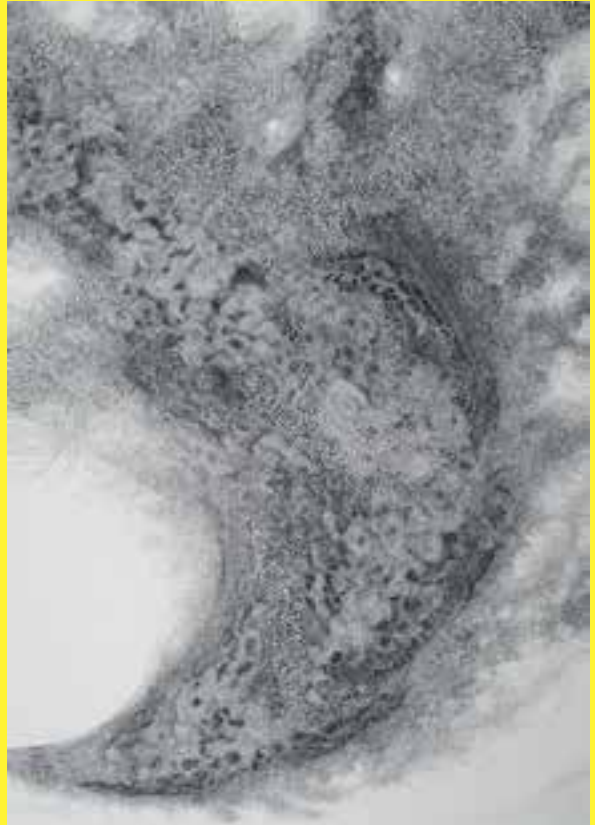


# Hiroaki DOI

A Big, Bold Art  
of Teeny-Tiny Circles

by Edward M. Gómez

Opposite page:  
*Untitled (HD 0109)*, 2009,  
59 ins. x 38.5 ins.;  
right: *Untitled (HD H0307)*, 2007,  
43 ins. x 31 ins.; both made with  
oil-based black ink on Japanese  
*washi* (handmade paper)



Consider the humble, ubiquitous, perfect form of the **circle**, one of the most basic shapes in nature and in art, as elegant in its simplicity as it is powerful in its symbolism, representing such resonant themes as fullness, unity, strength, vastness or even the fecundity of the protective, enveloping womb.

In Japan, the circle appears frequently as the subject of the calligrapher's art, even though, technically, it is a symbol and not one of the borrowed Chinese characters (*kanji*) with which the Japanese language is written. Zen Buddhism's influence can be felt in interpretations of the circle as a symbol of the universe or, by contrast, as a symbol of the void. It can also refer to a spirit-lifting sense of enlightenment that transcends the woes and distractions of the fleeting, fickle, weary material world.

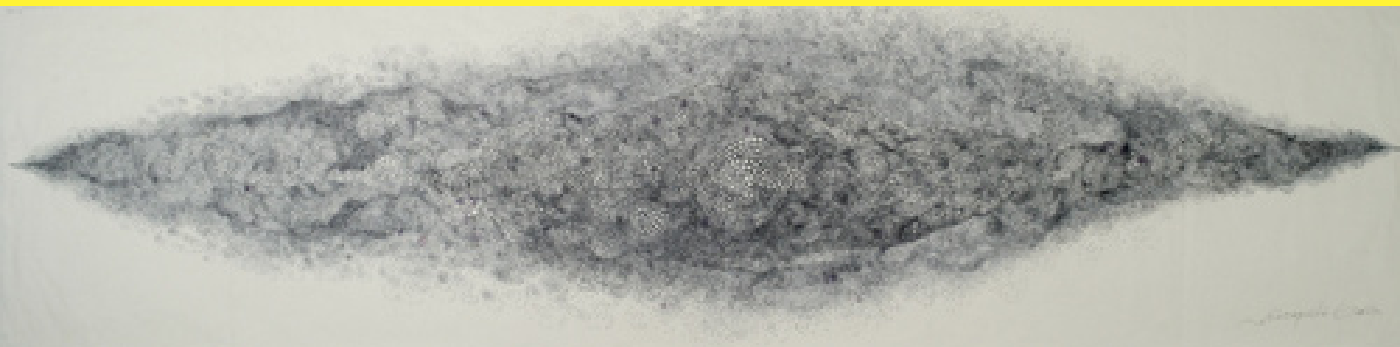
In Zen aesthetics, the simple circle gives visible form to a moment in which the mind is free of intellectual clutter, and an artist's unified body and spirit find expression in the making of a sure, impulsive, unencumbered mark. The painting that results is both the reflection of an enlightened state and a tangible record of a gesture that refers to and expresses that state. Such spontaneous mark-making is never modified or embellished later. Its clarity, simplicity and purity are essential aspects of its expressive power.

The Japanese self-taught artist **Hiroyuki Doi**, who was born in Nagoya in 1946, instinctively understands—and has been deeply moved by—the communicative power of the circle as a form and as a symbol. The circle is the basic form that he uses to incrementally build up and elaborate energetic, abstract compositions.

Below:  
*Untitled (HD 49Z06)*,  
no date, 25 ins. x 39 ins.;  
oil-based black ink on  
Japanese *washi*  
(handmade paper)



**Doi has written that,** for him, “using circles to produce images” has “provided relief from the sadness and grief” he has felt since the death, more than 35 years ago, of his youngest brother from a brain tumor. Since that time, as Doi has observed, he has created works that simultaneously have alluded to such themes as “the transmigration of the soul, the cosmos, the coexistence of living creatures, human cells, human dialog and peace.”

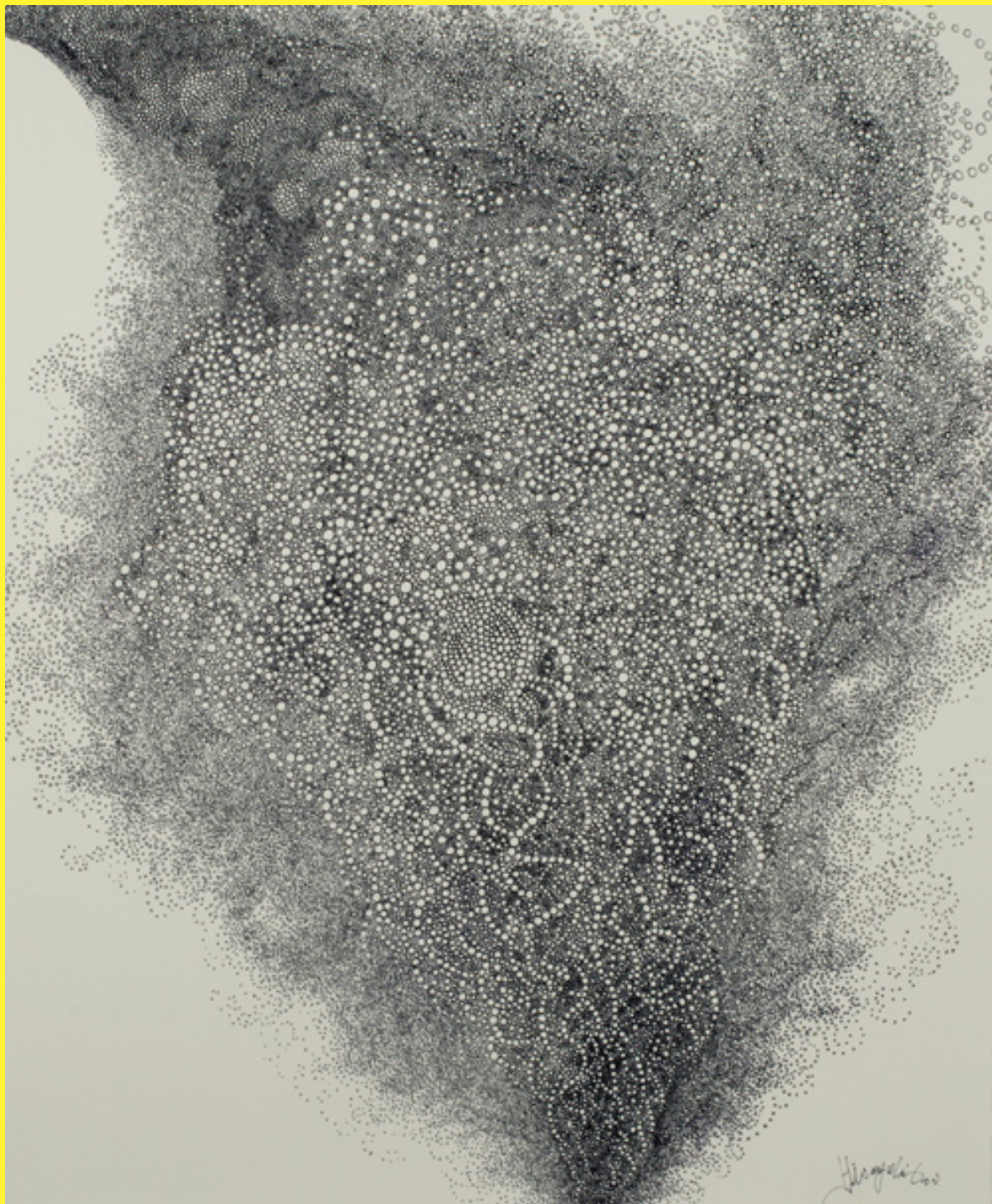


Above:  
*Untitled (HD 1-C02)*, 2002,  
13.5 ins. x 53 ins.;  
oil-based black ink on  
Japanese *washi*  
(handmade paper)

The artist, who uses pen and ink on Japanese *washi* (handmade paper) has recalled: “By drawing, I started to feel calm. I started to feel that something other than myself allowed me to draw these works.” The varieties of *washi* Doi has used for his drawings have included those made with fibers from the bark of such shrubs or trees as the *kouzo* (known as the paper mulberry in English), the *ganpi* and the *mitsumata*.

Doi’s untitled ink drawings in various formats include both small works depicting single, blob-like forms and larger pieces that recall ancient painted screens or hanging scrolls, and whose compositions suggest fluffy cloud formations or sprawling constellations. Doi, who today is based in Tokyo and is a retired master chef, makes his abstract drawings using only black, fine-point pens, which contain an archival-quality ink. (The pens he uses are marketed only in Japan.)





With these most basic materials, Doi creates connected, meandering clusters of circles, from random sprinklings of tiny dots to sprawling agglomerations of bubbly, bobbing cells.

The visual textures of his voluminously modeled forms belie his paper's flatness and the simplicity of each work's constituent parts—all of the thousands of miniscule circles that make up each image. Doi has observed that the act of drawing has allowed him to “feel calm.”

He never starts working on a new drawing with a particular composition in mind but instead allows each new image he creates to evolve spontaneously and to organically find its final form. The artist's work sessions, he says, are often long and intensive, and meditative in character. Doi has recalled that, “at some point, I started to feel that something other than myself was allowing me to draw these works.”

## **Like relief maps of other-worldly surfaces—sometimes**

they seem to depict imaginary islands adrift in peaceful or tempestuous seas—Doi's compositions pull a viewer's gaze in to examine the details of the richly textured forms he brings forth; they could be lunar craters, swirling eddies, surging ridges or gently arcing bays.

An enthusiastic traveler who enjoys exploring the artistic traditions and cuisines of other cultures, Doi began visiting museums in Europe in the 1970s in order to acquire a very personal understanding of Western art history. He also became familiar with the aesthetic and stylistic traditions of East Asian painting.

In his own work, though, the artist does not intentionally emulate any known technique or style. However, Doi does recognize the unabashedly hands-on quality of his creations and acknowledges that it is something unusual or rare in the contemporary-art world. In today's “age of a computerized society,” he notes, “I believe work made using human hands has to be emphasized more.”

Opposite page:  
*Untitled (HD 10808)*, 2008  
18 ins. x 15 ins.;  
oil-based black ink on  
Watson paper

Considering the construction of his distinctive images both symbolically and philosophically, Doi notes: "Suppose every creature is a circle, which exists in this world. How many of them could I draw?" Apparently, a lot. Of his incessant drawing of tiny circles, he says: "This is my life's work and my challenge."

If something about Doi's circle-making feels inescapably—perhaps even irresistibly—obsessive, for artist and viewer alike, it may also, he suggests, reflect and express the life force itself.

**"By drawing circles," he says, "I feel that I am alive and existing in the cosmos."**



Right:  
*Untitled (HD 10308)*, 2008,  
18 ins. x 15 ins.;  
oil-based black ink on  
Watson paper