



Michiko Itatani, "Cosmic Wanderlust" painting from Cosmic Theater 11-B-3 (CWC-7), 2011, Oil on canvas, 96 x 78 in

Exhibition: Michiko Itatani: Celestial Stage

Grades: 6 - 10

Learning Goals:

Students will be able to describe and interpret artworks;

Students will be able to incorporate ideas from art, history, and fiction into independent projects

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Educator Resource: Michiko Itatani's Libraries

Background Information

Michiko Itatani is a painter who lives and works in Chicago. Michiko was born in Osaka, Japan in 1948. As a child, Michiko became interested in the structures and rules that create order in our world—from laws of physics that determine the orbits of planets to the language that we use to tell stories and express ideas. Initially, Michiko wanted to be a fiction writer, and she studied literature and philosophy to ask questions about the world and explore her sense of wonder and curiosity about the unknown. Michiko's writing teachers suggested that she experience the world outside of Japan and expand her imagination as a writer.

In 1974, Michiko moved to Chicago. She enrolled as a student at the Art Institute of Chicago and experimented with different **media** before deciding to become a painter. She translated her interest in writing into a "painting language" that adopted references to the process of writing, including repeating lines and geometric shapes. As she continued to paint, Michiko started incorporating additional **motifs** including planets and celestial orbs, instruments, libraries, and observatories into her painting.

Many of Michiko's recent paintings, made between 2010 and 2020, are **narrative paintings** that tell a story using combinations of artistic and scientific objects. These large paintings depict celestial libraries and reference 17th century Europe, especially the **Baroque period**. The Baroque period happened after the Renaissance, and during this time the arts flourished, and architecture became heavily decorated with dramatic, exciting ornament that emphasized movement to create a sense of amazement. The Baroque period also coincided with the **Scientific Revolution**, a time when philosophers began to look to science, rather than religion, to explain the natural world. This period set the stage for the progression of science and invention in the Western world.

In her paintings, Michiko uses motifs from the Baroque Period and the Scientific Revolution to express her appreciation for the fundamental human desire to know the unknown. At the same time, Michiko's paintings appear fantastical, and she encourages her viewers to invent stories and fictional worlds. Michiko's fictional worlds include globes, planets, and stars, referencing the very small and special role of humanity in the vast universe.

Key Terms

media (singular: medium)

materials an artist uses to create an artwork, or a general means of communication (examples: oil painting, sculpture, drawing, writing)

motif

an element in an artwork that appears many times and expresses an important or central idea

narrative painting

painting that illustrates a story, real or fictional, using different elements, including color, mood, figures, images, and atmosphere

Baroque Period

a period between the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe of innovation in the arts, architecture, and music; styles typical of the Baroque period embrace drama and illusion, rather than naturalism, to create emotional responses in the viewer.

Scientific Revolution

a period between the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe of new scientific ideas that introduced reason and logic as dominant ways of learning about the world, in place of religion

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Close-looking Questions

Set a timer and look at the painting for five minutes. Write down everything you see. Consider objects, space, shapes, color, line, movement, focal point, depth. What do you think is happening in the painting? Make sure to support your answer with visual observations.

What kind of space is depicted in the painting? Do you think the painting is taking place inside or outside? Compare the bottom and top halves of the painting: how does the architecture of the space change? How would you describe the space?

What objects do you see in this painting? Which of the objects do you think exist in the real world and which do you think might be fictional, or made-up? Do you know the function of the objects of the painting? For any fictional objects, what function can you imagine? Do you think it is important to the artist whether the devices pictured are "real" or not?

This painting has two motifs that appear in many of Michiko's paintings: angled lines on the left and right sides of the canvas, and a ring of bright-colored orbs. What do you think these motifs might represent? Imagine creating a visual motif, or symbol, that represents yourself, without using your name or an image of you. What motif would you create?

Activities

Write + Draw: "Dream Library"

Have students read Michiko Itatani's short story *Encounter 7*. Older students may also read Jorge Luis Borges' story *The Library of Babel*. Discuss the story or stories: what do you imagine the two different spaces look like? Both stories feature mysterious figures, Michiko's character Xequi and Borges' narrator, what do you imagine these figures look like? Are they human? Alien? Something else? What do the two libraries look like? What colors, sounds, and textures do you imagine inside the libraries?

Imagine your own dream library. What would this library contain? Books, spaceships, instruments, toys, or something else? How big would your library be, and where would it be located? Who would come to your library? What would the purpose of your library be? Have students look at images of different libraries around the world and draw their dream library. Encourage experimentation! Can anything be a library?

For older students: how do Michiko Itatani and Jorge Luis Borges differ in their imagination of what libraries can be? Are both stories optimistic about the idea of an "infinite library"? Why or why not? Think about the different ways that you access information in a given day, do you have free access to all information? Why or why not?

Watch: "Orders of Infinity"

Have students look at a group of library paintings, read Michiko Itatani's short story *Encounter 7*, and watch Charles and Ray Eames' short video *Powers of Ten*. Each of these illustrates the idea of "infinity" in different ways. Is it hard or easy for you to imagine the idea of "infinity"? What do you think of the different ways these artists represent infinity? How do these different representations make you feel about the idea of infinity?

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Activities

Write + Paint: "Think like a painter"

Have students watch the series of videos with Michiko Itatani explaining her exhibition *Celestial Stage*. Have students write down any surprising or new ideas. Why do you think Michiko uses painting to express her ideas about the universe and humanity, as opposed to a different medium (like sculpture, or music)?

In the video *Michiko Itatani on 'Cosmic Returning'*, Michiko says, "I am trying to invite [people], using all I know about the painting process... to exercise the brain slightly different than daily life, so they can really find their true desire, dream, and hope." How does painting make you think differently than a story, or a song? Is it easier or harder to understand the meaning of a painting, or a story? Have students choose a favorite story, song, or poem and create a narrative painting telling the story. How will you represent people, places, and things? How will you represent feelings and ideas?

Write + Draw: "Golden Record"

Michiko's paintings collect artifacts from the human quest for knowledge, and present objects and ideas that she would like to preserve for generations to come.

In 1977, a Voyager spacecraft carried on board a golden record, inscribed with images, sounds, and symbols that would communicate important facts about human life on Earth if ever found by aliens.

Show students Michiko's paintings and the 1977 golden record. Compare and contrast the images depicted in both. What do you think an alien would think of either object? What would you want aliens to know about people on Earth, or you? Imagine that you could send one piece of paper to an alien civilization, to communicate everything you think is important about humanity on Earth. Have students create their "golden record" on a piece of paper.

Additional Resources

[Encounter 7 by Michiko Itatani](#)

[Voyager Golden Record Image](#)

[Casting the Celestial by Ashley Janke](#)

[The Library of Babel \(1941\), Jorge Luis Borges](#)

[Michiko Itatani Image Gallery](#)

[Powers of 10 \(1977\), Charles and Ray Eames](#)

[Video walkthroughs of Michiko Itatani: Celestial Stage](#)

Note from the artist

"I always dream of young people seeing my paintings and thinking of the larger world and the universe. I hope young students are encouraged to be free to do what they want to...to be free to expand their world, and to think beyond their usual lives, using their imagination, and dream for the future."