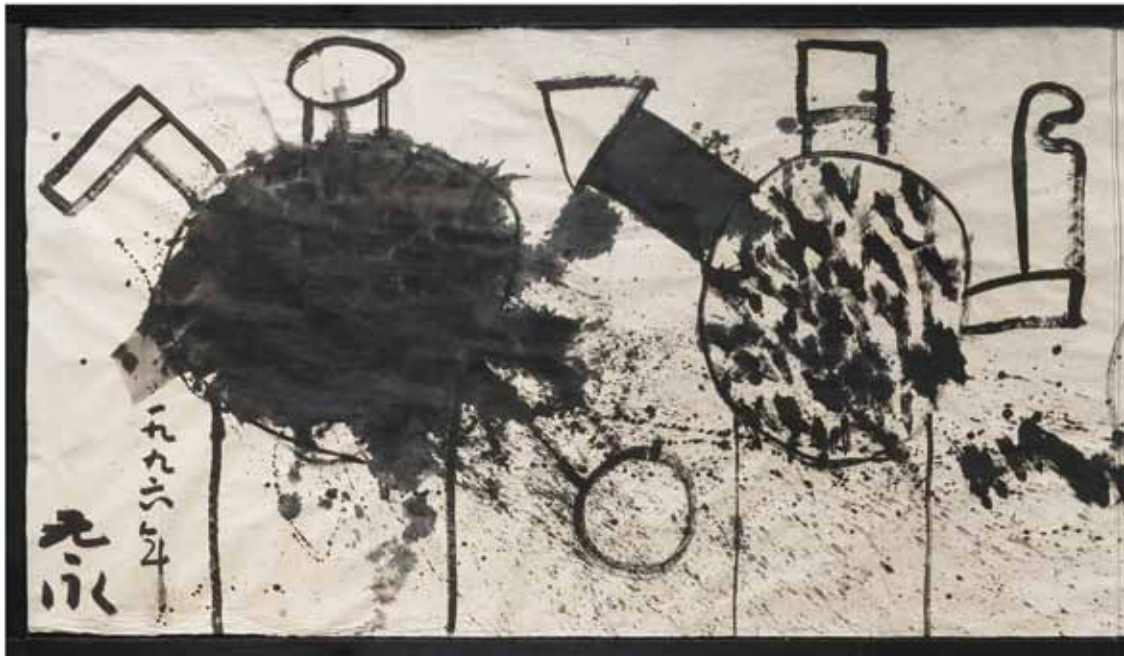








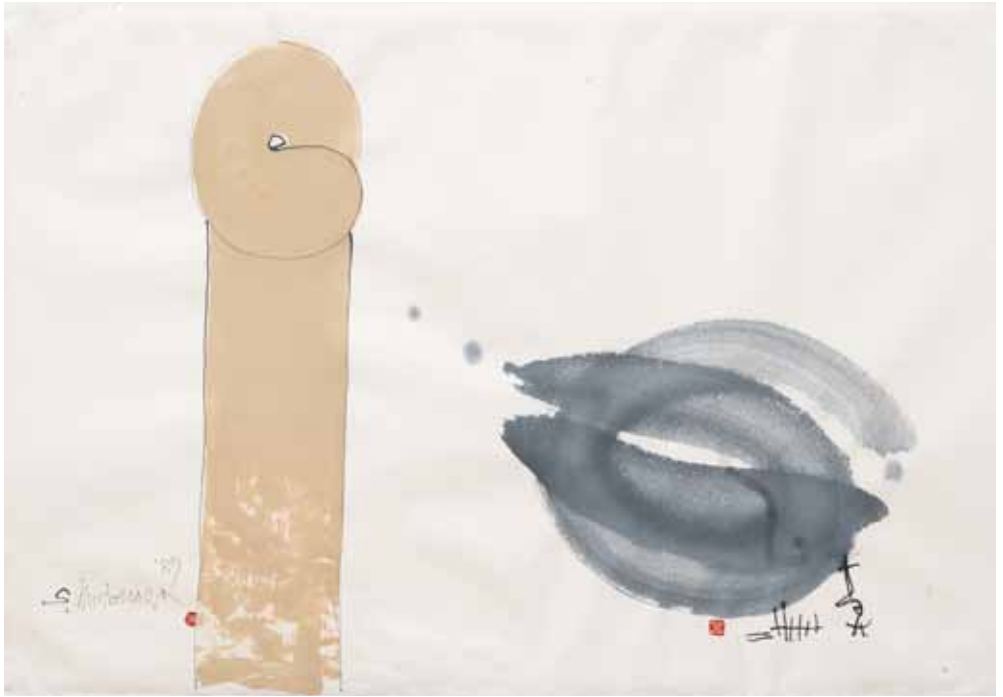








S. Motomura '92









Untitled, 1966
Synthetic resin on canvas
15.6 × 22.7 cm



New Year's Greeting Card, 1968
Pen and watercolour on postcard
14.5 × 10 cm



Work, 1968
Pen and watercolour on paper
14.8 × 10 cm



Untitled, 1996
Watercolour on Japanese paper
14 × 19.5 cm



Katachi Wa Futatsu, 2009
Watercolour and Indian ink on
paper - 24 × 27.2 cm



Work, 1982
Watercolour and pen on paper
14.8 × 10 cm



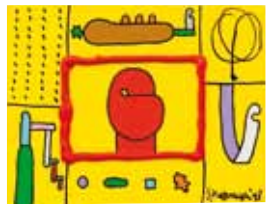
Untitled, 1999–2000
Bronze, resin
26 × 17 × 14 cm - Edition of 100



Shiro to Midori, 1991
Oil and acrylic on canvas
53 × 45.5 cm



*Horizontal Ellipse White Light Is
Downward*, 1987
Oil and acrylic on canvas
45.5 × 53 cm



Akai shikaku to aka katachi, 1993
Acrylic on canvas
14 × 18 cm



Yellow Amime (Meshes), 1981
Acrylic on canvas
73 × 60.5 cm



Work, 1972
Acrylic on canvas
18 × 18 cm



Untitled, 1980
Wood sculpture with lacquer paint
40 x 22.5 x 16 cm - Edition of 10



Chair, 1984
Wood sculpture with lacquer paint
40 x 22.5 x 16 cm - Edition of 10



Work, 2004
Wire
12.8 x 17 x 14.5 cm



Work, 1988
Ceramic plate
30.2 x 23.5 x 1.3 cm



Shiro bokashi kimidori, 1992
Acrylic on canvas
24.5 x 33.5 cm



Untitled
Acrylic on wood
4.2 x 12.2 cm



Three Colors on Top, 1991
Acrylic on canvas
41 x 31.8 cm



Stone, 2004
Stone and wire
12.9 x 14.3 x 7.4 cm



Two Backs of Chair
Wood sculpture with lacquer paint
42.5 x 27 x 14.5 cm - Edition of 10



Drawn Form in on Upper Side,
1990 - Oil and acrylic on canvas
32 x 41 cm



Three Shapes, 1989
Acrylic on canvas
24.3 x 33.5 cm



One Orange and Three Grey
Shapes, 1994
Acrylic on canvas - 33.4 x 24.4 cm



From a Purple Shape, 1990
Acrylic on canvas
60 x 72.5 cm



Daen To Yattsu, 1996
Acrylic on canvas
15.8 x 22.7 cm



Figures of Black Half Rounds, 1984
Acrylic on canvas
22.7 x 16 cm



Untitled, 1986
Ceramic
41 x 14.5 x 11.5 cm - Edition of 15



Untitled, 1980
Wood sculpture with lacquer paint
31 x 16.7 x 32.5 cm - Edition of 10



Silver Above, 1987
Acrylic on canvas
23 x 15.8 cm



White Light and One Black, 1986
Acrylic on canvas
41 x 31.8 cm



Round Net, 1994
Oil and acrylic on canvas
24.3 x 33.4 cm



Work, 1992
Acrylic on paper
10 x 15 cm



Black Vortex and White Figures,
1989
Acrylic on canvas - 45.5 x 53 cm



Work, 1992
Watercolor, marker-pen on paper
10 x 15 cm



Untitled, 2000
Acrylic and pastel on Japanese
paper - 15 x 20 cm



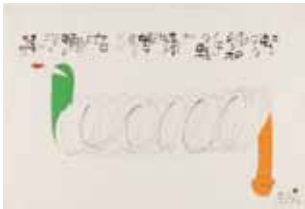
Work, 1988
Gouache on paper
18.5 x 23.2 cm



Hanging Four by Four, 1991
Watercolor and felt pen on
paperboard - 27 x 24 cm



Lines in a Mess, 1996
Pen and crayon and watercolour
on paper - 56 x 75.5 cm



Work, 1987
Acrylic and Indian ink on paper
64 x 97.5 cm



Work, 1984
Ink on paper
24 x 27 cm



Work, 1985
Watercolour and pen on
paperboard - 24.3 x 27.3 cm



Work, 1970
Pen and ink on paper
16.5 x 14.2 cm



Work, 1978
Watercolour and pen on
paperboard - 27 x 24 cm



Untitled, 1992
Watercolour on Japanese paper
10 x 15 cm



Untitled, 1996
Watercolour on fan-shaped paper
47 x 61 cm



Untitled, 2002
Acrylic on Japanese paper
11 x 71 cm



Drawing, 1996
Indian ink on Japanese paper
109.5 × 398.7 cm



Work, 1992
Acrylic on paper
9.2 × 5.5 cm



Bakuzan Sakaki, 1987
Watercolour, pen, sumi ink on
paper - 65 x 98.5 cm



Untitled
Ceramic, 9 works
14.4 x 40.2 cm - Edition of 15

Magonza

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