Miyoko Ito
Heart of Hearts
April 7 – May 6, 2018

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– Miyoko Ito, 1978

Heart of Hearts comprises a selection of enigmatic abstract paintings by Miyoko Ito (1918–1983), whose work has remained largely examined 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 Loron, 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.
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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.

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.” While she attended 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 breakdown, and would speak about this earlier time losing the ability to walk. Towards the breakdown, and would speak about this earlier

The earliest and largest work in the exhibition, Kalamoza, 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, 1973, 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 unified and occasionally synesthetic approach. Thick, horizontal lines support the picture as stretcher bars support a frame.

Later works like Center Stage, 1980, and Need, 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 articulated 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.” They speak to a violent and vulnerable admission of the mere thingness of painting, and in turn, life.

3. Ibid.
5. Miyoko Ito: An Interview
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--Jordan Stein

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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,” was informed by the surfaces of Pierre Bonnard and the creeping influence of Surrealism.

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.

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, improvisatory drawings in red, green, and charcoal. Her style, defined by some as “abstract impressionism,” was informed by the surfaces of Pierre Bonnard and the creeping influence of Surrealism.

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 urban up-and-comers. Titles like Oracle, Shrine, Dust, 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.

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