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Michiko Itatani Interview

Liza Rush

DePaul University

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Interviewer: Liza Rush
Artist: Michiko Itatani
In-Person: DePaul University Chicago, IL
Date: February 17, 2010 3:30pm

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during Winter quarter 2010 as part of the **Asian American Art Oral History** research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design/Director Asian American Studies.*

LR: Describe your path to become an artist.

MI: I dreamed about becoming a doctor, astronaut and everything else, to save the world (laughs). Then, I became serious to be a fiction writer. I never thought of being an artist. So, I can tell you a little story about how I was sort of defeated by senior writers while I was still in Japan. I read a short story in front of them and they critiqued me harshly. I was very discouraged. They told me that I was too young and inexperienced, and my content was not digested. After a night of crying over it, I became my optimistic self again and I realized they were absolutely right. That's one of the motivations of moving to a new place and trying to do something I had never done before. I never thought of more than two years of an experimental period. Since then, I made millions of small and insignificant decisions and an accumulation of that made me who I am. [2:24]

LR: When you had moved to the United States, did you know any English? Could you speak any English?

MI: English was the second language requirement in Japan. But it was very difficult for me to get used to hearing and speaking. Anyway, it took two or three years before I realized, "Wow, I am understanding every word they are speaking on TV and radio."

LR: And did you come right to Chicago?

MI: I wanted to come to the center of the continent. I just put my finger in the center (laughs) and I found the Art Institute. Ever since, I have been committing to do one more painting, one more exhibition and other reasons to stay. All of the sudden, I realized I have been spending much more time making art than writing novels. So, I must have been an artist (laughs). I am a made-in-America artist, that's what I thought for a long time. However, when I was very young, I was exposed to the activities of Gutai and Mono-Ha, the very avant-garde, cutting-edge, experimental work without even knowing what that meant. Yoko Ono, Tanaka and Sekine, I don't remember too well though. But I remember going to an exhibition on the Akashi Beach and I was impressed by Noboru Sekine's rearrangement of sand.

LR: Yoko Ono married to John Lennon

MI: Yes, and I vaguely knew about her activities of '60's and later I saw the works she re-made around 1990 at the Whitney, I believe. I had that kind of information. When I came to the Art Institute I was surprised by how traditional their education was. But there was a liberal atmosphere of choices there. Basically students were left alone. We did what we wanted, and many of us became artists.

LR: Did you know you wanted to focus in painting right away?

MI: No, I didn't make any decision. I never thought of myself as an artist during those times. I was at school and I was just experiencing and experimenting with my life. I knew I was not really gifted in art. I didn't draw when I was a child—like most of my students at the Art Institute. I was more literal, and I liked mathematics, chemistry and those kinds of things that seemed to make sense in their own small universe. Of course, I realized later I was seeing them only in the elementary level. Art seemed too fuzzy and I couldn't really grasp it. So, I thought it was not my kind of thing. However, drawing was a very powerful way of organizing my thoughts, so I made diagrams, pictures, and writing on a piece of paper. It was just like the same process when I write a novel. You organize your thoughts, systems, patterns and progress to complete a novel. And I did a very similar thing in my drawing. Then I thought, "Well, making a painting is not too different from writing fiction." That's the way I still do it. That's my process. It might not be what everybody does to make art. I realized it's not. Many artists can connect ideas from their brain to their hands naturally. I have to do more things. I cannot just start. But my defect can be useful to make me more unique.

LR: I think that shows through in your style though, because everything is very planned out.

MI: No. It is not at all. I do not have a picture of the painting before starting, though I have focused ideas. I have information, things I have accumulated; images, diagrams, writings and photographs. And, I toss those things around and think how I can organize my paintings. If I can try to really explain how I make the composition of my painting, you know the Chinese characters, Hànzì?

LR: Yes. [12:40]

MI: In my personal, idiosyncratic way, I look at those Chinese characters, and I am truly fascinated by them. They are constructed out of different elements; one element tells it's meaning, another it's context, another how a character is pronounced, etc. So, for example, there are literally hundreds of Chinese characters using one specific element (which happens to mean "moon"), naming and describing the physical body, from sick stomach to shiny healthy skin. Perhaps, this is not the way you might learn Chinese writing, nor the way Chinese people understand their writing. But this is my idiosyncratic way of seeing Chinese characters, perhaps an artist's point of view. It took several thousand years before Chinese characters reached their present forms. There are more than 45,000 characters, though many characters are rarely used. I have a dictionary, and I look at it often with great enjoyment. Characters are changing also, and are exported to different parts of the earth and changing differently in different areas. The reason I told you all about this, is because my painting is organized like a Chinese character.

LR: So, you're bringing in different elements to make a whole painting?

MI: Yes, but I don't think it is too productive to explain my process in order to tell you what my painting means. After all, my painting starts when my thinking stops, and I become speechless.

LR: So with this whole process then, until the end of the painting, how long does it usually take?

MI: For the thinking part, I have no idea. Sometimes five years, two years, or sometimes rather instantaneous. The physical process is, regardless of the scale, four to nine months. A larger one might take a year. My paintings are layered, so is my content.

Every artist has a different way of working. Art is freedom and freethinking. In my studio, I do lots of

different things freely. The show you saw, you might see the organization and the coherence [referring to her Walsh Gallery solo show “Personal Codes” Feb 2010 Chicago, IL]. I often curate my own show in order to present my work as comprehensively as possible. I kept the order in the front three rooms, but I show quite different work in one room.

LR: Yes, like the backroom. [19:52]

MI: That is a counterpoint. It is necessary in order to show who I am.

LR: The silverpoint room, when I was in there, some of the drawing looked—were almost like blueprints of the painting, is that intentional? [22:36]

MI: Silverpoint drawing is the purest media for me, simple and clean. Sometimes I did the drawing first, then went back and did the painting, then the drawing again.

LR: And changed the drawing, it’s kind of like an on-going process?

MI: Yes.

LR: If you’re going back and forth, it’s almost like it’s an ever-changing blueprint.

MI: Yes, painting is not an exact copy of a drawing. I make a drawing, and work on a painting. When I come to where I have questions, I do another silverpoint because I cannot make a correction on the same silverpoint drawing. Then I go back to the painting or another painting. I go back and forth. The process is cybernetic. Self-correcting each step. Yet, every work is inconclusive.

LR: So you identify yourself as an earthling?

MI: First an earthling and maybe second, an artist. I don’t want to go into any more categories. I think that’s a government thing, a political thing. I have many students from many countries—it’s a very international school where I am teaching [School of the Art Institute of Chicago] —Somehow something’s wrong identifying individuals primarily with a nation. The Nation State Civilization is a reality now, which cannot be changed overnight, but I have a strong feeling against that system we are presently in. I am also categorized as a woman, middle aged and Asian etc. I don’t deny any of it, but it is insignificant to me. I think even the Asian identity is too specific or too general for me. And it’s a very small part of me. And when you really think about it, every one of us came from somewhere, probably the same place (laughs). [2:17] If something comes out naturally from the culture I am familiar with in my work or in myself I would accept it. It’s just a small part of myself. I am more interested in individual identity which we create.

LR: When I was at your show, the impression I was getting from your paintings was that maybe it’s how the audience reacts to them. The paintings may have a specific meaning, but the emphasis is on the reaction?

MI: Hopefully, interaction and participation. I still believe painting is a special language of communication. I am not making a statement; rather, I am asking questions through my painting. I am happiest, as an artist, if somebody can stop thinking while looking at my paintings, just looking. And through quiet contemplation, if viewers end up thinking about what is really important for them, my painting might be doing something.

If I summarize my concerns in my work over the past 30 years, it's about the human desire of trying to reach beyond our capacity and we are doing that bit by bit—from the 17th century to the 21st century, it seems we made huge progress, but in the context of the larger universe, it's nothing. I want to kind of look at ourselves and want to smile, (laughs) how small and insignificant we are! However something is extremely beautiful about our disproportionate desire.

Personally, especially after September 11, 2001 and consequential events, I had some doubt about the human species' future. I was disgusted; we are egotistic, greedy, and violent, we are the worst creatures on the earth. I was really depressed about that. Then I said, "Oh my gosh, I'm one of them" (laughs). Maybe I should find something nice about us, so I started to count what I like about us. I counted from art to music, fiction to science, to all those things I am interested in, and at the end, we have a gift—our desire to know the unknown. [13:29] I think the core element of all my work is about that.

LR: Human desire?

MI: Desire to explore the unknown, the desire for knowledge. You asked me about the two series of work the *HyperBaroque*, books, globes and stars: that is the human desire to reach out. And *Moonlight/Mooring* is the desire to reach in. We have something we want to know outside, but we know very little about deep inside of us. [14:33] We think we know, but we don't. We started to talk about DNA and this and that, but I don't know how our minds work. And that truly fascinates me. [15:03]

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