

Michiko Itatani: Celestial Stage

On View at Wrightwood 659 in Chicago from October 1 – January 28, 2023

Exhibition of Exuberant Paintings Reflects an Artist's Search for Answers to the Wondrous Universe



Michiko Itatani, "Collection Sol III" painting from *Celestial Maze 22-B-1*, 2022

(CHICAGO, IL, October 4, 2022)—Wrightwood 659 is pleased to announce *Michiko Itatani: Celestial Stage*, an exhibition of more than 60 paintings and drawings that reveals the Chicago-based artist's fascination with humankind's efforts to comprehend the universe and the inspiring grandeur of the unknown. Over the course of her 40-year career, Itatani (b. 1948, Osaka, Japan) has created a compelling body of work that is at once private in its inspirations, and outward facing in its engagement with the mysteries and science of the cosmos. *Celestial Stage* is on view through January 28.

Itatani's oversized paintings—often seven-by-eight feet or even larger—burst with an energy created by densely placed images, which serve as symbols of humanity's eternal search for knowledge. Many of the paintings depict "stages" where science and culture come improbably together—linking baroque bookcases and rockets, grand pianos with Japanese tea rooms, and harps alongside helical staircases. The effect is of an artist's joyous exuberance and her wonder and awe at the world and beyond.

Michiko Itatani: Celestial Stages is presented by Alphawood Exhibitions.

The exhibition has been organized by Ashley Janke, Wrightwood 659 Assistant Curator.

"The galleries at Wrightwood were designed to foster the kind of quiet contemplation that Michiko Itatani's *oeuvre* inspires—even requires. We also consider it our mission to bring into public focus important art that otherwise might not be exhibited. This gathering of Michiko's production over her lifetime marks just such an occasion," says Chirag G. Badlani, Executive Director of Alphawood Foundation Chicago, which is presenting *Celestial Stage* through Alphawood Exhibitions.

Itatani's work is ever timely as a foreshadowing of our collective future. The artist says, "When I was young, I thought I would live forever. Now I think the human species occupies such a tiny little portion of cosmic time;

yet, we might destroy ourselves. But I am pathetically optimistic. We have this very precious, wonderful occasion to enjoy real time. I am aware this painting I am doing is not going to last forever.”

Ashley Janke added, “One sees in Michiko’s work a thirst to understand human life in relation to the cosmos. In pursuing this vast, open-ended inquiry as a visual artist, she found ways to condense and express the human experience in coded terms and visual systems of her own devising.”

The Exhibition

Michiko Itatani: Celestial Stage features approximately 60 paintings and drawings, nearly half of them vibrantly colored, densely layered narratively, and enormous in scale. They show the artist experimenting

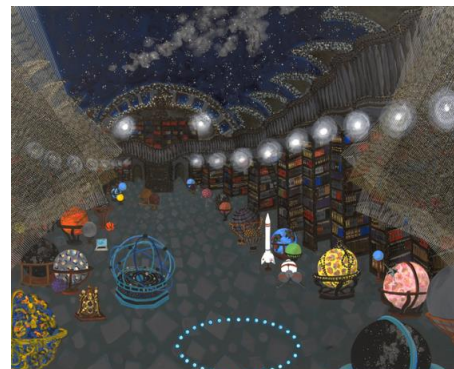


Michiko Itatani, “Still life” painting from *Astroarchaeologist* 22-D-2, 2022

along dual tracks: using either a color-filled palette to imagine domestically scaled rooms filled with a jumble of scientific inventions under the dome of the cosmos, or gray abstractions pulsing with glowing orbs, spirals, and tumbling polyhedrons. Large-scale canvases are installed alongside drawings the size of typing paper, rendered with a virtuosity befitting an artist whose early training included Japanese ink brush drawing. Twelve recent paintings are being exhibited for the first time.

The exhibition begins in Wrightwood’s entrance atrium with *Still Life* (2022) from the “Astroarchaeologist” series, a faux-naïve take on the genre of still-life. In the large, bright, and charmingly eccentric painting, the artist has jumbled such scientific devices as globes, a miniature James Webb telescope, a laptop computer, a rocket, and what looks like a space toy alien

space craft, all in front of a traditional bookcase. Upstairs, the exhibition is divided into three thematic sections. The first, installed in the Main Gallery of the third floor, highlights Itatani’s fascination with scientific and cultural artifacts in juxtapositions that create dream-like imagery. Among the works on view are *Cosmic Wanderlust* (2011) and *Astroarchaeologist* (2022). These are large, vividly hued paintings—very much alike in their palette of bold blue, gold,



Michiko Itatani, “Cosmic Wanderlust” painting from *CTRL-Home/Echo* 11-B-1 (CRH-2), 2011

and orange and their depiction of architectural spaces containing a bevy of devices, glowing chandeliers, and tiny shiny orbital rings.



Michiko Itatani, “Cosmic Returning” painting from *Quantum Chandelier* 21-C-02, 2021

Another large-scale canvas—saturated with a fiery red—hangs nearby. *Cosmic Returning* (2021) portrays a Gilded Age-like interior dominated by a grand piano, another of Itatani’s favored motifs. The piano is framed under a stained-glass wall and flanked by a winding staircase and bookshelf. In the background are a door draped with red and green curtains and another crowned by Baroque, gilded tracery. The dense pictorial tableau layers visual forms, some of the artist’s own invention, like the mesh-like screens framing the interior space like

stage curtains. Some objects are hi-tech, such as a blue-light-emitting computer console; others are outmoded, exemplified by a mechanical model of the solar system.

The exhibition's second section, also on the third floor, brings together the macro and the micro—expansive images of the universe and of atoms in dreamlike settings that break down and distort the dimension of space. On view in the South Gallery or Gray Room are a group of gray monochrome paintings depicting celestial forms and stars in movement. Four works, including the seven by six-foot *Three Body Problem* (2021), represent the impossible: they are translations into two dimensions via oil on canvas of the geometric form of the tesseract, a four-dimensional analogue of the cube. These dynamic explorations of the tesseract form are installed aside the nearby *Codebreaker* (2020), another exhibition highlight, wherein planets, rings, spheres, and glowing lights whip around as if in a frenetic ballet set amid an energy-filled solar expanse.



Michiko Itatani, "Codebreaker" painting from *Celestial Maze* 20-D-10, 2020



Michiko Itatani, "Personal Codes" painting from *Cosmic Geometry* 19-B-4, 2019

On the fourth floor, the third section boasts some of Itatani's more abstract work, including paintings featuring geometric forms of woven lines, polyhedrons, and rings of floating orbs. Here, another selection of grisaille abstract paintings surrounds the earliest work in the exhibition, a mute black box created in 1978 that stands, stele-like, in the middle of the gallery. Among the gray-scale paintings here is *Personal Codes* (2019), an enormous swath of near-blacks where a polyhedron seems to spring from a dark sphere etched in tiny delicate cross-hatched lines. In the background, distant stars and planets the size of pinheads are rendered with surprising nuance and specificity.

Returning to the main gallery, the visitor's eye is drawn to a large grisaille painting surrounded by white polyhedron forms dominating the far wall of the elevated North Gallery. Upon approach, the processional perspective of *Cosmic Wanderlust* (2012) draws the viewer into a scene of a corridor lined with colorful, misshapen globes and sinuously stylized trees. The only color amid the spectrum of grays is a brilliant crown of tiny golden orbs showering black and white dots down upon the picture plane.

Exhibition Publication

Michiko Itatani: Celestial Stage is accompanied by an 80-page publication which highlights the poetic systems and devices in Itatani's paintings and her fascination with humanity's desire to grapple with the unknown universe. Documentation of the artworks and installation are included along with a fictional short story by Itatani published for the first time, along with essays by Assistant Curator Ashley Janke and theorist Simon O'Sullivan.

The Artist

Michiko Itatani is Professor Emeritus at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), where she has taught for 40 years. She was born and educated in Japan, where from an early age she was fascinated by the patterns and structures of science, learned traditional brush painting, and published poetry. She came to the

U.S. in her early 20s, earning BFA and MFA degrees from SAIC (1974, 1976). Her work is represented in the permanent collections of public museums around the world, including the Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois; Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA), Spain; National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, Korea; Olympic Museum, Lausanne, Switzerland; and the U.S. Embassy in Brasilia, Brazil, among many others.

Also on View at Wrightwood 659

Running concurrently with *Michiko Itatani: Celestial Stage* is *The First Homosexuals: Global Depictions of a New Identity, 1869-1930*, a groundbreaking exhibition on the role of art in the modern construction of same-sex desire.

About Wrightwood 659

Wrightwood 659 is a private, non-collecting institution devoted to socially engaged art and to architecture. Located at 659 W. Wrightwood Avenue, in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood, the intimate space officially opened in late 2018 and hosts public exhibitions in the Fall/Winter and Spring/Summer. Wrightwood 659 was designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Tadao Ando, who transformed a 1920s building with his signature concrete forms and poetic treatment of natural light. For additional information, visit:

<https://wrightwood659.org>

About Alphawood Exhibitions

Alphawood Exhibitions is an affiliate of Alphawood Foundation, a Chicago-based, grant-making private foundation working for an equitable, just, and humane society.

Hours of Operation

Fridays 12–7 pm

Saturdays 10 am–5 pm

Tickets

Exhibition tickets are \$15 and are available online only <https://tickets.wrightwood659.org/events>. Please note, admission is by advance ticket only. Walk-ups are not permitted.

COVID-19 Response

We require all staff and guests to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19. Visitors will be required to show proof of vaccination and booster prior to admission to Wrightwood 659. Proof of vaccine and booster can be your official vaccine card or a photo of the card, along with a matching photo ID. Any individual who does not meet these requirements will not be permitted to enter the building. Children who are not fully vaccinated or who are ineligible for vaccination cannot be admitted to the building.

Masks will continue to be required throughout the gallery. <https://wrightwood659.org/terms-and-conditions/health-safety/>.

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Image Credits

Note: All images courtesy of the artist

Image 1: Michiko Itatani, *"Collection Sol III"* painting from *Celestial Maze 22-B-1*, 2022, oil on canvas, 78" x 96"

Image 2: Michiko Itatani, *"Still life"* painting from *Astroarchaeologist 22-D-2*, 2022, oil on canvas, 28"x 23"

Image 3: Michiko Itatani, *"Cosmic Wanderlust"* painting from *CTRL-Home/Echo 11-B-1 (CRH-2)*, 2011, oil on canvas, 78"x 96"

Image 4: Michiko Itatani, *"Cosmic Returning"* painting from *Quantum Chandelier 21-C-02*, 2021, oil on canvas, 72"x 60"

Image 5: Michiko Itatani, *"Codebreaker"* painting from *Celestial Maze 20-D-10*, 2020, oil on canvas, 42"x 34"

Image 6: Michiko Itatani, *"Personal Codes"* painting from *Cosmic Geometry 19-B-4*, 2019, oil on canvas, 78"x 96"