

Deep Time, Moonlight and a Place to Enter the Universe: A Review of Michiko Itatani at One After 909

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"Personal Codes"
painting from *Cosmic Geometry 19-D-01*, 2019, Oil on canvas, 42x 34 inches/ Image: One After 909.

Beneath a labyrinth of beads made of light, a corridor—or is it a river of gray scales move toward an invisible horizon? In its depths, orbs—or maybe snowflakes—settle on the tips of solid matter, or are they melting? Ripples from rock rooted in the riverbed emanate on a glass-like surface. In the distance, a row of windows, or maybe an observatory, is scarcely visible. In the foreground, a water-bearing pot stands silent, still and strong. Everything is strangely suspended in time. Time itself sits on the surface suspended. Light moves, drifts and emanates at different depths, making it difficult to understand where exactly one is situated within the painting. A ring of orbs hover at the lower edge of the painting. They appear repetitively, like a nagging conscience, across neighboring canvases. There can be no right or wrong answer here.

Much like the Voyager's milestone image of the Earth as seen for the first time from space, Michiko Itatani's paintings at One After 909 remind us of how infinitesimally small yet hugely impressive every single human being is in determining the destiny of this earth. The artist, who prefers to be referred to by her first name, was born in Japan, and has been in Chicago since 1970, the year she decided to live "somewhere she had never lived before." As a young writer in Japan, her teachers recommended she live somewhere new, somewhere she could "live fully," to understand her identity as a writer of fiction. Dropping a pin at the center of the United States, Michiko migrated to Chicago, later attending the School of the Art Institute of Chicago to study painting, "something she had never done before." She began to teach in the same department in 1979, and continues to do so today. This constant state of intention set against a baseline of unknowingness is where I met the artist, at her opening at One After 909.



"Cosmic Kaleidoscope" painting from Pattern Recognition PT-10, 2013, Oil on canvas, 84 x 72 inches / Image: One After 909

Michiko, who still finds her roots in fiction writing, is deeply concerned with contemporary humanist themes. The anxieties of climate change, border politics, and growing religious and political intolerance lie at the center of her concerns, yet what is expressed in her works are valuable,

precious moments of deep time and careful compositional consideration that stem from chapters of her personal story.

“Though they may have been created as chapters, they are not meant to be read as chapters,” she says.

The paintings stand as visions that initiate a quiet conversation between the artist and the child-like curiosity of the viewer. To approach the works, it seems almost necessary to embody the humility of a child, finding your voice on a planet at the brink of extinction.

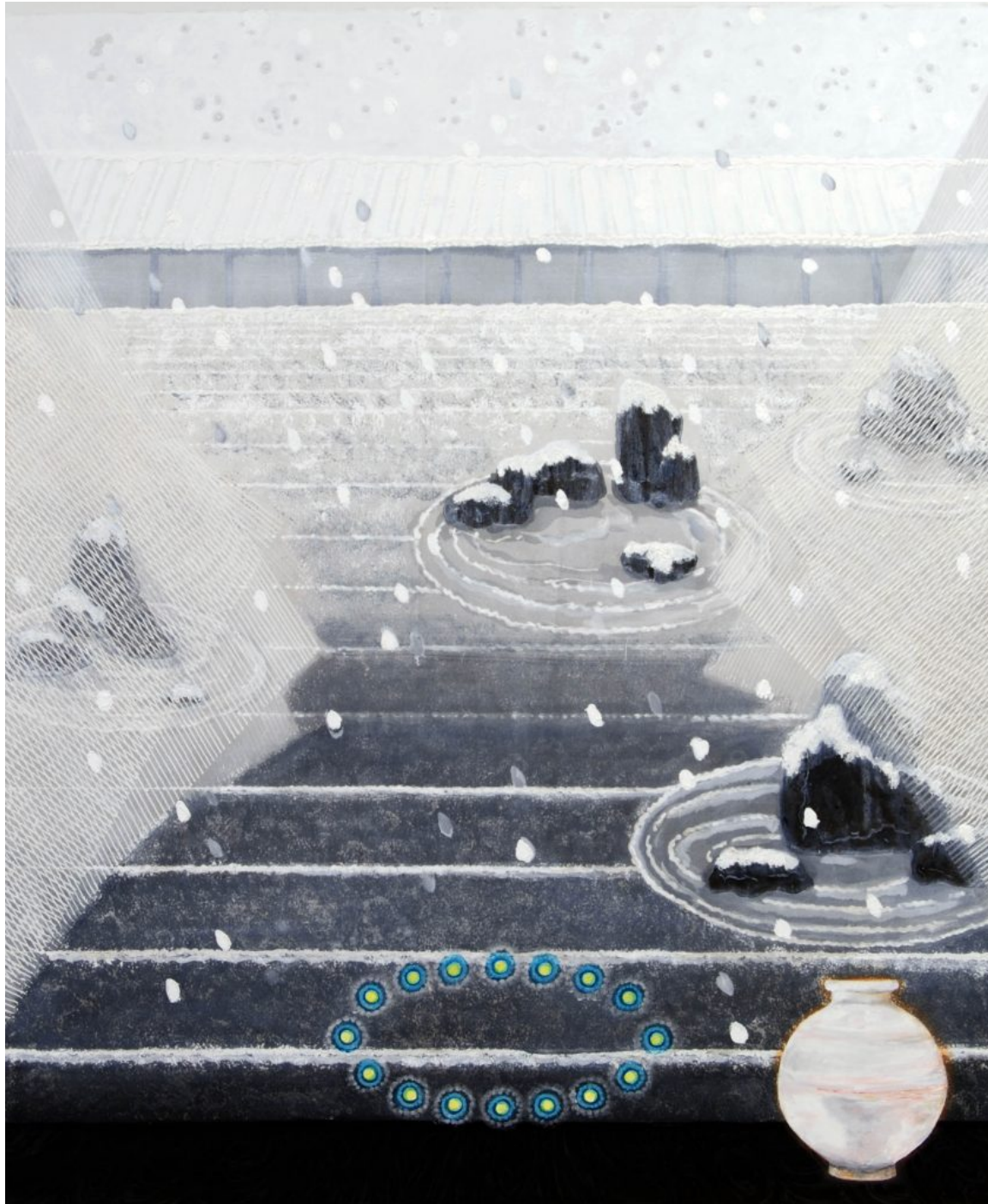
Michiko intuitively leaves marks of cultural moments within her abstractions on canvas. A model of a rocket, an antique globe, a halo of bright orbs, all force a shift in perspective set against the backdrop of deep time. While some paintings focus on the tesseract as central form, others portray the expansive breadth and depth of baroque hallways—a series of rooms whose doors face each other, holding the knowledge of generations before us.

“It is a miracle that we are still here given how complex we have made our culture,” Michiko says.

She reminds us that it is humbling to be human at this instant, with the imminence of the collapse of global ecosystems and mass extinction nipping at our heels. Michiko emphasizes the need for each individual to play their part in resisting, in slowing down our ways of living, in order to function in relation to the vast scales of the universe and civilization.

Ranging from large format portrait-oriented canvases to a series of miniature works at the entrance of the exhibit, Michiko and Stano Grezdo, the gallery director, intentionally set out to create a space for calming and careful consideration. Known for her craft and aptitude for building her own canvases, Michiko, now seventy-one, scales her own lumber and builds each piece by hand, lending each work a unique quality. While I hoped to see her irregular, geometric canvases, the thoughtful selection of this body of work creates an atmosphere that is formed by the gallery’s spatial, material and experiential conditions. In an

engagement with the works in the space, one finds oneself able to unpack, reformulate and discover the effects of the artist's ideas, allowing one to move, change and grow the longer one submits themselves to the process of slowing down.



"Cosmic Wanderlust" painting from CTRL- HOME/Echo CRH-1, 2011. Oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches/ Image: One After 909.

As an image-maker first, Michiko thinks of meaning making and storytelling as central to her practice. When asked what story inspired a particular piece, Michiko graciously smiles.

“As long as the image has meaning to the viewer, the work exists,” she says. “While I may have written a story before the painting, when my brush meets the surface of the canvas, something unexpected comes forth.”

Her curiosity is contagious. Here, patterns emerge as process, light and form become modes of experience, and the diagrammatic rendering of form against abstraction are referential to our personal metaphors. We are standing at the edge of what Michiko calls the “blackbox.”

The “blackbox” could be interpreted as an internal space, a transistor or algorithm, which processes information and intelligence. One cannot see or know what happens in the blackbox. The only knowns are human experience, space, light, form, line, material and care for humanity. What emerges, one hopes, are conditions for the viewer to consider how we need to seek creative answers, indigenous templates and new ways of rethinking our relationship to the land we inhabit. Through Michiko’s “forced optimism,” as she lovingly calls it, and her inquiries on the scientific, historical, cultural and political conditions of our time, we are urged to meditate on life, death and the profound impact each of us has on our collective humanity. (Pia Singh)

Michiko Itatani: Cosmic Codes is on view at One After 909, 906 North Ashland, through December 7