

Miyoko Ito

Heart of Hearts

April 7 – May 6, 2018

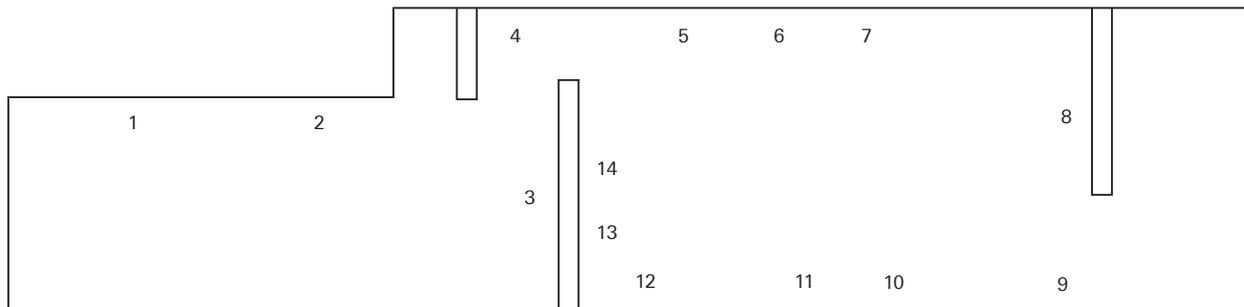
“I have no place to take myself except painting.”
– Miyoko Ito, 1978¹

Heart of Hearts comprises a selection of enigmatic abstract paintings by Miyoko Ito (1918–1983), whose work has remained largely unexamined and overlooked outside of the city of Chicago, where she lived and worked. The exhibition spans over two decades of Ito’s practice and, continuing the longtime mission of Artists Space to create timely reappraisals of often marginalized voices and approaches in the field of visual culture, marks the first solo institutional presentation of Ito’s work in New York.

Miyoko Ito was born in Berkeley, California, to Japanese parents in 1918. As a young girl, she spent several years with her mother and sister in Japan, where she first experimented with calligraphy and painting. Ito followed her father in attending University of California, Berkeley, where she studied watercolor under John Haley, Erle Loran, and Worth Ryder. Months before her graduation in 1942, Ito was sent to Tanforan, an internment camp south of San Francisco. Released years before her new husband, she briefly matriculated at Smith College before transferring to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she received a scholarship but never graduated. Although her efforts were highly susceptible to regionalization, Ito participated in the 1975 Whitney Biennial and was honored with a retrospective exhibition at the Renaissance Society in 1980. She was represented by Phyllis Kind Gallery in Chicago and New York from the late 1960s through her death in 1983. Recent exhibitions include solo presentations at the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2017; Adam Baumgold Gallery, New York, 2006 and 2014; VeneKlasen/Werner, Berlin, 2012; and *No Vacancies*, a group presentation at Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, 2015.

Curated by Jordan Stein in collaboration with Artists Space, *Heart of Hearts* follows *Miyoko Ito / MATRIX 267* at the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.

Artists Space
Exhibitions
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1 *Heart of Hearts, Basking*, 1973
Oil on canvas
44 x 31 inches
Matthew Marks Gallery

2 Lyn Blumenthal and Kate Horsfield
Miyoko Ito: An Interview, 1978
½-inch tape transferred to digital
video (b/w, sound)
54 min 57 sec
Courtesy of the Video Data Bank,
School of the Art Institute of
Chicago

3 *Kalamazoo*, 1959
Oil on canvas
56 x 70 inches
Karin Tappendorf Collection

4 *Center Stage*, 1980
Oil on canvas
29 ½ x 37 ½ inches
Robert Storr

5 *Gorodiva*, 1968
Oil on canvas
48 x 48 inches
Karen Lennox Gallery

6 *Untitled*, 1971–72
Oil on canvas
46 x 46 inches
Karen Lennox Gallery

7 *Bell Cage*, 1973
Oil on canvas
46 ¼ x 37 ½ inches
JPMorgan Chase Art Collection

8 *Iliad*, 1981
Oil on canvas
30 x 38 inches
Peter Doig and Parinaz Mogadossi

9 *Odyssey*, 1981
Oil on canvas
29 ¼ x 37 ½ inches
Gordon VeneKlasen Collection

10 *Tabled Presence*, 1971
Oil on canvas
48 x 56 inches
Alice Brunner, Chicago

11 *Mandarin, or the Red Empress*, 1977
Oil on canvas
46 x 41 inches
Richard and Clement Durkes
Collection

12 *Island in the Sun*, 1978
Oil on canvas
38 x 33 inches
John B. Pittman Collection

13 *Todoroki*, 1974
Oil on canvas
47 x 39 inches
Alice Brunner, Chicago

14 *Walls of No Escape*, 1980
Oil on canvas
48 x 34 inches
John B. Pittman Collection

We would like to extend our
gratitude to all of the lenders to
Heart of Hearts:
Alice Brunner, Peter Doig and
Parinaz Mogadassi, Karen Lennox,
Kate Lennox, Matthew Marks
Gallery, JPMorgan Chase Art
Collection, John B. Pittman, Robert
Storr, Karin Tappendorf, and
Gordon VeneKlasen. Thanks also to
Video Data Bank, School of the
Art Institute of Chicago; and the
University of California, Berkeley Art
Museum and Pacific Film Archive

With generous support contributed
by Frank Williams and Matthew
Marks Gallery

Heart of Hearts Supporters:
The Friends of Artists Space,
The Artists Space Program Fund,
Lambent Foundation Fund of
Tides Foundation, New York City
Department of Cultural Affairs in
partnership with the City Council,
New York State Council on the Arts
with the support of Governor
Andrew M. Cuomo and the New York
State Legislature



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Thank you to Matthew Coleman,
Apsara DiQuinzio, Lela Hersh,
Beth Petriello, and Lindsey White

This exhibition builds on *MATRIX 267* at the University of California, Berkley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Ito's first monographic institutional presentation in nearly forty years. Like its West Coast counterpart, *Heart of Hearts* is not a decisive survey, but instead brings together a group of works, mostly taken from the 1970s until the end of Ito's life, which highlight her exploration of self-portraiture and place.

At once first person and topographic in their construction, many works from this period overlay a mountainous, bust-like figure against a distant horizon of saturated color. Though references to landscape painting and architecture are overt, Ito's highly structured, never-quite-symmetrical compositions suggest a mapping of the psyche, oscillating between confinement and expanse. In a palette that warms over time, vertical stacks of tubes, bars, and mounds are rendered in delicate fades of color and subtle modulations in tone. A picture emerges of an artist endeavoring to position herself in relation to hazy and remote surroundings. "I have no place to take myself except painting," Ito revealed in a 1978 interview.²

Ito was born to Japanese parents in Berkeley, but relocated to Japan as a young girl with her pregnant mother and younger sister, owing to her family's limited means and a difficult housing market. "Those five years are the roots of what I am right now," she reported later, explaining that they were both "very wonderful" and "terribly traumatic."³ While she excelled in an arts-filled curriculum at school, her mother gave birth to a stillborn child and Ito became badly ill, for a time losing the ability to walk. Towards the end of her life, the artist experienced a nervous breakdown, and would speak about this earlier chapter of her childhood in these terms.

Returning to Berkeley, Ito attended high school and majored in art practice at UC Berkeley. Her senior year was interrupted by World War II, when she was sent to Tanforan—a San Bruno horse track turned internment camp—alongside her new husband and thousands of others under Executive Order 9066, signed by Franklin Roosevelt in 1942. Once liberated, Ito briefly pursued graduate studies at Smith College before transferring to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC). Later that decade, she abandoned the watercolor

practice informed by the patterns and textures of Synthetic Cubism that had defined her education. Experimenting in other painting and printmaking methods, including lithography, etching, and oil paint on canvas, she began to alter her formal approach. Sharp corners grew rounded and compositions turned bodily and tubular. Her style, defined by some as "abstract impressionism,"⁴ was informed by the surfaces of Pierre Bonnard and the creeping influence of Surrealism.⁵

Beginning in the late 1940s, Ito's work was included in large—and largely anonymous—annual juried exhibitions around the country, including repeat appearances at the Art Institute of Chicago, the San Francisco Museum of Art (later the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art), and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. From the early 1970s, these message-in-a-bottle submissions gave way to more nuanced participation at a number of nimble and exciting Chicago institutions, including a 1971 solo exhibition at the Hyde Park Art Center and the 1972 landmark exhibition *Chicago Imagist Art* at the Museum of Contemporary Art. The artist was an early charge of Phyllis Kind, whose gallery would go on to represent now internationally recognized Imagist artists Roger Brown, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, and Barbara Rossi, among others. Nutt recalls that Kind's embrace of Ito motivated him and wife Nilsson to join her growing artist roster, one that became critical to Chicago's art history.⁶

Though a generation older than the stars of a movement known for its offbeat, comic book iconography, Ito shared the Imagists' zeal for the subliminal juxtaposition, logic-defying representation, and technical precision of Surrealism. Ito and the younger artists successfully fused Pop Art's feverish palette with an eccentric, outsider air. A sense of discovery was prized. "When I approach a canvas, I try to as much as possible keep my mind blank," Ito remarked.⁷ Improvisatory drawings in red, green, and charcoal formed the foundations of emergent paintings, the lines serving as shadowy gaps between color forms.

Ito, however, cannot wholly or adequately be described as an Imagist. The group associated with Chicago Imagism was largely assembled from a network of self-organized cliques like the

Hairy Who, Nonplussed Some, and False Image, who were fresh out of undergraduate studies at SAIC and a countercultural force willfully disengaged from broader art world trends. Ito's work was more difficult to socially and aesthetically categorize, and she was an outsider in age, disposition, background, and concerns. Her union of physical and metaphysical worlds would have been too precious for many of the urbane up-and-comers. Titles like *Oracle*, *Shrine*, *Dusk*, *Narcissa*, and *Steps* signal an interest in time, ritual, repetition, and myth. Ito's efforts are more aligned with the materially rich and visionary work of painters such as Forrest Bess and Helen Frankenthaler, her contemporaries, or Arthur Dove and Giorgio Morandi, a generation older.

The earliest and largest work in the exhibition, *Kalamazoo*, 1959, depicts a menagerie of wide-eyed figures in a thick, earthy application of mid-century browns, blues, and yellows. Its title, which references a town just over the Michigan border from Illinois, may have sounded otherworldly to a Midwestern transplant seeking inspiration. A sense of buoyancy and depth foreshadows the floating network of wiggles, threads, dots, portals, and tufts that would populate her efforts for decades.

The compartmentalized spaces of her most fertile period are organic and exact, like dreams recalled in unusual detail. Works like *Tabled Presence*, 1971, and *Heart of Hearts*, 1973, portray furniture-like elements slipping into abstraction, while simultaneously suggesting a mind becoming a closet or drawer—that is, an apparatus for the arrangement of things, sometimes shared but often closed or concealed. Not explicitly political, the tension between domestic and subjective interiority, the act of self-portraiture, and her collage-like practice are nonetheless in tune with the second-wave feminism of the time.

The title of *Todoroki*, 1974, is a Japanese surname common to the Nagano Prefecture, where it exists as a location. It is also a remote waterfall in the Okinawa Prefecture, and, neatly, in English translates to “rumble” or “resound.” The painting emphasizes an overlapping of name, place, and sound, and is indicative of Ito's unfixed and occasionally synesthetic approach. Thick, horizontal lines support the picture as stretcher bars support a frame.

Later works like *Center Stage*, 1980, and *Iliad*, 1981, grow increasingly abstract and celestial, the drama at their core not just hollow, but indeterminate. A more profound sense of space is signaled, as if the theater itself, unsure of its role without actors, begins to come undone. Ever warmer, and deftly articulate of painting's ability to hold opposites in singular forms, they are rendered in mauve, pine, summer orange, and countless shades of blue.

Numerous canvases are affixed to their stretcher bars with half-driven tacks, apparently the result of Ito's wish to remove and continue working on various paintings over time. The raised tacks remain, however, even in many “finished” works—as if a halo beyond the canvas edge. As critic John Yau notes, they “recall the need to be able to leave quickly with what is most precious, to be able to roll it up rather than leave it behind.”⁸ They speak to a violent and vulnerable admission of the mere thingness of painting, and in turn, life.

– Jordan Stein

1. *Miyoko Ito: An Interview*, Blumenthal/Horsfield, Video Data Bank, 1978.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Oral history interview with Miyoko Ito, July 20, 1978. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Online.

4. *Miyoko Ito: An Interview*.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Jim Nutt, conversation with the author, September 19, 2016.

7. *Miyoko Ito: An Interview*.

8. John Yau, “Artseen: Miyoko Ito,” *Brooklyn Rail*, May 9, 2006. Online.

Jordan Stein is a curator based in San Francisco, California.