

Westword DENVER

Arts & Entertainment

Natural Beauty

The idea of basing art on things found in nature has had many adherents over the centuries and today manifests itself in a wide array of approaches, from straight-up

By **Michael Paglia** depictions of the landscape to abstracts made up of organically inspired shapes.

The two solos shows at Rule Gallery feature contemporary work that's informed by the influence of nature. In the front space is **Barbara Takenaga: Fade Away & Radiate**, a nice selection of abstracts by a New York artist who lived for many years in Colorado. In the back room is **Mary Ehrin: Rockspace**, an installation by a noted Colorado conceptualist.

Takenaga is a dot painter. Using repeated ovoid forms, she creates elaborate compositions that have a cosmic feeling, as though we're looking at the universe, with its rigid ordering of physical forces. These ovoid shapes are organized like swirling galaxies in outer space, and the compositions typically radiate out of the center of the pictures. The dots are often made up of multiple dots that function as individual ones. Takenaga applies one dot on top of another and arranges them so that their sizes diminish as they rise to the top of the stack, creating halos or rings around the small central dots.



"Gold Hobo Dubai Rock," by Mary Ehrin, 2009, multi-media, tailored gilded leather, 29 x 28 x 20 inches

The dots may also bring to mind op art from the '60s and '70s, but Takenaga has a different aim in mind, because as tightly composed as her paintings are, they don't seem to vibrate or wave, the way classic op art does. Eliminating that approach would inevitably lead to pattern painting, and that's more properly the category where her work belongs.

The gallery irreverently describes Takenaga's paintings as being "trippy outer space explosions." This odd reference helps me make my next point, which is that there is definitely a relationship between Takenaga's "trippy

outer space explosions" and those dot paintings of the universe done by the late Vance Kirkland, which could be described using exactly those same words. I'd love to see a show pairing the two.



Install of Rockspace by Mary Ehrin @ Rule Gallery

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And the Kirkland association isn't so far-fetched given Takenaga's long-term connection to Colorado. She earned her BFA and MFA from the University of Colorado at Boulder and taught for a time at the University of Denver. I first became aware of her work when I saw it in the Decades/Remix combination show at the old MCA in 2006. Decades/Remix was a major effort curated by Cydney Payton that was intended to chronicle Colorado art since 1985 with more than 100 worthy artists included.

***Barbara Takenaga and
Mary Ehrin***

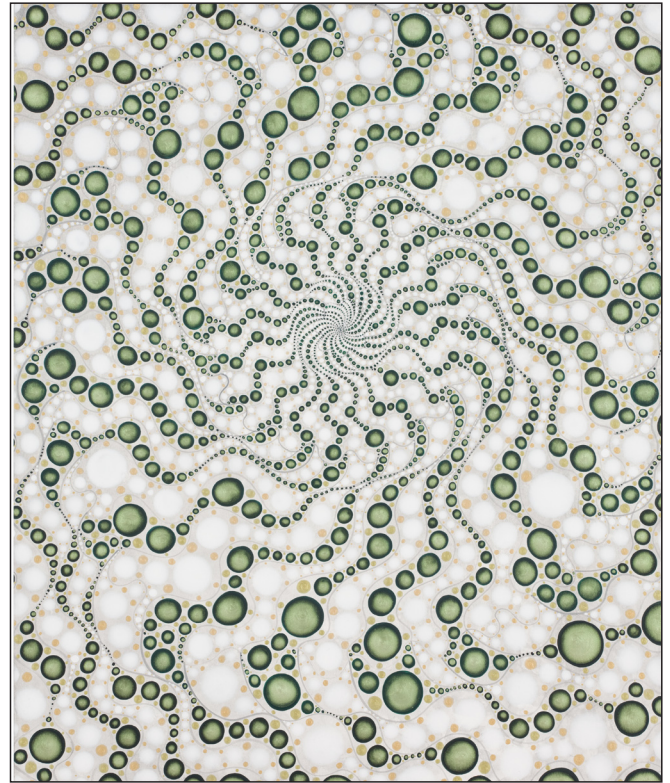
Through June 20, Rule
Gallery, 227 Broadway,
303-777-9473,
www.rulegallery.com

Coincidentally, Ehrin, the other artist with a solo at Rule, was also in Decades/Remix, though I'd seen her work back in the late '90s, when she was "painting" with feathers — by which I mean covering the surfaces of canvases with strings of

marabou feathers dyed in outrageously rich colors like deep purple and bright red. Her piece in Decades/Remix was made up of gold-leafed coral samples and more closely anticipates her Rockspace show at Rule than do the feather paintings.

At Rule, Ehrin designed a lattice screen divider made of wooden boards to separate her show from Takenaga's. Once within Rockspace, the mood heightens the sci-fi feeling expressed by Takenaga. On a series of low slab tables covered in white laminate that Ehrin designed are rock-like sculptures in spare arrangements. Taken as a whole, Rockspace looks like part of a set for Star Trek.

The rock sculptures are really interesting. Ehrin has acquired fake rocks used in dioramas and theatrical settings and then had them upholstered in luxurious materials, particularly leathers in fancy finishes. The results are pretty compelling. In order to conform to the shape of the fake rocks, the leathers have been cut into pieces that mimic the rocks' simulated contours. The separate pieces are stitched together like shoes or purses; this detailing is intriguing and eye-catching. I liked a lot of them, but one, "Gold Hobo

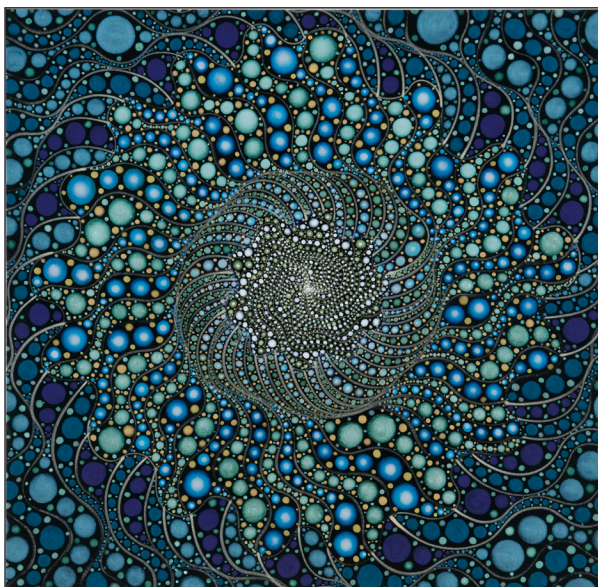


"GREEN ON WHITE," BY BARBARA TAKENAGA, 2009, ACRYLIC ON WOOD, 24 X 20 INCHES

Dubai Rock," covered in leather festooned with bangles, is unforgettable.

In addition, Ehrin placed some of the upholstered rocks in natural settings and had them photographed by Andrew Durham. The show includes a trio of these Durham photos.

Takenaga and Ehrin at Rule make for an interesting combination of shows. The exhibition is closing soon.



"Untitled DD," by Barbara Takenaga, 2008, acrylic on handmade paper, 17 x 17 inches