

Michiko Itatani: *Hi-Point Contact*

Zhou B Art Center, Chicago, IL, USA, 17 October–30 December 2016

Considered a “quiet giant” of the Chicago art scene since the 1970s, Michiko Itatani, born in Osaka, Japan, describes herself as a “made-in-America artist.” In the last months of 2016, her retrospective *Hi-Point Contact*, curated by Sergio Gomez, filled the cavernous block-length exhibition spaces of the Zhou B Art Center in Chicago’s Bridgeport neighbourhood. Featured were Itatani’s explorations of abstract time-spaces and alternate cosmoses appearing to the viewer as visual narratives—a form of “writing” but “with paint,” as Itatani has explained of her own process.¹

Small-scale paintings occasionally punctuated the exhibition space, demonstrating the artist’s range, yet it was the massive canvases that offered viewers a comparably large-scale insight into the terrain of Itatani’s multidimensional explorations over the past four decades. From the layers of monochromatic paint marking her earliest works from the late 1970s to the writerly paint of later work, the show gave view to movement within the artist’s oeuvre, revealing a humanist’s confrontations with civilizational edifices ranging from the neoclassical, to the baroque, to the intergalactic.

More than providing a backdrop, the Age of Reason serves as a point of departure for “reading” the muscular specimens of Itatani’s early-to-mid-career canvases. A series of headless figures, redolent of the athleticism of Greco-Roman statues, recur throughout the works of the 1980s and 1990s, albeit with positional and thematic variations. Beyond the turmoil of classical beauty or medievalism’s inferno, such works urge the viewer into spaces of the future. In some instances, the figural dimensions literally extend beyond the frame, through the superimposition of blocks of canvas affixed to the “base.” Pictorially, a comparable effect is achieved through the representational gesture of bodies mirrored, shown locked in perpetual stalemate. This painterly rendering of pitched battle becomes a recurring trope of the confrontation of force with counterforce, into perpetuity. Such “mirror battles” supply a crucial component of Itatani’s *Untitled* (1994) from the series *Tolerance Zone #2*. The turmoil of physical deadlock is partially counterbalanced by the vista of a free-floating universe deploying Itatani’s intent to break wide open the historical function of human bodies in roles both lived and imagined.

Perhaps it would not be too much of an interpretive leap to suggest that the macrocosmic imagery of another canvas featuring the roiling musculature

1 Michiko Itatani, interview with Jason Foumberg during an artist talk at the Zhou B Art Center, Chicago, IL, 18 November 2016.

of Itatani's battling figures, *Untitled* (1988) from the series *Raised & Supported* (fig. 1), is redolent of the fission bomb. Up to the present, Hiroshima and Nagasaki remain the primary metonyms for the apocalyptic nuclear implement, but such imagery can also fall outside these immediate—and frankly devastating—geo-temporal referents, recalling images of nuclear testing conducted by the US military throughout the North American southwest in the 1950s (inspiring, incidentally, some of the most iconic science-horror imaginings of slasher filmmaker Wes Craven). In this particularly monumental untitled work, Itatani's headless figures splash—detonate?—across the landscape, their dynamic muscularity morphing into roiling clouds of grey matter that overtake the landscape of aqua-violet. Itatani's canvases have never housed landscapes, precisely; this one gives rise to overlapping panoramas of matter constituted by the grids of scientific notation, a molecular space-scape. Hence the show's title, deriving from the notion of “point contact,” a term, as Itatani notes in a press release for the exhibition, “describing a momentary touching of two elements.”² In juxtaposing the language of engineering with such



FIGURE 1 *In the foreground: Michiko Itatani, Untitled, from the series Raised & Supported, 1988, oil on canvas, 120 inches × 234 inches (304.8 cm × 595.4 cm). Installation view. IMAGE COURTESY OF ZHOU B ART CENTER*

² “*Hi-Point Contact: Michiko Itatani Retrospective at the Zhou B Art Center*,” *ArtNxtLevel Journal*, 2 October 2016, accessed 13 July 2017, <https://artnxtleveljournal.com/2016/10/02/hi-point-contact-michiko-itatani-retrospective-at-the-zhou-b-art-center>.

space-scapes, Itatani's work invokes the semi-conductivity of an imagined space age.

Viewers familiar with Itatani's influences might describe this as an age of science fiction. Indeed, Itatani has acknowledged the frustrating fact that science stops at the present—hence, the necessity to turn to science fiction in her visual narrativity. The molecular present she offers up resembles, or so it seems, a present informed by the post-apocalyptic predications of religious tenets, whether the creeds of Judeo-Christian traditions, the philosophical doctrines of Buddhism, or the pseudoscience of L. Ron Hubbard (who began as a writer of fiction). Broad swathes of paint bring into relief the conjoining of sites where philosophy, gods, and the supra-naturalism of earth meet the exuberant spaces of radical exteriority. As Itatani indicates: "It's personal."³ Refraining from overt allegorizations of social strife or ideological commentaries on worldly matters, she remains more attentive to the molecular and subatomic levels of particulate being.

Itatani is, first and foremost, a literary artist. Hers is a perpetual present of the writerly text, on which she calls to produce this visual literature of particulate matter. Viewing the selections of her oeuvre, it seems the headless figures from her earlier period ultimately give way to a series of panoramas that surpass the battling bodies in ever greater defiance of the limitations of the earthly human realm. *Cosmic Sleepwalk* (2009) from the *Hyper Baroque* series presents one instance of such an evolving defiance. The interior cathedral-like space of a massive ballroom or opera house is evoked in multi-tiered layers of red dotted with pastels, from the crowning chandelier to a row of orbiting lights pearl-strung together. From the latter falls a space-storm of opaque and hyper-sized ionic dabs in Easter candy colours. Featured here is luminescence, the architecture of enlightenment, and spatial enclosures that nonetheless open up to dramatic exteriority.

Notably obscured in this theatre are the human attendees, in relation to whom the viewer could be implicated as the central attraction, the stage performer granted a bird's-eye view of such cosmic and contradictory interior space. Reduced to a series of shadows, however, the human presence is merely hinted at, as slender grey daubs just visible through pillared arches. Within this temple of civilization, the human form has been nearly effaced, ostensibly to privilege the spectacle of space. Arguably, a narrative is at work here, as in the artist's other works resplendent with the colour and scale of imagined galaxies. Itatani has indicated that she prefers to think of the paintings as narratives, as

3 Michiko Itatani, interview with Jason Foumberg, 18 November 2016.

stories or portraits of “what it’s like to be on earth today, to be human.”⁴ Based on viewing *Hi-Point Contact*, it seems that being human defies singularity.

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4 Ibid.