MIYOKO ITO

The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago
MIYOKO ITO: A REVIEW

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Acknowledgements

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Susanne Ghez
Director of Exhibitions

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Dennis Adrian

The growth of Miyoko Ito’s sensitive and extraordinary art over the more than three decades in which she has been active as a painter in Chicago is the record of the personal exploration of an inner poetic world, discovered and elaborated upon through her own artistic processes. Ito’s early training was as a watercolorist in California in the 1940’s, in the ambience of a group of American artists, such as Earle Loran, Worth Rider and John Haley, leaders of the “Bay Region” or “Berkeley” school of watercolor, who melded a conscientious study of European modernism, especially Synthetic Cubism, with a reverence for Cezanne and the stimulating example of Hans Hofmann’s work and ideas. Ito says that her work in this period was a kind of structured Synthetic Cubism which retained representational values and that ended up looking a bit like Raoul Dufy, particularly in its combination of gouache whites with transparent watercolor.

A 1948 Ito still-life in oils (Cat. no. 1), however, reveals that the artist had left behind the openness and indefiniteness of form characteristic of later Dufy and that she locked the planes of the painted forms into a very stable, orderly arrangement over the whole canvas. In this work the questions of space and recession are dealt with in terms of changes in color value and our reading of the subject. The palette is sober and cool, with greys, blues and ochres relieved by small, telling areas of bright red and yellow.

Already in this painting certain characteristic qualities in Ito’s work are established. The areas of color are relatively unmodified, keeping the forms related to the surface, and the color, though cool, seems to contain air within it. The matte surfaces are stroked in uniform touches, with little impasto, and the directional suggestions of these strokes do not lead the eye in long runs but instead act cumulatively to form a dappled texture. Also, Ito’s spatial construction, relying only minimally on perspective orthogonals (diagonal lines) is pretty well defined by about 1950. By the overlapping of shapes and the very careful adjustment of related tones and hues, shapes emerge and recede relative to one another without ever disturbing the stable arrangement of their disposition as areas over the surface of the picture; more than any other quality this element in Ito’s work reveals what she absorbed from the masters of Synthetic Cubism such as Gris, Braque and Picasso.

Ito’s technical practice had also become pretty well set by the early 1950’s. It is interesting that it is uncompromisingly traditional. She tacks rather than staples her canvases and in certain instances has left the tacks protruding significantly so that they form a bordering frame that very strongly emphasizes the painting as an object, an aspect that certain other Chicago artists have coincidentally shared: one thinks, for example, of the spikily projecting frames of nails (points out) in a group of impressive works by Sarah Canright from the early 1970’s. Ito ordinarily uses a greenish underpainting or tinted ground, very much like the practice of 16th and 17th century Venetian and Spanish painting, over an underdrawing in charcoal; occasionally she employs other hues, also combinations of primary colors. From time to time Ito may return to the completed canvas to make subsequent adjustments of various relationships (“corrections,” she calls them), but judging by the seamless brushwork of her paintings in the past fifteen years, this practice would seem to be more and more infrequent.

The stroke that Ito has developed over the years has a good deal to do with the effects of light and color particular to her work. The touches of the brush in Ito’s paintings are, typically, short regular units, relatively uniform in size, which are banked and serried most often horizontally, although they may follow as they define the contours of this or that shape. Because the consistency of Ito’s paint as she works it is relatively stiff, many strokes retain a fine parallel ribbing from the hairs of the round brushes she uses. (Lately she has learned more to the use of flat sables.) Because the crests of these fine ridges catch the light (and throw a minuscule shadow) the areas painted in this way present a shimmering vibration of colored light, directionally modulated in different ways over the surface of the whole painting. While Ito seems to have developed this facture on her own, it was perhaps familiar to her earlier in the works of Cubist painters such as Braque and Picasso in the period 1911-14, and perhaps earlier still in Impressionist painters such as Monet and Sisley. We come to know it first in the suave and glittering brushwork of Rubens and Velasquez in the 17th century and it is ultimately to this “Grand Tradition” of Western painting, technically at least, that Ito’s painting is connected.

The 1950’s is the decade in which Ito’s painting evolves the
directions and forms which we now regard as characteristically hers. The birth of her son in 1950 marked the time, she says, in which she began to work to some degree every day on her painting. With the coming of her children her life became more regularly settled round her home (where her studio is) and the relative paucity of works from the early 50’s naturally reflects the greater amount of time maternal attention to a growing family demanded. But by the later 50’s, with her children now past infancy, the volume of Ito’s painting increases to its present level of a maximum of ten paintings a year.

The most noticeable facet of Ito’s work which had come into being by 1956 is her essentially abstract vocabulary of form; where the painting Still Life with Head of 1951 (Cat. no. 2) still retains the structural format of a still life on a table, except for the table and a form at the upper left which perhaps suggests a vase, we have moved away from the comparative literalism of the simplified fruit, flowers and dishes of the still life painting of four years earlier. The forms and composition of the 1951 painting now have autonomous functions, purely as painterly inventions, which overshadow their remaining tinges of referential suggestion. At this stage, Ito’s compositions reach the same kind of balance between the source of a form in a real object (or at least familiar image) and the new expressiveness of these forms in their purely pictorial significance such as we find in the final stages of Picasso’s Synthetic Cubist paintings of 1922-25.

Paintings such as Act Three by the Sea (1959, Cat. no. 5) and Upstream (1957, Cat. no. 4) are representative of the palette and compositional tendencies of this period: in the first we see elliptical and ovoid organic forms flanked and surrounded by band-like areas of different widths which introduce dynamic elements into the com-

*Act Three by the Sea, 1959, 50" X 60"*
positions. This new sense of movement does not disrupt the formal security of Ito’s previous style but animates it with broad directional flows which provide the new impetus in Ito’s work. In the second painting these bands take over the structural order of the painting, enclosing bigish areas of the underlying ground tones; the organic suggestions of the earlier painting gives way to a new grandeur of scope: we might be looking at great roadways or earthen ramparts from a high aerial viewpoint. The dark bands, flanked on each side by a fine relieved line of the lighter underpainting now are the ribs and bones of a very strong visual construct which nonetheless retains liveliness and movement through the repeats and echoes of the curving forms.

The color in these paintings, continuing into the early 1960’s, combines earth browns and ochres with dark ultramarines, blackish greens, greys and dark blue. The admixture of medium in some of the pigments gives them a glossy richness, different from the drier tones of earlier years, which imbues the color with a resonance and depth that adds to the emotional profundity of these grave and beautiful paintings.

The landscape titles appearing in the late 50’s works indicate that the range of experience Ito is exploring has broadened to include a new sense of scale, vaster than that of the still life derived earlier works. In these “topographical” paintings the artist is certainly not recapping any physical features of some place she knows or has visited, “abstracting” the composition from the motif, as it were, but is instead recapturing in the studio an atmosphere, an emotional climate and intensified recollection which completely transforms the place or event which might have primed the artist’s artistic processes.

Throughout the 60’s and 70’s the artist’s imagistic themes further enlarge to add a more complex kind of still life suggestion, this time connected to the idea of pieces of furniture in interiors. This type of image, or rather this variety of allusion now appearing in the work, has an additional layer of significance in that the hints of bureaus, chiffoniers, vanities and the like also suggest in some ways the human figure. (Indeed, the artist has titled a 1973 work Paintress as a Chair.) These figurational allusions therefore inject a new element into Ito’s imagery, that of an animate and sensate awareness, a feeling presence that gives these pictures an enigmatic and mysterious life. Some of these works, such as Mirror/Mirror (1964, Cat. no. 8) address the question of the figurative image almost directly but, by keeping to the side of abstract formal arrangement, Ito retains the strength of suggestion and allusion which would be dissipated by a more explicit kind of image. The sentient awareness that appears in some of the “furniture” paintings (Chiffonier, 1971, Cat. no. 15) is not easy to describe: the artist is not creating spooky or haunted furniture of the kind one might see in Ensor or Ernst, but rather seems to be able to transfer her own state of feeling about a certain kind of experience into her structure of color and arrangement in such a way that we do not see the anthropomorphizing of an inanimate image, only a new unique image which is the vehicle of the artist’s awareness.

In this faculty Ito’s work seems close to similar qualities in the art of Paul Klee: both artists have a rare ability to invest their images with a sense of inner life and feeling that is compelling and magical. Ito has remarked on this character of Klee’s work and she draws an interesting contradistinction between herself and the Swiss master, stating that she feels that “Where Klee has been described as Cosmic, I am of the Earth.” Perhaps in this observation she has
something of her palette in mind but beyond that is possibly referring to the absence of an articulated fantasy element in her art. In Ito’s painting one is always conscious of her great gifts of invention in the composition and color, but the threads of narrative (or the suggestion of it) which are such an enchantment in Klee’s work have no real counterpart in Ito’s vision. Her imagery seems to articulate the spirit and feeling which dwells within things and places like that of the geometric and architectural feeling of the Heian period of Japanese art, and she accomplishes this with the sense of an extraordinary intensity and calm.

Toward the end of the 60’s Ito’s palette brightens with the introduction of hot reds and yellows and wonderfully reverberating clear greens and blues which often shade away into hues and tones of empyrean lightness. *Aurora* (1966, Cat. no. 10) and *Eroded* (1968, Cat. no. 11) exemplify this new coloration, and the sense of vast atmospheric spaces that the blue and green colors especially lend the compositions certainly would seem to partake of a sense of the cosmic, despite the artist’s disclaimer that she is “of the earth.”

A connection with the earth does become more explicit in the early 1970’s when for two or three years the intense color that had appeared in Ito’s immediately previous works subsides in favor of pearly pinkish tans and beiges, warmed here and there with hotter flushes of red. The light in these comparatively more monochromatic (or more tonally consistent) paintings such as *Steps* (1974, Cat. no. 25) or *Irrigation* (1976, Cat. no. 26) has a marvellous radiance and coruscation related to the striations of the paint itself discussed earlier but, in addition, the artist, in both her color handling and in this light effect, seems to capture something of the special and hypnotic light and pale color in the paintings of Giorgio Morandi, another artist with whom Ito feels a special kinship. Certainly the transcendental glowing illumination of Ito’s “pale” pictures invests their usually landscape related images with a timeless fascination like that of the still life masterpieces of the Italian painter, and perhaps both share a common inspiration in the otherworldly glowing clarity of Piero della Francesca.

Another element appearing in Ito’s “pale” paintings is the use of recessive orthogonals which create a new kind of deep space in her paintings. Steplike forms may appear to mount upwards as well as back into the picture or narrow converging bands lead roadlike back into far distances. Accompanying these and other perspective effects is an increasing subtlety and complexity of gradation in hue and tone: the combination of modulated color and constructed space adds a new weight as well as depth to Ito’s compositions, and in some, such as *Sea Changes* (1977, Cat. no. 31) a suggestion of volume and projection begins to appear as well.

By the mid 70’s, Ito’s palette again heats up, returning to the vibrant reds and deep sea greens and blues which had appeared in the work of the mid 60’s, but now with an even greater prominence: the larger areas of hot and cool colors appearing in *Mandarin, or the Red Empress* (1977, Cat. no. 29) or *Kite Day* (1976, Cat. no. 27) are riveting in their strength and powerful contrasts. And, in the past three years, Ito has kept this very high color in some paintings while re-introducing a whole new range of cooler color ensembles built around greys, blues and blackish tans.

In all these later paintings Ito seems to have reached a new level of richness and complication involving all the areas of her art. The work contains new compositional elaboration, consisting not only in a regularly large number of formal events in each canvas, but the volumetric suggestions which emerged at the beginning of the 70’s.
now include strongly illusionistic projections (*Dream of a Dream*, 1979, Cat. no. 36) and intricate suggestions of “picture within a picture” constructions of a sort which had appeared in simpler form in some of the “furniture” paintings of the previous decade. Some of these devices suggest mirrors within the painting that reflect some reality outside the painting but yet are congruent with it (*78 into 79*, 1979, Cat. no. 38) and others employ borderlike strips of color at the edge of the canvas which act like window frames within the picture through which we see into yet another realm of form and space (*Habitat*, 1979, Cat. no. 37).

Additionally, Ito’s use of elliptical shapes which enclose much of the central composition in several paintings calls to mind both a favorite Cubist device (the “empty corners” arrangement of much Cubist painting even in rectangular formats) and a return to the anthropomorphic head-like suggestions of some of her early 60’s paintings. In one of the most impressive of these, *January into February* (1978, Cat. no. 34) the vertical ellipse dominating the composition suggests at once a head and a landscape featuring an immense obelisk shaped structure, vast in scale. The wonderful color, exquisitely refined technique and manifold layers of imagistic
suggestion all display Ito's genius at the top of her form.

Miyoko Ito's artistic accomplishment is certainly the product of the artist's singular and unique personal development and is all the more remarkable for that; it did not evolve within the framework of a school of any articulated artistic ideology but is her private achievement. This is not to say, however, that there are no connections between her work and other artists in the Chicago area, some her contemporaries and some younger, who independently have contributed impressive artistic œuvres in an occasionally related spirit. In all may be discerned (at different times and ways) an interest in the qualities of painting as an object, in a formal language which might loosely be called abstractly organic, and in a sumptuous and highly worked technique of great intricacy. These concerns are all currents in important aspects of Chicago and American art which have contributed much to their present eminence, and we see in Ito and other Chicago artists the continuing exercise of some of the highest levels of contemporary American painterly genius.
Step by Step. 1962, 38" X 34"
Miyoko Ito

Born: Berkeley, California, 1918

Education

1942  B.A. University of California, Berkeley
1943  Graduate Scholarship, Smith College, Massachusetts
1944  Graduate Scholarship, School of the Art Institute of Chicago

Exhibitions

One-person

1943  Smith College Musum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts.
1958  Stuart Brent Gallery, Chicago.
1960  Superior Street Gallery, Chicago.
Group


Fifty-ninth Annual Exhibition by Artists of Chicago and Vicinity. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago. March 8–April 12.


Exhibition Momentum. Chicago.


Ravinia Festival Art Exhibit. Ravinia Festival Art Exhibition Committee and Casino Gallery, Ravinia, Illinois. [Summer].


1963  Group Exhibition. McCormick Place, Chicago.


Sixty-eighth Annual Exhibition by Artists of Chicago and Vicinity. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago. April 30–May 23.


Five Formalists. Phalanx, Chicago.


Thirty Works by Thirty Artists to Celebrate the Thirtieth Year of the Hyde Park Art Center. The Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago. September 14–October 11.


Astrology is the Clock of Destiny. The Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago. October 8–November 6.


1973  *Selected Painters.* Mulvane Art Center, Washburn University of Topeka, Topeka, Kansas. March 4–April 1.


*Paintings and Sculpture by Midwest Faculty-Artists.* Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Illinois. April 1–May 2. Travelled to Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington Campus, Bloomington, Indiana.

*Old and New Works by Artists from the Phyllis Kind Gallery.* Foster Gallery, The University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire, Eau Claire, Wisconsin. April 19–May 5.


*Visions, Painting and Sculpture: Distinguished Alumni 1945 to the Present.* The School of The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago. October 7–December 10.


1977  *Seventy-sixth Exhibition by Artists of Chicago and Vicinity.* The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago. February 19–March 27.

*Masterpieces of Recent Chicago Art.* The Chicago Public Library Cultural Center, Chicago. October 3–November 2.

*Chicago ’77.* Ohio State University Gallery of Fine Art, Sullivan Hall, Columbus, Ohio. November 1–December 7.


*Chicago Abstractionists: Romanticized Structures.* University of Missouri-Kansas City Art Gallery, Kansas City, Missouri. February 26–March 24. Travelled to: Springfield Art Museum, Springfield, Missouri; The National Bank of Commerce, Lincoln, Nebraska; Oklahoma Arts Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Mulvane Art Center, Washburn University, Topeka, Kansas; University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri; Western Illinois University, Macomb, Illinois.


*Contemporary Chicago Painters.* Department of Art Gallery of Art, University of Northern Iowa, Waterloo-Cedar Falls, Iowa. April 2–30.


Selected Bibliography


________. “Ravinia comes up with a five-star art exhibition.” Chicago Daily News, Panorama Section, July 8–9, 1972.


Catalogue

1. *Easel and Table*, 1948
   Oil on canvas, 24 X 30 inches
   Lent by the artist

2. *Still Life with Head*, 1951
   Oil on canvas, 24 X 30 inches
   Lent by Ms. Tazuko Suzuki, Arlington Heights, Illinois

3. *Sundown*, late 1950’s
   Oil on canvas, 56 X 36 inches
   Lent by Jacques C. Brownson, Denver, Colorado

4. *Upstream*, 1957
   Oil on canvas, 49½ X 39 inches
   Lent by the Grand Rapids Art Museum, Grand Rapids, Michigan

5. *Act Three by the Sea*, 1959
   Oil on canvas, 50 X 60 inches
   Lent by The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Gilpin Fund Purchase, 1960

   Oil on canvas, 50 X 56 inches
   Lent Anonymously

   Oil on canvas, 38 X 34 inches
   Lent by the artist

8. *Mirror/Mirror*, 1964
   Oil on canvas, 38 X 35½ inches
   Lent by the artist

   Oil on canvas, 48 X 46 inches
   Lent by the artist

10. *Aurora*, 1966
    Oil on canvas, 50 X 45 inches
    Lent by John T. and Larayne Black, Chicago, Illinois

    Oil on canvas, 44½ X 45½ inches
    Lent by Betty and Lester Guttman, Chicago, Illinois

12. *Catalexa*, late 1960’s
    Oil on canvas, 43½ X 44½ inches
    Lent by Lee and David Cunningham, Chicago, Illinois

    Oil on canvas, 47¼ X 37¾ inches
    Lent by Jim Nutt and Gladys Nilsson, Wilmette, Illinois

    Oil on canvas, 45 X 39 inches
    Lent by the artist

15. *Chiffonier*, 1971
    Oil on canvas, 46 X 32 inches
    Lent by Mitchell and Susan Franklin, Glencoe, Illinois

    Oil on canvas, 38 X 30 inches
    Lent by Richard Christiansen, Chicago, Illinois

17. *Agricola*, 1972
    Oil on canvas, 47 X 43 inches
    Lent by Paul Fong, Chicago, Illinois

18. *Dusk*, 1972
    Oil on canvas, 48¼ X 36 inches
    Lent by Mr. and Mrs. James Reinish, New York, New York
19. *No Place Landscape*, 1972  
Oil on canvas, 45 3/4 X 36 inches  
Lent by Hirschtritt, Hirschtritt & Gold, P.C., and Greenbaum & Browne, Ltd., Chicago, Illinois

Oil on canvas, 45 X 41 inches  
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Floyd H. Abramson, Chicago, Illinois

21. *Interior Landscape*, 1973  
Oil on canvas, 47 X 40 inches  
Lent by Philip Hanson and Christina Ramberg, Chicago, Illinois

22. *Beehive and Sea*, 1973  
Oil on canvas, 45 X 32 inches  
Lent by Betty and Lester Guttman, Chicago, Illinois

23. *Hidden Interior*, 1973  
Oil on canvas, 47 X 36 inches  
Lent by John T. and Larayne Black, Chicago, Illinois

Oil on canvas, 47 X 36 inches  
Lent by Gilda and Henry Buchbinder, Chicago, Illinois

Oil on canvas, 46 X 40 inches  
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Sidney J. Taylor, Glencoe, Illinois

26. *Irrigation*, 1976  
Oil on canvas, 46 X 42 inches  
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Martin E. Zimmerman, Evanston, Illinois

27. *Kite Day*, 1976  
Oil on canvas, 47 X 39 inches  
Lent by Louis Kolokoff, M.D., Chicago, Illinois

Oil on canvas, 47 X 36 inches  
Lent by Dr. and Mrs. James Fisch, Winnetka, Illinois

Oil on canvas, 46 X 41 inches  
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Richard W. Durkes, Dixon, Illinois

30. *Nagisa*, 1977  
Oil on canvas, 47 X 34 inches  
Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Michael E. Suden, St. Louis, Missouri

31. *Sea Changes*, 1977  
Oil on canvas, 45 X 36 inches  
Lent by the Main Bank of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois

32. *Egyptian Night*, 1978  
Oil on canvas, 44 X 35 inches  
Lent by Robert C. Upton, St. Joseph, Michigan

33. *Island in the Sun*, 1978  
Oil on canvas, 38 X 33 inches  
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. John B. Pittman, St. Charles, Illinois

34. *January into February*, 1978  
Oil on canvas, 47 X 39 inches  
Lent by Jetta Norris Jones, Chicago, Illinois

35. *August*, 1979  
Oil on canvas, 23 X 31 inches  
Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Samuel Weiss, Chicago, Illinois

36. *Dream of a Dream*, 1979  
Oil on canvas, 30 X 24 inches  
Lent by Hal and Bonnie Crawford, Chicago, Illinois

37. *Habitat*, 1979  
Oil on canvas, 43 X 32 inches  
Lent by Richard Hull, Chicago, Illinois

38. *78 into 79*, 1979  
Oil on canvas, 41 X 47 inches  
Lent by International Minerals & Chemical Corporation, Northbrook, Illinois

In the catalogue height precedes width precedes depth.