

Art in America

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Barbara Takenaga at McKenzie Fine Art

by Robert Kushner

Different artists achieve their maturity at different times. In the last five years, Barbara Takenaga, who has been painting since the 1970s, has experienced a remarkable breakthrough in her work. The New York-based artist's recent paintings provide delicious contradictions. When viewed intimately, they are composed of nothing more than vast arrays of flat colored dots and squiggles neatly applied to wood panels. But as soon as they are seen from any distance, they erupt into pulsing centripetal and centrifugal vortices. The works request verbs to define them: expanding, constricting, throbbing, swirling, dissolving.

There are daring similarities from one painting to the next. They are all modestly scaled and rectangular. There is always a fulcrum slightly above center from which concentric bands of dots radiate. The colors usually fade to paleness toward the middle. The background is always the darkness of night. But within these ultra-tight self-imposed parameters, Takenaga weaves surprisingly different arrangements of her beloved dots, spirals and mutant pinwheels. She sets up our expectations of how an individual system will play out, then promptly counters them with an errant strand or an unexpected development in the chromatic progression.

Each painting is compulsive in the extreme. Usually compulsion for its own sake becomes cloying. Here the meticulous application of the thousands of dots executed with Takenaga's preternaturally steady hand is always directed toward its own visual end, the enrichment of our experience of hypnotic seduction. Like an expert scat singer, Takenaga continuously invents with a confidence attained through years of practice and experimentation.

Some of the paintings have lurching visual shifts, evoking nightmares or warfare. Others suggest the violent but orderly expansion of a nova, stately as the night sky itself. While a few are overtly giddy and amusing, many bear the elegiac aura of mortality. The artist has said: "I want them to be a little goofy but as beautiful as I can make them."

Takenaga has been at her craft a long time now. In this exhibition, she has leaped to a new level and provides abstract painting with a refreshing voice.