

**“Personal Codes: Virtual Cube in the Kitchen”  
Michiko Itatani at 4th Ward Projects, Chicago**

*By Michel Ségard*

I have seen Michiko Itatani’s work for 42 years, ever since she did an installation at the Mariane Deson Gallery in 1979. Her works then were very large installations, occupying entire walls. In this exhibition, most of the paintings are less than a foot square, a dramatic reduction in scale that creates a new discourse between the work and Itatani’s viewers.

The space, 4th Ward Projects, is also small and intimate. It is a converted room in the basement of a six-flat in Hyde Park near the end of a dead-end street. One must enter it through a rear door under the back porches of the building. It is one of those spaces that has been around for some time, but that most art lovers have never heard of, and it had been closed for nearly two years due to the Covid pandemic.

Originally a poet, Itatani manipulates three specific motifs like words to create the images in this show. Her first and signature motif is the field of angled parallel lines that are in nearly all her paintings. They represent writing, the presence of information. In recent years, she has added a circle of glowing forms that represent spirituality. And in this show, she adds an irregular dodecahedron, a twelve-sided polyhedron with varying flat sides. It is based on a 1934 sculpture by Alberto Giacometti called *Cube* that Itatani had seen at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. This mysterious shape appears in all the paintings of this show.

Studying these 21 intimate and loosely rendered paintings (almost drawings), a narrative begins to emerge. It starts with Itatani’s recollection that there was a large stone in the middle of the kitchen of her father’s house. It was sometimes used as a table or a chair, but most often it was just *there*. *Personal Codes* (from *Cosmic Cube* 2019-K-18) depicts the family home on a starry night, smoke rising from the chimney and “eyes” peering out from the roof gable. Itatani’s signature line fields appear on each side, announcing the presence of the house, while 16 blue lights form a ring in front of its entrance. Giacometti’s *Cube* sits unobtrusively in the lower right-hand corner and outside the house. We are given an overview of an ancestral family compound.



Michiko Itatani, *Personal Codes* (from Cosmic Cube 2019-K-18), 2019. Gouache, ink & prisma color pencil on board, 6 x 6 inches. *Personal Codes* (from Cosmic Cube 2019-K-12. 2019). Gouache, ink & prisma color pencil on board, 8 x 8 inches. Photos courtesy of the artist.

*Personal Code* (from Cosmic Cube 2019-K-12) give us a close-up of the building with a slight Roger Brown twist, featuring silhouettes in the windows. The line fields are present on each side, like drapes flanking a window or side flats defining a stage set, while the ring of lights hover over the floor of what appears to be a patio. The Cube sits on the lower left protected by a grating and guarding the entrance to the house. In this piece, Itatani uses repeating patterns, in this case the window gratings, to create an almost symmetrical, abstract composition that almost eclipses the straightforward rendering of the house.

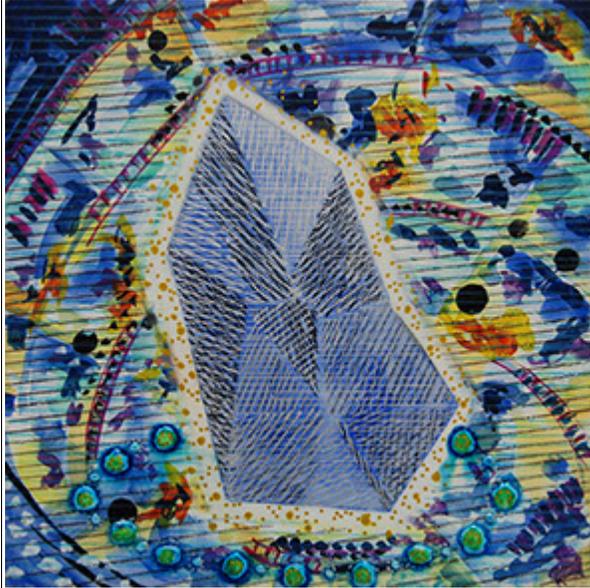
In one of three larger paintings, we see the interior of this house. *Tesseract Study* (from Cosmic Encounter 19-D-18) focuses on an interior stairway. The posts, beams, and stairs don't quite read as a plausible space, giving this painting a subtle Escheresque quality. The walls covered with bare tree branches give an additional surreal sense to the scene. But Itatani's three motifs are ever present. The ring of lights hovers at the top of the painting, while the Cube sits at the base of the stairs, again protected by a grating. And the line fields flank the sides, protruding into the space. The network of posts, beams, and stairs create the abstract compositional framework of this piece, but being off kilter, it gives the work a sinister undertone. The bare tree branches suggest a space open to the outside, but at the upper right, there is a window to the night sky. The whole work suggests that we are in another dimension where something unearthly is going on.



Michiko Itatani, *White Night* (from Tesseract Study 2019-K-28), 2019. Gouache, ink & prisma color pencil on board, 8 x8 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist.

The otherworldliness is reinforced in *White Night* (from Tesseract Study 2019-K-28). This small 8-inch square painting has an outdoor setting. A protective white bubble houses the Cube, now a prominent object in the painting in a forest of bare trees that faintly suggest anthropomorphic forms—if you don't focus too sharply. The ring of lights seems to rest on the ground next to the Cube. While the line fields, this time in prominent gold, flank the painting as usual, but here, they suggest curtains flying in the breeze of an open window. And above, a shower of meteors rains down out of a black night sky. All in all, we are now in a science fiction setting.

This sci-fi mode is carried into *Study of Cube* (from Cosmic Giacometti 2018-K-26). The focus of this tiny painting (6 by 8 inches) is the Cube depicted as a black mass floating in space above a strange earthlike world. There are brown branch-like markings on its surface that could be rivers or seas. Or the whole thing could be a spherical greenhouse floating in space with latitude and longitude lines serving as a structural framework. The ring of lights is broken up, and each light floats independently around the Cube like a mini satellite. And the line fields still flank the picture on either side. The Cube has now become a spaceship circling this strange planet. The first few bars of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* echoed in my mind, and I wondered whether the Cube were really a monolith.



Michiko Itatani, *Study of Cube* (from *Cosmic Giacometti* 2018-K-28), 2018. Gouache, ink & prisma color pencil on board, 6 x 6 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Finally, in *Study of Cube* (From *Cosmic Giacometti* 2018-K-28), we see the Cube in glorious color with the line fields on its surfaces and giving off a golden glow in the smallest piece in the show, only six by six inches—and the most colorful. The Cube is floating in a swirling, patterned space with a separate black line field overlaying a rich primary colored background filled with suggestions of figures and curved ladder forms (genetic material?). The ring of lights is back serving as a pedestal at the base of the Cube, and the linear fields on its surface suggest that it is the source of all knowledge. It brought to my mind the monolith from the film 2001 and the Rosetta Stone at the same time. In summary, the work feels like a religious painting or icon, declaring the presence of a superior intelligence—the source of all knowledge.

What I have described is just one interpretation of these small, intimate paintings. I could have stayed all afternoon sussing out additional meanings in this collection of images. Going contrary to her previous work, Michiko Itatani condensed her cosmic understanding and perspective into a handful of small, lovingly rendered paintings and shown them in a comfortably casual and intimate space.

**Michel Ségard is the Editor in Chief of the *New Art Examiner* and a former adjunct assistant professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He is also the author of numerous exhibition catalog essays.**