

CASTING THE CELESTIAL

Ashley Janke

For the past 45 years, Michiko Itatani (b. Osaka, Japan 1948) has grappled with humanity's mysterious place in the infinite universe. Her immense, layered paintings inspire a sense of grandeur, capturing the precarious beauty of a complex and curious civilization drifting through a vast galactic arena.

During the development of Michiko Itatani's exhibition *Celestial Stage*, Itatani and I discussed the worlds of past and future at length as we combed through her meticulously systemized index of hundreds of works and eventually settled on a selection of 65 pieces. Although her process and perspectives have shifted through the decades, central components, such as viscous cross-hatched lines and broader epistemological quandaries have remained consistent. The exhibition surveys the carefully cultivated language of Itatani's pictorial narratives through an abridgment of works produced throughout her prolific career.

Coded forms and structures captivated Itatani from an early age, first in scientific systems and later through the written word. She studied literature and philosophy and admired the rigorous composition of the novel while reflecting on fiction's ability to pose questions and probe convoluted truths. After moving to the United States, Itatani enrolled in a painting program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the early '70s to experience something new. At the school, she experimented with sculpture, print media, performance, and video. Itatani transferred what fascinated her most about literary devices into painting, developing a lexicon of anthropomorphic, geometric elements which draw on references from her own life, the art historical canon, and the metaphysical world.

Itatani's visual symbols are not concrete but nuanced in design. The beginning of two key visual elements can be found in the monolithic sculpture *"Untitled" painting/installation 78-J-3*, produced in 1978, and the oldest of Itatani's works included in *Celestial Stage*. The three-sided canvas structure takes the form of a human-scale rectangular prism painted jet black and adorned in sheaths of syringe-ejected metallic lines which gracefully wrap around the surface in interwoven patterns like twisted staffs of musical verse. Four decades later, Itatani's mesh lines routinely appear in both her studies and monumental works, generally located in the periphery like the curtains of a theatrical production, while the

rectangular prism slowly morphed into a painted polyhedron often filling the canvas.

From the *"Shadows of the Mind" painting from Celestial Connection 18-B-4* to the *"Ascending Order" painting from Cosmic Geometry 19-D-9*, the smooth black twelve-sided polyhedrons termed 'tesseract,' or four-dimensional cubes, in Itatani's work bear a striking resemblance to *Cube* (1934 [bronze cast 1959]), the only known abstract sculpture produced by the Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti, who was known for his figurative compositions. *Cube* is a complex emblem, described as a self-portrait, a marker of his father's death, and a meditation on the artist's creative process. *Cube* also draws upon the bizarre, magical tesseract in Albrecht Dürer's famous engraving *Melencolia I* (1514), considered an allegorical ode to creative genius and madness, including Durer's own. Across time, the tesseract defies singular categorization, and references varied perspectives on a singular, inaccessible reality while serving as a complex portrait of its maker. In Itatani's work, the tesseract evokes these histories and compounds with other elemental forms like kanji strokes—taking on a new meaning in the subjective context of each work.

As Itatani transitioned from writer to artist, she witnessed the rapid global shift into the Information Age driven by algorithmic computation and the desire to extend the Age of Contact (a period between the 15th and 17th centuries commonly referred to as the Age of Exploration, when Europe first made contact with the Americas) into the boundless interstellar realm. She hones in on periods of rapid expansion and the technical objects they produced. Over time, Itatani's visual vocabulary expanded to include particles, stars, globes, pianos, orreries, rockets, control panels, quantum computers, and black holes against a backdrop of helix staircases, observatories, libraries, and studies—reflecting products of human ingenuity measured between the quantum and cosmic.

Through prop-filled paintings populated with encrypted forms and familiar devices, Itatani examines the disproportionate human impulse to reach beyond one's capacity to know the unknown. Mechanisms from astronomical and anthropological records are extracted from their historical context and scaled to fit the stage, animating a familiar, dream-like world floating in the cosmos. Chromatic blues and synthetic neon reds electrify

the scenes as they quake with vivacity like a plucked string frozen in time. The seemingly impossible geometry of Itatani's lively interiors draws upon architectural styles which emerged in the 17th century, a period heavily referenced in her recent in her work, ranging from opulent, baroque European libraries (for example in *"Cosmic Wanderlust" painting from Cosmic Theater 10-B-3(CWC-3)*) to Japanese sukiya-zukuri style studies refracted by layered screens (*"Collection Sol III" painting from Celestial Maze 22-B1*).

The 17th century in Europe also marked the transition from the Scientific Revolution to the Age of Enlightenment, sparking the development of new inventions and systems ranging from the telescope to Isaac Newton's laws of motion. Early civilizations built observatories to record and interpret blazing celestial bodies scattered across the sky with astonishing precision, and by the 17th century, lenses and mirrors focused views of the micro and macro worlds, inventing tools to illustrate an uncanny relationship between the two. In Itatani's series *Celestial Maze*, she integrates past knowledge with the present as telescopes and deconstructed architectural components from observatories unravel to reveal a vast interstellar background. Energetic rings and spheres whip around like electrons circling a nucleus or exoplanets orbiting in a distant solar system. Itatani captures a reflection of the world, dismantled by the distant gaze of the universe through dense, geometric compositions. In these reverberating scenes, the atomic and the cosmic are intertwined in a visual theory of everything.

During the Scientific Revolution, stargazers embraced astronomy over astrology, and codebreakers took the place of mystics, replacing divination with the impulse to hoard information. Over time, this impulse has compounded compressing books to hard drives to quantum storage. The pursuit of information in this scientific period ushered in a new mechanistic view of the natural world which redefined Western ideology. Itatani's pictorial arrangements, viewed through this lens, depict the remains of a serious desire to capture the universe and master everything within it.

Itatani's work emphasizes forms of observation and information management as the engines of technological achievements which have propelled some worlds while

destroying others. From rockets to Sputnik to the James Webb Space Telescope, Itatani includes devices that are generally recognized but take on different meanings depending on the social and cultural background of the viewer. Her work is inquisitive and temporal, reaching through time to craft scenes that foreshadow an unknown future with the machines of our present and past.