

Making an Archive, Building a Legacy: Jordan Stein on Miyoko Ito

“ In a city so rich with cultural history, what does it look like to build a legacy for oneself? How are we each in the practice of building legacies—our own or of others? ”

by Sam Hiura

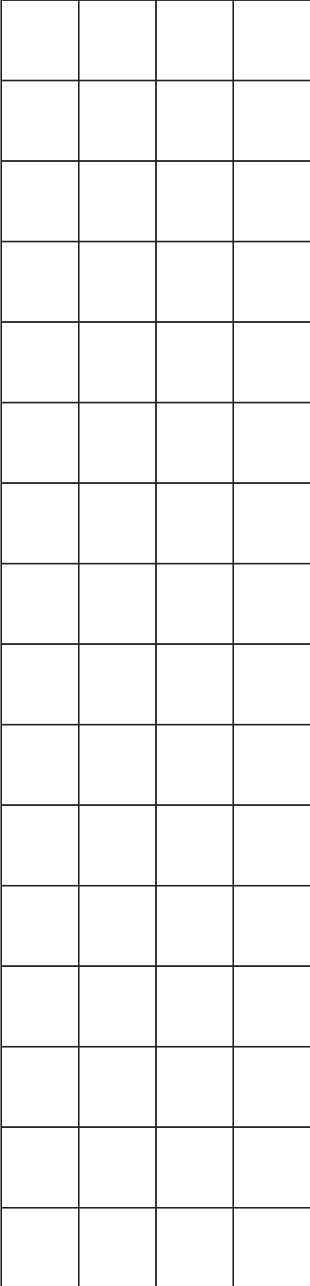
Cover of *Miyoko Ito: Heart of Hearts* (2024)

Assembled by Jordan Stein and Pre-Echo Press



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In a city so rich with cultural history, what does it look like to build a legacy for oneself? How are we each in the practice of building legacies—our own or of others? This line of questioning has remained on the mind of Jordan Stein, a San Francisco-based independent curator and writer, and the founder of Cushion Works, an exhibition space located in the Mission. Over the last few years, Stein has been working on a transmutational, multi-form project, resulting in the publication of his new book *Miyoko Ito: Heart of Hearts*, on which he delivered a lecture at CCA on February 15, 2024. An archival discovery-turned exhibition-turned book, this project acts as the primary collection of knowledge and recognition of the artistic career of painter Miyoko Ito.

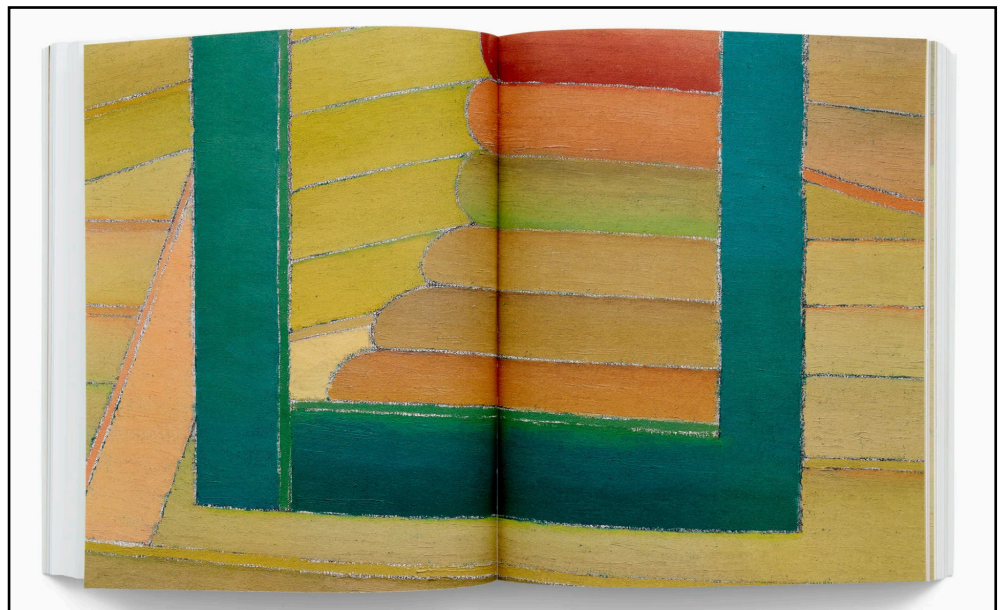


Photograph of Miyoko Ito found in *Miyoko Ito: Heart of Hearts* (2024), courtesy of Jordan Stein and Pre-Echo Press

First, Stein retraced his steps leading up to this moment: a move to Chicago to perform archival curatorial work for the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, a move back to California, a brief but eventual return to Chicago, a return to the Bay Area, and so on. It was in Chicago where Stein first encountered Ito's work. Stein exhibited one of her paintings at the top of a stairwell in the Renaissance Society's gallery space after stum-

bling upon it in their archives, a decision upon which he in retrospect remarked, "It was embarrassing." This passive encounter in the museum's archives acted as a fitting seed to begin this project with Ito, which Stein regards as "legacy work."

Miyoko Ito (April 27, 1918–August 18, 1983) was a painter born in Berkeley who received little recognition during her lifetime, with only a few gallery exhibitions peppered throughout. There is not too much to do with her biography within the book; a mere introduction stands in comparison to the many, many pages of artwork images and information. This compositional decision subverts the contemporary pressure towards biographical determinism within artwork interpretation, which is especially present in reading the work of artists of color. Instead, the work is foregrounded, and the ways in which her work shifted formally become subtly reflected in the shifts of her life. These shifts in the artist's work—the ways in which she wanes between abstraction and figuration, her incremental movement between cooler and warmer palettes throughout the decades—are opened up to broader interpretation.

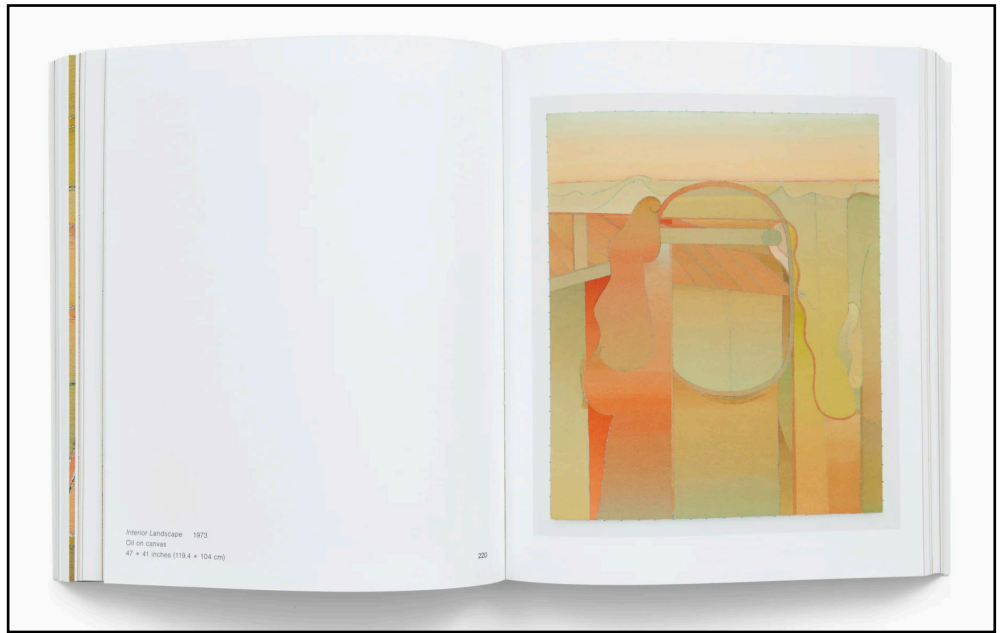


Page in *Miyoko Ito: Heart of Hearts* (2024),
courtesy of Jordan Stein and Pre-Echo Press



Jordan Stein
Photo courtesy of Jordan Stein

Like a detective on a case, Stein embarked on a multi-year journey of tracking down the locations of all of Ito's extant work through traces left by gallerists, curators, collectors, and the like. I have noticed that this project was conducted in the same vein as he architects the trajectory of Cushion Works—in an "improvisational space." All of the information, images, and provenance information that appear in the book were collected by Stein himself. Although Stein's book includes a considerable portion of Ito's works, there remains a number of them that are undocumented, not yet tracked down by Stein. At the end of the book, there are pages of small slides of artworks that were uncovered in the printing and publishing process that could not be included in the full spread, suggesting the ongoing nature of not only this project, but the archive in general.



Page in *Miyoko Ito: Heart of Hearts* (2024),
courtesy of Jordan Stein and Pre-Echo Press

It is rare that this type of book is produced without the support of a major institution. Projects like this require extensive time, labor, and funds, the scale of which can often only be afforded by major institutions like museums. However, while researchers and academics working within these spaces may have the benefits of this support, independent researchers enjoy other advantages like creative freedom, and ultimately find themselves able to construct a more expansive and inclusive narrative of history. Thus, this book represents an important art history in the making, and it feels culturally significant that it is being produced outside of the typical means. This type of retrospective legacy-building is important work, but it is also done with an awareness of its effects. What Stein urged the audience to remember was that post-mortem fame and collection of a particular artist is in many ways arbitrary: "It's not like the work got better over time." Building legacy projects is important—vital—to the field of art history and the contemporary lived practices of artists now. Yet, it is a complicated practice to engage in, made so by the real-world, financial outcomes of the art world's economy.

A question that lingers in my mind from Stein's lecture was, "Does my work have a mission statement?" While I do not think it is necessarily imperative to answer this for oneself and stick to it, I do think it can allow us to crack open our practice to see its true core, what lies within the heart of hearts of our work.

