

ARTSEEN
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BARBARA TAKENAGA *Nebraska*

by Kara L. Rooney

MASS MOCA | CURRENTLY ON VIEW

Barbara Takenaga's site-specific installation at MASS MoCA capitalizes on the artist's signature patterned dot motifs while pushing the medium restriction of the canvas into new and unprecedented realms. While the vastness of the work, which occupies a 100-foot-long hallway in the museum's Hunter Center lobby, recalls the never-ending sitelines of the Midwestern prairie, Takenaga's homeland, the overall effect is resolutely more cosmic.

Set against a horizontally bifurcated background of melancholic hues—deep indigo in the upper portion and slate-gray below—a dizzying array of celestial orbs connect to one another via a complex web of filigreed threads. Above, the orbs indicate the heavens, or, more regionally, the star-studded night sky of the Nebraskan plains. Below, they summon myriad references, from agricultural crop lines and the celestial silence of the deep sea to intergalactic travel and warp speed. Printed on wallpaper and hand accented with iridescent paint, these beacons of light radiate, in repeating patterns, from a distinct horizon line, the composition then repeating itself twelve times along the wall's expanse. A hum of electric current runs through the repeated stills but its charge is a low-decibel one, rewarded by extended looking. Takenaga's palette, a combination of pearlescent white, cobalt, and ebony, with the occasional spark of cadmium yellow and lime green set against the aforementioned grounds, expands upon her more chromatically restricted "Nebraska Paintings" series. This palette, which has served to underscore Takenaga's work for more than a decade, conveys, in the artist's own words, "the 'violet hour' of in-between time, when the land and sky start to blur."

While undoubtedly anchored in the tradition of abstract painting, *Nebraska* simply contains too much visual information for aesthetic disinterestedness. Here, the trademarked obsessiveness of Takenaga's gesture—painstakingly rendered matrices of dots, swirls, and dashes—translates to an expansiveness of image and interpretation unparalleled in the canvas works. In this leap of scale, the artist has torn down the walls assigned to abstract contemplation—its passivity and detachment from life—in the same way that Kandinsky's emotionally thirsty

canvases attempted to, in his words, “awaken as yet nameless feelings of a finer nature.” Nebraska’s immensity and its myriad repetitions also conjure the passage of time, of natural cycles, as well as the elusive atmospheric energies that constitute and connect psychic consciousness. To observe *Nebraska* is to engage in an act of optic meditation.

Three sets of doors, interspersed along the hallway, add to the hallucinatory effect. While arguably distracting on a formal level, they could equally be said to serve as concrete metaphors for the work itself: as virtual gateways, access points, or portals.

As in many of Takenaga’s other works, *Nebraska* draws a certain connection to Tantric Hinduism, particularly that of the abstract painting practices exercised in Rajasthan, India (and recently brought to attention by two stunning exhibitions at Feature, Inc. in New York and the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 2012). Used primarily for meditative purposes and made anonymously, the paintings, rendered on small, notebook sized pieces of paper, attempt to depict the religion’s main deities—Kali, Shiva, and Tara—as geometric forms. Pattern, precision, and vibrantly ecstatic palettes govern the works, which, over time, led to a complex cosmology of signs utilized for both devotional worship and focusing of the mind.

Such forms of meditative visualization, it is theorized, were also practiced among the ancient Greeks within the school of Plotinus (most likely influenced by his contact with Indian and Tibetan traditions). Writing in the mid-third century, CE, the philosopher, as a meditative guide, instructs his students to:

Let us, then, make a mental picture of our universe: each member shall remain what it is, distinctly apart; yet all is to form, as far as possible, a complete unity so that whatever comes into view, say the outer orb of the heavens, shall bring immediately with it the vision, on the one plane, of the sun and all the stars, with earth and sea and all living things as if exhibited upon a transparent globe.

Bring this vision actually before your sight, so that there shall be in your mind the gleaming representation of a sphere, a picture holding all the things of the universe moving or in repose or (as in reality) some at rest, some in motion. Keep this sphere before you, and from it imagine another, a sphere stripped of magnitude and of spatial differences; cast out your inborn sense of Matter, taking care not to attenuate it.¹

Such descriptive visualizations of the mandala similarly inform Takenaga’s earlier imagery—works like *White Out III* (2009), *Double Halo* (2009), and *Dione* (2010), for example—where the paintings, rather than being organized by a horizon line, are dominated by vortex-like circular motifs, starbursts, and potential black holes.

Whether directly intended or not, *Nebraska* proffers similar opportunities for meditative contemplation. Let your eyes go soft and a halo of light emerges from the midpoint of the landscape, where around its nexus and joined at the wallpaper's seams, another set of lines establish a triangular composition of orbs within the larger pattern. This seemingly endless recurrence of expansion and retraction, focus and dissolve, located just above eye level, elicits a feeling of groundlessness, what the *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali* (2.54-2.55) refer to as *pratyahara*, or a "withdrawal from sense objects." Look long enough and this subtly pulsating movement, greatly amplified by the installation's ambitious scale, begins to mirror the breath, the rhythmic inhale/exhale of corporeal existence. One can imagine the astral body traversing these pathways, tripping, dancing, even singing on its ebullient journey.

While Takenaga's painterly works have often been critically situated within the lineage of Op Art or likened to that of contemporaries such as Ross Bleckner, with *Nebraska* she engages a visual territory all her own. In a time of infinitely increasing skepticism and myopic interests, Takenaga has located a means of switching our focus from the micro to the macro, reminding us that *seeing* sometimes requires more than just the eyes.

Endnotes

1. Thomas McEvelley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (New York: Allworth Press, 2002), 589.

<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2015/09/artseen/barbara-takenaga-nebraska>