

# Bearable Weightlessness of Being

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## Sono Osato's paintings suggest heft of sculpture

**A**bstract style, like it or not, is a way of taming the raw stuff of painting. But the recent work of Bay Area artist Sono Osato at Gross puts the sheer matter of paint above style.

Her paintings are halfway to being sculpture, like Jay DeFeo's "The Rose" (1958-66), an icon of Bay Area modernism that they bring to mind. In execution, though, Osato's pieces resemble more closely the late '60s or early '80s work of New York painter Milton Resnick. Where DeFeo's and Resnick's paintings are intended to hang, though, several of Osato's sit on the floor and lean. Or if they hang, they tilt steeply forward.

It is not easy to guess how Osato works her pictures. They are thickly laden but betray no obvious trace of the hand. "Munen Muso" looks like a segment of snow-dusted wall, while the surface of "Sho" resembles a relief map of a lava-clotted landscape. A rusted, gearlike object embedded in the lower left of "Sho" suggests the dormant crater of a volcano that produced the table-size ter-

rain.

The way "Sho," which is more than 7 feet tall, tilts forward from the wall might make a viewer leery of getting close to it. But its angled hanging also causes the opposite effect, producing a dreamlike sensation of looking down on a landscape, suggestive more of

NASA space-probe photographs than of facing a precarious slab of bronze or stone.

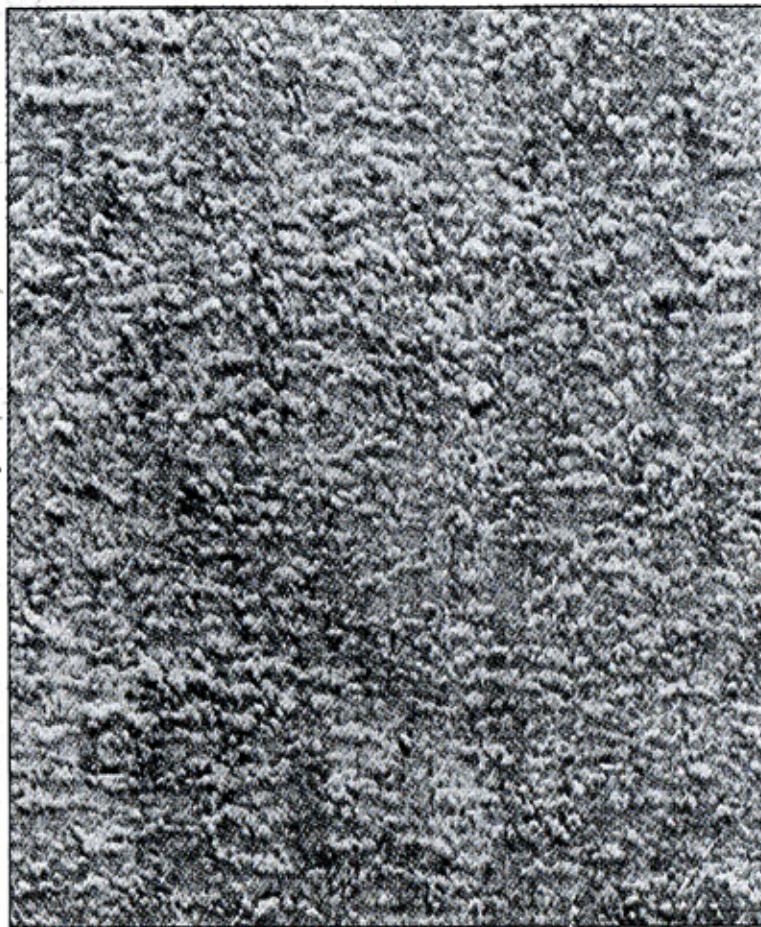
Bear down on Osato's almost monochromatic paintings and they prove to be filled with minute nuances

of color and grain. Tiny golden flecks wink from within the blue-black matrix of "Ku," for example.

Most of the time, Osato's paintings look ponderous, especially those that sit at floor level. Yet they can also appear suddenly weightless, increate, like swatches of natural phenomena. How can the same object support two such contradictory experiences?

How do we ever see beyond the materiality of an art object to meanings that seem impalpable?

To sustain our attention to these questions — if not to answer them — is the apparent aim of Osato's recent work. Her Japanese titles reference Buddhism, perhaps as an instance of spiritual thought that, like painting, entails no denial of physical experience.



Sono Osato's painting "Munen Muso" (1998) looks like a segment of snow-dusted wall.

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