MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
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The New York Review of Books

# Inventories of Light

**David Beal**

The work of the Chicago painter Miyoko Ito is at once tightly controlled and filled with exuberant love for the medium.

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Estate of Miyoko Ito/Matthew Marks Gallery
Miyoko Ito: *E for Elissa*, circa 1975

Miyoko Ito created one of the most extraordinary bodies of work in the last century of American painting. It records the growth of a lucid private vision that could only be translated to the canvas by adhering to a meticulous, sui generis technique. Ito was influential in her adopted hometown of Chicago, especially for the run of paintings she made between the early 1960s and her death at sixty-five in 1983. She has long been ignored by the other power centers of the art world. In 1975 she was included in the Whitney Biennial but otherwise has received scant attention in New York; she had two solo shows here during her lifetime, a posthumous show at Adam Baumgold Gallery in 2006, and one small but illuminating retrospective at Artists Space in 2018. Her later paintings were shown in her native Berkeley for the first time only six years ago. A volume on her work is forthcoming from Pre-Echo Press later this year, but otherwise there have been no major catalogs and little academic research on her life and career to date. A new show at Matthew Marks is her first at an A-list commercial gallery in New York since her death.

Her paintings are mysterious, allusive, playful, and profound. Objects collapse into one another and enclose off-kilter worlds inside themselves. The same forms pop up again and again, always on the verge of becoming some known thing: rooms, mountains, lakes, popsicle sticks, licorice, strands

of hair, dynamite. Much of the work has an affinity with architectural structures—prosceniums, door transoms, rafters—and with chairs, tables, drawers, wood joinery. (Ito collected old pieces of furniture that she used as models.) But it also evokes an infant's perception, in which the elements of the visible world are all the more vivid for being uncategorized in the mind and identical with the self.

The paintings generate some of their power from the tension between the wild inventiveness of their spatial design and the rhythmic consistency of their surfaces. Paint is secured to the canvas in hundreds of short, horizontal units; the even dispersal of these matte brushstrokes over green and red grounds gives them a sense of trembling luminosity and acts in counterpoint to the irregularity of Ito's shape-making. The paint is thick enough to retain its dimensionality and thin enough so that the tooth of the canvas shows through; often the original charcoal outlines are still visible between the shapes. While the paintings seem rigorously planned, their execution carefully regulated, they also seem to have been discovered in the process of their making. She spoke of each painting as "a beginning again."

Each work has a tightly controlled palette but also suggests the infinite divisibility of the chromatic spectrum. There is a spellbinding drama in her arrangement and calm modulation of planes of color: low values gradually become high values; pastel yellows and tans border saturated blues and reds. In *Sea Chest* (1972), a mustard horizon lies behind a lopsided sectional mass of undulating

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Miyoko Ito: *Heart of Hearts, Basking*, 1973

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red, which supports an arched portal of cerulean sliced through with a thin sliver of Verona green and surrounded by a plane of pastel pink and greenish yellow. In *E for Elissa* (circa 1975), wavelengths of green, yellow, and orange seem to vibrate inside two slightly crooked squares at the bottom of the painting. The colors shift gracefully, but their blending is not exactly diffuse. Rather, with each horizontal band, Ito loads the brush with a pigment mixture that is barely modified from the previous one. Changes in color are registered cumulatively, as if each plane were taking an inventory of the light hitting it. How Ito was able to consistently produce this surface effect is one of the most dazzling and confounding aspects of her work.

Some of Ito's canvases are nailed only halfway deep into the stretcher bars, so that dozens of closely spaced carpet tacks jut out from the sides of the painting. Why she sometimes left her canvases in this state is not really known. They may be a remnant of the preparation process; apparently she didn't mind when framers hammered in the tacks all the way. But they are somehow integral to her work. They make the paintings float off the wall, and call attention to the nature of the canvases as stretched objects, their surfaces held in suspension like drumskins. Maybe Ito, with her interest in interior domestic spaces, also liked the fact that the main purpose of canvas tacks is to fasten carpets to floors. The critic John Yau has written that 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." The tacks are also just plain cool—they make the paintings look like *Hellraiser*.

It is easy to see meditation and restraint in her art; it is also easy to sense an exuberant love of paint itself, a mischievous staging of forms, and an obsession with the repetitive motor action of brushwork. An unfinished work from 1983 (not included in the Matthew Marks show) reveals that Ito liked to paint her red grounds with a small flat brush in swirling hatch marks rather than with a wide brush and a solid fill, giving the canvases an energized, nonhomogeneous foundation. Her paintings tend to have a misty quality even when their colors are highly saturated. In the order of their surfaces, the precision of their shapes, and the subtlety of their gradients, they have a kind of tranquility. But they also suggest a restless mind trying to understand its inner workings and its place in a chaotic world.

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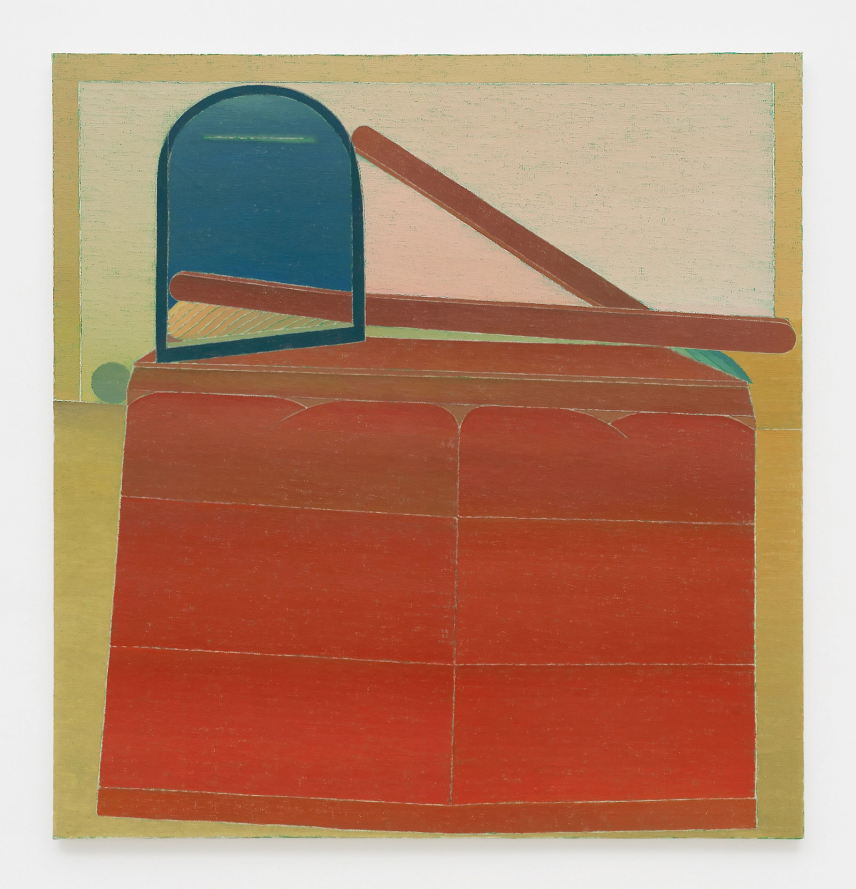
Ito was born in 1918 in Berkeley to parents of Japanese descent and spent part of her childhood living with her mother and sister in rural Japan, near Nagoya. "Those five years," she later said, "are the roots of what I am right now." She was ill from a young age and often bedridden, the result, she later conjectured, of a nervous breakdown. She barely escaped death in the Great Kantō earthquake of 1923. She became obsessed with landscape painting as early as first grade.

Ito's diasporic experience was in some ways aligned with that of the *Kibei Nisei* generation of Japanese Americans, children of first-generation immigrants (*Issei*) who spent some portion of their youth back in Japan—though she only spent her primary school years abroad. In a postcard to the painter Ray Yoshida from 1975, she describes how reading Yasunari Kawabata's *The Lake* "recaptured the scenes from my own years in provincial Japan." The main character in Kawabata's free-associative, erotic 1954 novel is always recalling the lake in his mother's village: "Whenever he saw that vast and deep expanse of motionless water lit suddenly by the night sky, he felt crushed by



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Miyoko Ito: *Sea Chest*, 1972

the awful mystery of nature, the agony of time. It was as if he himself had been struck by lightning and everything around him had burst with light." One imagines Ito's childhood recollections being imbued with some of this blinding intensity, which may have informed some of the visionary cast of her work.

But her art was also shaped by a long immersion in European and American modernism. When she was ten she returned to the Bay Area with her mother and sister, and she went on to study art at the University of California at Berkeley, where she gravitated toward Cézanne and Picasso and synthetic cubism. Her early work in watercolor was inspired by her association with the Berkeley School of watercolor painting. Under the influence of Hans Hofmann, these painters emphasized open planes of color as opposed to the realistic delineation of Southern California watercolorists.

In 1942, just before graduating college, Ito was incarcerated at Tanforan, a prison camp for Japanese Americans in San Bruno. She had married her boyfriend a few days before so that they would be sent to the same "assembly center." Tanforan was a horse racing track, quickly jerry-rigged into living quarters for eight thousand people. While in the camp Ito was involved in an art education program spearheaded by the painter Chiura Obata, and she came into contact with many Bay Area Japanese artists who taught there; she didn't speak about this in the few interviews she gave, but Yau claims, plausibly, that "the first supportive art world community in which Ito thrived was entirely Japanese."

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Ito spent less than six months at Tanforan, and one hesitates to read this period of her life too deeply into her work, but it surely stayed with her. Jordan Stein, the curator who organized the brilliant retrospective of Ito's work at the Berkeley Art Museum that traveled to Artists Space, has said that while she was incarcerated, "all she had was sky."

Many of her paintings are preoccupied with shifts in atmospheric light, weather, and time of day; she may also have been attentive to the built environment of the camps, often partially constructed by detainees.

The photographer Dorothea Lange spent time at Tanforan documenting the camp, a skeletal collection of drafty buildings that the War Relocation Authority described to detainees as guaranteeing only "food, shelter, medical care, and protection until you leave for a Relocation Center." Her photographs show long horse barracks with face-nail siding, diagonally braced doors, exposed insulation, shed roofing, crooked telephone poles, and an abundance of wood planks amid the muddy expanse of the racetrack (she was prohibited from photographing the barbed wire or surveillance towers). In the distance are the gently sloping hills of the San Francisco Peninsula. The photographs were likely commissioned to show the ostensibly humane conditions of the camps. But they telegraph an atmosphere of disorienting confinement in a wide-open landscape, and a sense of a permeable boundary between inside and outside—qualities also intrinsic to Ito's paintings.

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Miyoko Ito: *Untitled*, 1970

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Ito was released from Tanforan to attend graduate school at Smith College in the fall of 1942. She was likely assisted in her release by the Quaker-sponsored National Japanese American Student Relocation Council, which helped place students from the camps in colleges outside the West Coast; decades later, a local news article mentioned that Ito was aided by the Smith College chaplain Burns Chalmers, who had also been active in negotiating the release of Jews from concentration camps in southern France.

After a year she transferred to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, in the city where she would spend the rest of her life. The School of the Art Institute was relatively progressive; Stein notes that it began admitting women by the end of the nineteenth century and offered classes on work outside the Western canon. The city's inclusive environment, at least in these respects, nourished Ito, and she started to show her work regularly. She also did some commercial art for State Street department stores and designed wrapping paper. In the late 1940s she began making lithographs, which made her visual approach, she said, "more linear and sort of black-and-white-oriented, harder edge." These lithographs are among the earliest artworks in the Matthew Marks show, and

although they depict actual things—trees, a bicycle, dishware, a baby—they also display what she called the "closed…construction composition" that set her work on a new path. At the same time she was making her first serious attempt to "digest the process of oil painting."

By the early 1950s she had two children, and she spent much of the decade "pretty much isolated," raising her family. In a 1951 article she said she intended to use some recently awarded fellowship money to "hire a housekeeper and some baby-sitters." She still painted every day even after she converted her home studio to a nursery, and her paintings from this era show her developing her distinctive approach to form, underpainting, and brushwork that would reach a breakthrough around the start of the 1960s. The lower right section of *Act One by the Sea* (circa 1955) is an aggregation of orange and brown rendered in short brush marks (vertically directional, for now) over a bluish ground; slightly gappy white lines give the impression that the shapes are stitched together. It's a modernist genre painting, but it intimates some of what's to come.

As she refined her methods and her paintings grew more idiosyncratic, Ito became loosely associated with the burgeoning movement of Chicago Imagism. She shared these painters' gallerist, Phyllis Kind, and what Stein calls "their zeal for the subliminal juxtaposition, logic-defying representation, and technical precision of Surrealism," if not their wondrous irreverence. In a 1983 essay, Ito's friend the painter Vera Klement wrote that Chicago aesthetics in the 1960s were "polarized between imagism and abstraction," but that "Miyoko had taken her place on a higher ledge, a precarious point of balance between the two." Still, Ito was a warm presence on the Chicago scene. According to Stein, the painter Gladys Nilsson described once seeing her with her socks inside out; Ito said she thought it "just looked a lot better that way, with the stitching revealed."

By the 1970s she had settled into a rhythm of producing about one painting a month, each formatted at an approachable, nonmonumental scale, often around four feet by three and a half feet. She survived breast cancer and had a double mastectomy, and she spoke candidly of another nervous breakdown she had as an adult. Her work from these years is her crowning achievement. Paintings like *River of Pediment* (1972), *Heart of Hearts, Basking* (1973), and *Act One in the Desert* (1977) seem bound by a set of secret rules developed only through a long and resolute devotion to the act of applying paint. In their funky and exacting geometric conception, their sense of visual possibility, their fastidious attention to the tactility of light, and their radiant intelligence, these paintings model both a sense of humility before the medium and a rich inner freedom.

In 1978 Ito was interviewed on camera by Lyn Blumenthal and Kate Horsfield, two fellow Chicago artists; it's the only known footage of her. She speaks for nearly an hour about how painting has centered her life. There is something in her tone—her long pauses and small exclamations, her disarming smile and lack of pretense—that sheds light on the elusive poignancy of her art. Painting is "like breathing," she tells them. "It's a necessity, it's do or die…Every time I have a problem…I go deeper and deeper into it. I have no place to take myself except painting…it's been my biggest life-giving force." ●

**"Miyoko Ito" is at Matthew Marks through April 15.**

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