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KEY HIRAGA

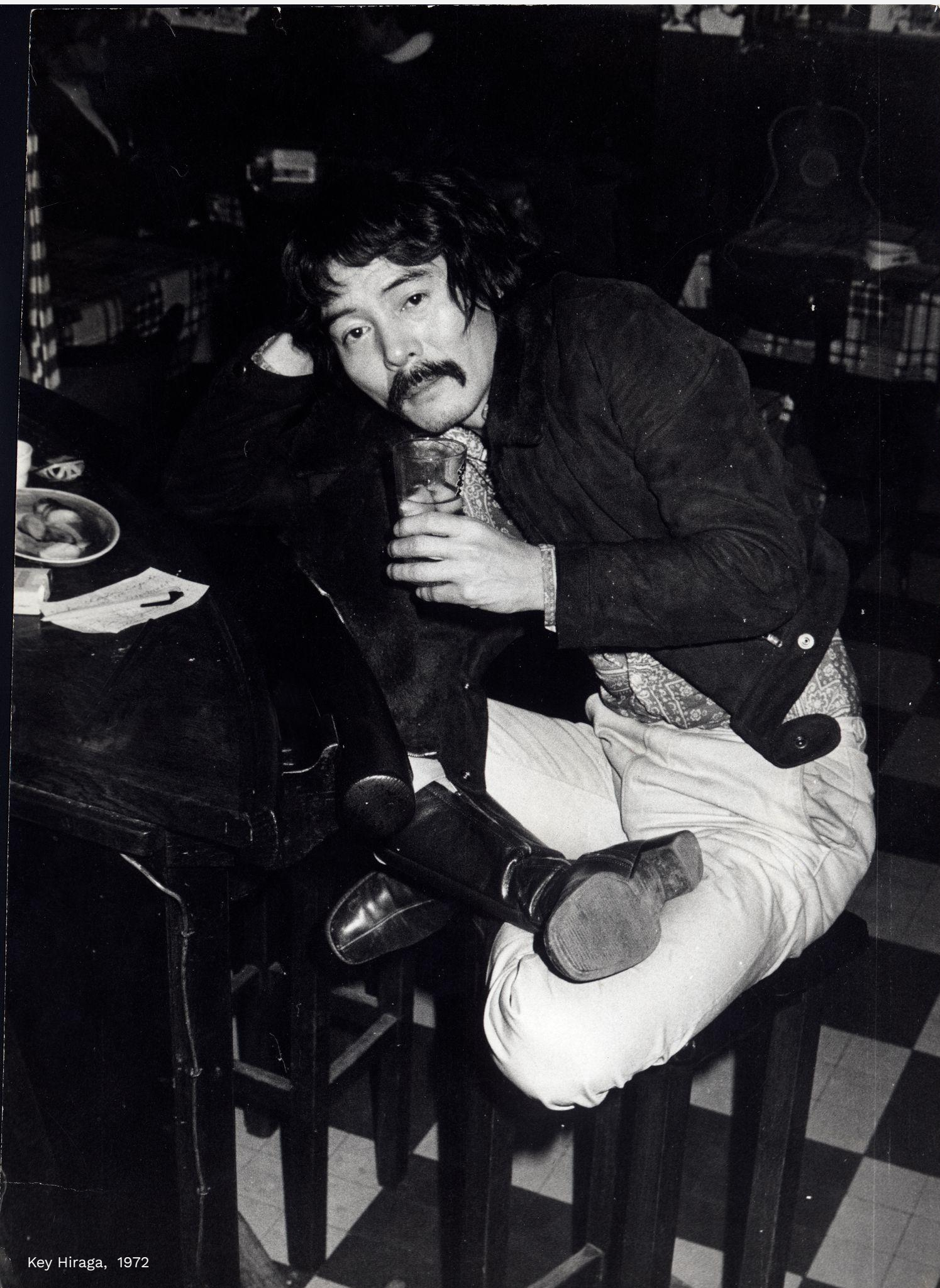
THE ELEGANT LIFE OF MR. H

APRIL 12 - MAY 31, 2025
2025年4月12日～5月31日
LOS ANGELES

NonakaHill

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Key Hiraga: Elegant Extremity

Julian Myers-Szupinska

Tumble down the rabbit-hole of Key Hiraga's work in the late-60s and early-70s and find yourself in a comical world of swollen extremities and orifices: boobs, dicks, noses, and tongues, licking, waggling, penetrating, and pimped. This is a mute floating world where sex, lurid and illogical, is everywhere, and biology operates according to chaotic rules. Bodies might interpenetrate, split apart, or open a window into their innards, exposing gurgling intestines or a fetus waving happily from inside a womb. A central character of this universe is Mr. K, whose goggling, bloodshot eyes and bowler hat make him an avatar of the artist himself, and whose "elegant life" these pictures describe.

From what sort of person, and history, did these wild images emit? Born in Tokyo in 1936, Hiraga's childhood was spent in wartime, during which his family lived in Morioka, a quiet city surrounded by mountains in north Japan. Influenced by wartime comics, he developed a child's love for art, and early on drew battle scenes for Japanese soldiers' care packages. [1] Later, after returning to Tokyo, he designed tattoos for occupying American soldiers at a friend's shop in Asakusa: "If they were paratroopers, I'd design a pig hanging from a parachute," he recalled. [2] Pressed by his parents to study economics rather than art, he skipped a conventional art education. Ironically, this positioned him after graduation to participate in a late-1950s fascination among Japanese artists, especially those unaffiliated with official art societies, with Art Informel and Art Brut, European art movements focused on gestural line and influenced by art by children and the insane.

Hiraga's early work—drawings on canvas, scratched into a surface of white oil paint—bore resemblances to Dubuffet's work of the late 1940s and

-50s. They are ineluctably flat, largely monochromatic, and sketch out lump-like bodies with spindly limbs against spotted, yellowed, stained-seeming backgrounds. Hiraga's dead-eyed figures, though, drew equally from manga, and often sprouted word balloons chattering nonsense kanji or loopy, quasi-cursive. He soon began painting "psychological landscapes"—scorched and stormy terrains—and canvases subdivided into "windows": discrete panels, each obeying their own scribbled logic. [3] These too drew on the example of manga but were equally inspired by Hiraga's shocked, thrilled experience of Tokyo's newly built public housing complexes, the result of a postwar construction boom: "Every window had the same shape, but inside, completely different lives were unfolding . . . it felt like America." [4]

Hiraga's talent was noticed. He was soon winning young-artist prizes, including an award sponsored by the British oil and gas company Shell in 1963, and the grand prize at the 3rd International Young Artists Exhibition in 1964, which included a grant for study in Paris—surely an emerging artist's dream? Not so for Hiraga, who later mused, "I had no desire to go to Paris . . . it was like a punishment, in a way." [5] Reluctant to leave, he spent several months in Japan, during which he married Koda Sachi and was invited by William Lieberman, then curator of Drawing and Prints at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, to participate in the museum's exhibition *New Japanese Painting and Sculpture*, where he would show two oil paintings, *The Day It Rained* (1963), and *The Window* (1964). [6]

Hiraga moved to Paris in April 1965, and despite "total culture shock," found inspiration, in the form of Pop-vivid colors—a reaction to Europe's "darkness"—and a strong network of galleries and artists interested in his work. [7] Living with his wife in the 11th arrondissement, he frequented bars on the Boulevard Saint-Germain with a drinking buddy, the critic and curator Tadao Ogura; Hiraga would memorialize this booze-soaked era in a

(possibly imaginary) art book titled *Paris Drunken Dream Chronicles*. [8] And he showed his work. His exhibition history lists shows at Galerie Lambert, Paris; at the Traverse Gallery in Edinburgh, Scotland, a countercultural space run by the free-love advocate Jim Haynes; and in the exhibition *La Figuration Narrative* at Galerie Creuze, Paris, where he would have shown alongside David Hockney, Öyvind Fahlström, and Niki de Saint-Phalle. [9] Hiraga met members of the avant-garde artists' group CoBrA, who brokered his relationship with galleries in the Netherlands, [10] another home base for several years. The bowler-hatted Mr. K (or sometimes Mr. H) became, in the work of the next decade and more, a libertine: René Magritte's *Man in a Bowler Hat* with his cock out, gawking and grinding his teeth.

Read Hiraga's curriculum vitae over the next decade and find an artist swamped with opportunities, showing his work in Amsterdam, Kyoto, Milan, Tokyo, São Paulo, and more, [11] whose work filled gallery windows in Paris, [12] but who could still be described as a "cheerful person, often short of money." [13] His work in this period ramped up, both in sheer number of works produced, and in the increasingly radical pulverization of the figures it depicted. Mr. K's gaga male sexuality came unmoored, mashed together with its objects, mechanical. There is violence here: body horror, razor-sliced heads, severed dick-snakes. Bodies merge and mutate, not always happily. Sexual attributes float free from gendered owners, multiply, and transmute. Mr. K wears a condom on his elongated cock-nose, wears garters, has boobs and a vulva. The floating world gains a self-reproducing autonomy, free of any subject that might be affirmed or denied. Cartoon spermatozoa wriggle and spew from priapic pipes. Eyeballs lunge from their sockets, sperm-like. The elegant life becomes ever-more-polymorphous, a science-fictional sex-machine.

Eventually, this elegant life found limits—whether in the anarchy of the aesthetic (how much farther could he take it?) or in the sensorium of a

human body that without infinite resources cannot live forever in a drunken dream. In the mid-1970s, Hiraga's paintings, which until then had happened in a flat non-space, began to impose a reality principle, the third dimension. His figures were suddenly somewhere: in cars or rooms, posing on beaches, stalking through a red-light district. After a decade-and-more of travels, he returned, in 1977, permanently to Japan. The bodily chaos of the previous years coalesced into figures and figure-groups drawing on historical genres, like *ukiyo-e*, and artists, like Hiroshige. [14] Prostitutes and gangsters glare, with stylized, self-consciously Japanese accoutrements: folding screens and tatami mats, cherry blossoms, and *fugu*.

Conservative? Maybe—relatively. The old radicalism still cropped up from time to time, as in the 1981 lithograph series *Hako*, where the titular box offers a lens onto snarling anatomical chaos inside the new figures, who smoke and leer as they are splayed or pulled apart. It winks at the edges of his brothel scenes. But seen within the arc of a life—Hiraga died in 2000 shortly after moving to Hakone-Yumoto, a village in Kanagawa prefecture—one might wonder, dialectically, if the visceral chaos of his international years might likewise have belonged to a place: The West. The bowler hat, after all, is a Victorian invention, adopted in late-19th century Japan as a stylistic signifier of modernity. Follow this line of thought and find in Hiraga's pre-Paris life a constant interpenetration of Japan and the hard-and-soft-power of the West: tattoos for occupying soldiers, a craze for Art Informel, new American-style public housing, an art award from British oil company, the dreaded grant to study in Paris, “total culture shock.” [15] Relocated to the cultural heart of an empire, who can blame a cheerful Mr. K for going apeshit? And who is to say whether this chaos was not, in its way, a sort of realism? The irony of his elegance should not be lost on us.

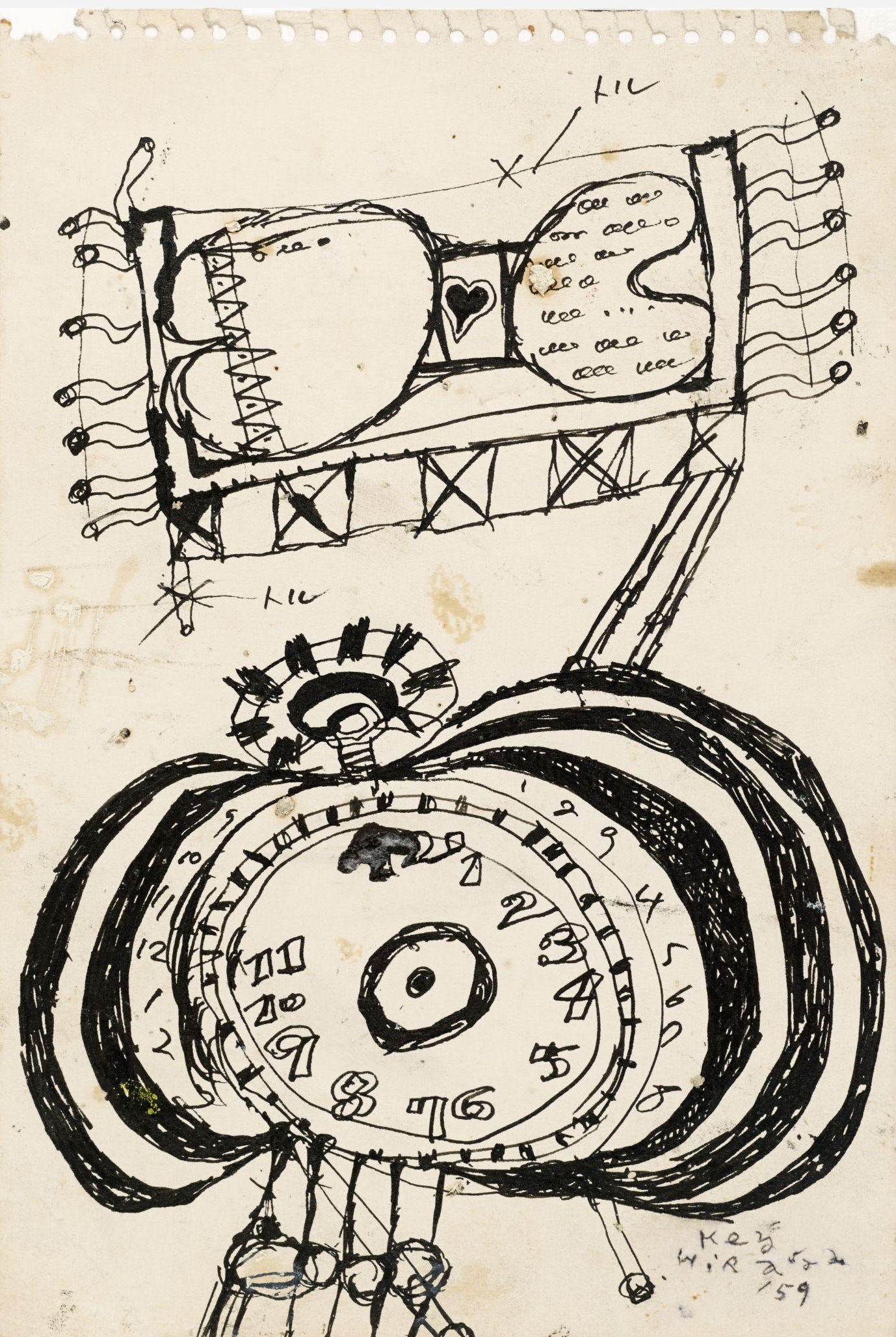


Key Hiraga, Untitled, 1971, Acrylic on canvas, 21 5/8 x 18 1/8 in (55 x 46 cm)



Key Hiraga
Untitled, 1968
Oil on canvas
18 1/8 x 21 5/8 in
46 x 55 cm

€ 55,000.00



Key Hiraga
Untitled, 1959
Ink on paper
9 1/4 x 6 1/4 in
(23.5 x 16 cm)

€ 8,000.00



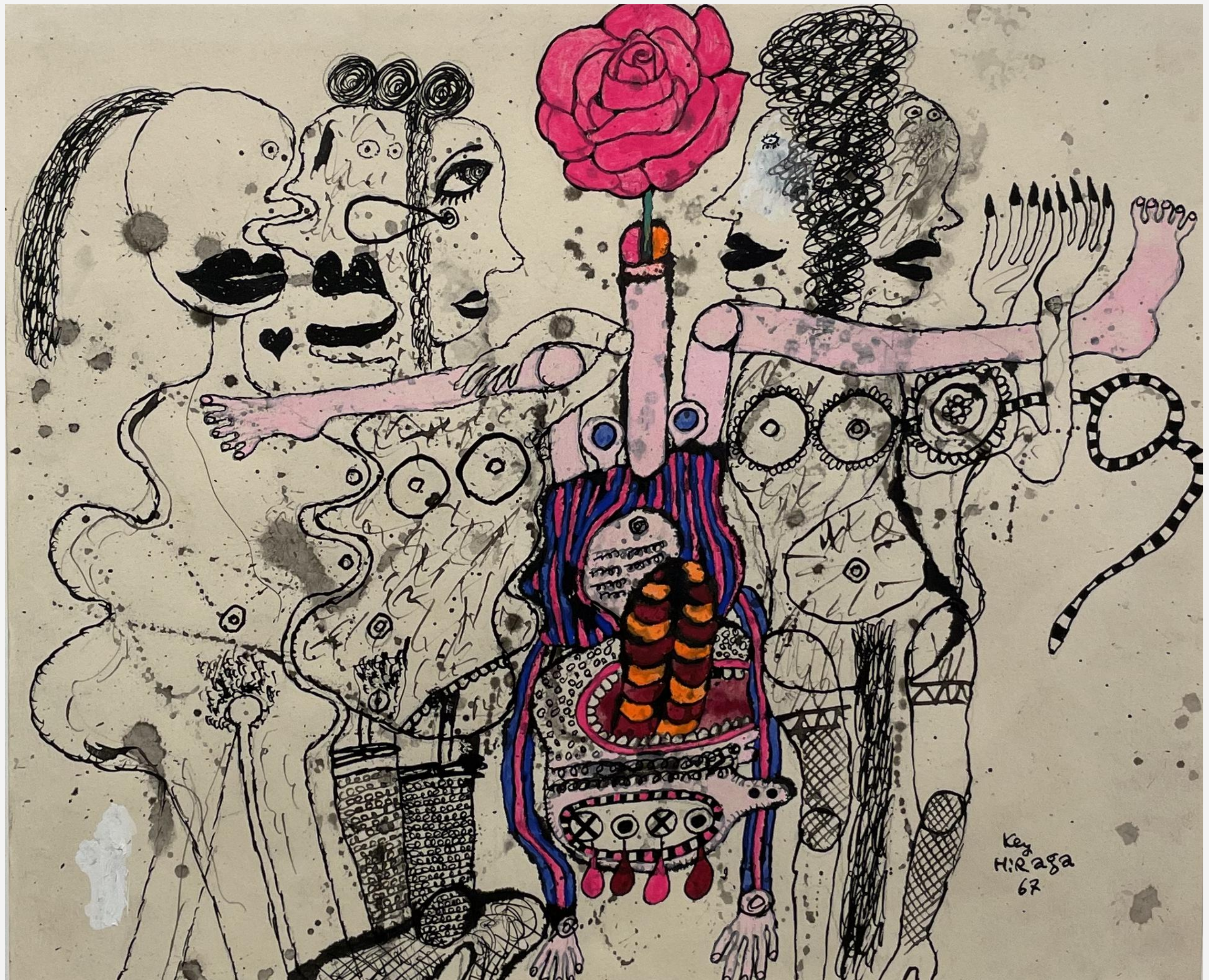
Key Hiraga
Envious People, 1963
Ink and oil drawing on paper
20 x 17 in (50.7 x 43.1 cm)
26 5/8 x 24 1/8 x 1 in framed
(67.7 x 61.3 x 2.5 cm framed)

US \$ 16,000.00



Key Hiraga
Untitled, 1965
Gouache and acrylic on paper
13 x 11 in
(33 x 28 cm)

€ 12,000.00



Key HIRAGA
Untitled, 1967
Ink and acrylic on paper
9 5/8 x 11 3/4 in
(24.5 x 30 cm)

€ 16,000.00



Key Hiraga
The Elegant Life of Mr. H, 1967
Mixed media on paper
10 5/8 x 8 5/8 in
(27 x 22 cm)

€ 14,000.00



Key Hiraga
Windows, 1966-1967
Acrylic on canvas
45 7/8 x 34 5/8 in
(116.5 x 88 cm)

€ 120,000.00







Key Hiraga
Untitled, 1967
Oil on canvas
28 3/4 x 23 5/8 in
(73 x 60 cm)

€ 70,000.00



Key Hiraga
The Elegant Life of Mr. H, 1967
Oil on canvas
25 5/8 x 21 1/4 in
(65 x 54 cm)

€ 65,000.00





Key Hiraga
The Elegant Life of Mr. K, 1971
Oil on canvas
51 1/8 x 63 3/4 in
(130 x 162 cm)

€ 180,000.00





Key Hiraga
Soap bubble, 1975
Acrylic on canvas
17 3/4 x 21 in (45 x 53.5 cm)
22 5/8 x 25 5/8 x 1 5/8 in framed
(57.5 x 65 x 4 cm framed)

US \$ 38,000.00



Key Hiraga
The Elegant Life of Mr. H II-9, 1971
Acrylic on canvas
18 1/8 x 15 in (46 x 38 cm)
18 7/8 x 15 3/4 x 1 1/2 in framed
(48 x 40 x 3.7 cm framed)

US \$ 35,000.00



Key Hiraga
Untitled, 1971
Acrylic on canvas
21 5/8 x 18 1/8 in
(55 x 46 cm)

€ 55,000.00



Key Hiraga
Untitled, 1971
Acrylic on canvas
21 1/4 x 17 3/4 in
(54 x 45 cm)

€ 55,000.00



Key Hiraga
The Elegant Life of Mr. H, 1973
Acrylic on canvas
17 7/8 x 20 7/8 in
45.5 x 53 cm

US \$38,000.00



Key Hiraga
To Where, 1973
Acrylic on canvas
34 7/8 x 45 5/8 in
(88.5 x 115.8 cm)
41 x 51 5/8 x 2 3/8 in framed
(104 x 131 x 6 framed cm)

US \$75,000.00



Key Hiraga
The Elegant Life of Mr. K, 1971
Acrylic on canvas
10 5/8 x 8 5/8 in
(27 x 22 cm)

€ 24,000.00



Key Hiraga
The Woman in the Window, 1975
Acrylic on canvas
10 5/8 x 8 1/2 in (27 x 21.6 cm)
16 7/8 x 14 3/4 x 1 1/2 in framed
(43 x 37.6 x 3.7 cm framed)

US \$ 28,000.00



Key Hiraga
Rose and Candy III, 1978
Acrylic on canvas
10 7/8 x 8 5/8 in
27.5 x 22 cm

€ 18,000.00







Key Hiraga
Tea Ceremony at Yesterday's Hermitage, 1984
Mixed media on paper
15 x 17 3/4 in
38 x 45 cm
€ 14,000.00



Key Hiraga
Gin Fizz by Mr. Q, 1988
Mixed media on paper
17 3/8 x 13 in
44 x 33 cm

€ 14,000.00



Key Hiraga
Untitled, 1992
Mixed media on paper
12 7/8 x 16 1/2 in
32.7 x 41.8 cm

€ 7,500.00



Key Hiraga
Cherry Blossoms in the Night at Koiso, 1984
Acrylic on canvas
13 x 9 1/2 in
33 x 24 cm

€ 20,000.00



Key Hiraga
Untitled, 1989
Mixed media on paper
15 x 18 1/8 in
(38 x 46 cm)
€ 14,000.00

KEY HIRAGA

b. 1936 Tokyo, Japan | d. 2000, Hakone, Japan

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2025

Key Hiraga, The Elegant Life of Mr. H, Nonaka-Hill, Los Angeles, CA

2020

Key Hiraga, Paris 1964-1974, curator Stéphane Corréard, Loeve&Co, Gallery, Paris, France

2019

Key Hiraga, Works 1958-1993, Ortuzar, New York, NY

2015

Key Hiraga, Studio Gariboldi, Milano, Italy

2008

The Elegant Life of Key Hiraga : A Japanese artist in Europe 1965 – 1974, The Mayor Gallery, London, UK

2000

Modern painter - Exhibition of the avant-garde fiction paintings of Key Hiraga, Hiratsuka Museum of Modern Art, Hiratsuka, Japan

1971

The Crazy World of Mister K., Galerie T., Haarlem, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
The Crazy World of Mister K., Galerie Jalmar, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

1969

Solo show, Daïnana Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

1968

The Elegant Life of Mister P. , Schiedam (Pays-Bas), Punt Vier Gallery, Schiedam, The Netherlands

1967

Tableaux de Key Hiraga, Lambert Gallery, Paris, France

Selected Group Exhibitions

2020

New images of Man, curator, Alison M. Giingeras, Blum&Poe, Los Angeles, USA

2017

Key Hiraga / Tetsumi Kudo, En affinité(s), Loevenbruck, Paris, France

1991

Japanese Anti-Art: Now and Then, The National Museum of Art, Osaka, Japan

1989

Japanese Ways Western Means: Art of the 1980s in Japan, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia

1972

Japanese Artists from Europe, The National Museum of Art, Kyoto, Japan

1970

Erotissimorama, Jacques Casanova Gallery, Paris, France

1969

10th Sao Paulo Biennale, Sao Paulo, Brazil

1967

Le groupe ORA, Jacqueline Ranson, Gallery, Paris, France

1966

The New Japanese Painting and Sculpture, MoMA, New York, USA

1965

La figuration narrative, Creuze Gallery, Paris, France
Biennale de Paris, Paris France

1964

National Exhibition, New Artist Price laureat, Tokyo Metropolitan Museum, Tokyo, Japan

1957

First Asian Young Artists Exhibition, Tokyo, Japan

KEY HIRAGA

b. 1936 Tokyo, Japan | d. 2000, Hakone, Japan

Public Collections

Fonds Municipal d’Art Contemporain, Paris, France

Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, The Netherlands

Kei Hiraga Museum, Hakone, Japan

Lunds Konsthall, Lund, Sweden

Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA

The National Museum of Art, Osaka, Japan

The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, Japan

Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK

Yorozu Tetsugoro Memorial Museum, Towa, Japan



Key Hiraga, Untitled (Three Women), 1983,
Pencil on paper, 10 7/8 x 14 5/8 in (27.5 x 37 cm)
US \$ 9,500.00

1. Key Hiraga, “Artist Interview,” by Hikari Koike, in Modern Painter: Exhibition of the Avant-Garde Fiction Paintings of Key Hiraga, exhibition catalogue (Hiratsuka Museum of Art, 2000), 12–16. As translated by Chie Taino.
2. Hiraga, “Artist Interview.”
3. Hiraga, “Artist Interview.”
4. Hiraga, “Artist Interview.”
5. Hiraga, “Artist Interview.”
6. The New Japanese Painting and Sculpture was organized by Lieberman and Dorothy C. Miller, the museum’s senior curator of Painting and Sculpture, and was open from October 19, 1966, to January 2, 1967. The museum acquired Hiraga’s Windows for its permanent collection in 1967.
7. Hiraga, “Artist Interview.”
8. As described by Japanologist and art historian Inge Klompmakers in The Elegant Life of Key Hiraga: A Japanese Artist in Europe, 1965–1974, exhibition catalogue (The Mayor Gallery, 2008), 8–10. Describing his Paris years, Hiraga reminisced, “Time flies. The days just go by so quickly. That’s why I titled my art book Paris Drunken Dream Chronicles. It really felt like an instant.” Hiraga, “Artist Interview.” The art book’s existence is unconfirmed.
9. Klompmakers narrates Hiraga’s participation in La Figuration narrative (The Elegant Life, 10) but misdates it to 1966. Organized by the French critic and curator G  rald Gassiot-Talabot, La Figuration narrative dans l’art contemporain appeared at Galerie Creuze, Paris, October 1–29, 1965; Hiraga’s name does not appear on the poster for the show. Hiraga may have been a late addition—he arrived in Paris in April—or he may have been added to later editions of the show as it traveled. Hiraga’s correspondence with Gassiot-Talabot seems to begin in 1966.
10. According to Klompmakers, he became acquainted with the CoBrA artist Corneille, who introduced him to Gallery T, Haarlem, the Netherlands (The Elegant Life, 10). Inaugurated in 1966, Gallery T was run by the Dutch comics artist Frans Funke K  pper and his wife Rith   and specialized in the New Figuration movement. See “Frans Funke K  pper,” Lambiek Comiclopedia, last updated September 7, 2024, https://www.lambiek.net/artists/f/funke_kupper_f.htm.
11. Hiraga was one of seven artists chosen by Tadao Ogura to represent Japan at the 10th S  o Paulo Biennial. See Ogura, Japao: 10 Bienal de Sao Paulo 1969: Key Hiraga, Kozo Mio, Hotoshi Maeda, Keiji Usami, Tomio Miki, Hisayuki Mogami, Kazuo Yuhara, exhibition catalogue (Bienal de Sao Paulo and Kokusai Bunka, 1969).
12. Yutaka Sasaki, “Key Hiraga: Endless Mystery,” in Modern Painter: Exhibition of the Avant-Garde Fiction Paintings of Key Hiraga, exhibition catalogue (Hiratsuka Museum of Art, 2000), 9. Translated by Chie Taino.
13. This characterization relies on Klompmakers’s reading of Hiraga’s correspondence with Gallery T (The Elegant Life, 10). She writes, “more than once he asked Gallery T for an advance payment or a loan.”
14. For example, Klompmakers, 11 n.18, traces fireworks in the background of a 1990 painting by Hiraga to a scene in Hiroshige’s One Hundred Famous Views of Edo (1858). See also the description offered by Bokushin Gallery director Yasuaki Niimi in “The Ultimate Aesthetic of the Ordinary,” in Modern Painter, 11. Translated by Chie Taino.
15. Hiraga, “Artist Interview.”

Nonaka-Hill was founded in 2018 in Los Angeles by Rodney and Takayoshi Nonaka-Hill. Nonaka-Hill Kyoto opened in Fall of 2025.

Recognizing that art exhibition spaces of any scale and economy will, over time, provide a community with a matrix of new and long-lasting memories, Nonaka-Hill has endeavored to keep “Japan” as a connective presence in each of its exhibitions to date. Working with emerging artists, established artists, and artist estates from Japan and its diaspora, alongside non-Japanese artists, the gallery team has enjoyed the erratic shifts in self-education, exhibition presentation, and public storytelling.

Los Angeles

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営業時間: 11:00 – 18:00

定休日: 日・月・祝祭日

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