

Takao Tanabe, born in 1926 in Seal Cove, BC, to parents of Japanese ancestry, came to art indirectly. His family was involved in the fishing industry, and as a boy, Tanabe was never exposed to art or museums. The policies of the Canadian government during the Second World War meant that his education ended abruptly in 1942, when he and his family were interned at the Lemon Creek camp. After two years there, Tanabe was able to join some of his siblings who were working in the Winnipeg area. The end of the war saw Tanabe with an uncertain future—he had not finished high school and therefore opportunities to attend university were closed to him. He discovered however that the Winnipeg School of Art was willing to accept him as a student without his matriculation. Tanabe enrolled thinking that he might be a sign painter. At the Winnipeg School of Art, he discovered that there was fine as well as commercial art. The school principal, Lionel LeMoine FitzGerald, was the dominant presence in the Winnipeg art scene but he, beginning in 1947, took leave and later resigned as Principal in 1949. He was replaced by the young Joseph Plaskett, who had recently returned to Canada after a period of study with Hans Hofmann in New York. Through Plaskett, Tanabe and his fellow students, were exposed to some of the ideas of abstraction that were current in New York.

Indeed, following his graduation in 1949, Tanabe visited New York in 1951-2, taking classes at the Brooklyn Museum and drawing classes at night from Hofmann himself. During this period he was, like most of his peers, producing modernist abstractions. A brief return to British Columbia in 1952 and his exhibiting in Vancouver drew him to the attention of Lawren Harris, who administered the Emily Carr Scholarships. Tanabe was awarded a scholarship which enabled him to study in London at the Central School of Arts & Crafts and more importantly to travel throughout Europe until 1955. Upon his return to Canada, he returned to BC and settled in Vancouver. In 1959-60, he received a Canada Council Grant to visit Japan where he studied calligraphy and sumi-e painting. While he occasionally depicted the landscape, he felt himself an abstract painter.

His relationship with the Mira Godard Gallery began in 1962, when Mira Godard bought the Galerie Agnès Lefort, Montreal, where he had been exhibiting and this relationship continues to the present as, of course, does his painting. While his art began in formal abstraction, after a period of living in New York from 1968-1972, Tanabe began to think about the landscape. In the summer of 1972, Tanabe taught at the Banff Centre and the following year agreed to take the running of the art school. Tanabe was the head of the art department from 1973-1982. During that time Tanabe turned his attention not to the Rockies themselves but to the landscape of the prairies and foothills. Between 1973 and 1982, he produced a singular and distinctive series of canvases that depict the prairie landscape in a manner previously unseen. The exceptional nature of his achievement was recognized in a nationally touring exhibition *Takao Tanabe 1972-1976: The Land*. Interestingly, Tanabe had rarely depicted the landscape immediately around him during the period.

In 1982, Tanabe left Banff and returned to British Columbia where he settled on Vancouver Island. He began to rethink his subject matter and to explore the province of his birth and particularly the coast. Using both drawings and photographs as the basis for his images, Tanabe began a monumental series of canvases that depict coastal British Columbia in the early 1980s. He was now exploring the landscape of his birth and the atmosphere that most pleased him. His prairie paintings had been characterized by minimal incident—they showed no human traces and were often executed in sweeping bands of colour, applied to a horizontal canvas. The earliest of the paintings in this exhibition, *Gulf Islands Late Afternoon 4/82*, 1982, is among the first of Tanabe's BC landscapes and continues the use of broad sweeps of colour, minimal definition of topography and uses a wash over the whole painting to provide tonal unity. At first the image seems almost monochromatic, but longer examination reveals a subtle play of colour and light over the forms of the islands and the ocean.

*S. Moresby 7/85: Skincuttle* shows how Tanabe has adjusted his application of paint to reflect the environs he now depicts. While the image is still devoid of human content, both the surface of the ocean and the sky are animated by varied brushwork. Skincuttle Island, located in the inlet of the same name, near South Moresby Island, is part of the Haida Gwaii archipelago. Tanabe has long admired the misty atmosphere of this region, and his affection for the mists of the west coast is evident here.

The most recent of the images in the exhibition is also the one closest to home for Tanabe. It is the most detailed, and reflects the ongoing evolution of his approach to the BC landscape. Based on an image viewed from his back deck on Vancouver Island, *Errington 4/88: Autumn Sunset*, 1988, looks out over the trees to celebrate the drama of a west coast sunset. The edge of the huge black cloud overhead is tinged by vivid oranges. In the distance on the left side of the canvas is another cloud bank. The painting, which was the cover image for Tanabe's exhibition, *Takao Tanabe: Wet Coasts and Dry Lands* (Kelowna Art Gallery, 2000), is a vivid depiction of an ephemeral moment in the ever-changing skies of the west coast.

These three images of British Columbia's coast clearly demonstrate why Tanabe is one of the most admired Canadian landscape artists of the last fifty years.

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