



Takao Tanabe 1972-76, *The Land*

Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery,
University of Regina

October 29-November 28, 1976

KEITH BELL

To date Takao Tanabe has had an interesting and varied artistic career. Starting from his early training at the Winnipeg School of Art in 1946, he then spent a short period in New York studying under Hans Hofmann and Reuben Tam at the Brooklyn Museum Art School. After this he returned to Vancouver where he remained, with the exception of a two-year stay in Europe, until 1959. Then, with a Canada Council award he was able to spend two years in Japan studying the exacting arts of sumi-e with Ikuo Hirayama of the Tokyo University of Arts, and calligraphy with Yanagida Taiun. From 1961 to 1968 Tanabe was back in Vancouver, working at the Vancouver Art School as head of the commercial art department, during which time he completed two large mural commissions, one for the Department of Agriculture, the other a work for the Winnipeg Centennial Hall. Three more years spent in New York (1969-72) were, according to Tanabe, of critical importance to his art; not so much through contact with any particular school of American painting, but because it enabled him to establish a clearer perception of his work, and of its relationship to Canadian life and art. Further, his interest in landscape was stimulated by his experience of the Hudson River Valley and the fields of Pennsylvania. Up to this time Tanabe had not been a landscape painter in the strict sense of the term, though the English artist William Scott, and William Seitz, Director of the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, both remarked in the 50s that there was a

"landscape" element in Tanabe's art. Nancy Dillow, Director of the Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery, in her introduction to the catalogue to the exhibition which she also organized, refers to the sketch for the Gander Airport mural competition of 1957, which is generally thought of as a landscape. The 26 paintings in this exhibition on the theme of *The Land* showed clearly how this idea has come to dominate his work.

The exhibition consisted of works taken mainly from the period after Tanabe's rediscovery of the landscape form around 1968, but usefully included four earlier works from 1964-66, two of which are small landscape sketches. Of these *The Island* is the most successful, where a large brightly colored rainbow contrasts with the deep indigo blue of water, a black sky, and the faintly perceptible verticals of trees on an island lying low on the horizon. Several of the ideas evident in these two earlier works re-emerge in the paintings of the 70s - for example, the division into two broad tonal areas ("land" and "sky"), and the use of small stippled areas indicating the presence of the clumps of trees or rocky outcrops which inhabit the middle distance of several paintings (*The Land* 56/73 and 4/76). These forms, found especially in works of 1972-73, give both a sense of life and space to the otherwise pure and sometimes rigid color organization.

Most of the remaining paintings in the exhibition, painted in acrylic on canvas, are much larger. Of these, the ones from 1972-73 still retain much of the geometric form and broad

pure color areas of Tanabe's earlier abstract work, which was probably influenced by Hofmann and his admiration for the formalism of Josef Albers. This geometric form is translated in *The Land* 10/72 into a series of diagonal patterns, "fields," which create a sensation of space worked out in line and color (yellow, green, blue) until they are broken on the horizon by a range of low rolling hills whose soft curves help to counteract the otherwise rigid structure of the painting.

Succeeding works show a progressive elimination of linear and geometric elements in favor of a softer and more integrated form in which the tones, rather than being divided, blend into one another. The color becomes stronger. In *The Foothills* 1/75, for example, the yellowish tones of a distant curving hillside contrast with an intense cobalt blue sky, while the foreground descends through tones of green to black. Throughout the painting changes of vegetation or terrain are merely hinted at by faint shadowing or stippling in browns and greens.

The increased sense of unity which is to be found in these later paintings seems to me to be derived from two sources. Firstly, from an exacting and methodical process: paint is laid on a plastic sizing, then organized by a brush or the tilting of the canvas, each area being worked out separately, and finally a fine black wash is applied to the whole canvas. This last procedure functions both to integrate the composition and, crucially, to convey a sense of atmosphere, particularly in the sky where the light is confined or breaks through the wash depending upon its intensity. Secondly, Tanabe has moved away from imposing a preconceived abstract structure upon a landscape idea, towards a closer understanding of the land based upon its own constantly changing lights and colors. In the process I feel he has achieved a far greater empathy with his subject than is evident in the more geometric works around 1972.

Clearly Tanabe's paintings are less about the specifics of landscape than the more general relationships between land and sky and the way their forms are subtly altered by the time of day or season. In the process of his intense investigation the forms have become progressively simpler and softer until finally, in the latest paintings, all that remains is a series of undulating color relationships unified and controlled by the atmospheric effects of the black wash.

The overall impression that the exhibition gives is of a systematic, controlled development from one painting to the next, using an exacting technique which is clearly derived from earlier non-objective influences and experience of the rigorous demands of Japanese sumi-e.

However, I do have reservations about some of the works. The peculiarly unemotional manner in which Tanabe works, combined with his minimalist style, leads in a few cases (*The Land* 34/74, 2/76) towards a bland, uninteresting image, which even the subtlety of color relationships cannot prevent. Here an obsession with technique and uniformity seems to interfere with the broader, more stimulating concerns expressed in more successful paintings like *The Foothills* 1/75 and 1/76.

TAKAO TANABE

The Foothills 2/76

acrylic on canvas 43" x 48"

Photo: courtesy Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery,
University of Regina