

Catalog Essay

Barbara Takenaga at McKenzie Fine Art

By Brice Brown

Conflating fervor of purpose, delectation of process, satisfyingly ambiguous resolutions and ecstatically decorated surfaces into a single piece is the hallmark of Barbara Takenaga's work. In her new paintings, Takenaga has ramped down the snappy, welcoming psychedelia of her previous pieces and inserted a tinge of danger just beneath their bejeweled surfaces. While slightly more reticent, secretive and even self-protective, these paintings are also bracing for their ability to be transmutable and slippery; Takenaga now allows them to exist in a heady state of constant potential, where anything can become everything.

In various ways, each painting moves back and forth between being sweetly intimate one minute to chillingly intimidating the next. It's an exciting effect similar to seeing a shark's fin break the water's surface while lazily resting on a boat in the middle of the ocean. Takenaga has smartly muddled the idea of infinite bliss ordinarily intimated in her paintings, hinting at the mortality connecting all living things. And this balance between a highly refined formal elegance and the full embrace — and simultaneous attempt to keep at arm's length — of our corporeal shortcomings is precisely what makes Takenaga's new work so thrilling.

In the past, Takenaga has always used the swirling repetition of a few elements as her preferred formal strategy, her faith firm in the belief that the process of moving from mark to mark would ultimately yield a satisfying outcome — which it did. We now get a sense that Takenaga's marks are as much about finding a way to knit her paintings into being as they are about building up a well-wrought shield against the unknown — and the unknown in these paintings is an icy, deep place, probably more related to the ocean's wonderfully creepy phantasmagoria than anything of cosmic origin. The wintry temperature of her new color palette — with crisp iridescent blues, wet greens, pearlescent whites and light reflecting metallic gold — confirms this sense of the alien aquatic.

In a succinct poetic twist, Takenaga has introduced a new mark into her repertoire: a stylized, Byzantine-inflected angel wing based on a tiny Fra Angelico painting she saw in an exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Though Takenaga transforms these golden wings into the distilled essence of fluttering motion, she also uses them to remind us that even beneath the shimmer of an angel's wing one will find sinewy raw muscle and bone, for nothing exists without its fleshy counterpart. As if to further bolster this idea, her Angel compositions even begin to take on anthropomorphic associations,

sprouting possible arms and legs (and wings) out from the collapsing central void of the pictures.

Takenaga clearly knows how to make very pretty things, and her paintings have always been gorgeous affairs of brightly colored, highly calibrated micro- and macro-events. With this new work, she excites in her discovery that beauty has an underbelly, and this underbelly, too, has its own type of magnificence. She understands that nothing is finite or perfect, that there is beauty in life's imperfections, and that to ignore this fact is to risk being incomplete.