

Michiko Itatani: *Celestial Stage*

By [Conor Lauesen](#)



Michiko Itatani, "Collection Sol III" painting from *Celestial Maze 22-B-1*, 2022, oil on canvas, 78 x 96 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Theatrical and resplendent, contemporary artist Michiko Itatani's exhibition *Celestial Stage* occupies the top two-floors at the Wrightwood 659 Gallery in Chicago. Organized by Ashley Janke, this forty-year retrospective is composed predominantly of large-scale tableau paintings, sculpture, and site-specific objects. Regardless of her materials, the entirety of her oeuvre is committed to narrative and the language of story-telling. In this way, the artist's visual lexicon of planetary penchants and mathematical dreamscapes permeates the ongoing exhibition (now extended through January 28, 2023) at the Wrightwood.

“Quantum Chandelier” painting from *Tesseract Study 21-B-02* (2021) is a gossamer shield of pinks and reds. Inside a laser-beam hall of the unknown, Itatani discloses her benevolent universe of otherness. At center hovers a prismatic tetrahedral shape—this cube-like geometrical device repeatedly appears in the artist’s pictures. Surrounding the translucent mesh-icon is a lavish array of chandeliers and extraterrestrial polka-dot globes.

To frame the regularly serialized work, let us situate the American artist in the early 1970s as a novice practitioner and international student at SAIC (School of the Art Institute of Chicago). Coming to the states from Japan, Itatani imagined herself as a fiction writer. When describing her current practice, she suggests: “I collect them all [a person, a creature, a tree ... a song, a painting, or a planet] and let them mingle with the cosmos. It’s my fiction writing in painting language: incomplete, fragmented, and under inquiry.” Receptive to the fissures of contingency, Itatani’s quantum milieu is fundamentally invested in the literary tradition of world-building.

Consider a few astrophysical titles as example: *“Quantum Chandelier”* painting from *Tesseract Study 21-B-02*, or *“Personal Codes”* painting from *Cosmic Geometry 19-B-4* (2019). Albeit at first defamiliarizing, these lunar scenes in fact harbor a sense of quiet ceremonial intimacy.



Michiko Itatani, *“Cosmic Returning”* painting from *Quantum Chandelier 21-C-02*, 2021, oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches. Courtesy the artist.

“*Collection Sol III*” painting from *Celestial Maze 22-B-1* (2022) is a diorama-like picture festooned with alchemical symbols placed atop a golden tiled floor: atomic models, atlas obscura, AI instruments, and other esoteric compasses nestle within this labyrinth. At the periphery, an Azul skyscape seems to bracket the galactic interior chamber. However, within this astronomical elixir any stable sense of three-dimensional coordination is complicated by two apparitional tetra-wires shapes. These fine cubic lines horizontally float into the middle of the frame. As if rotating along a vapor continuum, Itatani’s best satellite pictures contain this unknowable ebb and flow: a mixture of levity and humor, pure imagination and sentient seriousness gloss the surface.

Itatani’s most recent anti-gravitational series “Roundabout Orbit” too reveals akin gestalt psychology. These small-scale cinematic drawings are neither sketches nor studies. Instead, the condensed constellation of cross-hatched *kakeami* are self-contained works: molecular forms in a propulsive forcefield. In these three alike pictures, magnetic atoms and asteroid electrons dance in harmony.

Similar concepts of space-time configure the artist’s sculptural work: questions of form and scale, objecthood and materiality, absence and presence, repetition and incongruity (think of a cosmically-minded Frank Stella or Cy Twombly). Installed on the second-floor (adjoining staircase too) are three object-oriented, site-specific works. “Unquiet” painting/installation from *Radiant Triage 1999-A-2* (1999–2022) is a constellation of repetitive hexagonal frames. The armada of crystal snowflakes flank the grand staircase. Just atop the stairs stands and lurking is “*Untitled*” painting/installation 78-J-3 (25 by 25 by 85 inches). Composed in 1978, the installation sculpture is the earliest artwork on display. At 85 inches high, this shimmering black box is an object just slightly larger than human proportions. Its polished dark surface repeats the tetra-threaded lines seen throughout Itatani’s more traditional tableau pictures. Formally shifting between a visual vernacular of sculpture, statue, monument, and obelisk, the domineering figure stands erect in a liminal cosmic plane.

“*esseract Study*” is the third and final specific object. Here, the artist’s mathematical interest in wholeness and indivisibility takes on gravitational pull. Electric blue stars, ethereal window patterns, and an obsidian neon nest catapult across the polyhedral canvas. Like a totemic bridge, the topography glides across the off-kilter surface—a matrix of elements emergent from a distant void. The edgy shape doubly mobilizes the gallery space: a mineral deposit from an alien sphere spins quiet on the gallery wall. Cinephiles may find pictorial analogs to filmmakers and video artists such as auteur directors David Lynch or Apichatpong Weerasethakul, perhaps even Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Beholden to this final phosphorescent encounter we are invited into an uncanny ballroom of cosmic collisions. In “*Cosmic Returning*” a golden pearled harp, grand piano, and Borges-like helix bookcase create the tableau. Behind the central montage a dozen sky-blue screens frame a back wall. At the edges her geometric lattice lines invade the scene of stasis. All inside a red

room. Seen together, Itatani's astral planes form a palimpsest of unheard harmonic visions and sonic intervals amidst a celestial sky.

Wrightwood 659 Gallery

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Chicago



Michiko Itatani, "Still life" painting from *Astroarchaeologist 22-D-2*, 2022, oil on canvas, 28 x 23 inches. Courtesy the artist.