

**Mary Mitsuda**

b.1949, Honolulu, Hawai'i, lives in Honolulu, O'ahu

exhibited in *Biennial IV*

*Semaphore*, 2011

acrylic on wood panel

## MARY MITSUDA

*Born 1949 in Honolulu, Hawai'i  
Lives in Honolulu on O'ahu*

Mary Mitsuda's first exposure to art was in her childhood home in Aiea, O'ahu. Her mother's interests included calligraphy, block printing, drawing, flower arranging, lauhala weaving, and both parents loved reading, so for Mary and her brother, playing usually meant making something or going to the library.

Additional exposure to art and art making came during elementary public school through the visiting art specialists and the Artmobile, as well as attending summer classes at the Honolulu Academy of Arts Art Center. During high school Mitsuda began to focus on writing and literature, and when she enrolled in the University of Hawai'i—Mānoa in 1967 she intended to major in English. It was through a friend who was an art major that Mitsuda first made contact with the university's art department, where she got to know faculty and students in the ceramics and sculpture departments. Excited by the spirit of exploration and creativity she encountered in the art program, she eventually changed her major to art, taking courses that introduced her to a wide range of media and techniques. The atmosphere of the times was a stimulating one that encouraged cross-over in all genres—a philosophy which continues to strongly influence her thinking and working.

After graduation from the University of Hawai'i in 1976 with a bachelor of fine arts degree, Mitsuda's work continued to incorporate ceramics, glass, painting, photography, wood, stitchery, metal, Bondo, cement, xerography, screenprinting and found objects. Although she had a small solo exhibition at Queen Emma Gallery in 1979, Mitsuda has always preferred exhibiting with other artists, in a context of contrasting visual expressions and perspectives. In addition to participating in invitational and juried exhibitions, she has also been a member of several artists collectives including The Women's Group (1977-1994) and The Artists' Group (since 1994).

In 1976 she began working as a part-time assistant to Laila Roster, the Director of the Contemporary Arts Center. Mitsuda's work with the collection and, later, the exhibitions and publications, gave her an opportunity to meet many artists and see a wide range of work, to learn another side of the art world. During this period the Arts Center began to evolve from its single-gallery downtown location into its present incarnation as The Contemporary Museum in Makiki Heights. Mitsuda enjoyed being a part of this growth period, functioning as publications director, then acting director in 1983, and finally director until 1986 when she left to return to art making.

Mitsuda again worked in mixed media but began to move toward a simpler and quieter look. In 1988 she took a screenprinting class at the University of Hawai'i and found that she liked the restrictions imposed by the medium and the emphatic two-dimensionality of its flat, smooth surface. She wanted a way of interacting with the medium in a more spontaneous way so she began screening successive fields of color through an open screen, printing wet on wet, manipulating the inks on the screen and on the paper with her fingers or other tools.

While Mitsuda liked the rhythm of applying inks in sweeping vertical and horizontal movements, the screen seemed to hinder attempts at a more straightforward process. So she dispensed with the screen, taped off the paper borders, and using only primary colors, spread inks onto the surface directly with scrapers and squeegees. She worked on heavy papers in a wet-on-wet technique, applying the inks in layers, still with broad horizontal and vertical movements, occasionally augmented by brushwork. This yielded transparent "plaid" compositions with subtle color mixes and rich surfaces. She felt the stripes suggested simplified views of nature—falling water, gravity, the horizon, growth upward and downward.

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## MITSUDA (continued)

For a long time Mitsuda enjoyed exploring the range of variations and effects she could achieve with this process. Eventually however, a desire to work in an even simpler and less toxic process led her to start working in acrylic on wood panel and canvas supports. Panels offered smooth and firm surfaces, similar to the feeling she was accustomed to in working on paper on a table, but canvas offered her the possibility of painting on a larger scale.

Mitsuda soon embarked on a series of acrylic paintings in which she employed a range of painting styles. In some, she divided the canvas plane into two or three rectangular sections and then painted each area in a different manner, ranging from the minimalism of a flatly applied single color to the expressionistic scumbling of paint in whorls or broad strokes applied with brush, fingers or rubber scraper. At the same time Mitsuda continued to make her plaid compositions, painting networks of horizontal and vertical lines emerging through transparent veils of color. After pursuing a range of expressions in paint, Mitsuda felt she wanted to try a more minimal approach and paint in a very simple and direct way—one color, one process, everything applied and articulated in a spontaneous and straightforward manner. *Folded Letter*, the first painting of the series, part of a commission she completed for Neiman Marcus's new Honolulu store, is based on Mitsuda's experience as curator, since 1989, of the Persis Stamp Collection. Sold at auction in 1995, the renowned collection contained many letters from

1820 to 1900, written by missionaries, settlers and native Hawaiians, filled with vivid descriptions of the Islands and life of those times. For Mitsuda, these letters have an intrinsic beauty and poignance and represent the human spirit as well as the passage of time. The appearance and feel of the letters, their pages divided into softly creased grids, influenced Mitsuda's thinking about the structure and surfaces of her paintings.

The large canvases that proceeded from *Folded Letter* are visually arresting for their starkly monochrome surfaces, for which Mitsuda has used a rich blue ranging in tone from faded denim to deep ultramarine. Mitsuda is intrigued by monochromatic things, for example black and white photographs, in which the contrast of darks and lights gives images an abstract, sculptural quality. She chose blue for the paintings because it is an obviously unnatural, non-referential color by itself and heightens the perception in the viewer that one is seeing a made-up image, not a representation of something.

Mitsuda begins by applying paint broadly in sections with scrapers, then uses her fingers to create images and forms in the paint, pushing it aside or removing it so the white ground of the canvas shows through. Lastly she goes back into the surface with scrapers and sponges; where the paint has sufficiently dried it remains, where it is still wet it is removed. Mitsuda does little or no

after-painting; however, in some of the works Mitsuda has applied thin rivulets of yellow paint running down the surface of the canvas. Formally these opaque lines affect our perception in a number of ways. They provide a context for the background space, referencing the view as if one is looking through a window. At the same time the lines halt our vision at the picture plane, establishing it as part of our own realm and emphasizing that this is made, it is a painting. The varying lengths of the lines establish a sense of time and movement in the work. Mitsuda wants the viewer to always be aware of the means by which the paintings were made, to imagine oneself involved in the creative process.

Though Mitsuda emphasizes formal and conceptual aspects of these paintings, she makes them work on a personal, emotional level as well. With their indication of plant forms and evocation of water and soil, they can be read as landscapes, and the erosional method of their making functions as an analogy to processes in the natural world. Their gridded and fragmented images, showing the section-by-section way they were made, and their abraded, blurred surfaces remind us of the look of old letters and documents folded and unfolded over many years. On the one hand, Mitsuda's paintings have a nostalgic presence; they evoke memories of the past and a longing for things lost. And on the other the paintings also embody a spirit of optimism, celebrating growth and regeneration and a confidence in life's ongoing processes.