



IN CONVERSATION:
Michiko Itatani and Nolan Jimbo

The following conversation between Michiko Itatani and Nolan Jimbo (Assistant Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago) took place during the first two weeks of May 2025 in Itatani's studio in Chicago, Illinois and over email. The transcript has been condensed and revised for clarity.

For me, to be an artist each day is an intellectual choice and a carefully chosen commitment. There is no intoxication.

- Michiko Itatani

NOLAN JIMBO: During our studio visit, you mentioned that your painting practice is largely inspired by fiction writing. Could you elaborate on your work's relationship to literature? Are there particular texts or stories that resonate with you?

MICHIKO ITATANI: In my youth, I wanted to pursue writing fiction. Fiction is a uniquely human activity among Earthlings, though perhaps not exclusively. I strongly believe in fiction's ability to express the deepest truths.

My painting process is inspired by writers' ways. Many writers have a basic theme they pursue for a long time, often for life, but the subjects they write are varied. They investigate the basic theme from different angles, using different subjects. For example, Kazuo Ishiguro seems to write about intricate individual mind activities in particular social/political environments. His subject matter is vastly varied, but to me there is a fundamental inquiry throughout his novels. I am influenced in this manner by writers' ways of developing their work. I have a major theme but my images are different according to the focus.

I wanted to write because I wanted to investigate human existence in the larger context of the Universe or the Multiverse (we don't know). I am curious how the larger context is related to an individual existence. Also, I was curious how the larger context is related to how our minds work. The extreme largeness of the Universe/Multiverse and the extreme smallness of the brain's nerve activities—I heard that both are something to do with quantum theory. Yet, the human desire to know the unknown is extremely strong. Also, what we know is extremely limited. We are in a curious situation.

My conceptual process of painting is similar to writing a novel. After research and consideration, I make a series of paintings. Each painting could be compared to a chapter of a novel. I see my recent work as a series of fictions based on the human desire to reach out into the mental and physical space beyond our grasp outward and inward. My fiction is incomplete, fragmented and under inquiry. Through this process, I am trying to come to terms with the complex reality of the 21st century. And my vision stays pathetically optimistic.

NJ: Repetition appears to be a core element in your practice. On a micro-scale, there are forms that are repeated within your paintings, from light rings to concert hall seats to ceiling patterns. On a broader scale, you also repeat compositional formats from painting to painting. In your *Cosmic Theater* series, for instance, you frequently render a single-point perspective of a palatial interior. Could you speak about the role of repetition in your work?

MI: My physical painting processes mimic life. Life is a

repetition in a way. In a day, we repeat the same activities we did yesterday. But each day is different. Also, the lives in the human species in general are quite similar but different for each person in detail. I am interested in the hugely different experience of the individual in the seemingly similar life of the human species.

My physical painting process starts with a trip to the lumber yard, cutting wood, assembling the wood into canvas stretchers, and putting on canvas and painting gesso. Then, I paint. Using oil media, with different interaction in different timing, it takes four to nine months to complete a large painting. It becomes a ritual.

NJ: Each of your paintings in *Cosmic Codes* contains rings of luminous forms, which are always horizontally centered within each composition. What is the significance of these light rings?

MI: A ring in my painting positions an individual facing a situation, a place, an event, the Universe, the Multiverse, and the unknown. The ring is a place for me or you. I depict not an interior, but an interior looked at by an individual. An individual, facing a situation and place, wanting to know beyond their reach. It's about longing.

NJ: You mention your work's relationship to the unknown, an idea that is often associated with abstraction throughout art history. Although you worked in abstraction earlier in your career, your more recent work has approached this impulse to "know beyond one's reach" through detailed renderings of spaces. Why did you move away from abstraction?

MI: “Abstraction” is an accepted art history term. I can use the term conveniently to talk about art from the 20th century to the present, including my work. However, when we try to define the term, we bump into more questions.

My history as an artist is not a linear progression. I always keep the basic theme of “examine Human existence in the larger context of the Universe/Multiverse,” but my painting focuses on a few particular aspects at a time, and in which I freely use different image presentations, abstract or representational. In my large solo exhibition at Wrightwood 659, Ashley Janke, a curator, displayed both (abstract and representational) images.

My decision to use recognizable images came from my desire to reach out to my viewers actively, especially to young viewers. That is my expression of love and hope to the human species in future generations.

We all need focus through which we live our lives. I came to the conclusion at some point in my past: I will use ART as my focus. Now, I want to be remembered only by my painting. I take full responsibility that I am a painter.

NJ: Another motif that appears throughout the show – and your oeuvre more broadly – are planes of intersecting lines that reside on the edges of your paintings. To me, they resemble curtains blowing softly in the wind. Positioned on the left and right sides of each painting, they also call to mind stage curtains framing a theatrical scene. What role do these lines play in your paintings?

MI: I started using overlapping lines to symbolize linear ways

of thinking. Writing!

I used to write a portrait of a person from several slightly different perspectives in order to show one individual. Different angles of lines in my paintings mimic that.

I have learned a lot from other species on Planet Earth who live “here and now.” I consciously learn and use this knowledge to live my life. However, we are bound to linear ways of thinking, with words. My intersecting lines are a symbol of writing or linear thinking with some logic and imagination.

When physically presented in paintings, my lines transform to layered sound, wind, curtains, frames, etc. I like those different interpretations by different viewers. I am interested in how people differently interpret images. Compared to writing, free association is stronger in pictures. My paintings depend on the viewer’s imagination/fiction to become alive.

NJ: Your paintings often focus on grand spaces related to knowledge production and artistic expression, from concert halls to planetariums to libraries. What draws you to these types of settings?

MI: Yes, I am attracted to places and objects expressing human imagination, especially with hope and confidence.

I was mesmerized by the Dripstone wall of the Wallenstein Palace in Prague and the White sand sea of Jisho-in in Kyoto. Both stopped my breath momentarily when I saw them for the first time and my eyes were transfixed. The Baroque of the West and the Dry landscape of the East are

human achievements of the early 17th century.

I am fascinated by these parallel achievements in different places at the same period. Both demonstrate to me their extreme development of a concept and their contradictions. Their extreme development seems to be toward opposites: one went additive, ecstatic and anthropomorphic, and commands physical and emotional participation and another went reductive, meditative and symbolic.

Both demonstrate to me their extreme development of a concept and their contradictions. I compare them to the relationship between Renaissance and Baroque, and Modernism and Postmodernism. They are products of human imagination/fiction. I am fascinated by the visual and theoretical abilities of the human mind.

Other creatures do similar things, but the human species does it excessively. And that's called Art. I appreciate ART in all different forms.

NJ: Why do you choose to depict these spaces without human figures?

MI: I am examining human existence in the larger context of the Universe/Multiverse systematically. I focused on human bodies in the '80's and the '90's. Other times, I investigated landscapes of the Planet Earth. Now, the space we use as shelters, which might be on the Earth or moving through outer space.

Humanity has existed for an extremely short time in a tiny part of the Universe or the Multiverse. The impact of human

existence is a minor bump cosmically. I imagine what other civilizations may encounter sometimes when humans are gone. Residues of individual human activities might be found in what we left behind. My image making is my fiction.

NJ: I understand that you were first interested in science before you gravitated towards fiction writing. Upon first glance, fiction seems to be in opposition to the sciences, which are grounded in empirical observation and logic. Can you address how these two seemingly distinct fields interact in your paintings?

MI: Yes, I have always been interested in science. When I was very young, a Nobel Prize physicist, Hideki Yukawa, came to our school to give a talk. He told us that a scientist's job becomes creative and almost intuitive at the front edge of science, facing the unknown. He told us he got the idea from which he received the Nobel Prize when he was taking a shower. Then empirical observation, logic, and mathematics were needed to prove the idea worth investigating further unless the results proved deniable. But, even established scientific truth could be denied after centuries. Now, interesting questions have come up about the seemingly well-established "Big Bang" theory because of the new James Webb telescope. The line between the known and the unknown is fragile. Scientists are challenged for constant renewals of "truth."

So, I don't see the opposition between science and fiction. However, I am only interested in fiction that directly stems from reality and science. I am not too interested in pure fantasy. However, I know that attitude might be my prejudice. We know so little.

NJ: Your paintings are incredibly detailed yet they render scenes that are actually imagined, rather than drawn from reality. Could you speak about what appears to be a paradox between realism and fantasy that exists in your work?

MI: Uneven treatment of areas in my painting is intentional.

I indulge in creating details of the story, individuals' psychological details, or depictions of architecture. Details are about the discovered in the familiar. I see the same pattern in detail description in Anthony Doerr's novels. Extremely intricate details are often hidden in familiar things. He reveals the hidden and/or creates what he feels is hidden.

I am interested in the details that always exist, but are often hidden, in the larger scenes. For example, the political identities of gender, race, nation, etc. are larger scenes (categories). But, when an individual person is examined in detail, the intricate personal history and issues are discovered. Details are the essence of what individuals actually live under, suffer from and find happiness in. Such small details in the large context of the Universe/Multiverse intrigue me.

Some details are hidden so deep, they appear only in imagination. My interest in science fiction stories stems from there, although I'm interested only in certain kinds of stories. (Kazuo Ishiguro, Anthony Doerr, CiXin Liu, Arthur C. Clarke, Stanislaw Lem)

NJ: Each painting in *Cosmic Codes* is relatively large-scale within the context of your oeuvre. What is the role of scale in

your work? How do you decide on the size of a painting and how does this influence the subject matter and style?

MI: I use the 2D surfaces with which my body relates. I am interested in how 3D space would be depicted in 2D space and how four-dimensional space could be depicted in 2D or 3D space. When I found the only abstract sculpture in the Giacometti exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, I had to go back to see it several times to study it. The sculpture was titled *Le Cube*.

I came back to the traditional oil on canvas format after experimenting with various media, including glass sculptures, video and performance. I like the limitation as a base and trying to see if I can fly people's minds beyond the media. It seems that is one of the interesting challenges in what I am doing.

NJ: Over the past decade or so, there has been a resurgence of identity-driven artistic practices in which artists' biographies have become increasingly intertwined with the production and interpretation of their work. How do you view your work in relation to biography?

MI: "Identity" is a complicated term. Often "identity" is tangled with time, politics, history and misunderstanding. Identifying with a particular group, the Nation, race, gender, family, religious and educational background, etc. is not usually one's choice. I didn't decide my gender, but I have lived with it, and influence from the outside is undeniable. However, I am reluctant to take full responsibility for what I, myself, didn't decide. It's not my first concern.

At this time, I don't mind if I am identified with the "human species" and I list other identity categories at lower places in the list. Further, I don't mind being identified with "Earthlings." But, that might become too limiting in the near future. How about AI and extraterrestrial life?

NJ: *Cosmic Codes* is your first solo exhibition in San Francisco in thirty-five years. Do you have any personal connections to the city?

MI: San Francisco is the first place I saw in America. The city was beautiful and different from anywhere I had been. People were kind to me. From there I traveled the United States, from El Paso to Niagara Falls with a 90-day Greyhound bus ticket.

Nolan Jimbo is a curator based in Chicago, IL. He is currently Assistant Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, where he organized the exhibitions *Endless, Interiors, and Chicago Works: Gregory Bae*. He served on the curatorial team for *Forecast Form: Art in the Caribbean Diaspora, 1990s-Present*, which traveled to the Institute of Contemporary Art / Boston and the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. Jimbo has also organized performances and programs, including *David Lamelas: This Is My Place*, *Wu Tsang: MOBY DICK; or, The Whale*, *Tanya Lukin Linklater: Ewako ôma askiy. This then is the earth.*, *In Progress: Devin T. Mays*, and *Soundtrack: Kioto Aoki*. He co-directs the MCA DNA Research Initiative, which commissions essays and digital content focused on the intersection of performance and visual arts within the museum's collection. Jimbo previously held curatorial positions at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, where he organized the exhibition *Close to You*, and the Dallas Museum of Art, where he organized the mural commission *Nicolas Party: Pathway*. Born and raised in Los Angeles, he holds an MA from the Williams Graduate Program in the History of Art and a BA from Tufts University.

Michiko Itatani (b. 1948, Osaka, Japan) lives and works in Chicago, IL. Itatani's paintings inspire a sense of grandeur by combining pictorial elements that refer to science, the cosmos, and cultural traditions.

Itatani received her BFA and MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She studied at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture and completed studies at the University of Chicago. She is Professor Emeritus at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her work has been shown in more than 100 one-person and group exhibitions nationally and internationally, including the University of Wyoming Art Museum, Laramie, WY (2022); Wright 659, Chicago, IL (2022); Illinois State Museum, Springfield, IL (2017); South Bend Museum of Art, IN (2014); Daum Museum of Contemporary Art, Sedalia, MO (2003); Frauen Museum, Bonn, Germany (2000); Tokoha Museum, Shizuoka, Japan (1998);

Chicago Cultural Center (1992); Musée du Quebec, Canada (1988); Rockford Art Museum, IL (1987); amongst others.

She received a Lifetime Achievement Award from The Women's Caucus of Art (2020); Grainger Foundation & Krems Residency Grant (2007); Illinois Arts Councils Artist's Fellowship (1999); John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship (1990); National Endowments for the Arts Artist's Fellowship (1980); amongst many others.

Her work is held by a number of institutions including the Olympic Museum, Lausanne, Switzerland; Museu d'Art Contemporani (MACBA), Barcelona, Spain; Kemper Collection, IL; Harvard University Art Museum, Cambridge, MA; Hyogo Art Museum, Hyogo, Japan; American Embassy, Brasilia, Brazil; Illinois State Library, Springfield, IL; Cincinnati Art Museum, OH; Musée du Quebec, Quebec, Canada; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL; De Paul University Museum of Art, Chicago, IL; amongst others.

Published in association with the exhibition

Michiko Itatani: *Cosmic Codes*
26 June - 2 August 2025

Rebecca Camacho Presents
526 Washington Street
San Francisco CA 94111
www.rebeccacamacho.com

Front Cover:

Michiko Itatani
Cosmic Wanderlust, 2014 (detail)
Oil on canvas
78 × 96 inches
198.1 × 243.8 cm

Courtesy of the artist and
Rebecca Camacho Presents, San Francisco

Photo: Chris Grunder

REBECCA
CAMACHO
PRESENTS