

# NIPO- TROPICÁLIA

By Inti Guerrero

*From Brazil's plantations to its early modern cities, Japanese-Brazilian artists articulated a modernism of their own.*

## I. Coffee Culture

In 1933, Tarsila do Amaral (1886–1973), one of the foundational figures of Brazilian modernism, painted *Operários* (“Workers”), a social-realist portrayal of a multiracial proletariat in the already industrialized city of São Paulo. With smokestacks and factory buildings in the background, rows of faces fill the composition, depicting men and women of Italian, Lebanese, Syrian, German and Japanese backgrounds as equals to the group’s majority hailing from Brazil’s diverse biracial populations.

Amaral’s portrait of São Paulo was created just four years after the Wall Street Crash devastated the coffee-export-based economy of the gigantic South American country. The artist herself had a personal connection with the coffee business. She was the daughter of a prominent coffee-plantation land-magnate, whose astronomical wealth had allowed her to study fine art in Paris under Fernand Léger. In the 1920s, before her shift into the social-realist genre, Amaral’s first paintings upon her arrival home from Paris were Léger-esque landscapes of her family’s coffee plantations, executed in a tropical palette of rich greens, blues and yellows.

It was to those same plantations, across millions of hectares, owned by the Brazilian elite, primarily of European descent, that almost all of the Japanese immigrants to Brazil were sent to work after 1908. Whereas in the 19th century, the nation encouraged primarily European immigration because of its elites’ preference for creating a European society. Following the Italian government’s elimination of subsidies for émigrés to the country due to complaints of mistreatment and precarious living conditions, Brazil was forced to look elsewhere for new citizens. A diplomatic agreement with the Empire of Japan, via the Tokyo-based Kokoku Shokumin Kaisha (“Empire Emigration Company”) made possible the transportation of 15,000 Japanese to Brazil. The majority of those families transferred to South America on a two-month boat journey were members of a disenfranchised rural Japanese population that sooner or later would have created poverty problems for newly industrialized Japan and its ideals of progress. By the turn of the 20th century, Japan had diplomatic credentials to make such an emigration agreement, having defeated the Russian Empire, a European power, in the

Russo-Japanese War (1904–05). As a result of this now-century-old, bilateral enterprise of migrant labor, which lured approximately 240,000 émigrés through the 1990s, Brazil has become the home of the largest Japanese community outside of Japan, today estimated at more than 1.5 million.

In the country’s art history, painters and sculptors of first and second generations of Nipo-Brazilians were instrumental in constructing “the modern” that Amaral and her entourage of cosmopolitan, bohemian Brazilians claimed to have inaugurated. Together with her first husband Oswald de Andrade (1890–1954), Amaral became an iconic figure in the avant-garde movement known as *Antropofagia* (“anthropophagy” is the scientific term for cannibalism) whose manifesto, penned by Andrade, proposed that “cultural cannibalism” was central to Brazilian identity, and was itself inspired by one of Amaral’s paintings. Andrade’s text is still the canonical—almost epistemological—lens through which modernity in Brazilian culture is understood.

Only much later would Nipo-Brazilian artists be recognized as the main voices of “informal abstraction” in Brazil. Having developed a more gestural and organic form of abstract art, their work lay outside of a certain triumphalist history of constructivist Brazilian art of the 1950s, which carried more weight among critics of the time who, with a bias toward European culture in general, were more interested in genealogies of Bauhaus-inspired geometrical abstraction rather than the calligraphic gestures, introspective abstraction and spirituality found in the Nipo-Brazilian circles. Had not some of the leading Nipo-Brazilian artists received crucial patronage from industrialists and become favorites of the governmental establishment, many of the latter works might have bypassed the intellectual interests of generations.

The world financial crisis of the 1930s severely affected demographics in Brazil, especially in the coffee state of São Paulo. Numerous impoverished peasants, including many of the newly arrived Japanese immigrant families, were forced to move to big cities where new industries were reanimating the economy. From the 1930s all the way to the repressive dictatorship era (1964–86), Brazil underwent a vast modernization campaign that garnered praise internationally, a prominent example being the inauguration



(Opposite page)  
**TOMIE OHTAKE**, *Untitled*, 1979, oil on canvas, 100.8 x 100.8 x 4 cm. Courtesy Instituto Tomie Ohtake, São Paulo, and Galeria Nara Roesler, São Paulo/Rio de Janeiro.

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**TARSILA DO AMARAL**, *Operários*, 1933, oil on canvas, 150 x 205 cm. Courtesy Acervo Artístico-Cultural dos Palácios do Estado de São Paulo, São Paulo.

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of the new capital Brasilia, in 1960, erected in the International Style that epitomized the midcentury period. Meanwhile, São Paulo, throughout the 1930s and '40s, had been producing its own new working class—which Amaral's *Operários* idealistically portrays as, on the one hand, having created groups of equal status and, on the other, one that transcended race. In a departure, however, from similar social contexts, such as those in the United States—a country also built up by slaves and later waves of immigrants—Amaral's painting betrays a social consciousness of how her own privileged bourgeoisie had become defunct after the economic crash, as it no longer garnered steady capital from coffee exports. The rural laborer had become the urban factory worker, and the enfranchised citizen of modern Brazil.

## II. When It Rains in the Cafezal

*“Life was hard in the coffee plantation . . . My father respected my inclination for art, but made it clear that work in the plantation was the priority, because from it depended the family's well-being. That's why I only painted on Sundays and during the days that it rained.”*

These are the words of painter Manabu Mabe (1924–1997), remembering his own experience living in the coffee plantations on the state of São Paulo. Mabe, who later became one of the most iconic abstract painters of his generation, was a largely self-taught artist who trained in calligraphy and watercolor. Like other Nipo-Brazilian artists, he received support from his family who recognized in the artistic sensibility of their son the cultural traditions of the Empire they had left behind. Mabe's description of his “free time” to paint would seem to inscribe the act of art-making within a bourgeois activity, only possible outside of the temporality of labor. But for a small number of Japanese immigrants of this generation, particularly those living in the last decade of Meiji Japan (1868–1912), the arts were part of scholarly conventions, for which masters and mentors were influential in their formation. It was in this late Meiji period that “plastic art” academies first emerged in Japan. In an attempt to modernize the arts, these institutions drew on European paradigms of representation and called for a differentiation of the fine and plastic arts from craft and traditional practices. Some Nipo-Brazilian artists, of a second generation of immigrants but older than Mabe, studied at these art schools before emigrating to Brazil.

In 1945, while still a field worker, Mabe received some basic training from painter and photographer Teisuke Kumasaka, who lived miles away in another plantation. Forced out of work by the economic depression of the 1930s, and after having sold a parcel of land that the family had owned, in the late 1940s Mabe finally decamped to São Paulo, where he met painter Tomoo Handa (1906–1996). Founder of the Seibi Group (1935–70s), the main

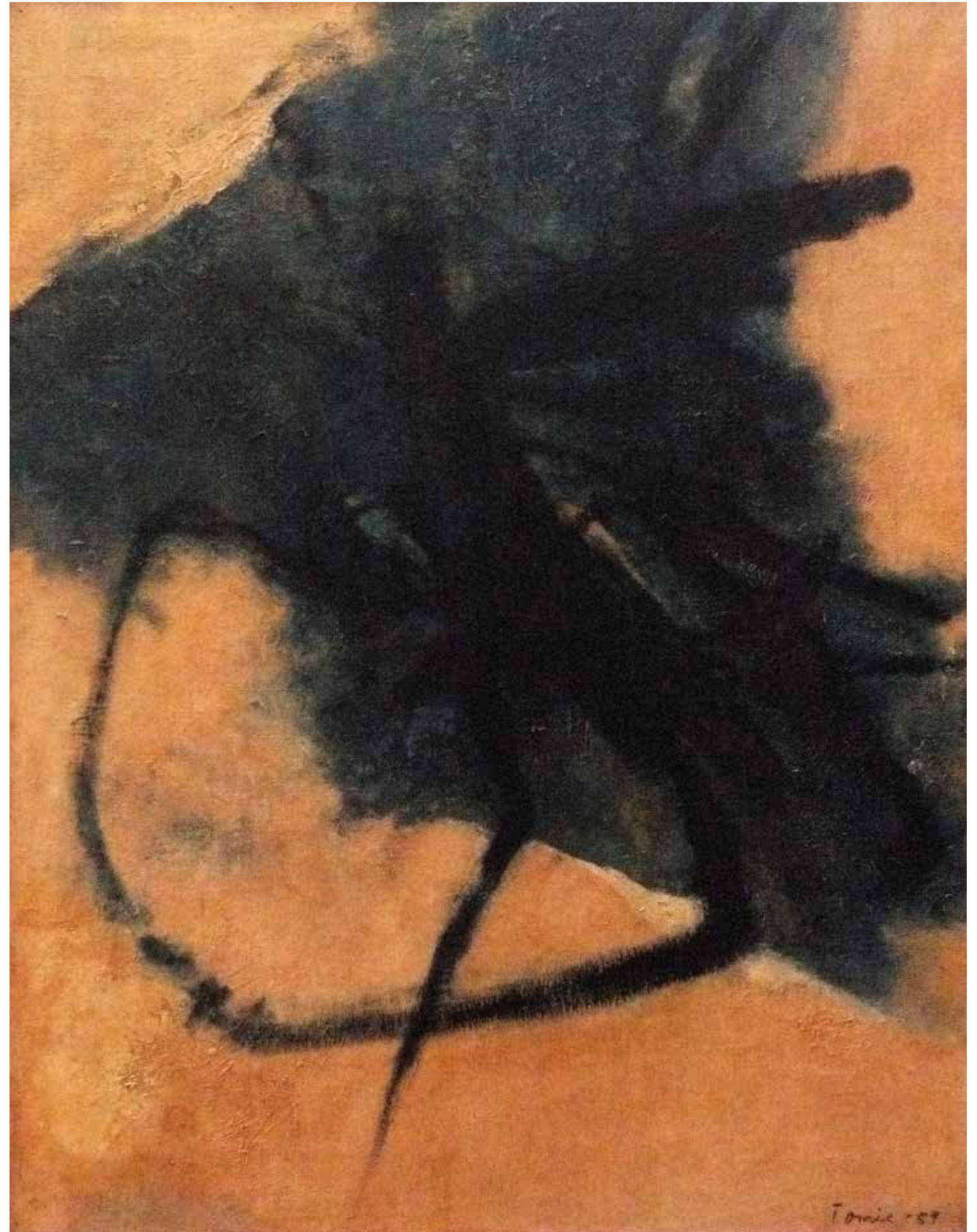
bohemian entourage of Nipo-Brazilians who rejected the beaux-arts, realist canon, Handa was central to the development of the uniquely modern visual languages of Nipo-Brazilians. The Seibi Group was also responsible for modernizing and professionalizing the craft and skills of its members, who, like Mabe, were autodidacts or came from more vernacular experiences with art-making. The consolidation of the group can be located within a “golden age” for the arts in São Paulo, where, since 1922, men and women who wanted to be part of the modern era—countering traditions, and with a sentiment of belonging to the larger world—formed various events, clubs and gatherings that expressed a rising multicultural urbanity.

At this time, the Seibi did not have the same weight or prestige as some other groups, such as the *Antropófagia*, the *Concretistas* (“Concretists”) and the *Neo-Concretistas* (“Neo-Concretists”), in part because they never wrote a manifesto. Yet the absence of a militant aesthetic regimen allowed them to be quite eclectic in style. Nonetheless, with the Seibi Group, Handa and his peers created the foundational institutional platform that cultivated generations of artists of Japanese descent. The initial core of the group was formed by painters Handa, Hajime Higaki (1908–1998), Shigeto Tanaka (1910–1970), Kiyoji Tomioka (1894–1985), Kichizaemon Takahashi (1908–1977), Yuji Tamaki (1916–1979), Yoshiya Takaoka (1909–1978), and the poet and journalist Kikuo Furuno. In 1938, Masato Aki (1918–1982) and the sculptor Iwakichi Yamamoto (b. 1914) joined the group. But in 1942, following the eruption of World War II, the Seibi dismantled, as gatherings of Japanese and Germans were declared illegal in Brazil. It was only in 1947 that the group reemerged with new members, including Mabe, Tikashi Fukushima (1920–2001), who would later lead the Guanabara faction of artists, Tomie Ohtake (1913–2015) and Flavio Shiró-Tanaka (b. 1928), among others.

The Seibi Group provided studios and exposure, but also, of perhaps even greater importance, a space for erudite discussions around the artists' productions. Through interviews made with Handa, it has been noted that prior to the war, a significant part of this intellectual debate was fueled by the group's readings of the Japanese magazine *Atelier*, which updated them in their native language on the international avant-garde. This fact attests to the radical dislocation of cultural appropriation in modern art history. It shows how Nipo-Brazilian artists, in their impulse to be modern, were studying from a Western-modernist discourse that had already been consciously appropriated in Japan. There is no doubt that *Japonisme* in 19th-century cosmopolitan Europe changed the course of many Western modern artists' careers—Manet, Whistler, Monet, Van Gogh and others, who were all subjects that would appear in the pages of *Atelier* during the 1930s. The European avant-garde's fascination with East Asia was based on the many examples of its iconography that circulated on the Continent, particularly through prints showing the ways in which traditional and Meiji Japan-era visual productions reduced forms, simplified figuration and created

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**TOMIE OHTAKE**, *Untitled*, 1959, oil on canvas, 97 x 77 cm. Courtesy Instituto Tomie Ohtake, São Paulo, and Galeria Nara Roesler, São Paulo/Rio de Janeiro.



volume through thick strokes. Japan had affected the gaze of European artists, who began to abstract the world around them and within them.

These gatherings of internationalism among Japanese artists living in the tropics were further catalyzed by the newer members of the Seibi Group, who were later arrivals to Brazil, and who had studied art at Japan's art academies. Tomioka, for example, was a student of Yasunobu Akagi (1889–1955) and Tojiro Oshita (1870–1911), founding editors of the magazine *Mizue*, an Anglophile Japanese publication that since its beginnings encouraged the use of watercolor in realistic painting and had desacralized representations of the landscape, which in traditional painting had religious connotations.

Despite the diverse practices and interests of its members, what united the Seibi Group's different members was their collective interest in expressionism, a genre that exteriorizes affect and disembodies the self. It was a style of art-making that signified the freedom and autonomy of the individual, away from what was still lingering as canonical values of the European academy (whether the 19th-century *École des Beaux Arts* or the early 20th-century Bauhaus). The diversity of visual forms in the Seibi Group ranged from Handa's reduction of forms and thick brushstrokes, informed by Cézanne, to represent scenes of tropical nature; to the subtlety of non-idyllic landscape painting in the watercolors of Kichizaemon Takahashi; or even the strong iconography present in the almost Futurist imagery of Shiró-Tanaka, who trained in Paris in the 1950s with Futurist painter Gino Severini, whose own expressionistic style of abstraction was a cathartic representation of the body, the city and the machine.

Manabu Mabe, the painter who came directly from the coffee fields, continued on to become an outstanding voice among his peers. In the 1950s, he participated in the most prestigious national salons held in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo; he was selected for the second, third and fifth editions of the Bienal de São Paulo (1953, 1955,



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**FLAVIO SHIRÓ-TANAKA**,  
*Nu*, c. 1952, pen and ink on paper,  
31 x 42 cm. Courtesy Instituto  
Tomie Ohtake, São Paulo.

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**MANABU MABE**, *Natsu No Sakebi*,  
1995, oil on canvas, 180 x 200 cm.  
Courtesy Kumamoto City, Japan.

1959, respectively). His commercial success was also fostered by his exposure at Galeria Barcinski in Rio de Janeiro, and he even received governmental patronage through prizes and grants that led him to participate—and take home a painting award—at the first Paris Biennial in 1959. At the fifth Bienal de São Paulo he won the prize for Best Painter, handed to him directly by then-Brazilian president Juscelino Kubitschek, the grand technocrat-reformer of Brazilian modernity who oversaw Brasília's completion.

Bearing this in mind, one might argue that Nipo-Brazilian abstract expressionists such as Mabe were quickly instrumentalized within a Cold War narrative in which Brazil, presenting itself as a modern country and part of the capitalist West, also embraced expressionist painting as a national style, echoing how this genre was co-opted by conservative elements within the United States as the antithesis of socialist realism under communism. This notion is supported by an article from *Time* magazine (a staunchly anticommunist publication), titled “The Year of Manabu Mabe,” which celebrated his immigrant-miracle story and illustrated how he could have only achieved such success in a free (that is, not communist) Brazil.

The Bienal de São Paulo, established in 1951 by the Italian-Brazilian industrialist Ciccillo Matarazzo, also played a role in changing the styles of artists, becoming in the early years a thermometer of what was relevant both nationally and internationally. The second-oldest event of its kind after Venice, the Bienal de São Paulo recognized works that then became of great influence to the scene. Although artists from the Seibi Group participated in significant numbers in the first editions, only a few, such as Mabe, continued to show in later iterations. The group's declining presence was related to how certain influential critics preferred and supported a Bauhaus-constructivists' paradigm of art history. It is a narrative that later became dominant, as it linked the *Concretismo* and the *Neo-Concretismo* movements in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro of the 1950s, which—among other factors—explains today's global knowledge of figures such as Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape and Hélio Oiticica, who all emerged from these groups, and have been subjects of recent retrospectives at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Tate Modern, London; and Reina Sofia, Madrid, respectively.

Although Mabe is the Seibi Group's best-known figure, to date he has been the subject of few surveys. In 1986, the Museum of Art of São Paulo held the first retrospective of Mabe's oeuvre. Recently, in 2013, a further comprehensive retrospective began traveling to different cities across Brazil, organized by the estate of the artist and Caixa Cultural Salvador. Perhaps the current exposure of his work will begin to dislocate Brazil's canonical art histories, and reposition the importance of his legacy—and that of the Seibi Group in general—within the country's history of modernism.

### III. Out of the Ghetto: Tomie Ohtake

The story of Tomie Ohtake is very different from that of many of the artists related to the Seibi Group. Born in Kyoto in 1913, she came to Brazil in 1936 to visit her brother and ended up staying when World

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War II broke out. She married, and would only go back once for a short visit in 1951. She had received drawing classes in Japan during her upbringing, but it was her arrival in Brazil that transformed her gaze. As Ohtake recalls in her memoirs, the light and humidity of the tropical landscape made a huge impact on her perception of time and space. It was only in 1952, when she studied under Japanese abstract artist Keisuke Sugano—visiting Brazil at the invitation of art critic Osório César to exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo—that she fully committed herself to an analytical inquiry of abstract painting.

Ohtake’s approach to her work was markedly different than that of Mabe and most of his peers, who favored an expressionist mode. Instead, Ohtake’s paintings embody a calligraphic action. Precise, deep and large-scale traces of ink and paint bring spirituality and introduce a sensuality of pictorial depth—an aspect of representation absent from the informal abstraction of most of the Seibi artists. Rather than exposing materiality, her works are pictorial ruminations on the limitations of the canvas and of our perception. Lacking clear figures or distinct backgrounds, her compositions reveal thick traces that expand in the spectator’s visual field. It is an experience that one can compare to the diluted borderlines of perception found in painters such as Rothko. But Ohtake’s images are inscribed in a humanistic symbolism found in Zen: an appropriation of her own Japanese heritage that distances her work from the *Japonisme* that modernism had appropriated from the Orientalist imagery circulating in Europe. Nonetheless, as local art critic and curator Paulo Herkenhoff has noted, “To think of the work of Ohtake exclusively under the perspective of that Japanese participation in the formulation of Brazilian art, or in the interests of the country for a mystical thought, would be an attempt to ghetto-ize [her achievement].”

There is no doubt that Zen thought informed her paintings as well as her life philosophy. Her relationship with signs, objects and interiority were very much connected to this cultural milieu. As she once stated, “A picture is not a thing, but a movement; it could be before, it could be after.” From her words, one can begin to see her gestures as signs of time—a time in which body and mind seem to be in a meditational transition. Standing before a painting by Ohtake, one’s gaze enters a holistic perspective. To a certain extent, this proposition of art-making brings her paintings closer to the dematerialization of the art object. Her paintings are pictorial experimentations with temporality, rather than fabrications of tangible surfaces. This point separates her from the action painters and other expressionists of the time, because she didn’t perceive her art as the record of an event—that is, the act of painting—but as a mutant state of what happened but also what can occur in the visual experiencing of her work.

If she were distancing herself from the idea of art as object, and instead proposing it as an experience, her work is also inscribed through other visual codes—namely, the bodily narratives of the Brazilian canon, in particular those of the *Neo-Concretistas* artists who would later develop even more radical ideas related to “art as experience.” This includes large-scale street performances by Lygia Pape, installation-environments for creative leisure by Hélio Oiticica, or experimental therapies by Lygia Clark, all of which expanded the field of performance history and contributed to what until recently has been categorized as “relational” productions centered around social activities. That said, Ohtake, and the other Nipo-Brazilian artists, continued their inquiry into abstract painting across the countercultural 1970s and ’80s. Their persistence in the genres of abstraction should not frame them as depoliticized artists, but as engaged with the possibility of other genealogies that were also questioning perception and the ontology of the art object in different terms. 🌐

**TOMIE OHTAKE**, *Untitled*, 1980,  
oil on canvas, 100.6 x 100.6 x 4 cm.  
Courtesy Instituto Tomie Ohtake,  
São Paulo, and Galeria Nara Roesler,  
São Paulo/Rio de Janeiro.

