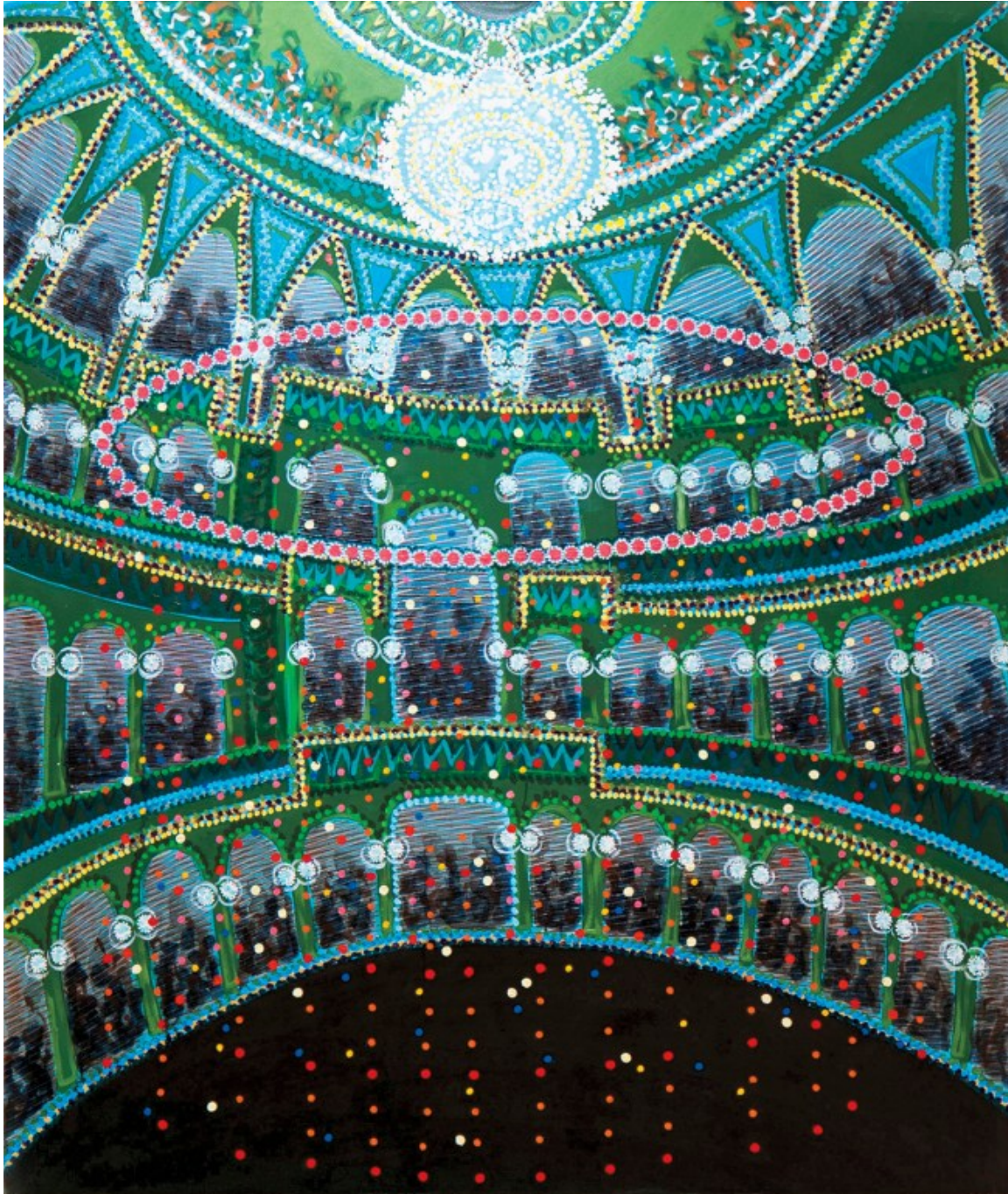


Michiko Itatani

Storage By Darren Jones



Michiko Itatani, "Untitled" painting from Rainmaker 06-C-5 (RM-3), 2006, oil on canvas, 72 × 60".

Michiko Itatani's exhibition here, "Cosmic Encounters," presented ten large-scale oil paintings, completed between 2006 and 2023, featuring imagery the Japanese-born and longtime Chicago-based artist is known for, including majestic amphitheaters beneath nighttime skies, and richly decorated interiors of libraries, cathedrals, and concert halls. At the center of these spaces, positioned high up, were rings of luminescent orbs and chandeliers that had similar multicolored disks cascading from them. In most instances, an array of globes were placed around the rooms' perimeters or encircle star charts laid into the floors. Architectural details—such as arches and Escher-like staircases, rendered with exaggerated perspectives—tempted the viewer to peer more deeply into the many recesses and passageways of these enigmatic scenes. At first glance, Itatani's inscrutable tableaux appeared uninhabited, evoking the unsettling eeriness of being alone in silent, empty arenas that are intended for great audiences and spectacular events. (One wondered, were we meant to be waiting for some revelatory arrival in these settings? Or more of a sinister departure?) Upon closer inspection, the viewer realized that, in three paintings of the artist's opera-house auditoriums, the tiered boxes were populated by shadowy, humanlike forms. One of these works, "*Untitled*" *painting from Rainmaker 06-C-10(RM-7)*, 2006, with its towering, bloodred facade and radiating lights, was a stunning combination of celebration and nightmare.

In "*Blackbox*" *painting from Celestial Narratives 17-B-5*, 2017, we look up from within a vaulted coliseum, which is open to a dark navy sky filled with hundreds of stellar points. The soaring walls are supported by Doric columns, covered in mosaics. A constellation map and the titular black box dominate the foreground. We witness brilliant explosions of yellows, pinks, and blues everywhere as clusters of planetary spheres collide into one another and burst into pieces. The blasts of light and pinballing kinetic energy are palpable, as though the painting itself might be about to take us to some unknown world. That Itatani sets whole universes inside her buildings is intriguing. Their inclusion could be a nod to mankind's insatiable ego, the urge to harness or contain nature and control its destiny—and, of course, to the futility of attempting to do so.

“Quantum Chandelier” painting from Tesseract Study 21-B-02, 2021, made only with ghostly whites and pinks, brought religion into the frame. Hanging in the center of a medieval abbey is the transparent hypercube of the work’s title, its planes rendered with thin, white lines. These geometric forms incorporate the fourth dimension—a proposed direction through space-time, beyond the three standard gauges of length, width, and depth. The tesseract is flanked by unfolded, netlike versions of itself. Three chandeliers, each with four layers of lights, are suspended around the object, perhaps representing the subatomic particles that make up all matter. The picture takes on both the astrophysical and the metaphysical, unveiling the sundry commonalities and contradictions between them.

If there is a throughline in Itatani’s work, it’s in the way she regards curiosity and knowledge with a deep sense of sacredness. We see it in the countless pictures of books, obscure instruments, and diagrams that line her open-air observatories; the cultural and holy institutions she invites us into; and the dynamic possibilities she asks us to consider within this mysterious ungovernable existence. That the artist can foster a sense of calm and meditative contemplation within these vast and labyrinthine contexts testifies to the capaciousness of the artist’s own restless, generous, and inquisitive imagination.