

artcritical

the online magazine of art and ideas

October 2003

Barbara Takenaga at McKenzie Fine Art

by Stephanie Buhmann

Barbara Takenaga's Night Paintings are based on recurring childhood dreams about the origins of the universe. Her excessively detailed abstractions chronicle cosmographic events filtered through memory. While these transcendental apparitions might be misread as kitsch or imitations of 1960s psychedelia, the artist's skillful handling of her subject matter proves otherwise.

Painted in lusciously saturated colors that create a mysterious neither-here-nor-there effect, Takenaga's works disorient the viewer and lure them into a surreal dream landscape. She makes innovative, multi-dimensional images of strings of pearls and spiraling fireballs embedded in an infinite space. These are pure visual experiences. In *(Blue) Flash* (2003, acrylic on wood panel, 24 x 20 in), a multi-layered star cluster painted in bright primary colors is set against a muted blue background. The contrast between the vibrantly colored, explosive epicenter and the dark curtain of the background is dramatic. Although the complexity of detail might seem overwhelming at first, the composition has a strong sense of order. The wild array of minute particles, partially submerged orbs, and sparkles are drawn towards an epicenter.

In comparison, *Wave*, (2002, acrylic on wood panel, 24 x 20 in) and *August*, (2002-03, acrylic on wood panel, 24 x 24 in) translate into crisp close up studies of autonomous systems. Both compositions are dominated by similar ornate motifs, the repetition of clearly articulated feathery swirls. These are spread evenly across the canvas, contributing to the overall decorative effect. These paintings conjure up many associations; Oriental tile work and Ernst Haeckel's illustrations in *Artforms of Nature* (*Kunstformen der Natur*, 1862) come to mind. Takenaga's intricate patterns evoke cross-cultural and scientific imagery.

The interplay between personal content and universal signs and symbols is hypnotic. The fusion of flat ornamental detail and mysterious spatial depth is very effective. *Night Vision 2* (2003, acrylic on wood panel, 24 x 20 in) is an endless stream of solid green bubbles expanding over the canvas, sucking the viewer into its alien scenery. Inspired by night vision photographs of military actions, Takenaga's colors intensify the intriguing aura of unpredictability and carry us deeper into the unknown.