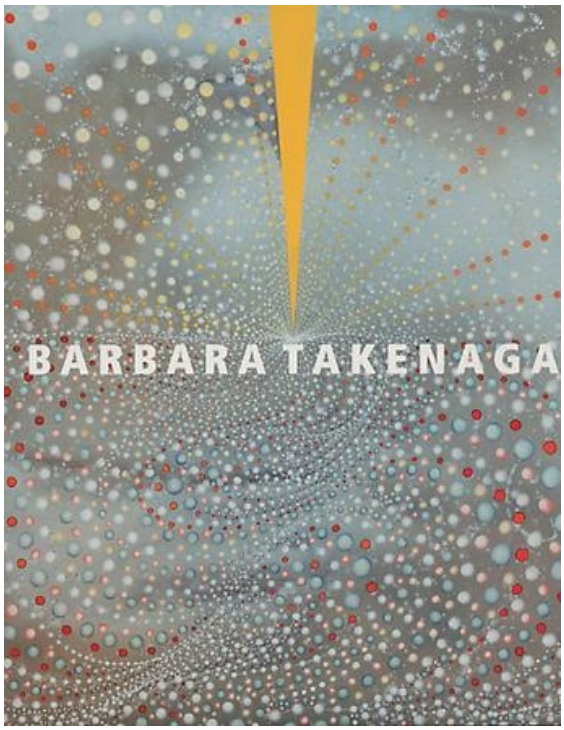

DC Moore Gallery
Catalog Essay

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Barbara Takenaga: New Paintings
By Nancy Princenthal

Even the most ardent pioneers of abstraction, breaking away from figurative representation almost exactly a century ago, invoked lived experience in describing their work— Kasimir Malevich cited "pure feeling," Wassily Kandinsky religious sentiment. Barbara Takenaga's meticulously handcrafted paintings, their swirling, dot-based, not-quite-symmetrical patterns at once hallucinogenic and sternly disciplined, are as purely optical as any in the Modernist lineage. But they have long invited associations to natural phenomena, from galaxies to oceans, subatomic particles to pulses of pure light. In her newest works, such intimations of the physical world are brought just a little closer to the surface.

This is true, partly, in the prosaic sense that many of the new canvases are divided by a horizontal line, which inevitably introduces (to viewers even vaguely familiar with Western painting) the space of landscape. To be exact, these paintings evoke the flat farmland of Takenaga's childhood home, in Nebraska. A literature major in college whose engagement with poetry and fiction seems undiminished, Takenaga mentioned, during a studio visit last summer, that she was reading Willa Cather. In a remarkably abstract description, the young narrator of Cather's *My Ántonia* says with awe, on his nighttime arrival in Nebraska, "There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made." There is that sense of limitless, unmarked expanses in Takenaga's recent paintings, of matter-of-fact infinitude.

In many of these compositions, there is also a kind of electrifying, animist spirituality, as in the landscapes of Charles Burchfield, whose every plant and tree radiates monster-voltage rapture. Takenaga greatly admires Burchfield's work; she also cites the influence of Roger Brown, an equally untamed (and decidedly secular) visual scribe of the Midwest. But much of her recent work has a quieter, more internal spiritual hum. It sustains, in a minor key, connections

(noted by both the artist and her critics) to sources that include 18th-century Tantric meditation drawings and a divinely luminous quattrocento painting of an angel's wing by Fra Angelico. In the past, Robert Kushner writes with infectious relish that Takenaga's palette has ranged from "French end-paper carmine" to "pumpkin cheesecake orange." The new paintings are considerably leaner chromatically. Many are dominated by a silky gray that Takenaga likens to dusk, "the 'violet hour' of in between time, when the land and sky start to blur a little."

Of course, as she observes as well, gray is also the color of melancholy. But there is a paradox to its emergence in her work. While Takenaga freely identifies her twilight palette with mourning, and specifically with her mother's death, in 2000, following a struggle with dementia, she also notes that the colors in her work have become progressively restrained over the decade since. Immediately after her loss, the artist says, her paintings were bright, even garish, but as her memories and emotions dimmed, "the colors got icier and colder. I think these gray paintings have some of that sense of fading—shiny, hazy, shifting." There is nothing literal about these connections; as Takenaga puts it, the mourning "runs deep behind the scenes, like a big dark submarine." Submerged as well is a parallel between the repetitive behaviors that accompany dementia and Takenaga's extremely painstaking method. Each dot and line is painted with enough precision that one at first suspects a mechanical process. The exacting technique is, she says, a way of "marking time, slowing it down." Similarly, there is a temporal aspect to the organization of the canvases. She now sees that the horizons in her painting are not just about landscape, but also about aging—about connoting shifts in "the power/weight of how much time is left, in where the 'larger' time is between the physical and the invisible."

This too is buried deep below the surface, and there is no requirement that it be unearthed. To the innocent viewer—to the ideal viewer, perhaps—*Nebraska Painting, EL 1* (2010), for instance, seems pure jubilation. The title helps identity the receding rows of little round white lights as budding crops in a tilled field; they suggest incandescent cotton bolls. Above, stars soar forward against an indigo sky from a sizzling horizon. In *Whiteout* (2011), the rows of snowy white dots recede toward a central point on the canvas, from which originates an ecstatic swirl of similar dots above, a configuration that storms across the entire sky. *Yellow Ray* (2011) reverses the composition: dots swirl below the horizon, and form straight, radiating rows above it; the narrow spike of pure, hot yellow driven through the sky—a sun rising, perhaps—is powerful enough to seem menacing. It vibrates with a chromatic note subtly audible throughout: though its predominant tones are gray, the field in *Yellow Ray* is riddled with red dots; above, white dots alternate with yellow and orange. Similarly, close inspection reveals green and red dots amid the white in *Whiteout*, and lines of delicate black. The bright-light, big-screen buoyancy that these paintings initially evoke testifies to the mind's preferences; intimate engagement complicates the experience, and allows us to see our perceptual, and emotional, biases at work.

These are among the more straightforward landscapes among the new work, and they are hardly descriptive in any conventional sense. Others are even less so. In *Lift* (2011), a dome built of concentric, accordion-folded black and white ribs arches against a star-bedazzled gray sky; below, a similar pattern shadows a field furrowed in shades of crimson and lavender. It is an image of irrepressible, almost manic ebullience. By contrast, *Ronin* (2011) is perhaps the most forbidding among the new paintings. Against a background painted in vaguely military tones of metallic gray are countless rows of hard-edged black figures, receding toward a distant horizon; they evoke a wintry field of burnt stubble, or perhaps an Air Force graveyard. But an anecdote from Takenaga's childhood points to a different reading. "When I was a kid in Nebraska my dad would sometimes say, let's go watch the sandhill cranes rise," she recalls. So they'd sit in the car in front of a cornfield, and wait, and nothing would happen. "Eventually he'd say, okay, let's go home, no cranes today." *Lift*, then, is a sky filled with wingtip-to-wingtip flocks of cranes; *Ronin* an image of birds settling over a field, searching along the rows for seed—or, of cranes just rising aloft. Seeing *Ronin* this way helps make visible a line of pink along the top of each of the birds' wings: backlighting from a sun that has just slipped below the horizon. And viewed in the light of this recollection, both paintings become exercises demonstrating the benefits of extended looking.

The exercise is well suited to the very big triptychs that are among the most ambitious of Takenaga's new works. Like many of the smaller paintings, they make use of "interference" paint, which creates a pearlescent, unstable surface that shifts in value and tone as viewers move from side to side. The effect is both metallic and mineral, and a little like sharkskin. A surging, spinning light show fires up the slate-gray sky of *Forte* (2011), which is roughly eleven feet wide; below, a smaller band of midnight blue is also alive with lights, arrayed along billowing contours that suggest the demarcations of force fields in physics, or the depth notations of nautical charts. *Rise Fall* (2011)is another massive triptych that features a full-force gale of lights above and, below, a narrow band that resists coming into sharp focus, the colors throughout particularly evanescent; Takenaga compares the composition to the rolling screen of an old TV set, with the image below not quite "hiked up."

While creating these chromatically muted paintings, Takenaga has continued to make images that employ the full range of high-keyed color and centripetal energy typical of previous work. *Spark* (2011)unfurls from the center in streamers of red-orange that alternate with oily iridescent blues; a concentration of such ribbons running laterally across the painting, and a slight shift in their orientation below it, subtly suggest a horizon. In *Sparkler (red line)* (2011), a swarm of stars, clustered at the center, blaze in a marine-blue deep-space sky that is bounded at the bottom by a hot red stripe. Each pinpoint of light is spiked as if seen through water, or tears, though the overall impression is of a

joyous, and fugitive, vision: of stars burning transcendently hot before being sucked away, fast and forever.

It would be misleading to overstate the figurative suggestions of these paintings, or their emotional weight. Many present a sleek seductiveness that combines acid-trip visual plentitude with James Bond cool. But given a minute, the imagery grows more complex. Takenaga's work explores the minimum requirements for evoking astral space, or snow over the plains, or an uncharted sea. And it demonstrates the many pleasures, not excluding the optical, that such evocations provide.

Untitled essay in *Barbara Takenaga* (New York: McKenzie Fine Art, 2005), unpaginated

All quotes are from emails from the artist written on July 28 and August 1, 2011, or from a conversation with the author on July 27.

The "submarine," here, as a metaphor of mourning, alludes/harks [?] back to a quote from a letter in Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), in which this submersible, seafaring vessel is conjured in a similar vein.