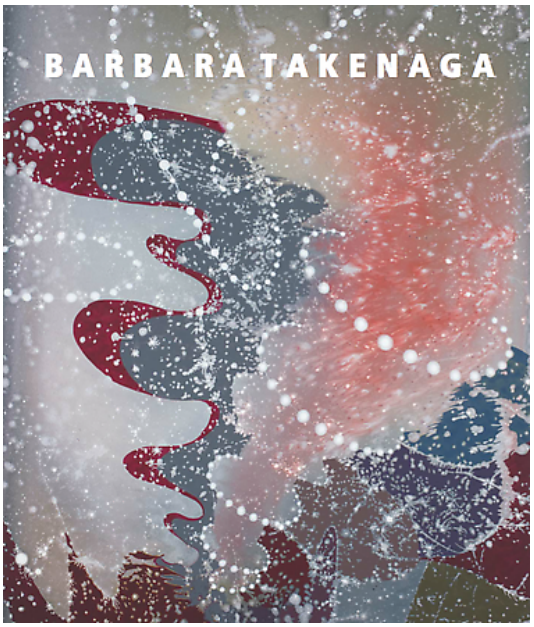

DC Moore Catalog Essay

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MACRO:MICRO::MICRO:MACRO

BARBARA TAKENAGA IN CONVERSATION WITH ROBERT KUSHNER

ROBERT KUSHNER: The very first time I saw your work, I was totally drawn in and fascinated. I had the need to keep looking at them, to decode their systems, and then come back to them and "re-learn" them all over again. Through the years your work has evolved and grown. Yet you always seem to retain a sense of Takenaga. No matter how experimental, they express your own unique vision. One of these aspects is your hybridization of abstraction and illusion. You have been included in many exhibitions of abstract painting. Much of the literature about your work refers to abstraction, discusses your work as abstract painting. But I have always been curious whether, in your mind, you consider these abstract paintings?

BARBARA TAKENAGA: You know, when people ask what I do, I always say I'm a painter. And they say what kind? And I say I'm an abstract painter. I think of the paintings as abstract for a number of reasons—because the visual reading is so open-ended and ambiguous, non-verbal and slippery in a way. And, because I'm interested in flatness and shape and all the gestures that one might think of as issues of abstraction. The paintings all start out that way, as a series of marks in my head, which I transfer onto the surface. I think of them as an abstract collection of shapes, but the thing is, they definitely have references to and allude to illusionistic things.

RK: Like what?

BT: Well, even, for instance, the dots —the way they dry and their edges pull away from the panel gives the dots an illusionistic look. They can be very flat and circular, but they can also appear to be three-dimensional and have the illusion of a bead or a sphere. A group of dots can just be making shapes on the surface, but the shapes could also refer to explosive situations, spaceships, or perhaps something as quiet and domestic as lanterns or upside-down chandeliers. So the paintings intentionally straddle that line between non-objectivity and depiction, but I think tons of artists who call themselves abstract painters cultivate that line. Oddly enough, the paintings easily read as landscape

as well. I say oddly, because I have never had an interest in pursuing that genre. But by just dropping in a horizontal division into the image, the viewer goes toward a spatial reading naturally— we want to read it as a landscape. More land or more sky depending upon the placement of that horizontal line. More heaven or more earth, which, of course, tips the reading and the position of the viewer. But I stubbornly think of them as abstract, maybe because they are "headscapes," not derived from observation.
RK: So then, does the impetus for a new painting begin from a formalist notion that then begins to incorporate these references as the painting takes shape? Or, from a sense of an evocative phenomenon that you are drawn to incorporating into your given vocabulary of forms?

BT: In my older work from 2001 to 2011, I was continually investigating basically the same composition. So the structure was set before I started the work. I knew generally what I wanted to have happen and then I kind of let it happen in terms of variation and play. They were formally diverse within a conceptual system, and had a sort of radial, cosmic, outer-space feeling.Lately, with this current group of paintings, I think the answer is more complex. I like that you said "evocative" in the question — that is something that I hope for in each work. Open-ended but some- thing looming, big, still or moving. But the paintings are willful—like dachshunds, they do what they want.Process-wise, I have been trying to loosen up. First, I make the back- grounds —splashy, faux Abstract Expressionist grounds with very freely manipulated paint, applied without much preconception. After that, I play "Zen Surrealist," studying the accidental incidents and finding subject matter embedded in the painting. I just sit and look at them, and wait for them to tell me what to do, and then go with that. They still seem to naturally gravitate, or maybe anti- gravitate, to some kind of explosive/implosive situation. I still love the idea itself of the Big Bang—in many of the paintings there is often a vanishing point and a certain kind of symmetry. So the formal and the evocative are intertwined.

RK: On the wall in your studio, you have a graphic representation taken from a magazine of the Big Bang—the inconceivably vast convulsion that physicists mark as the beginning of our universe. The specificity of that image made a very strong impression on me. It was an extraordinarily beautiful and peculiar form. How much of this particular body of work has to do with such macrocosmic events? Are you referring to theoretical physics? Or hooking up more with our shared cultural link of pop sci-fi?

BT: I love that illustration too. We liked the title, do you remember? "Rapidly Accelerating Expansion into the Future." It's a diagram of the Big Bang from a side view! Like watchingit from afar as it expands into the universe. Like a flower or a widening cone. In answer to your question, when I first started the more cosmic paintings from 2000, I was making what I thought were really small domestic paintings. They began as groups of fine black lines—like very detailed

paintings of hair spirals. The initial impetus came from looking at my dog. You know, that little spiral of fur on my dog's knee or on his butt— like the cowlick on a human head. I always thought that this transformation was so wonderful because it started out extremely mundane. Yet, I found that this little everyday thing, this curl of fur, also could be read as a cosmic spiral. I was interested in this elegance —the small being the large, and how they exist simultaneously. Later, when I started doing the night version of those paintings with darkened backgrounds, they definitely became outer space-like. The hair spirals became galaxies and stars. And when the paintings became larger, the macro/micro dichotomy was even more apparent because the field was expanded. I began looking a lot at electron microscope images and cellular diagrams. At the same time, I was also looking at, and thinking about, astronomy and Hubble telescope photo- graphs. My first show of this body of work was in 2001, a few months after 9/11. For me, those paintings were very celestial as if they were streaming from outer space. I had been thinking of them as being about celebration and grief—more like elegies. In a way, they were Little Bang paintings. I remember thinking: Oh my God, this is after 9/11, this is not appropriate. In this context, I was afraid they would be read as overly catastrophic. Big Bang, yes, but, you always think of it as more like a beginning rather than an ending. This astronomical point of time became a philosophical thing for me.Now, I've been looking at these recent paintings from 2013 and I wonder whether—because they allude to landscape — they can be read as more catastrophic even though that's not necessarily the intention. The little funnel, tornado-like shape could take on a more human-based narrative— weather as metaphor. So is the reading less spiritual and cosmic? Or more? From outer space/heaven down to corporeal earth?Which brings me to your question about science fiction. For me, it's not so much about popular culture but there is something about the visual invention and about dualities. Are they pseudo spaceships or single-celled organisms? Friend or foe? Hope or fear?

RK: Do you feel that when you increased the scale of your paintings that you opened some new arenas of exploration? The first shows of yours, which I saw, I think your preferred format was twelve by ten inches.

BT: Yes, they were all about that size.

RK: When you gave yourself permission to make larger paintings, I wonder whether the scale change itself altered some aspects of your artistic ambition?

BT: I think so. Although at that time, I felt a lot of ambition toward making small works too. I wanted to make a successful little painting—which seemed like quite the challenge. It was important to me that they were intimate in scale, personal, and that they had a certain kind of energy to them. When I moved to the larger scale, I think the emotional aspect changed, I hope for the viewer, but definitely for me. My ambition changed, just to get the larger format to work, to

get immersed in the openness of scale. And I think the fact that DC Moore encouraged me to make larger paintings kept me moving in that direction. All these things definitely increased the challenge and really, it was not the egotism just to make a bigger painting, but it was ambition in a lot of other good ways.
RK: There are many other things to be gained from this larger scale such as a sense of grandeur and wonder. What are the things you have to do as a painter to pull us into your web with the same intensity that was inherent in the small paintings?

BT: I feel like a small painting should be able to do the same things—have the same power—as a large painting, and I wanted to figure that out. So I deliberately worked within a small-scale format for a long time. But the fact of the matter is that large and small are different, obviously in good ways. If you have a really wonderful big painting that's working, it just is, I mean, it is doing what only a large painting can do. It has its own presence and to fight against that, or to think you don't want to take advantage of that, is missing the point, at least for me. So let me just say: I love making big paintings. There is more body "push"; they can convey a grander sense of space and movement, there is a different body/eyeball relationship to the scaled- up image. If I could, I would make even bigger paintings.

RK: Many of your earliest works were very large.

BT: There was a time in the 1990s when I was making these twenty-foot-long mural paintings on hollow core doors. I could physically handle each section and that's the way I made larger works.

RK: Do your works refer to the decorative?

BT: Well, from early on, decoration has been big for me. My influences have always tended to be abstract, non-Western, very pattern-y, as in textile design, Japanese prints, those fabulous Tantric mandalas, the illustrations of Tadanori Yokoo. Even in the paintings of Fra Angelico and Tintoretto, it's the abstract elements that I'm attracted to. So there is big admiration for the P & D movement, and I love that work which, of course, you know so well. The feminist aspect, the emphasis on other cultures and materials, rethinking the hierarchy—those things had, and are still having, such an impact on artists. It's interesting though, my big influence in grad school was Sol Lewitt. I always regret not sending him a fan letter. But that whole idea of systems and process was so intriguing—how "to do it" being as important, maybe more important, than the finished product. To me, there was always this lovely touching between systems work and decoration—one more cerebral and cool, and one more sensual and "in the world." I know that they were different camps, but I liked them both.

RK: Do these current paintings follow each other serially? Do you complete one

painting, and then does that lead you to start the next one? Or is your working method more a general progression?

BT: I think in general, one piece leads to another. Because repetitive labor is such a deliberate part of my process, the ideal situation is to be able to go to the studio every day. That's when I notice the body of work really all coming together, "everybody" is working on the paintings.
RK: "Everybody"?

BT: All my friends are working together.

RK: The imaginary studio gnomes?

BT: [laughs] I mean, yeah, they're fighting, but they're working together—the reds and the blues, the brushes and the paper towels, the water jar.

RK: Much of the writing on your work refers to the compulsive/obsessive nature of your mark-making. One could view these paintings as compulsive activities with both positive and slightly questionable associations.

BT: Yeah. I like that.

RK: What does it mean to you?

BT: I think I have a little bit of that naturally, you know. I am one of those people who locks and checks the door four times and goes downstairs and comes back and checks again. I'm not straightening the fringe on the carpet yet, but I feel like I am somewhat less compulsive now than ten years ago. Back then, I felt I was driven to make those wheel/mandala paintings and I think there was definitely a kind of compulsion to take them as far as I could—every square inch of the surface seemed to be covered. And those paintings were driven by events—loss of parents, a new sense of mortality, events that we all go through. I really felt that the paintings were intentionally celebrating a kind of compulsiveness, an almost meditative form of labor. Attending to, doing the work. There is a quote from Joan Didion that I love from The Year of Magical Thinking: "Grief is passive. Grief happens. Mourning, the act of dealing with grief, requires attention." "Attending to" has been a big thing for me.Now in these newer works, it may not be apparent, but I am leaving some space unattended to. Although they are still very compulsive, I want to open up the paintings so that some things happen that are out of my control. Even going back to that chance/subconscious thing, I'm letting the painting tell me what to do.

RK: What about craftsmanship? I think of you as a consummate craftsman. Even when you are talking about letting go, I can't imagine you creating a poorly

executed object or an ugly surface. I think some of this ties into your background as a printmaker where there is an accepted standard of execution.

BT: I think that craftsmanship comes from being the way I am, being drawn to a certain style of execution and process. But printmaking has also influenced me. When I teach there is a big difference between teaching printmaking and teaching painting. In printmaking, I love the fact that there are these rules. If you don't do it in the right order and you don't do it a certain way, it does not work. The creative aspect in terms of image and idea is still challenging, but there are steps to follow in the process. You have to work with or around the rules. So certain things about printmaking have influenced how I approach my paintings. The way I think about layering. Or how I put down the paint or wipe it off. For example, in lithography, tusche washes are often pooled as opposed to brushed on. I want the sense of the mark just being there when I am working on a panel. There is very little evidence of brushwork in my paintings and they don't have a lot of painterly gesture. I don't think of myself as a painterly painter.

RK: What about color? Your last show was an extended exploration of the luminosity of gray. But in this current body of work I feel that color is taking a huge step front and center. Your current use of color has a fresh radiance and vigor.

BT: In the early work, the color was very saturated. I wanted to use all colors in a very direct way, sometimes garishly so. This is contrary to what I tell my students. I always tell my students you are not allowed to use color straight out of the tube. If it is red you want, you still have to mix that red.

RK: Really? I nearly always use color straight out of the tube.

BT: [laughs] I do too. That's why I think this is so funny. I do not think it's so different from the color in my early work. They are the same paints—cadmium red light, cadmium red medium, ultramarine blue—so it's interesting that you're saying that it feels different. Maybe it's not necessarily the choice of color; maybe it's the primacy of how it's used. In the last show, I deliberately wanted to take the overall palette of colors down to a monochrome by using a lot of grays and black and white. I wanted the sensibility to be icy and contemplative, like something waning, and more minimal, if that's such a thing for me. After that, I thought I would go back into color. I wanted to use one or two colors, introducing them singly to see what would happen. The red paintings are loud talkers, I think.

RK: Since you are working with an additive, incremental process, how do you decide when a painting is finished?

BT: I think about all the things I might change: like, okay, I'm going to move that,

followed by adding more of those. Then, I'll do step number one, and often I decide not to do steps two and three. I look at the painting again and again, sometimes for months, and then at some point, the urgency to make those changes stops. I love that. That painting with the pink/red funnel, I changed it and changed it and changed it. I would brighten the burgundy color and then I muted it, but at some point I just didn't want to work on it anymore. I didn't even think it was done, but then I looked at it for six months and at some point I really liked it.

RK: In the back of your mind are you thinking about where, once all this work is shipped out of the studio and the room is empty again, where you will go next?

BT: I actually started worrying about that a little bit.

RK: Worrying? That wasn't the verb I had in mind.

BT: [laughs] I am slightly worried because for so long, when I essentially was making that one composition again and again, discovering all its potential variations, what to do next was not a question. I loved those paintings. Lately, I have been shifting the work, and it feels a little like turning an ocean liner. This is my new metaphor—thank you, Kathy Bradford. I feel like I am on this really giant ocean liner and I've got this little tiny steering wheel, and I'm turning and turning and turning it, I'm trying to make a different course for the ship, turning and turning the wheel, and nothing happens. Finally, the thing—me, my attitude, the history of the work, the paintings themselves—because its mass is so big, it starts moving, ever so slowly shifting. Finally, it's turning and now gaining momentum, and then it's like: Stop! Wait, stop already, too much turning! And then I start madly moving the steering wheel the other way but the ship won't stop because it's still going. Okay, finally, ever so slowly, it switches direction, coming back a little bit. So, to answer your question, yes, I feel like the work has been changing. In my last show at DC Moore, I felt like it was the beginning of a lot of shifts for me. And then this exhibition has continued that. I don't know if the boat is still turning. Or, if it's trying to come back to some familiar port? Ideally, I want everything to build on everything. One thing on another. Then, at least, I'm going forward and it's going some place.

RK: With this body of work, more than any that I've seen of yours, you have so many options. This is one of the most daring shows I've seen. From one painting to the next, you are asking so many different questions. With complete confidence, and panache, you have located so many different approaches with which to build and improvise.

BT: I think when I needed to change the work; I wanted to get rid of things that I previously relied on. For a while that even included the dots. I made some paintings that didn't have any dots at all. I substituted, for instance, a splash, an

Ab-Ex splash of paint that simulated organic dots and placed them randomly. Or, I substituted dense clusters of lines for the dots, giving the image an increased sense of movement and acceleration. Or, I let the background become the foreground by carefully painting around the paint splashes. I tried deliberately not to hold on so much to what usually works for me. I think what happens is that each painting then becomes its own particular world and I like that. For a while, I worried that they were too much like little individuals and not enough like a family. But it's funny—the more paintings that I made, the more they worked together, conceptually and formally. One painting filled the space between the two oddballs. Then another painting would fill another space and create a link. I feel good about this group and I am pretty excited. I shouldn't say I'm worried about the next group, I should say I'm excited, but I'm worried. All this talk about change—it's funny, I hate change, which is why I'm trying to embrace it and get some ease about it. But I do like the idea of figuring out more ways to let go of the control and then take it back.

RK: I think artists always have something you hope people will take away from a body of work. With my own work, sometimes it's clearer to me after the show rather than before. But I was wondering whether there is an ideal reaction you would like this work to elicit?

BT: If we're talking about some sort of emotional response to the work, you know, for a long time I wanted to make them as optical and systematic as possible and not be overly concerned with an emotive content because I wanted a kind of physical body response, even on some visceral level. I am doing that a little bit less, but I still want give and take with the viewer. Content-wise, another aim has been a kind of goofiness to the work.

RK: Goofy? I actually had that word, "goofy," in my interview notes and then I crossed it out. However, since you introduced "goofy" perhaps we can now use it?

BT: I like that word. I consider "goofy" a good word. It allows me to pursue a kind of slightly cartoonish, graphic quality. But then I'm trying to refer to a world filled with big things, big issues, big fears. It's an old question: What does one want to make work about? I really want to work with some of these big issues, but in more of a sidelong way. The goofiness is not meant to be ironic. I think it's more a kind of earnest goofiness. This wackiness opens the door for me to paint about the big things without, I hope, being melodramatic. I want it to feel like there is this looming thing either above or, way off, some enormous presence. It would be great if there were some sort of emotional push from that. I like the feeling that there is something imminent; there's something happening, some kind of anticipation that might be awe inspiring or terrifying. Then, on the other hand, I like the kind of funniness that seems to seep in there on its own. It's so terrifying it's funny. It is a little like science fiction which tends to be about

impending disaster or apocalypse, or occasionally the opposite of that, utopia. But, usually, there is always some weird duality, there are consequences—you have to pay a price. Like in the genre of a quest, you may win what you desire most, but you lose something you value at the same time. The ring is destroyed but the age of magic goes too. The glass is half full and half empty at the same time. I know that my pieces sometimes have a slightly disconcerting "underbelly." I love the fact that some people think the paintings are beautiful. But they sometimes have unsettling qualities at the same time.

RK: You often pit things against each other—you seduce us, but then there is a little piece of thorn sticking out, so that we are pulled in, and then a little repelled, and then pulled back in. Always, at the root of things, I think your paintings are deadly serious. And this feels like an unusually serious body of work for you.

BT: Right. I agree. I feel like they are very serious, but I also think that the humor is part of it. I love it when the painting can have its own duality. I think that's just a really wonderful thing to have happen. I like that.

THIS INTERVIEW was conducted between the artist and writer Robert Kushner and Barbara Takenaga at her studio in New York City on April 15, 2013.