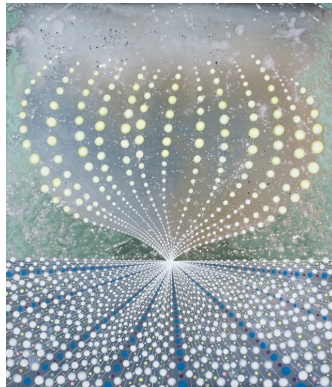


The Face of Infinity is Not a Picture: New Paintings by Barbara Takenaga

by John Yau on September 22, 2013



Barbara Takenaga, "Sphere/Horizon" (2012), acrylic on linen, 42 x 36 inches

(all images courtesy DC Moore Gallery)

In an illuminating interview with Barbara Takenaga, which is included in the catalogue accompanying her exhibition of *New Paintings* at DC Moore Gallery (September 5–October 5, 2013), Robert Kushner makes an observation that goes to the heart of a question that I want to raise about the artist's recent work:

Through the years your work has evolved and grown. Yet you always seem to retain a sense of Takenaga. No matter how experimental, they express your own unique vision. One of these aspects is your hybridization of abstraction and illusion.

Later, Takenaga — who for nearly a decade explored a mandala-like form of spirals — says to Kushner:

In my older work from 2001 to 2011, I was continually investigating basically the same composition. So the structure was set before I started to work.

Takenaga goes on to say:

Process-wise, I have been trying to loosen up. First I make the backgrounds — splashy, faux-Abstract Expressionist grounds with very freely manipulated paint, applied without much preconception. After that, I play "Zen Surrealist," studying the accidental incidents and finding subject matter embedded in the painting. I just sit and look at them, and wait for them to tell me what to do,

and then go with that. They still seem to naturally gravitate, or maybe anti-gravitate, to some kind of explosive/implosive situation. I still love the idea itself of the Big Bang ...

While Takenaga has gone from knowing the compositional structure when she set out, to responding to the different, unpredictable incidents in an abstract ground, she remains an incremental painter committed to being meticulous. The difference is that the paintings have gone from being relatively flat to evoking a deep, illusionistic space, often divided by a horizon line, such as in the nighttime blue “Two Waves” (2013) and the radiant “Sphere/ Horizon” (2012).



Barbara Takenaga, "Two Waves" (2013), acrylic on linen, 36 x 72 in.

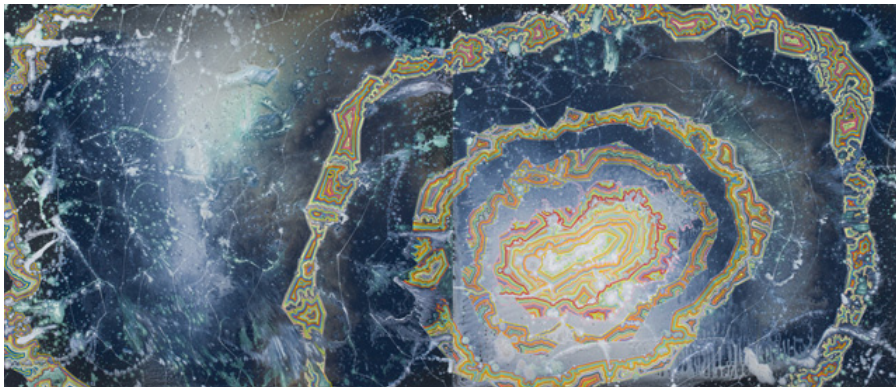
Given the change in her work, the question I want to raise is this: Does the illusionistic space that Takenaga evokes in these new paintings conform a tad too much to a pictorial view of deep space that we have gotten from NASA photographs and sci-fi movies? Can she transport herself and us somewhere else that is less namable? Can she investigate a space that only can only be made through paint? This seems to me to be the crossroads that Takenaga has arrived at in her work.



Barbara Takenaga, "Harmo" (2013), acrylic on linen, 42 x 36 inches.

Takenaga is clearly aware of this issue — I don't think that it is too much to state that it is actually a challenge and a crisis — and, as this statement she makes to Kushner suggests, she is trying to transform her work:

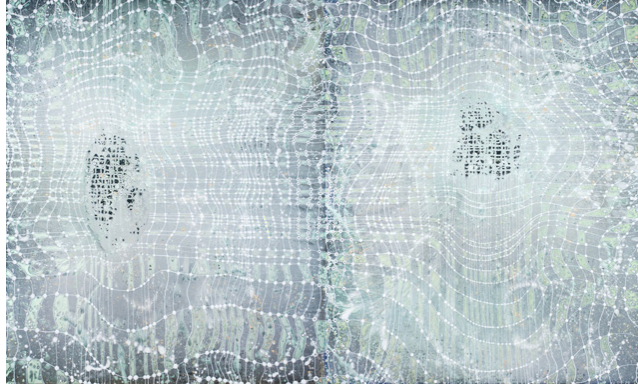
I feel like I am on this really giant ocean liner and I've got this little tiny steering wheel, and I'm turning and turning and turning it, and I'm trying to make a different course for the ship, turning and turning the wheel, and nothing happens. Finally, the thing — me, my attitude, the history of the work, the paintings themselves — because its mass is so big, it starts moving, ever so slowly shifting.



Barbara Takenaga, "Geode Diptych" (2013), acrylic on linen, 36 x 42 inches (each); 36 x 84 inches (overall).

It seems to me that Takenaga broke the mold, as well as moved in a new direction, in two recent paintings, "Geode Diptych" (2013) and "White Grid on Silver"(2013), both of which were done on large horizontal formats. They stood apart from the other paintings in the show, as well as suggested that she has been able to shift her work in a new and, to my mind, fresh and powerful direction.

In "White Grid on Silver," the wavy grid is made of unevenly spaced, vertical and horizontal white lines, which are punctuated by white orbs at the intersections. In many of the irregular quadrants defined by the grid, the ground is a grainy, celadon green in many of the irregular quadrants defined by the grid, while the other areas are painted a grainy, pearly gray. The materiality of the surface — puckered and blistered — contradicts the spatiality implied by the layering of the net-like grid over the abstract, splashy ground. The celadon green rectangles transform the grid into something resembling a plastic traffic barrier.



Barbara Takenaga, "White Grid on Silver" (2013), acrylic on linen, 54 x 90 inches.

Takenaga further amplifies this contradiction by making the grid materially dissolve in two areas, which float somewhere near the center of the painting's left and right side. In these areas, it as if a powerful corrosive has eaten through the grid, revealing what is behind the celadon green and pearly gray ground — a black ground marked by small white and green dots of paint. By collapsing materiality, image and space together so that is impossible to distinguish where one ends and the other begins, Takenaga moves out of the domain of the pictorial into something that cannot be categorized, achieving a fresh and disquieting possibility. For one, she entwines the infinite (the grid) and decomposition (the body), which is an inescapable effect of time passing. It is a material space that could only have been made of paint, which has a remarkable ability to expose the dance between mind and body, the visual and the visceral.

It is one thing to evoke the Big Bang and quite another to address the fact that we exist on the brink of infinity, aware of time's indifference to our vulnerable existence. In "Geode Diptych" and "White Grid on Silver," Takenaga faces infinity rather than pictures it.

Barbara Takenaga's New Paintings continues at DC Moore Gallery (535 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) until October 5.