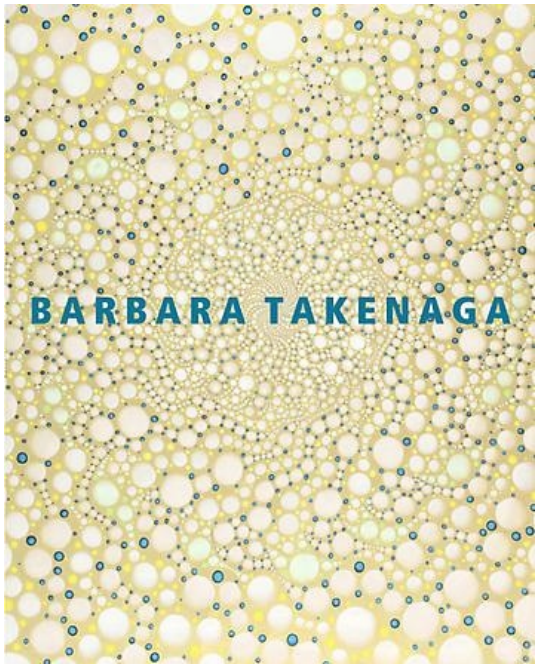

DC Moore Gallery
Catalog Essay

May 2009

Last Blue Wheel

By Susan Cross

Barbara Takenaga's distinctive works, recognizable by their obsessive patterns of circles, spirals, and pinwheels painstakingly rendered in controlled, yet surprising hues, have been described in contradictory language that can become as dizzying as the paintings themselves. They are often understood in terms of both the figurative and abstract, the religious and the scientific, the mathematical and the psychedelic, the conceptual and the decorative. Referencing both the "high" and the "low," they have inspired comparisons to cosmic explosions, aquatic creatures, microscopic visions, fractal patterns, sci-fi landscapes, Venetian beads, and new-age mandalas. On a formal level, the artist is engaged with opposites: surface and depth, darkness and light, flatness and dimensionality, stasis and movement. It is this state of dualism - or perhaps we might call it possibility - that lends the paintings both a certain tension and an expansiveness of association that echoes the boundlessness of their formal and visual structure.

Each work, whether small or large (they range in size from 12 x 10 inches to 54 x 90 inches), could, ostensibly, expand indefinitely in all directions, extending beyond the edges of its individual support. Their radiating pattern of lines and dots act much like Daniel Buren's iconic compositions and site-specific installations of repeated, vertical bands which metaphorically and visually link his works to their context while removing any hierarchy from the composition. Despite their unbridled, flamboyant appearance, Takenaga's paintings have a strong tie to the works of conceptual artists of the 1960s like Buren, and, in particular, the late Sol LeWitt whose working strategies have influenced Takenaga's own. Like LeWitt, whose wall drawings are created using a pre-determined system and a limited color palette, Takenaga works within a similarly constrained set of criteria. Her images, like LeWitt's, generate countless iterations through both repetition and chance.

In one of her most recent series, titled *Langwidere*, on view in the current exhibition, Takenaga has attempted to paint the same painting thirty times. Each is begun in the same manner - with the smallest of circles marking

a point of origin from which emanates an ever-widening spiral of circles. The small paintings vary greatly in appearance, however, despite the artist's own original intentions and her desire to take herself out of the works. As her disposition or interests changed, however, so did the direction and appearance of her paintings. The suite is playfully titled after Princess Langwidere, a character from the third of L. Frank Baum's fantastical Oz books. The princess has one body and thirty heads which she wears one at a time, changing them like one would an outfit. She switches these heads - with a variety of hair and eye colors, and noses of various shapes and sizes - as the mood strikes her. "There is, of course, but one princess, "one of Langwidere's subjects explains to Dorothy, "but she appears to us in many forms, which are all more or less beautiful."

The same can also be said of Takenaga's paintings, both in this particular series and of her practice as a whole. Although her paintings change in both drastic and subtle ways - a simple variation in her palette can dramatically alter the tone of a given work - Takenaga has been investigating similar compositions and familiar, repeated forms for nearly a decade. (The artist's nod to Langwidere, a rather self-obsessed character, seems to be a humorous reference to Takenaga's own focused studio practice and her subjective additions to that series of work.) Although her works are all unique, they do not move toward an evolution in any modernist sense of the word. Instead, her paintings articulate the fluctuations of a daily practice - each work different, yet part of a whole.

This calculated repetition - perhaps a vestige of her former life as a printmaker - represents an altered relationship to time for the artist. Takenaga has likened her approach to art-making to both soap opera narratives in which essentially nothing happens over long stretches of time and to the myth of Odysseus's wife, Penelope, who unraveled her weaving each night for three years to put off her unwanted suitors. In a similar fashion, Takenaga's process both marks time and slows it down, allowing it to move forwards and backwards much like the sense of space in her paintings, which take us spinning deep into the cosmos or right back to the work's surface, evoking both beginnings and endings.

In her compositions that are built from the center out, there is an uncanny sense of growth, mimicking the patterns of nature, like those seen in star fish and nautilus shells. Works such as *Last Blue Wheel* (2009), with its explosive ring of energy emanating out from the center of the canvas, bring to mind the birth of the world as we imagine it. Others, such as *Knot* and *Grid* (3*X)* from 2008, suggest space folding in on itself, perhaps an image of the universe collapsing. The title of *Last Blue Wheel* also suggests an ending of course. The death of Takenaga's mother in 2000 influenced the artist's interest in both endings and our imaginings of the unknown. Like her *Night Paintings*, made from 2000 to

2003, which marked a new direction in the artist's work, and were the first to envisage starry galaxies and exploding nebulae, Takenaga's images since have remained connected to our visions of what lies beyond - both above and below. Heaven, however, remains a fantasy for the artist, but she is interested in the human need to believe. The spiritual associations implied in her earlier work, referencing a range of sources, including the simple Tantric meditation drawings from 17th-Century India, have been expanded over the past two years, further influenced by the artist's longtime interest in the 15th-Century Italian painter Fra Angelico. Takenaga was inspired, in particular, by the Quattrocento artist's treatment of an angel's wing that she saw in an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2005. The repeated dots and patterns, the hint of movement captured in the line _ devices Fra Angelico used to conjure such an otherworldly creature _ are not unlike Takenaga's own attempts to summon the mystical from simple paint on linen or board.

In Takenaga's *Black/Gold/Blue* and *Black/White/Blue* (both from 2008), the sumptuous gilt of Fra Angelico's work is translated into shimmering, metallic paints that appear to change color when viewed from different vantages. True to her embrace of the two-fold nature of things, these paintings, simultaneously seductive and slightly garish, can be seen as two things at once, or, better yet, they can be described as being in a constant state of flux. Looking up towards the mercurial sky and down into the liquid oceans as she does, picturing both as variously dark and light (her recent paintings, such as *White Out* add to our imagination of a tunnel of light, a more chilling association of a blinding brightness), Takenaga metaphorically joins what we usually perceive as opposite poles.
In works such as *Angel Baby* and *The Knot* (both 2008), Takenaga also achieves this compositionally. Starting from the corners of the painting, she works her design so that opposing strands meet somewhere in the center. The repeated lines of her transformed angel's wing have morphed into a grid, reminiscent of the coordinates that map both the earth and sky, as well as the orthogonals that gave order and the illusion of perspective to art by Renaissance masters such as Fra Angelico. Takenaga's grid-like structures rise to the surface of these images, and, buckling with movement, appear to be bursting away from the paintings' support and simultaneously imploding through their back, suggesting an uncontainable image, much like those of earlier works which seemed to extend beyond their four sides.

In *Knot*, a subdued but psychedelic array of Takenaga's familiar orbs can be seen beneath a web of feathery lines. This delicate grid seems to be pulled into a vortex in the center of the work, bringing to mind the wrinkles of the knot of a belly button, or a wormhole created by a fold in space. Both evoke the mysteries of being and becoming that Takenaga enacts each day in her studio as she

fights off a linear progression of time. All this chaos is uncannily generated from a disciplined, repeated build-up of simple line and form - culminating in an explosion, which like the Big Bang, is perhaps both a beginning and an end.

Susan Cross, March 2009