



Miyoko Ito MATRIX 267 SEPTEMBER 27, 2017–JANUARY 28, 2018
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM & PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

“In a way I am growing all the time. At the same time each new painting seems like the beginning of painting, too. All those years of painting, yet each painting is a beginning again, all over again. Which is so wonderful.”—Miyoko Ito¹

MATRIX 267 presents a selection of paintings by Miyoko Ito (1918–1983) spanning several decades, marking the first solo presentation of Ito’s work in Berkeley and the first in a public institution in nearly forty years. Ito’s enigmatic work is little known beyond Chicago, where the artist spent her entire adult life. Her formative years, however, were in Berkeley, where she was born and raised, attended high school, and majored in art practice at the University of California. Her senior year was interrupted by World War II, when Ito, a second-generation Japanese American, was sent to Tanforan—a San Bruno horse track turned internment camp—alongside her new husband and thousands of others under Executive Order 9066, signed by Franklin Roosevelt in 1942. Once liberated, Ito briefly pursued graduate studies at Smith College before transferring to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Later that decade, she gave up the watercolor practice that had defined her education to explore Cubist-inspired geometries in lithography, etching, and oil paint. A sense of figuration eventually dropped out entirely as sharp corners grew rounded and compositions turned bodily and tubular. Her developing style, referred to as “organic abstraction” and “abstract impressionism,” was in part informed by the lyricism of Paul Klee and the metaphysics of Giorgio Morandi.

Ito was accepted in various annual juried shows in the 1950s—a popular format at the time—mostly in Chicago, but also in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and San Francisco. With commercial success out of reach, she started a family and invested in a community that included fellow artists Ted Halkin, Tom Kapsalis, Evelyn Statsinger, and artist-educator Whitney Halstead.

Beginning in the late 1960s, her message-in-a-bottle exhibition submissions gave way to appearances at a number of important Chicago institutions, including the Hyde Park Art Center, under legendary director Don Baum; Superior Street Gallery, a membership-driven enterprise financed by Joe Shapiro, founding president of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and MCA itself, where she was featured in the exhibition *Chicago Imagist Art* in 1972.

Ito was an early charge of Phyllis Kind, whose gallery would go on to represent now internationally recognized Imagist artists Roger Brown, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, and Barbara Rossi, among others. Nutt recalls that Kind’s embrace of Ito motivated him and wife Nilsson to sign up on her nascent roster.² Though a generation older than the rising stars of a movement known for its offbeat, comic-book iconography, Ito shared the Imagists’ zeal for the subliminal juxtaposition and technical rigor of Surrealism. And both Ito and the younger artists successfully fused Pop art’s feverish palette with an eccentric, outsider air. A sense of discovery was prized above all: “When I approach a canvas, I try to as much as possible keep my mind blank,” Ito said.³ Improvisatory drawings in red, green, and, later, charcoal formed the foundations of emergent paintings, the lines ultimately serving as shadowy gaps between large color forms.

Ito’s legacy primarily lies in her articulation of the tension between inner and outer lives. Many works position a highly constructed form—nearly a figure—against a distant horizon of saturated color. The reference to landscape painting is overt, but Ito’s work compellingly suggests a deeper engagement with psychological environments. In this way, Ito’s paintings are both first-person and topographic—pictures of an artist endeavoring to place herself in often hazy and remote surroundings. “Painting is very much a part of my life, like breathing,” she said in a 1978 interview. “It is a necessity. It is do or die. Every time I have a problem, I go deeper and deeper into painting. I have no place to take myself except painting.”⁴

Her compartmentalized spaces are organic and exact, like a dream recalled in unusual detail. Works like *Tabled Presence* (1971) and *Todoroki [Roaring]* (1974) portray furniture-like elements slipping into abstraction, while simultaneously suggesting a mind becoming a table or drawer—that is, an apparatus for the arrangement of things, sometimes shared but often closed or concealed. Free of cosmic preoccupations, her practice is defined by an earthly intimacy of objects, bodies, and limits.

Later paintings like *Narcissa* (1982) and *Byzantium* (1983) describe rigorous self-examination while hinting, for the first time in many years, at a combination of bodies. Layers stack vertically in mounds, slides, and bars, like video games of hallucinatory origin. Ever warmer, her final works are rendered in earth orange, hot red, and countless shades of blue.

Numerous canvases are affixed to their stretcher bars with half-driven tacks, apparently the result of Ito’s wish to remove and continue working on various paintings over time. The raised tacks remain, however, in many “finished” works, often with a halo-like frame floating just above their heads. As critic John Yau notes, they “recall the need to be able to leave quickly with what is most precious, to be able to roll it up rather than leave it behind.”⁵ Additionally, they speak to a violent and vulnerable admission of the mere thingness of painting—the fleeting nature of its capture in two dimensions.

Although it is difficult to explicitly track Ito’s relationship with Berkeley through her work, traces of her hometown appear in the most representational painting in the exhibition, *Untitled* (1970). The relatively subdued canvas foregrounds a dome-headed object surveying a strikingly familiar landscape, as if Ito were watching the sun slowly set beyond the hills and blue-green water of her childhood. Her singular vision, in this work and in her practice more broadly, reminds us not only of our inseparability from the natural world, but that human interiors are just as vast and unknowable as any vista.

Jordan Stein
GUEST CURATOR

1. Miyoko Ito, interview by Kate Horsfield, *Profile* 4, No. 1 (January 1984): 20.
2. Jim Nutt, conversation with the author, September 19, 2016.
3. Ito, interview by Horsfield, 15.
4. *Ibid.*, 19.
5. John Yau, “Artseen: Miyoko Ito,” *Brooklyn Rail*, May 9, 2006, <http://brooklynrail.org/2006/05/artseen/miyoko-ito>.



Biography

Miyoko Ito was born in Berkeley, California, to Japanese parents in 1918. As a young girl, she spent several years with her mother and sister in Japan, where she first experimented with calligraphy and painting. Ito followed in her father's footsteps by attending the University of California, Berkeley, where she studied watercolor under Worth Ryder, Erle Loran, and others. Months before her graduation in 1942, Ito was sent to Tanforan, an internment camp south of San Francisco. Released years before her new husband, Ito briefly matriculated at Smith College before transferring to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she received a scholarship but never graduated. Although, like those of other Chicago artists, her efforts were highly susceptible to regionalization, she participated in the 1975 Whitney Biennial and was honored with a retrospective exhibition at the Renaissance Society in 1980. She was represented by Phyllis Kind Gallery in Chicago and New York from the late 1960s through her death in 1983. Recent exhibitions include a solo presentation at VeneKlasen/Werner, Berlin (2012), and *No Vacancies*, a group presentation at Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York (2015).

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FRONT *Tabled Presence*
Photo: Michael Tropea

ABOVE *Narcissa*
Photo: James Prinz Photography

RIGHT *Oracle*
Photo: Tom Van Eynde

BACK *Island in the Sun*
Photo: Tom Van Eynde



Checklist

Kalamazoo
1959
Oil on canvas
56 × 70 in.
Courtesy of the Collection of Karin Tappendorf

Oracle
1967-1968
Oil on canvas
47 ³/₈ × 37 ³/₄ in.
Courtesy of Jim Nutt & Gladys Nilsson

Untitled
c. 1970
Oil on canvas
47 × 43 in.
Private collection

Untitled
1970s
Oil on canvas
48 × 46 in.
Courtesy of JPMorgan Chase Art Collection

Tabled Presence
1971
Oil on canvas
48 × 48 in.
Courtesy of Alice Brunner

Walls of No Escape
1980
Oil on canvas
46 × 32 in.
Courtesy of John B. Pittman

Untitled
1971-72
Oil on canvas
46 × 46 in.
Courtesy of Karen Lennox Gallery

Todoroki [Roaring]
1974
Oil on canvas
47 × 39 in.
Courtesy of Alice Brunner

Island in the Sun
1978
Oil on canvas
38 × 33 in.
Courtesy of John B. Pittman

Narcissa
1982
Oil on canvas
26 × 20 in.
Courtesy of JPMorgan Chase Art Collection

Byzantium
1983
Oil on canvas
35 × 27 ¹/₄ in.
Courtesy of JPMorgan Chase Art Collection

First Verdone
1983
Oil on canvas
26 × 20 in.
Courtesy of Jim Nutt & Gladys Nilsson

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