

Shen Wei: STILL/MOVING

Dear Teachers,

We are delighted to welcome you and your students to the exhibition *Shen Wei: STILL / MOVING*. This show invites viewers to experience the work of Shen Wei, an internationally acclaimed artist, dancer, and choreographer, best known as a lead choreographer of the Opening Ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. In this exhibition, students will encounter large-scale paintings, works on paper, and video highlights of his choreographic work and explore how movement can inspire visual art — and vice versa.

Shen Wei's unique interdisciplinary background and practice allow us to consider the connections between his contemporary work and traditional Chinese art forms. Calligraphy, Chinese opera, and Chinese landscape paintings inform the work on view and provide important historical and cultural context.

Through close looking, discussion, and hands-on activities, our tours encourage students to consider Shen Wei's interdisciplinary process:

- Explore connections between movement, sound, and visual art.
- Consider the variety and emotive power of lines and marks.
- Think about how tradition and historical practice influence contemporary artists.



This packet is designed for upper elementary students but can be adjusted for different grade levels. Look for the **light bulb** symbol for ideas suited for older students. Please feel free to share these materials with classroom and art teachers.

The following are included:

- Introduction to the exhibition and the artist, Shen Wei
- Images from the exhibition with discussion questions
- Pre-visit activities: Experimental Mark-Making and Exploring Landscapes
- Influences and historical context
- Glossary

We look forward to working with you to support your students' engagement with art and ideas. The KMA welcomes students of all abilities. We can customize school tours to meet the needs of diverse learners and encourage teachers to reach out to collaboratively plan a visit. If you have questions or would like to discuss tour specifics, please don't hesitate to contact us!

Thank you for choosing the KMA for your class visit.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Margaret Adasko".

Margaret Adasko
Curator of Education
Katonah Museum of Art
914.767.2969 | madasko@katonahmuseum.org

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Katonah Museum of Art

Introduction to the Exhibition

Shen Wei: STILL/MOVING considers Shen Wei's visionary career as a dancer, choreographer, visual artist, and global cultural ambassador. The exhibition is comprised of two parts and illuminates the full scope of the artist's practice since his arrival to the United States in 1995, offering viewers rare access to his immersive paintings, short films, and video highlights of the Shen Wei Dance Arts repertoire.



Shen Wei was born in China's Hunan province in 1968, amidst the Cultural Revolution. At age six, he began studying traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy as well as Chinese classical opera. Upon the country's opening to the West, Shen Wei immersed himself in the pursuit of western modern dance and contemporary visual art alongside his role as a performer with the Hunan State Xian Opera Company from 1984 to 1989, before co-founding the Guangdong Modern Dance Company in 1991. This formative period informed Shen Wei's expansive outlook and his deft ability to transcend cultures and disciplines to create poetic moments of transference that unite the viewer with the cosmos and ethereal realms of consciousness.

While Shen Wei's choreography has been widely celebrated on international stages, his work as a visual artist is relatively unknown. At the Katonah Museum of Art, Shen Wei's paintings capture the body in motion through dynamic brushwork that seamlessly incorporate Chinese calligraphy and allusions to post-World War II abstract painting movements.

Selected works are accompanied by musical scores, emphasizing the generative influence of music to his interdisciplinary practice. At The Pocantico Center, Shen Wei's more recent landscape paintings reflect his ongoing dialogue with Chinese traditional *shan shui* (mountain-water) painting and nature. Often monumental in scale, these paintings possess a cinematic quality that compels the viewer to physically engage with the work, inviting sustained contemplation.

Shen Wei: STILL/MOVING is co-organized by the Katonah Museum of Art and The Pocantico Center of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. The exhibition is curated by Michelle Yun Mapplethorpe, Director and Chief Curator at the KMA, with support from Elizabeth Monti, Associate Curator at the KMA, and Katrina London, Curator at The Pocantico Center.

EXHIBITION SUPPORT

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Image for Discussion – Line and Movement

Carefully look at the image on page 5. Describe what you see.

Brushstrokes:

- What different types of lines and marks can you see?
- How do the lines differ from one another?
 - Curved or straight? Thick or thin? Dark or light?
- Use some descriptive words to help explain the way the lines move.
- Look at one line. How could you describe this line to help someone else find it?

Movement and music:

- This painting was created in response to a piece of music.
 - What type of music do you think he was listening to?
 - Scan the QR code to listen to *The Rite of Spring* by Igor Stravinsky.
 - How does listening to this music change your view of the artwork and the brushstrokes?
- Shen Wei is also a dancer and choreographer.
 - Can you see any connection between this artwork and dance?
 - How may his experience as a dancer and choreographer affect his artistic process?
 - On your visit to the KMA you will see a video of the artist creating this painting.



Overall:

- How would you describe the overall movement or energy of this artwork?
- What does this painting make you think of?
- Even though this painting is abstract, what meaning might it have for you?
- How do you think differently about this painting now, compared to when you first saw it?

As a follow up to this discussion, try the Pre-Visit Activities: Experimental Mark-Making

Shen Wei, *Study for Rite of Spring No. 2*, 2003
Oil on canvas
108 x 69 ½ in. (274.3 x 176.5 cm)



Shen Wei, *Untitled No. 1*, 2013
Oil and acrylic on linen canvas
83 ½ x 192 7/8 in. (212 x 490 cm)

Image for Discussion – Considering Landscape

Carefully look at the image on page 8.

- What do you see?
- Explore the whole painting from side to side, top to bottom.
 - What shapes, brushstrokes, or colors do you notice?
 - Look for some large swooping areas and some small, detailed elements.
 - What do you see in the background, middle ground, or foreground?
- What does this artwork remind you of?
- What mood or feeling comes to mind?
- If you were to step inside, what might it feel like?

The artist Shen Wei was influenced by traditional Chinese landscape painting, called *shan shui*. This translates to “mountain-water” and is a style of painting that depicts realistic and idealized natural landscapes, emphasizing the harmony between humans and nature.

Compare this artwork to a traditional Chinese landscape seen here.

- What is similar?
- What is very different?



Qu Ding, *Summer Mountains*, ca. 1050. Handscroll; ink and color on silk.
(Not in the exhibition.)



Compare Shen Wei, *Untitled No. 1* to the painting, *Study for Rite of Spring No. 2*

- How are these artworks different?
- How did he use his brush and paint differently?
- What similarities do you notice?

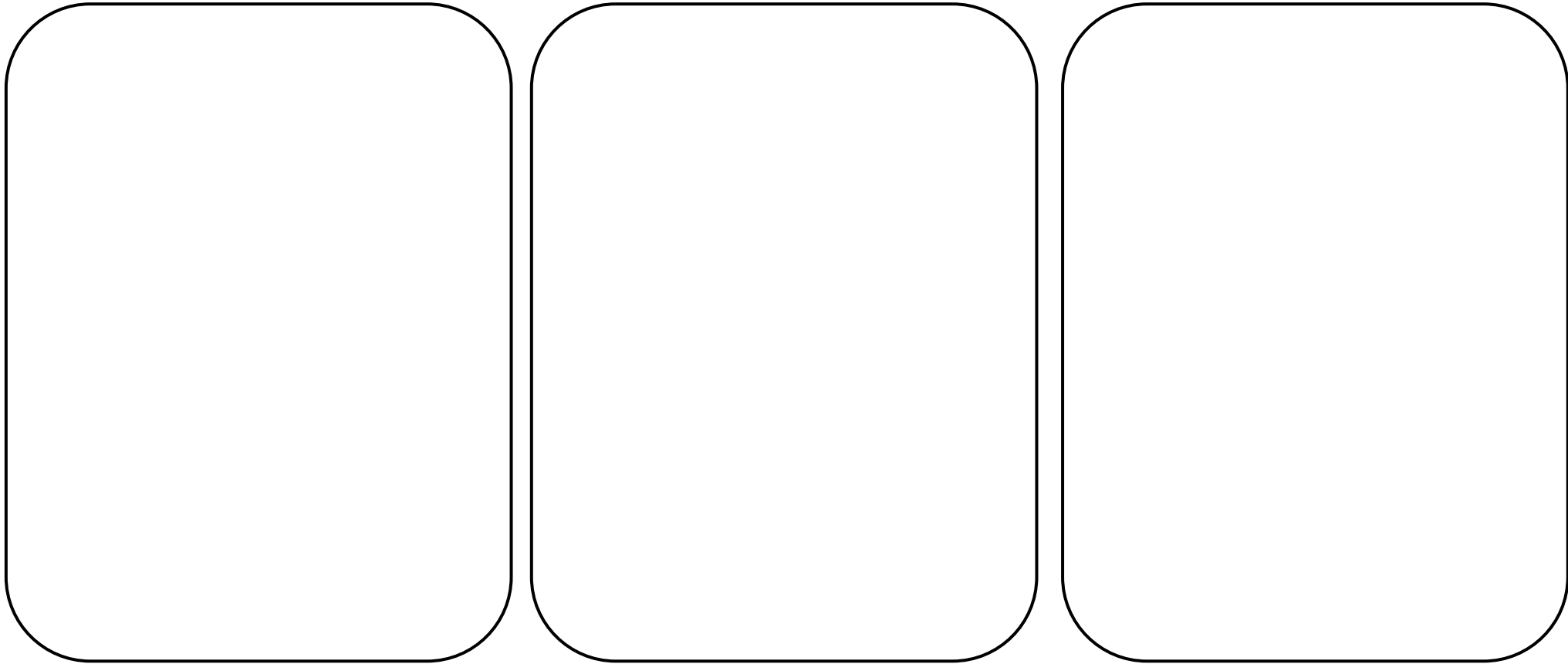
After discussing this artwork try Pre-Visit Activity: Exploring Landscape

Pre-Visit: Experimental Mark-Making – Line Quality

Mark-making describes the many ways that we can create lines and shapes on paper or other surfaces. Shen Wei's work is influenced by traditional Chinese calligraphy that utilizes different types of lines and pressure. In paintings like *Study for Rite of Spring No. 1* (page 5) we can see how the artist creates different kinds of lines by applying different amounts of pressure with his brush. When multiple paintings are created in a series, we can find similarities and differences between the individual paintings.

Make your own series

Explore a different kind of line in each box below. Use pencils, markers, crayons, pastels, or brush and ink. Line qualities could include:
thick / thin • heavy / gentle pressure • long / short lines • overlapping marks • curving / angular lines

Three large, empty rounded rectangular boxes arranged horizontally, intended for students to create their own series of line drawings or paintings. Each box is a simple black outline with rounded corners.

Reflect: What makes your paintings similar within the series? What makes them different? How do the different line qualities affect the feeling of your painting?

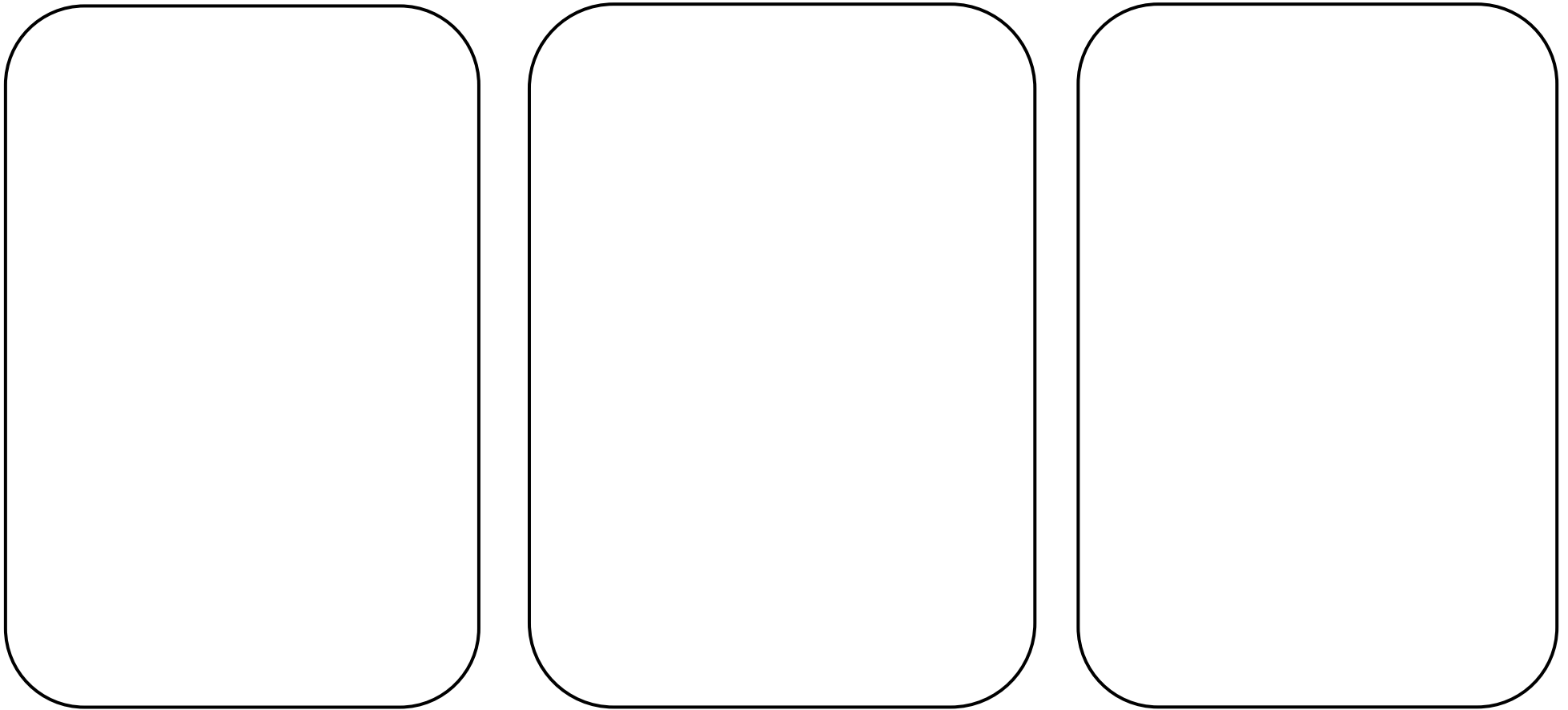
Pre-Visit: Experimental Mark-Making – Movement

We can also consider how movement affects the marks we make. Shen Wei is a painter and a dancer, so movement is very important to him. The process of creating his paintings and the gestures involved in making the marks result in expressive works that convey energy and motion.

Consider the action of your body as you make new marks.

Try a new movement technique in each box below. Motions could include:

Slither like a snake! Wiggle your brush side to side across the paper • Float like a cloud! Move slowly and softly, dabbing or brushing lightly • Flutter like a butterfly! Make light, quick movements with your brush • Bounce like popcorn. Pop up and down with your brush in hand!

Three large, empty rounded rectangular boxes arranged horizontally, intended for experimental mark-making exercises.

Reflect: Does your painting look the way you expected? Maybe you were surprised by how different motions created different lines. Compare this activity to the last one: how are these movement-inspired marks different than line quality marks in the previous activity?

Pre-Visit: Exploring Landscape

Make an experimental landscape inspired by the artist Shen Wei! After looking at the *Untitled No. 1* on page 8, Notice how this **landscape** feels like both **nature** and **abstraction** at once.

Close your eyes and picture a place, real or imaginary. Think about colors, textures, and moods rather than just mountains, trees, or sky.

Step 1: Use watercolors to lay down a foundation

Start by painting watery, broad washes of color to create an atmospheric **background**. Tilt your paper and let the paint flow, blend, and drip naturally across your page.

Step 2: Build layers

Once the background has dried a little, add new marks, such as brushstrokes, splatters, scratches, or layered shapes, to create the **foreground** of your painting.

Step 3: Reflect on your process

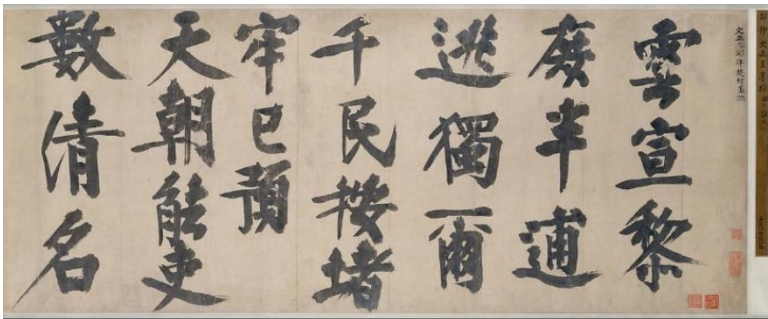
How did experimenting with chance and **gesture** change the way you think about landscapes?

Influences and Historical Context:

Action Painting: A genre of painting developed and popularized between the 1940s and the early 1960s, artists creating action paintings emphasized the physical act of painting as an essential part of the finished work. Artists like Jackson Pollock used splashing, dripping, and large gestural brushstrokes to create dynamic paintings full of movement and expression. This style of painting can be seen as an influence on Shen Wei's work through his own attention to how movement of the body can create visual works.



Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*, 1947
Enamel on canvas. 9 fr. 9 in. x 17 ft. 3 in.



Yelü Chucai, *Poem of Farewell to Liu Man*, 1240
Handscroll; ink on paper. 14 ½ x 11 ¾ in.

Calligraphy: This 3000-year-old practice combines delicate brushwork with controlled movements to create beautiful lettering and writing. Chinese calligraphy can be described in five different styles: seal script, clerical script, regular script, running script, and cursive script. Each style has its own unique brushstrokes and characters, highlighting different qualities and expressions. Traditional calligraphy students would be evaluated by the eight fundamental principles: mood/emotion, energy/vital force, spirit, realm/standing, elegance, style, expressiveness, and manner. There is an important emphasis on balance, ensuring the

appropriate equilibrium between black and white, thick and thin, big and small. Calligraphy has remained a highly valued art in Chinese culture, bridging language and art. In many of his works, Shen Wei applies black paint on a white background using gestural brushstrokes that resemble a calligraphic style.

Traditional Chinese landscape painting – shan shui

Shan shui (山水): literally translates to “mountain and water.” It is a traditional Chinese style of landscape painting that reflects the harmony between humans and nature. Rather than depicting a realistic view of the natural world, shan shui paintings express the artist's inner feelings and spiritual connection to the landscape.

Developed during the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties, shan shui became one of the most esteemed forms of Chinese art. Artists used ink and brush on paper or silk, working with expressive brushstrokes to create layered mountains, flowing rivers, misty skies, and poetic spaces that invite contemplation.

Key to shan shui is the idea that nature is not just observed, it is experienced. Artists often paint imagined landscapes that blend memory, philosophy, and emotion. The goal is not to reproduce what the eye sees, but to capture the balance and energy (qi) of the world.

Fan Kuan, *Travelers by Streams and Mountains*, ink on silk hanging scroll, c. 1000, 206.3 x 103.3 cm (National Palace Museum, Taipei)



Shen Wei: STILL/MOVING – Glossary

Museum Words:

Museum: An institution or building where works of art or other objects of value are cared for, studied, and displayed so the public can experience and learn from them.

Curator: A person who selects, organizes, and presents objects for display.

Docent: A knowledgeable guide, especially one who leads visitors through a museum and facilitates discussion about the exhibit.

Art Terms and Ideas:

Abstraction: Art that refers to the style or approach in which artists move away from representing objects and scenes realistically. Instead, they focus on elements like color, shape, form, and texture to create an artwork that expresses ideas, emotions, or concepts without directly depicting recognizable objects.

Calligraphy: The art of "beautiful writing," often created with a special pen or brush. A tradition going back 3,000 years in China, there are a variety of calligraphic styles and scripts and it is considered a supreme visual art form.

Choreographer: A person who composes the sequence of steps and moves for a performance or dance.

Contemporary art: The art of today, produced by artists who are living in the 21st century. Contemporary art provides an opportunity to reflect on present day society and the issues relevant to us and the world around us.

Gesture: The movement used to apply paint to canvas. Describing a painting as more or less gestural refers to the extent to which the artist's hand is apparent.

Guqin, pronounced [goo' keen]: A plucked Chinese seven string, musical instrument often translated as "Chinese lute" or "ancient lute." The instrument dates back 3,000 years and is revered for its rich, nuanced tones. Associated with Chinese philosophy, literature and art, it signifies cultural refinement, scholarship and intellectual depth.

Gutai, pronounced [GOO-tie]: The Gutai movement, founded in Japan in 1954, was an avant-garde art movement that emphasized experimentation, interaction, and the materiality of art. It challenged traditional boundaries between art and life, advocating for a more active engagement with the viewer through innovative techniques and mediums. Gutai artists were pioneers in combining performance, installation, and new technologies, making significant contributions to the global avant-garde discourse.

Landscape: A genre of art that depicts natural scenery such as mountains, forests, rivers, and valleys.

Mark: A visible trace or impression on a surface, such as a line, dot, spot, stain, scratch.

Mark-making: The different lines, dots, marks, patterns, and textures we can create in an artwork. This can be done using a variety of tools, techniques, and movements.

Monochromatic: A color scheme based on only one, single color tint. It uses only variations (shades) of a single hue, made by altering the saturation and brightness of the base color.

Movement: The act of moving your body or a part of your body. In art, movement may refer to the use of visual techniques, such as color, line, shape and composition, to create an illusion of motion or dynamism in an artwork.

Shan shui, pronounced [shán shwèi]: Translates as "mountain-water," a traditional style of Chinese painting that depicts realistic and idealized natural landscapes, emphasizing the harmony between humans and nature. It often features motifs like mountains, rivers, and waterfalls rendered with brush and ink, and carries philosophical meanings influenced by Taoism and Confucianism.

Tradition: The transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation. This can include ideas, art, food, celebrations and more.