OCULA

Greg Ito Makes Space to Grow
Written by: Stephanie Bailey
March 2, 2022

'My work is my life and my life is my work', says Greg Ito, whose paintings filter subjective, worldly experiences into symbolic ideograms.

Greg Ito, Paradise (2021) (detail). Acrylic on canvas over panel. 127 x 508 cm. Five-panel polyptych. Courtesy Anat Ebgi, Los Angeles.

The five-panel Paradise (2021), the final canvas Ito painted before his daughter Spring's birth in 2021, was the focal point of The Arrival of Spring, a solo presentation with Anat Ebgi at Art Basel Hong Kong that year.

Viewed through five square window frames is a flat-coloured coastal suburb, with fires raging across a hillside crowned by an orange sunset—a reference to the Californian wildfires engulfing the state.

Symbols that recur in Ito's paintings appear across Paradise like clip art: helicopters emitting searchlights; a crescent moon; a butterfly, which Ito likens to a phoenix rising from the ashes, rendered in block orange with a world map painted in black.

The forms and colours of Ito's visual lexicon—among them red suns and snakes—hint at his influences.

Greg Ito, Motion Picture (2021) (detail). Acrylic on canvas over panel. 241.94 x 533.4 cm. Courtesy Anat Ebgi, Los Angeles

There's uncle Peter Shire of the Memphis Group, whose geometric shapes and pop colours find their echoes in Ito's images; early internet imagery and children's book illustrations, including Goodnight Moon; Japanese woodblock prints, anime, and Hayao Miyazaki; set design 'treatments'; and the colour fields of James Turrell and Mark Rothko.

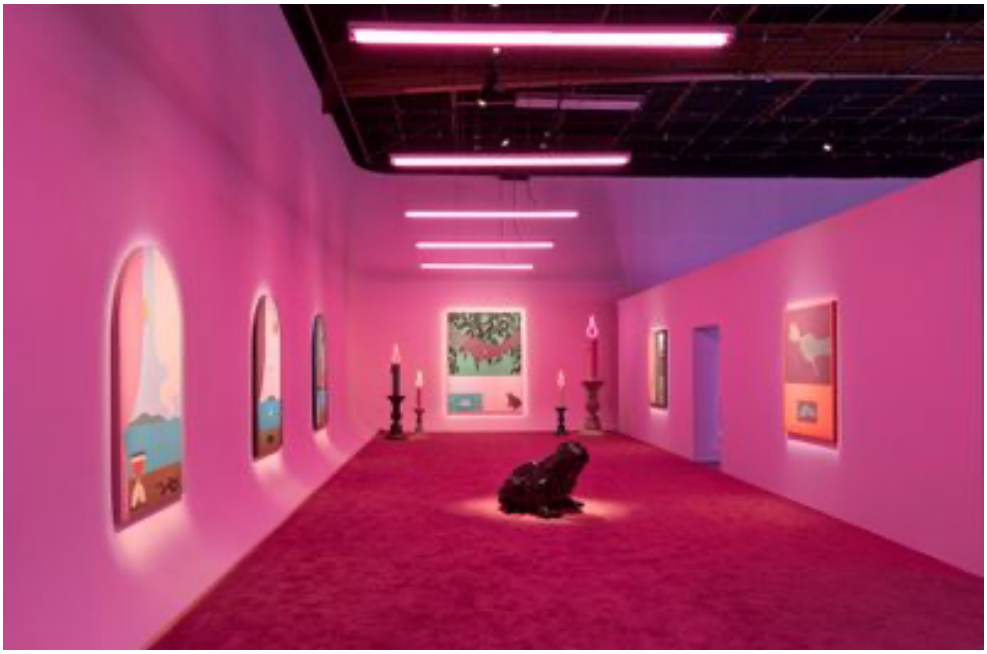
Then there are the signs of Ito's hometown of Los Angeles, including its acid-coloured sunsets, approximated to pink and blue neon lights in Hallowed Ground, a 2018 show with ArtCubed in L.A.

Ito's Art Basel Hong Kong booth extended his sell-out debut with Anat Ebgi at Frieze L.A. 2020, which included Into the Night (2020). The tondo centres a burning house and a burning tree poised on a cliff's edge, as a red hand reaches up from the ground and a purple arm emerges through a smoky channel intersecting a sooty strait.

The burning house is a self-portrait. Ito says it reflects the complex negotiation of home for a fourth-generation Japanese-American Angeleno like himself.

The motif first appeared in Home Sweet Home (2016), a brown canvas that hangs in Ito's studio, with two hands rendered on an orange rectangular panel up top and an hourglass and burning house below. (For Ito, painting hands counterbalances a superflat style that renders the artist's gesture invisible.)

Home Sweet Home is among the first of Ito's 'vignettes', paintings defined by pictorial windows on flat grounds. They were inspired by a Rothko—most likely No. 14, 1960—that Ito saw at SFMOMA while living in San Francisco, where he studied at the San Francisco Art Institute, and co-founded San Francisco Arts Quarterly and gallery Ever Gold.



Exhibition view: Greg Ito, Hallowed Ground, ArtCubed, Los Angeles (11 May–3 June 2018). Courtesy ArtCubed.

The work was included in Soothsayer at Steve Turner in 2016, Ito's first major show after returning to L.A. from San Francisco. In the gallery, pink walls and purple lights simulated twilight, as black-and-white striped candlesticks hosting lit flames arranged across the install invoked a séance.

Paintings of those candles—which later evolved into sculptures with neon flames—were included in Lullaby at Andrew Rafacz in Chicago in 2017, alongside early window paintings. The show took place after Ito visited the site of the Gila River Relocation Center in Arizona, an internment camp where his grandparents met as a result of the anti-Japanese Executive Order 9066 in 1942.

Staged like a cell with open cage doors, Lullaby featured the vignette Guardian (2017). Crowning a black canvas is a grey panel showing two hands holding, pastel lovebirds bottom left, a castle bottom right, and a green key hovering in the middle.

Ito tells me his grandfather, a cartoonist who declined a job at Walt Disney, carved wooden deer and rabbits based on the animation Bambi for his grandmother while they were incarcerated, which explains the painting's fairytale tone. 'I was thinking even through the toughest of times, love wins,' he told Art + Practice's Joshua Oduga in 2021.

After Lullaby, Ito moved to his Chinatown studio in L.A., where he recently opened, with partner Karen Galloway, the gallery Sow & Tailor in 2021, whose name speaks to the act of sowing seeds.

Themes of growth expanded in Apparition, the artist's first solo show with Anat Ebgi (2 October–20 November 2021), where paintings mixed fire with visions of regeneration.

Exhibition view: Greg Ito, Soothsayer, Steve Turner, Los Angeles (10 September–8 October 2016). Courtesy Steve Turner.

The houses of the waterside suburb that Ito's compositions return to give way to earth mounds marking planted seeds in the monumental Motion Picture (2021), a line of five panels shaped like arched windows whose grills create a compositional grid. Floral silhouettes rise up across the painting's base.

The window is Ito's constant viewfinder; a perspective that transforms paintings into portals that look out to look within; a movement that expands into speculative scenographies whenever Ito stages solo presentations in space.

Staged across Apparition, three-dimensional elements drawn from Ito's paintings included a teapot suspended mid-air by its resin flow—an object poised in the centre of The Ceremony (2021), another landscape painting organised by a five-window grid, this time with all homes replaced by earth mounds and blue flames replacing red.

Apparition also featured a life-sized construction of Ito's classic house, with fluorescent red interiors and a smooth façade crowned by gingko tree branches and offset by a back wall of charred wooden slats.

Hung inside was a shrine-like arch painting of a burning house over which a moon, butterfly, and flower form a trinity (Day In, Day Out, 2021), while a low table hosted a spinning bowl of ramen with chopsticks poised in the air.

The spectres of Ito's family history come into full view in All You Can Carry at ICA San Diego North (12 March–15 May 2022). For the first time, images from his grandparent's archive are being shown alongside the paintings, including photographs of their internment and a sketch by Ito's grandfather of the camps, whose barracks echo Ito's landscapes.

Presented across two galleries augmented with orange, yellow, and red lighting, and walls covered with pieces of charred wood, from which some green shoots appear, are intricate paintings where blue flames and the keyhole symbol are prominent.

Exhibition view: Greg Ito, Lullaby, Andrew Rafacz, Chicago (23 June–19 August 2017). Courtesy Andrew Rafacz.

Ito likens the keyhole to a tunnel that reflects a relationship to the past that is at once distant and proximate, which speaks to a question he's been thinking about since his daughter's birth: how to heal generational trauma and move forward.

That desire for evolution is echoed in Ito's latest window landscape, What Will Remain (2022), a four-panel view of a house by the water, as blue flames eat away at the painting's frame. Blue is the hottest part of the fire, Ito says; but the colour is cool. It's a contrast this painting mediates as its grid dissolves.

Suitcases also feature across All You Can Carry. In one gallery, they form a pyramid on which a cast aluminium house maquette sits. While referring to Japanese American internment, the object speaks to experiences of forced displacement that communities have endured across the world, Ito points out.

With that, an outdoor installation offers a gesture of—if not an incantation for—healing. Visitors can plant wildflower seeds in a charcoal and soil mound encased by the frame of a burned house installed on a hilltop, an homage to Ito's grandfather's internment job to watch a water tower on a hill.

Ito plans to nourish these seeds with drums of water he will carry on his own; as if to plant new roots. —[O]