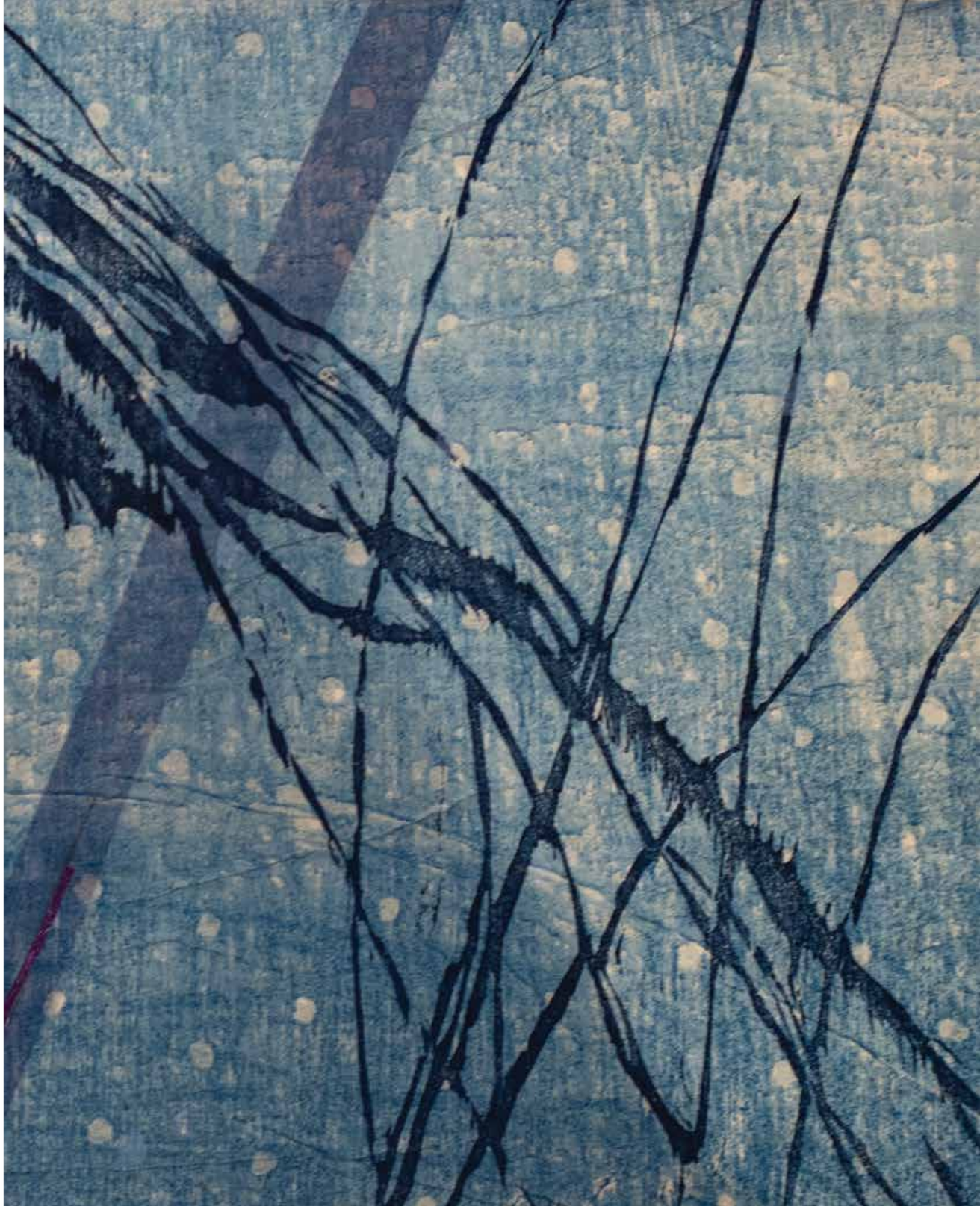

KEIKO HARA

FOUR DECADES OF PAINTINGS & PRINTS

Linda Tesner | Ryan Hardesty

WSU PRESS

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The Washington State University Pullman campus is located on the homelands of the Niimíipuu (Nez Perce) Tribe and the Palus people. We acknowledge their presence here since time immemorial and recognize their continuing connection to the land, to the water, and to their ancestors. WSU Press is committed to publishing works that foster a deeper understanding of the Pacific Northwest and the contributions of its Native peoples.

Graphic design by Tracy Randall
Cover design by Debby Stinson
Previous spread: Keiko Hara in her Walla Walla studio. Photo: Amahra Leaman

On the cover and on half title and end pages: *Verse · Ma and Ki · Memory* (detail) | 2017
Mokuhanga monoprint with collage, silk gauze, two panels hung back-to-back | 84 x 24 inches
Photo: Sean Sullivan

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Topophilia · Imbuing Seasons | 2004
Installation at the Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture, Spokane

introduction

Ryan Hardesty,
Executive Director
JSMA WSU

I have had the immense pleasure of knowing artist Keiko Hara for just shy of twenty years, and our first project together set the tone for the many years that have followed. When we met in 2004, Hara was preparing for a major installation at the Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture in Spokane, Washington, where I served on the project as co-curator. The exhibition's centerpiece was a multi-media, four-room "house," its exterior covered with hand-worked rice paper. Stepping inside, visitors were bathed in a kaleidoscopic environment of color, light, and projected pattern. It was a transportive experience.

During our visits leading up to the installation, I learned two simple facts about the artist: Hara's creative spirit and ambition are insuppressible, perhaps even unmatched within our region, and while she is an introspective person, her default impulse is one of generosity, which makes sense given her twenty-eight years as a teacher. She is also the most generous host in her adopted home of Walla Walla, Washington. My numerous studio visits with Hara over the years typically involve her whisking me around town to see her various studios, to visit the Walla Walla Foundry, and to retrieve fresh produce from the valley farms, with countless stops and introductions along the way.

We are exceedingly proud to originate and present *Keiko Hara: Four Decades of Paintings and Prints* at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Washington State University. Our project represents Hara's first full-scale museum publication alongside a survey exhibition of her painting and printmaking practices. Hara's boundless artistic vision and production are remarkable and enormously deserving of our attention and careful study, especially as we draw upon the power of art as a window into human thought and as a provocation of emotion to raise awareness. In fact, throughout her career, Hara has been guided by the concept of topophilia, exploring its meaning of "a strong love of place" in large multi-media installations as well as in paintings and prints. She believes each of us holds essential connections to places of meaning, beauty, and power, whether these "places" be external or internal.

Born in what is now North Korea to Japanese parents during the Second World War, Hara moved to Japan in 1945 and was raised and educated there. In 1971, she left Japan for the United States to further her education, imagining America as a progressive cultural environment that would challenge her artistic development.

For an artist moving between lands and cultures, Hara's work shows an artist stitching together many memories and navigating radical life transitions brought on by partings, loss, and making new homes. While personal memory and longing have been central to the artist's work, over the years Hara has increasingly focused her projects toward a collective universality, writing, "It is our individual topophilia that unites us as human beings." I propose that Hara's practice may be seen as an attempt to bridge the gap between physical worlds, connecting us across timeless currents flowing through human life in all places.

This publication required a community effort and would never have been possible without the dedication, love, and collaboration of colleagues, supporters, and friends—all of whom played their respective roles in bringing this very special book to life.

Our appreciation begins with Keiko Hara, who kindly provided the beautiful images, captions, and reference materials in this retrospective. Her lifetime of poetic paintings and prints are meticulously documented, and we are grateful for her vision and creativity that have enchanted us all.

We wish to thank independent curator and writer Linda Tesner for her insightful essay. We are appreciative and honored that she enthusiastically accepted our invitation to provide the lead essay chronicling Hara's life and engagement with painting and printmaking across a span of four decades.

Thank you to the museum staff for their support, encouragement, and helpful contributions throughout this process. In particular, I wish to acknowledge Debby Stinson for her timeless cover design, valuable insights, and significant contributions in keeping everything on schedule.

To the team at WSU Press—thanks to Linda Bathgate for her buoyant nature, faultless ability to schedule multiple pieces into manageable tasks, and guiding hand in bringing this book to press. Jessica Schloss gracefully facilitated the design and printing stages, and a special thanks goes out to Tracy Randall for her beautiful graphic design and her talent of coaxing order and harmony into every element of this wonderful publication.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, a very special set of recognitions goes out to our publication's donors. We begin with Ainslie and Keith Peoples, Hara's longtime supporters and friends who graciously underwrote the publication through a major gift. Additional and valued support for our publication came from Barbara Johns and Richard Hesik, Patricia Watkinson, and an anonymous donor. Thank you for your belief in this idea, bringing it so generously to print, and making dreams come true for admirers of Hara's artwork across the globe.

The corresponding exhibition to this publication also benefited from the generosity of many, including Samuel H. and Patricia W. Smith, Nancy Spitzer, Patricia and Lisa Anderson, and the Walla Walla Foundry. We thank you all for your enthusiasm for Keiko Hara and support of this museum.

Previous and top of page
Verse · Blue with Orange (details) | 2016
Paper and mixed-media on board | 40 x 79 x 2 inches
Private collection

Following page
Verse · Space M | 2007
Work on paper | 15 x 22 inches
Private collection

Keiko Hara outside her Walla Walla art storage.
Photo: Ryan Hardesty

essay

Imagery at the Edge of Imagination

Linda Tesner
Independent Curator and Writer
Portland, Oregon

On the very outskirts of Walla Walla, Washington, near the city's small airport and surrounded by uncultivated fields, is Keiko Hara's studio. The building is an old Army barrack; inside, the space is devoted to various areas that support Hara's complex working processes. There is equipment for printmaking, supplies of paper, and space for painting. Hara does not limit herself to one medium or one technique. Her materials and process are hybrid and determined by her innate curiosity.

Juxtaposition, contrast, and interrelatedness are lifelong themes that are interwoven into the oeuvre of Keiko Hara. Now celebrating her eightieth year with a major exhibition at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Washington State University, one might say that Hara's visual poetry explores themes of yin and yang—of light and dark, calm and turbulence, volume and void, absence and presence. Her own dual nature as Japanese American and her roles as both teacher and studio artist underscore these dichotomies. But much more than that, her work also elegantly and subtly articulates a sense of in-betweenness, the liminal and slippery space that exists in the untouchable interstice between cerebral and emotional, between image and the imagination.

Keiko Hara was born in 1942 to Japanese parents living in what is now North Korea. By 1945, her mother and the children had returned to Japan, where Hara would spend her childhood in the Yamaguchi prefecture. But Hara's early years were marked with anxiety, as her father, who worked for a Japanese-owned company in Korea, was captured by the Chinese and imprisoned for eight years. Hara's childhood was spent on the Seto Inland Sea, where she was soothed and mesmerized by the ocean and the ever-changing still lifes that washed to shore. She says it was as if the tide continually spat out compositional elements—shells, seaweed, driftwood, the flotsam and jetsam of the ocean—that mysteriously arranged themselves into tableaus that she read as works of art.

As a young woman, Hara studied at the Gendai Art School in Tokyo and the Oita-Kenritsu Art College in Oita. She then taught art to children, all of whom had disabilities,[1] at the Kenritsu Yogo School in Kagoshima. She was interested in the relationship with their minds and emotional aspects of their development through the arts. The experience led Hara to imagine a career in art therapy which, in 1971, she decided to pursue in the United States. Her research in America made her realize that this career path would require consummate dedication to evolve the nascent profession of art

[1] This was an important moment for Hara, as she was fascinated by the art made by children with disabilities. She recognized the therapeutic opportunities that art-making provided for these children.

therapy in Japan—at the detriment of a robust studio practice. She decided, instead, to earn a bachelor of fine arts degree at Mississippi State University for Women, then graduate degrees in art from the University of Wisconsin (1975) and Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan (1976). After teaching in Wisconsin for several years, she was lured to Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington—at first under the assumption that a college in Washington must, in fact, be in Washington, DC—where she taught painting, printmaking, and book arts. Hara has made Walla Walla her home since 1985 and is now an emerita professor. When asked if she yearns for the sea of her childhood, Hara says that the abundant wheat fields of the Palouse—which stretch into the horizon as far as the eye can see—have become her adopted "ocean." In the east wind, the wheat stems undulate and shimmer like a simulacrum of tidal waves.

Hara's studio practice can be grouped not into specific periods, but into themes that she revisits repeatedly, delving deeper and deeper into concepts that intrigue her. In the cyclical nature of Hara's work, repetition means something new with each successive work. *Image • Space* (1977–1978) (p. 20) is the earliest painting in this exhibition, yet even at the distant vantage point of forty-five years, the painting portends themes that Hara has revisited over her entire career. The painting is a field of colorful orbs, drawn and painted onto Hara's hallmark *washi* paper. Hara's hand is vividly evident in the array of marks and gestures that pattern the painting from edge to edge. Hara had just been in Japan, where she met a traditional papermaker; she brought him threads and pigments to use in making papers she would later use in her work. Interspersed between the lifesaver-like shapes are seemingly random drawn marks and gestures that might remind one of the threads and fibrous bits one finds in handmade paper.

An abiding theme that has engrossed Hara is topophilia, a term she has returned to in numerous works over decades. Past scholarship on Hara has credited the British poet Sir John Betjeman as having coined the term, but it was W. H. Auden, in an introduction to a selection of verse and prose by Betjeman called *Slick but Not Streamlined* (1947), who attempted to define it. The etymology of the word comes from the Greek *tópos* (place) + *philia* (like or love for something). It is a word that has been invoked by many other creatives and thinkers.[2] In general, the term describes "a longing for special places either for their beauty, for their fascination, for their ugliness, or even for their indescribability."[3] To Hara, the term further conjures the Japanese word *aware* which, according to Hara, refers to "an artist, poet, or person's ability to grasp the beauty and sadness of life's passing moments in the context of a single, often trifling (ephemeral) event or image."[4] Hara's work gives shape to fleeting shards

[2] Notable among these are French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard (in *The Poetics of Space*, 1958) and human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan in his essay and book *Topophilia* (1961 and 1974). *Topophilia* (2015) is also the name of a documentary by Peter Bo Rappmund, an exploration of built and natural environments along the 800-mile length of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline.

[3] Terri Hopkins. *Japanese/American: The In Between, Keiko Hara and Michihiro Kosuge, 1998*. Portland: The Art Gym, 1998, 5.

[4] Ibid., 6.

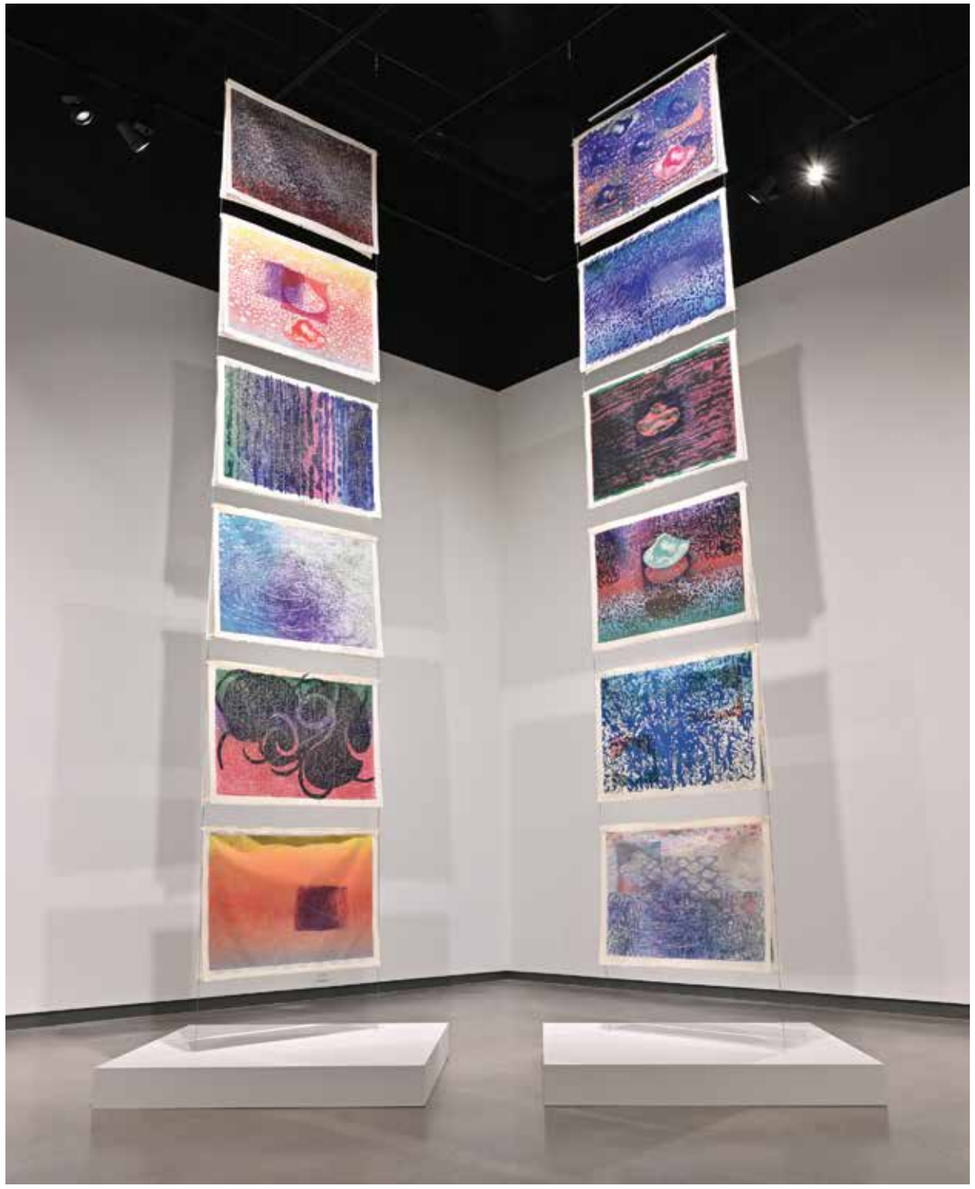
of memory or momentary glimpses of nature. It is these delicate and almost imperceptible fissures of experience that intrigue Hara.

The first work to which Hara ascribed the title "topophilia" is *Topophilia 1* (1981) (p. 36–37), a series of twelve lithographic prints on handmade Japanese *gampi* paper (twenty-four images, as the prints are viewable on both front and back). The prints are hung from dowels to create a suspended "curtain" of images that can be viewed from innumerable perspectives. Added into the lithography are collage elements and machine sewing, both of which add new forms and lines to the compositions. A central image in this series is a seashell shape. Hara says that she is less interested in what the shape represents than in how the form exists in/on the picture plane, but the "shellness" of the silhouette is a visual cue. The lithographs, in radiant and deeply saturated hues, are full of patterns from nature. Some suggest seaweed or coral, whirlpools and tidal pools, fish scales, fronds and other herbage, sand patterns, refracted sunlight seen through a rippled veil of water, and even a sense of saltiness in the very air. Other imagery looks like Japanese *kanji* brushwork, as if the prints were literary pages of an unknown narrative.

Included in Hara's exhibition is a series of four works titled *Topophilia 7 • Grey, Blue, Green,* and *Red* (1996) (p. 48–49). The series is an excellent example of Hara's master abilities with printmaking, specifically *mokuhanga* (Japanese woodblock printing). As a schoolgirl in Japan, Hara learned to make woodblock prints—an artform that is commonly taught to pupils. Later, in her academic studies, she mastered other printmaking techniques—lithography, screen printing, and intaglio—which she often combined with other elements, such as collage, papermaking, and glass. Her interest in *mokuhanga* specifically, however, was rekindled when a 1987 faculty fellowship took her to Kyoto for a semester of teaching and research. There Hara plunged into the art of *Ukiyo-e* or "pictures of the floating world," the genre of Japanese woodblock printing that flourished from the 17th through the 19th century.[5] Common *Ukiyo-e* themes included views of courtesan life, narratives of the merchant class, and scenes of nature. Back in her Walla Walla studio, Hara began to incorporate woodblock prints into her work in her own idiosyncratic way, combining them with other media. She appreciated the way in which pigments either absorbed deeply into the fibers of paper or, through screen printing, sat viscously on the surface of the paper. She used these techniques to create both richness of line and moments of translucency. Hara's dedication to the art of *mokuhanga* led to the establishment of the Mokuhanga Project Space, where this art form is taught and preserved. She continues to curate *mokuhanga* exhibitions, program workshops, and other events.

In 1996, Hara met Tadashi Toda, a fourth-generation *Ukiyo-e* master printer. Toda was already distinguished by his printing work of Western artists such as Chuck Close, Francesco Clemente, Helen Frankenthaler, and Anish Kapoor. Hara invited him to Whitman College and he, in turn, invited Hara to work with him in Kyoto.

[5] *Ukiyo-e* was elemental to the West's perception of Japanese art in the late 19th century, particularly the landscapes of Hokusai and Hiroshige. Japonisme had an enduring influence on the French Impressionists, Post-Impressionists, and Art Nouveau artists.



Topophilia 1 | 1981
Installation at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art WSU
Photo: Bob Hubner, WSU Photo Services

Toda printed the series *Topophilia 7 • Grey, Blue, Green,* and *Red,* remarkably using twenty-one woodblocks and twenty-three colors to translate Hara's original black and white drawing into the lush prints. Using Toda's richly toned prints as a base, Hara added in stencil, collage, and language fragments. The Japanese words refer to a specific Noh play in which a mother is searching for her son along the banks of the Sumida River; the son's ghost evaporates within the mother's embrace. The central form in each print feels both solid and ephemeral; the nonspecific shape mysteriously and almost simultaneously comes into focus and dissolves into a void. It looks eerily like a high dive platform in undefined space, but it could also be imagined as a waterfall, a fragment of a geological ledge, or part of a gate. This nebulous trope, that of fugitive and temporal sensations, is a leitmotif of Hara's work.

Another example of Hara's amalgam of process is found in *Verse from Sea* (2002) (p. 28 detail, 62–63), a portfolio of twelve prints using *mokuhanga* woodblock printing, stencil, and collage.[6] This series is Hara's paean to the sea of her heritage and her memories of growing up at the ocean's edge. Each print is a lyrical, visual prose poem, condensing innumerable impressions and sensations of being at the beach—the tumble of rocks in the waves, the water-on-water of a cloudburst over the sea, the patterns humans and animals make on the wet sand. One important thing to note about Hara's multiples is that she never creates exact reproductions. This is a joyful aspect of the print-making process that Hara uses to great effect. Each print is individuated by slightly changing the registration of the woodblock, or using ghost images from previously inked-and-printed blocks. Thus, even a multiple is a one-off, imbued with the hand of the artist.

Topophilia Ma and Ki in Memory (2015) (p. 88–89) is monumental—a 24-foot painting in oil and collage on canvas. Simply by virtue of scale, viewing the painting frontally and by peripheral vision, one is enveloped by the work. Divided into quadrants, the painting presents four distinct environments—or perhaps more accurately, four separate sensations. These are not representations of landscape or of the seasons; they are more answers to the questions: How does one describe a feeling? What do concepts of time and space look like?

Of this work Hara writes, "My idea was a dream, in the way we all have dreams. Dreams are so vivid, but when we look at our dreams, we only have bits and pieces left, not a whole, no matter how complete they seemed before waking." The words in the title, *ma* and *ki*, refer to two important Japanese concepts. *Ma* refers to a seeming paradox in Japanese art and design, where void can be as important as presence—it roughly translates as "negative space," but the word evokes a more subtle sense of "an emptiness full of possibilities." *Ki* is a Japanese word meaning spirit or energy (*chi* in Chinese), an elusive term, yes, but pregnant with possible interpretations, depending upon the viewer. Hara points out that *ki* is often combined with other syllables in Japanese, such as *kibun* (feelings) or *genki* (energy).

[6] This complete series is found at Harbor View Medical Center in Seattle.

A watershed work in Hara's oeuvre is a monumental, room-size installation called *Topophilia Ma and Ki • Memory* (2016) (p. 13) that was shown at the Kentler International Drawing Space in Brooklyn.[7] The installation was an immersive experience for the viewer, as one walked through the installation between fifty double-sided *mokuhanga* monotype prints that hung from the ceiling like Japanese scrolls. Each panel was made of two sheets of semitransparent Japanese *washi* paper backed with silk gauze, hung so that the viewer meandered around the panels which moved ever-so-slightly in the ambient air. Interspersed within the installation were fifty shiny aluminum cutouts, shaped in a stylized floral pattern—or are they cloud forms?—which were strung horizontally onto cords like beads threaded through and between the panels.[8] Then, the panels were individually lit with *washi*-wrapped light bulbs, choreographed to create both brilliance and shadow within the installation. The floor was an expanse of aluminum tiles, sandblasted to suggest the wind pattern on sand, the evanescence of the sky, or ripples on the surface of water. The panels were hung at differing heights, ascending into the shape of a Fibonacci spiral, the pattern based on the golden ratio that is structurally inherent in all living things. Additionally, Hara collaborated with New York-based artist and musician Donald Groscost, who conceived a four-minute loop of collaged electronic and sampled tracks—gongs, chimes, seagull cries, and dreamy storm sounds. The moodiness of the soundtrack set an emotive mood of reverence and contemplation.

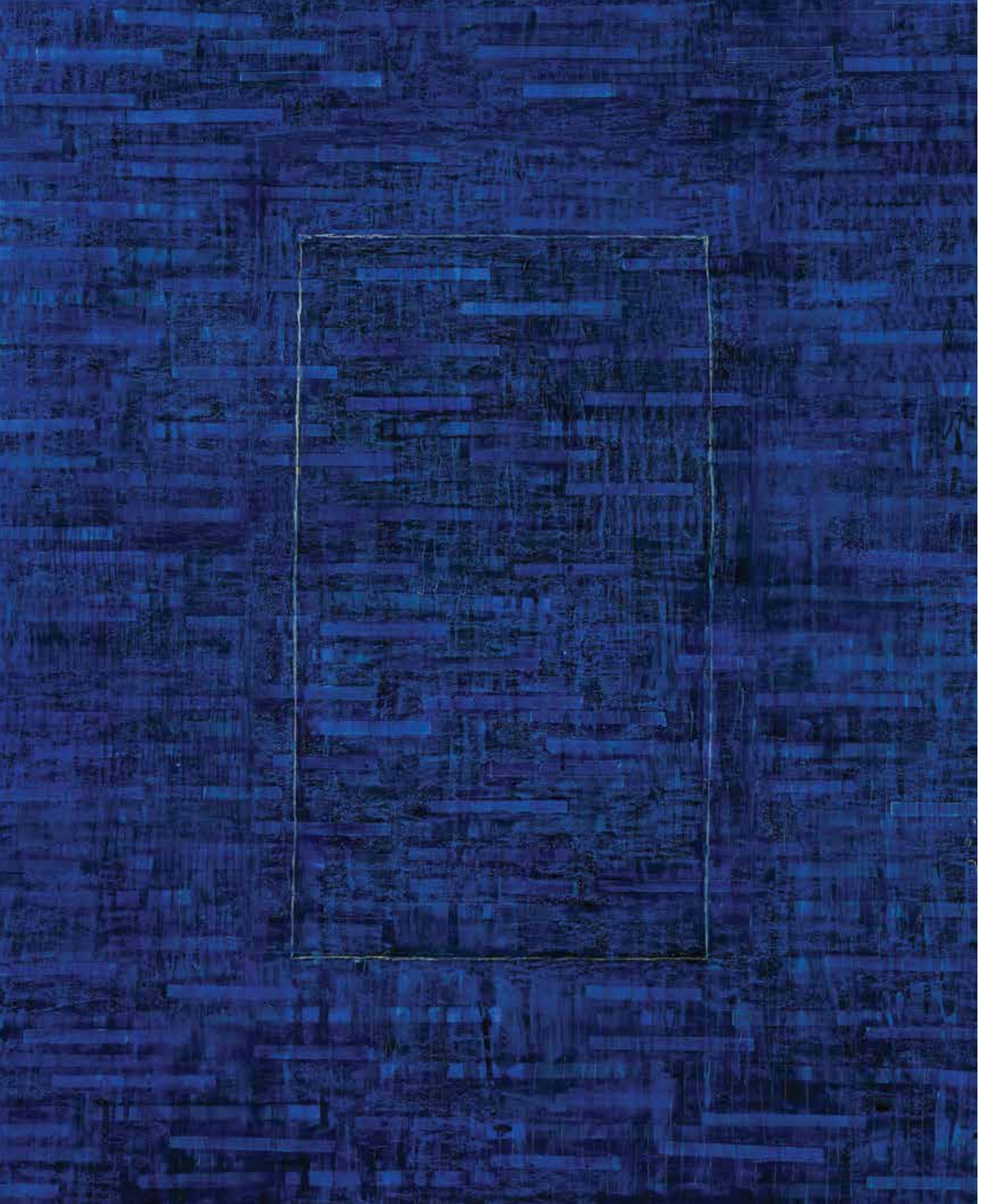
Topophilia Ma and Ki • Memory is an important project in Hara's oeuvre because it marks a moment in which Hara's focus shifted subtly from the personal to the collective. Hara stated that the installation was dedicated to the memory of her parents and the end of her family's name in Japan, a name that spanned more than 350 years. But she also made the piece as a memorial to the devastating Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami in 2011, which resulted in the meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactors. Such a staggering tragedy is difficult to comprehend—the fact that the events caused nearly 16,000 deaths is oddly specific, but ultimately vague and abstract. Hara visited Tōhoku soon after the catastrophe to see for herself what the annihilated landscape looked like. Seeing only one lone pine tree standing in a landscape of sheer devastation, Hara was moved to want to preserve the sense of tremendous loss of human beings, each with his or her own story.[9] In Hara's words, "The unthinkable loss of life and land in natural and manmade disasters touches my soul deeply. As my life evolves, my art too has evolved from a more personal approach to being concerned with the universal human experience."

[7] See keikohara.com for a video of this installation.

[8] Lilly Wei. *Keiko Hara: Topophilia Ma and Ki • Memory*. Kentler International Drawing Space, New York, 2016. Wei wrote that the aluminum forms "might be stylized chrysanthemums, a flower that signifies the Japanese imperium, or lotus flower, emblematic of Buddhism, Hinduism, and more."

[9] Coincidentally, the Kentler International Drawing Space is located near New York Bay, which suffered its own flooding and storm damage during Hurricane Sandy in 2012.

Topophilia Ma and Ki • Memory | 2016
Installation at the Kentler International Drawing Space, New York



Mokuhanga, in Hara's hands, establishes the gravitas of this multi-paneled installation. The imagery on the fifty panels is wrought primarily in varying shades of indigo, balanced by white, gray, and black. The abstract forms conjure all manner of natural processes, from the volatile eruption of the earth's crust to rain showers, falling snow, ocean waves, and the flickering dappled sunlight seen through foliage. Her images are evocative, not definitive, as if seen from the very edge of consciousness.

The woodblock printing method allows Hara to either intensify colors or dilute them by creating ghost images, depending upon how aggressively she inks the woodblock. When printed on *washi*, the viewer sees both the primary image on one side and the penumbra of an image on the other side. The screens are, in fact, palimpsests in which the imagery builds upon, obscures, or enhances others. There is a saying that memory is a palimpsest that is continually being written over, but never perfectly so. This is a concept that Hara embraces.

It would be a mistake to limit a discussion of Hara's work to printmaking only. She also has a robust painting practice. When pressed to describe the difference between painting and printmaking, Hara says that "Painting is more like jumping in the ocean and swimming around to find everything. Printmaking is about certain ideas that I want to test and explore further." Both are important processes to her and are reflected in her titles. Paintings with titles such as "Verse" and "Space" are almost like preparatory sketches or thought experiments that might lead to a deeper investigation in a print series. Examples of this are four paintings in the exhibition, *Verse—Space in White, Blue, Green, and Black* (2019) (p. 14 detail, 103), in gouache, graphite, and collage on paper. From even a slight distance, these paintings look like color field paintings, each with an elemental vertical white rectangle drawn onto the surface. But, when viewed at very close range, one experiences Hara's nimble hand with mark-making. The picture plane is enlivened by splotches and lines, underlying colors, pulsating explorations of light and dark, and the ever-so-slight sculptural element of collage. One other comment that should be made about Hara's materials: she is assiduously devoted to using nontoxic, water-based materials; many of her pigments are handmade by the artist. She eschews acrylic as a somewhat garish and "flat" medium, while her layers and layers of gouache, graphite, and collage create such depth that one feels as if one could step into her paintings.

This essay would be incomplete without mention of Hara's significant achievements in public art. Her first public commission was inspired by her exhibition, *Topophilia 5 • 100 Gates* (p. 45), that was installed at the Tacoma Art Museum in 1994. The installation included one hundred simply constructed wood arches; Hara's works on paper created translucent posts. Like Hara's later installation in Brooklyn, the viewer experienced the artwork kinetically, by ambling through and between the gates. A question was posed to Hara: Could these elegant gates be reconceived to exist out of doors?

Facing page
Verse · Space in Blue (detail) | 2019
Gouache, graphite, and collage on paper | 48.75 x 33 inches

The resounding answer was "yes." Hara's first public art commission was made by Whitman College, where she created a site-specific work called *Topophilia Gates* (1999) (p. 16) in glass and bronze. Sited in a gentle creek at the base of a lush ravine on the Whitman campus, three simple gates are constructed of posts and lintels made of colorful glass panels. The gates are reminiscent of Japanese *torii* gates, which traditionally symbolize the passage from mundane to sacred space. Hara's bronze structures were designed by the artist and the Walla Walla Foundry, an organization with which Hara shares a great affinity. Each post comprises seven multi-layered screen-printed and stenciled fused-glass panels, each a distinct and colorful composition reminiscent of Hara's paintings and prints. Like her *mokuhanga* screens, in which each side of the same print reveals distinct but related imagery—each recto is composed of ghost images of the verso—the translucency of the glass panes offers the same opportunity to blur the boundaries between one side and the other. Of course, being sited in a natural setting, the changing light conditions and reflection from the running water cause the colored glass to sparkle and transform. The idea that there is no front or back to the gates—no specific way to pass through them—suggests that the entire environment enlivened by the artwork is, in fact, sacred. Undoubtedly, members of the Whitman College community find the sculpture to be a hallowed environment for reverence and contemplation.

Since *Topophilia Gates*, Hara has completed other important site-specific public works, including *Topophilia—Imbuing in Maru* (2006) at Seattle Central Community College and *Verses—Reflected and Reflecting* (2010) at the City Archives and Record Center in Portland, Oregon.

"My interest is in spatial qualities," says Hara. "I am a sculptor working with finite space."[10] These words seem paradoxical, given that Hara works primarily in two dimensions. However, even within the flatness of a print or painting, Hara's deft abilities create literal and metamorphic topography—time and space—in layers of ink, collage, drawing, paint, and sewn line. Using the language of abstraction, Hara captures the relationship between things and ideas. Not overly concerned with the pictorial depiction of nature, she delves much deeper than that with the courage to give image to the imageless. She achieves the seemingly impossible, capturing the evanescence of feelings, memories, and subtle sensations with a transcendental sense of mystery and otherworldliness.

[10] Patricia Watkinson. *Keiko Hara: Mokuhanga/A Selection of Woodblock Prints*. Sammamish, WA: Sammamish Arts Commission, 2017, 3.

Facing page
Topophilia Gates | 1999
Collection of Whitman College, Walla Walla

Following pages
Verse · Space Yuukyuu (detail) | 2019
Work on paper | 20 x 24 inches
Private collection