

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS

NEW YORK

Miyoko Ito

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Glowing with subtle gradations of color, the singular visions that Miyoko Ito (1918–1983) committed to canvas throughout the 1970s conflate interior and exterior realms, simultaneously evoking desolate vistas and sun-drenched rooms. Her improvised but methodically built-out compositions—populated with archways, windows that could be mirrors, and pictures within pictures—confine as often as they reflect, refract, or open onto sweeping panoramas. *Untitled*, 1970, embodies this confusion: One seems to look at, into, and through the depicted space. At the painting's center is a depthless, diagonally striped mound, a loafing mass sitting for a portrait—it's even capped with a wisp of wavy hair. Encasing this form are walls painted in a punchy coral that gradually transitions to ripe persimmon and dusty pink. A favored technique of Ito's,



Miyoko Ito, *Untitled*,
1975, oil on canvas,
60¼ × 68¼".

the ombré shading suggests twilight's transience. Light is the real subject here: the fiery radiance of dusk pouring into the room from the window above. Or is that a picture frame?

This exhibition, like the long overdue survey of Ito's art mounted at New York's Artists Space five years ago, focused on her prolific output from the 1970s, but a handful of paintings and three lithographs from the first half of her career provided a welcome opportunity to understand her artistic development. Ito's story is hard to disentangle from her work, and the catalogue accompanying the Matthew Marks show reinforces this connection: A biographical chronology is the only text in the slim volume. Ito was born to Japanese immigrants in Berkeley, California, and, aside from five formative but trying childhood years in Japan, was raised there as well. In April 1942, shortly after the US entered World War II and one month before she was set to graduate from the University of California, Berkeley, she was forcibly relocated to the Tanforan internment camp for Japanese Americans. A scholarship to Smith College enabled her to leave the detention center, but she later transferred to the Art Institute of Chicago and settled in that city, where she would develop her signature style.

Ito worked out of her home while raising two children, painting by day on one canvas at a time. *Easel and Table*, 1948, an early example of her preoccupation with spatial tension, captures her cramped working conditions, her studio infringing

upon her living space. Gradually, over the course of three decades, she established a presence within Chicago's art scene, despite her familial responsibilities and struggles with cancer and mental health. She exhibited alongside the Imagists at Phyllis Kind Gallery, but she aligned herself more closely with a small group of painters self-dubbed the Allusive Abstractionists for their emphasis on observation-based abstraction over pure objective form. She was a senior figure in both circles, and her evocative formalism represented a generational and stylistic bridge between the two. As a result, she made an impression on younger artists, including Christina Ramberg and Diane Simpson.

Ito emphasized the physicality and facture of her paintings by leaving aspects of her process visible. The carpenter's tacks used to fasten her canvases to stretchers remained partially exposed on several paintings here, forming a protective frame of punctures that speaks to the vulnerability and impermanence of any artwork. The artist also preserved traces of her preliminary charcoal drawings, and the green underpaintings, which subdue her warmer tones, seep through to the surface. As evident in the stratified bands of *River of Pediment*, 1972, she painted right up to the edges of the charcoal lines, leaving a negative space that helps delineate volume. Her meticulously crafted, taut compositions are also, by design, surprisingly sketchy and fluid. Using short linear brushstrokes, she produced extremely matte, light-absorbing surfaces, her oils taking on the dry quality of pastels, as arid as the illusory landscapes she conjures.

Though Ito's paintings have the aura of landscapes, they are not of any particular location. Her abstractions can evoke vistas from her lived experience: views of the Pacific Ocean from Northern California and Japan; the high-altitude deserts of Utah, where her husband was interred; or the vast, flat expanses of Lake Michigan and the Midwest. *Untitled #126*, ca. 1970, depicts a

sun setting over a distinctly Northern California bay. Yet other paintings are almost entirely composed of atmospheric light and surreal accents, such as the winged sun and the giant squeegee sweeping across the sky in *Act One in the Desert*, 1977. As she indicated with the title of a 1972 painting, *A No Place Landscape* (not on view here), her vistas, like desert mirages, were products of the mind as much as of the world. No place and every place: Her paintings bring us there.

— Chris Murtha