

Grace Munakata Biology of Flight at Anglim/Trimble

By Barbara Morris December 22, 2023



Grace Munakata, *Curious Cloud*, 2022, Acrylic, wax pastel on panel, 37 1/2 x 48 in.

Grace Munakata “Biology of Flight” at Anglim/Trimble

How does one define “abstract art?” Some feel that an abstract painting should not include any recognizable objects, while others suggest that it is the conceptual underpinning of a work, the way in which the artist approaches the canvas, that makes it abstract, rather than the eventual presence, or absence, of objects. The late John Baldessari, an influential multi-disciplinary artist

and art professor, presented an interesting exercise to his students at UC San Diego. Each was given an abstract image, one completely devoid of any discernible objects, with the assignment to go find and photograph this image in the real world. Almost without exception, the students were successful.

Falling squarely into the realm of abstract work grounded in reality is that of painter Grace Munakata, whose current exhibition “Biology of Flight” at Anglim/Trimble presents a range of small and medium-scaled paintings, collages, and works on paper and panel. Munakata studied at UC Davis under Wayne Thiebaud, who became a mentor and friend. In a 2021 interview with Manneti Shrem Museum’s Associate Curator Susie Kantor in conjunction with the exhibition *Wayne Thiebaud Influencer a New Generation*, Munakata recalled Thiebaud’s belief that “painting is an intellectual inquiry, finding out about as many aspects of human experience as possible,” and his description of the studio as “a shared laboratory for experience.” Munakata went on to a her own distinguished career as a professor, teaching at Cal State East Bay (formerly Cal State Hayward) as well as sustaining a remarkable visual art practice.

Munakata grew up in the Central Valley, into a Nisei Japanese family which had endured internment during World War II. Her family’s experience undoubtedly colored her perceptions of the world, suggesting it as a place of mixed signals and shifting planes. Her mother was a seamstress, and the influence of her love of fabric, the feeling of swatches of different material and patterns, is clearly felt, as well as the influence of different cultures coming together. Descriptions of her family home include images of her father creating sumi-e works on the kitchen table, her mother spreading fabric and patterns on the floor, and décor ranging from gestural senryu poetry panels and elaborate Japanese dolls in lacquered boxes, to an Asian version of Santa Claus, all mixed in with a painting of the Golden Gate Bridge. With an eclectic mix of aesthetics, one senses in the work her openness to inspiration and source material of all kinds.

Curious Cloud (2022) hinges on an amorphous violet shape, the cloud, just left of center. Other forms may or may not suggest additional clouds, mountains, trees, or other natural forms. A rough oval is bisected into a rust orange on one side, the other broken into a floral pattern in blue-violet, cream, and yellow. An underlying checkerboard makes a subtle allusion to the Minimalist grid, and the Hofmannesque push and pull of the forms on the picture plane draw our eye in and out. What draws one into the work initially, in addition to its glorious color, are the dazzling visual pyrotechnics of her many overlapping compositional devices. We may think of the work of Julie Mehretu, using more hard-edged, architecturally-inspired images to construct a visual field of similar complexity and depth. *Mt. Govardan and Wilson's Snipe* (2023) uses a similar strategy, balancing objects with the non-objective, careful rendering here and there, particularly of the bird, and washy patches of color. Contrasts of light and dark, blurry and focused, keep us engaged and create a satisfying sense of mystery.



Grace Munakata, *Mt. Govardan and Wilson's Snipe*, 2023, Acrylic, wax pastels on panel
36 × 47 in.

Harbuz, 7 X Down, 8 X Up (2023), inhabited by insistent bumblebees, smiling pumpkins, and frowning gnomes, immerses us in the realms of fairy tale and fantasy, with a

specific reference to Sankaku “Triangle” Daruma, Japanese dolls symbolizing resilience. Munakata displays an enduring playful spirit and willingness to, as Thiebaud advised, embrace the ridiculous, even to “risk artistic suicide.” Among her diverse practices and strategies, she also cites the importance of randomness and the gestural impulse.



Grace Munakata, *Harbuz*, 7 x Down, 8 x Up, 2023, Acrylic, wax pastels on panel
41 x 48 in.

Munakata also presents many smaller paintings and collages without distinct objects, “pure abstractions,” which are intensely satisfying. *Deep in the Ground* (2021) presents rich yet muted colors and quirky shapes overlaid with careful tracings of pattern dancing across the panel. The joyous collage *Susan’s Circus* (2019) offers deep purple and brilliant yellow bands anchoring an irregular rectangle; playful dots suggest balls and juggling, as well as the yin-yang symbol.

With art a highly subjective realm, ultimately abstraction, like beauty, may lie in the eye of the beholder. As with many attempts to define or quantify aesthetic qualities, words fall short of experience. In the work of Munakata, a mixture of influences and techniques, layers of imagery

and gestural marks, combine in satisfying compositions highly abstract—yet suggesting a diaristic record of a life of intellectual inquiry.

Barbara Morris

Grace Munakata “Biology of Flight” will close Saturday, December 23 at Anglim/Trimble, SF.

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