

VISIONS

A R T Q U A R T E R L Y



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Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination. This book became a catalyst to Jesse's search for a female professorial position and resulted in a series of work which layered art-historical and literary images with personal information. Jesse's bedroom and studio, while growing up in Nebraska, was an attic. Her models for a creative process became women like the Brontës, Virginia Woolf, Willa Cather, Djuna Barnes and H.D. who, in Herman, superimposes her own poem on the structure of the earlier Greek verse, so that the original sublates her own work exposing two conflicting text [sic]."

— Marlene Argyis

MASAKO TAKAHASHI

Employing watercolor on the difficult medium of pre-Columbian Mexican *amate* (bark) paper, Masako Takahashi has unleashed an evocative, unsettling series of paintings. These haunting, atavistic works draw upon the vocabulary of folk objects and toys (*juguetes*) found in the markets of Mexico and elsewhere for their imagery — skulls, snakes, dolls, ladders, dice, skeletons (*calaveras*), shoes, tops, even Chinese fortune cookies and Japanese dolls.

The objects and their execution initially exude a playfulness and charm quickly subverted by composition and subject matter. Invocations of fate, innocence, luck, hope, and death emerge from the objects' depiction and arrangement. Working a rich vein of paradox, the artist has rendered seemingly harmless charms, talismans, and objects of fortune so as to trigger submerged longings, fears, and desires. Rich with dark wit and humorous philosophic ponderings, these paintings explore that shifting territory where childhood innocence meets adult fears, where ideas of fate and effort contest, where cultural belief systems collide. Toying with the limits of reason, Takahashi's work reminds us that images can be dangerous.

A colloquium of Mexican skulls lie about, like Beckett characters. What are they waiting for, or conveying, with their eternal inscrutable smiles? What's so funny? Who pulls the strings that animate the skull?

The work, while conceptually resonant, is also sensual. The richly toned and various textural field of the

amate paper provides a kind of visual amniotic fluid, a heightened spatial landscape in which these mischievously ominous objects float.

Techno-culture proceeds necessarily, and naively, from a denial of death. Older civilizations understand that life and death are the two poles of the battery that charges existence. Toys and ritual objects become repositories of intensely experienced human conundrums, embodying forces larger than the merely psychological or the socio-political. Fortune is whimsical: sometimes kind, sometimes cruel. Creations of creations, Masako Takahashi's paintings of toys and folk objects summon forth the invigorating proposition that to play with death creatively, ritualistically, is in a sense to master death. Or at the very least, to come alive oneself.

— Tony Cohan



Masako Takahashi, *Untitled, 1992*, Watercolor on amate, 16 1/2 x 23 inches



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