

## KEIKO SADAKANE: GEOMETRIC PAINTING AFTER PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA

GEBERT CONTEMPORARY  
558 CANYON ROAD, SANTA FE

### I RECENTLY CAME ACROSS THE PHRASE “SURGICALLY PRECISE”

in a review that Roberta Smith wrote for *The New York Times*, but her review had nothing to do with Keiko Sadakane’s show in Santa Fe. Nonetheless, when I read it, I thought, Indeed, that is the essence of Sadakane’s exhibition of recent panel paintings—these geometric explorations and translations of work by the early Renaissance artist Piero della Francesca. Sadakane is not alone in her fascination with della Francesca’s painting; many other contemporary artists love it as well for its sense of calm grandeur, its color, spatial clarity, and the enigmatic nature of della Francesca’s fixations. Was he more interested in mathematics, or the meaning behind the religious symbolism of his day? In spite of the fact that della Francesca’s paintings are religious illustrations, his deeper preoccupation seemed to have been with manifesting the sanctity of geometric relationships that were at the very foundation of the Renaissance rediscovery of one-point perspective. In Sadakane’s new body of work, she based each one of her images on a particular painting by della Francesca

and then rigorously analyzed the latter’s spatial compositions in terms of their mathematical precision.

On one wall of the gallery at Gebert Contemporary were black-and-white facsimiles of the eight della Francesca paintings that Sadakane analyzed and then transformed into abstract images. It was instructive to view these facsimiles as preliminary sketches because the artist had drawn over them in bright red as a means of defining her various systems of horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines; over each reproduction she indicated how she organized della Francesca’s pictorial spaces and brought them into her own paintings with their interpretive colors and forms. This doesn’t mean that a viewer needed all this information to appreciate the jewel-like qualities in Sadakane’s pieces, but seeing that della Francesca was the *genius loci* of this exhibition certainly helped to understand the “surgically precise” decisions that Sadakane made in each of her works.

If a viewer did a comparison of a Sadakane painting with a color reproduction of the della Francesca work on which it was based, some of the artist’s extrapolations—while true to form in their parsing of the Renaissance master’s geometry—were highly subjective; one could tell that Sadakane has done a fair amount of interpretation in her abstract paintings. For

example, her work was not a literal translation of the pictorial devices of Catholic mysticism found in della Francesca. If Sadakane’s work suggested the spiritual, it was through an abstract painter’s religious devotion to color and formal relationships. Sadakane both celebrated the locus of her inspiration and grandly departed from it.

In two of Sadakane’s pieces in particular, *Annunciazione* and *Misericordia*, when compared with those works by della Francesca, there was a clarity and solidity in Sadakane’s ability to move from original image to contemporary invention. *Annunciazione* is divided into four quadrants as is the work by della Francesca: a depiction of God is in the upper left, the angel Gabriel below him, Mary to the lower right, and an arched open window above Mary. Sadakane has reduced God to a monochromatic field of red, and Mary to one of blue; in the upper right quadrant, the artist has hinted at the architectural detail of the original, and in the lower left quadrant, Gabriel—delivering the message from the Holy Spirit about Mary’s imminent pregnancy—is rendered as thin, rose-and-aqua-colored triangles radiating from a diffuse center. Sadakane’s bridge—from della Francesca’s annunciation scene to vibrant contemporary abstraction—was not only coherent in its visual translation, it was an arresting interpretation of the Renaissance belief in the logic and clarity of the human mind, from which emerges the power of the word and the divinity of the artist’s visions.

This same depth of analysis is embedded in Sadakane’s *Misericordia*, whose geometric parts lend themselves to comparison with the central panel of della Francesca’s multi-part altarpiece from which Sadakane has borrowed. In Sadakane’s painting, the geometry of the central triangle, in subtle shades of red, represents the protective body of Mary, who watches over her followers symbolized in the multi-colored drum-like form below. The golden oval at the tip of the pyramid is Mary’s halo, her abstract aura, and an attribute of her transubstantiation. Sadakane’s painting is also an astute analogy for the state of the artist who resides both in the world of matter and the world of visions, merging the qualities of one with the powers of the other in never-ending cycles of abstraction at the mercy of representation. Or is it the other way around? Or are they, at heart, the same? Sadakane’s work is proof that paintings can contain both a rigorous sense of precision in their making and still be open-ended and poetic in their visual resonance, in their clearly defined yet disembodied reach.

—DIANE ARMITAGE



Left: Keiko Sadakane, *Annunciazione*, acrylic on wood, 29½" x 19½", 2013  
Right: Keiko Sadakane, *Misericordia*, acrylic on wood, 29½" x 19½", 2013