

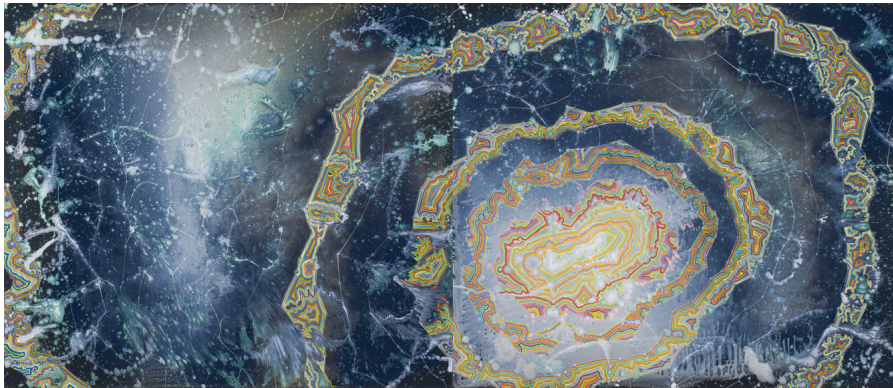
BARBARA TAKENAGA

New Paintings

by Robert Berling
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The ample array of Barbara Takenaga's recent, work-intensive paintings dazzles the eyes with the panache of fireworks. She is prolific both in her generous output and *within* each of her paintings, which are made of myriad, exquisitely crafted details. The initial impact is due partly to the complexity of her images, their many ways of moving pictorially across and into space. Sparkling configurations erupt outward, then call you closer, and closer still, to examine their constituent parts. Takenaga's familiar signature dots are not simple discs but luminous three-dimensional bits that fascinate like those intricate, precious jewels of a Jan van Eyck Madonna. Her multitudinous tiny, gradated white spheres swirling through space may be descendants of the single pearl Vermeer placed on that young woman's left ear.



Barbara Takenaga, "Geode Diptych," 2013. Acrylic on linen 36 × 84".
Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York.

After the initial, high-energy impact of so many particles careening around the picture plane and plunging through galactic realms, the paintings offer themselves as complex orchestrations. The variously textured, layered stages by which they are painted may seem strikingly incongruous, the complexity of their opposing effects forcing you to untangle what should be, but somehow aren't, contradictory vocabularies. The surfaces of "Geode Diptych" (2013), for example, read doubly as the cavity of the stone suggested by the title and deep expanses of cosmic space. Surrounding a luminous nebula within the painting's

indigo depths are irregular bands whose patterns call to mind decorative folk embroidery. That these inventions are convincing elements within this astronomical domain is a mysterious accomplishment. They are part of a notable expansion of Takenaga's formal ideas and techniques. In fact the extraordinary, confident 36" × 84" painting owes its power in large part to this irrational juxtaposition.

Earlier works were often symmetrical with a center from which circular formations would radiate, a general formula with variations. The new paintings tend toward depictions of events, although just what these events may be is open to interpretation. Among the innovations are horizons from which ground planes shoot forward while intense activities fill the sky. Some of the horizon pictures become illustrational in their effect, thus giving up some of the ambiguity that energizes the best paintings. The powerful effect of "Two Waves" (2013), with its countless squiggly whites shooting forward like spermatozoa on steroids, derives from but is limited to its perspectival device and sci-fi quality. "Red Funnel" (2013) features a carnivalesque, voluminous array of sparkling dots atop the eponymous funnel, which touches down on what may be an atmospheric, mountainous, nighttime terrain: a sort of "close encounter." These pictures are sensational tours de force, but ultimately less engaging than those whose effect is not so quickly accounted for.

Two of her strongest works, "Green Light" (2013) and "Red/Pink Funnel (J.N.)" (2013), combine areas of pearlescent hues, that shift as you change angle of vision, with flatly painted parts and animated, swirling atmospheres. And yet it somehow all holds together. Here we are not sure just what, in an ecstatic moment, we are seeing; it is this pleasurable bewilderment that holds our attention.

Two others from 2013 are equally innovative and also among her best. The gauzy grid of "#3 Black and Silver Grid" writhes on the surface in front of dark, starry celestial depths. If that edge-to-edge grid was once a screen of verticals and horizontals, it has now come alive, partially blocking a greenish nebula deep in space behind it. In the larger "White Grid on Silver," the white dots we took for stars are at the intersections of a net's skewed threads. Like most of the paintings, these can be seen as depicting an event of cosmic proportions.

In an enlightening conversation with Robert Kushner included in the catalog, Takenaga touches on the ebullience of her dramas: “Content-wise, another aim has been a kind of goofiness to the work.” “Earnest goofiness,” she later specifies, “a kind of funniness that seems to seep in there on its own. It’s so terrifying it’s funny.” Such edgy playfulness, partly evoked by somewhat cartoony graphics, makes for lively and canny ambiguity. For all her emphatic, possibly obsessional control of acrylics on board or on linen, the exact emotional and allusive tenor of Takenaga’s art arises from improvisatory processes through which she figures where each image needs to go. The inferences of what she calls her “headscapes”—sci-fi, microscopic, or psychedelic visions, Big Bang theories, or celestial cataclysms—are never quite definitive. Just as they flip back and forth between the picture plane and deep space, they can go from being high-speed visual narratives to meditative mandalas, always, in her best work, seeking new visions.