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A Review

Tanabe adds prairie clarity

By JOHN W. GRAHAM

Through the balance of September and into October, two exhibitions which should be of particular interest to Winnipeg viewers are being shown: one in the Thomas Gallery at River and Osborne, the other at the Winnipeg Art Gallery. It is both the artist and the thematic subject matter which give these works their local significance.

Takao Tanabe began his training as an artist in Winnipeg little more than 20 years ago just when the old School of Art was about to lose its city-based autonomy to become a part of the University of Manitoba. Although most of his ensuing development and career has been abroad and in Vancouver, and currently in Banff where he is head of the art department of the School of Fine Arts, his work is familiar to this city through his banners which hang in the north lobby of the Centennial Concert Hall, their shimmering intensity of colors animating the space they serve.

His most recent work from which the two exhibitions are drawn are abstracted landscapes which capture the spatial essence of the vast open prairie region. Though familiar to most of us and inescapable in its influence upon all our lives, Tanabe's reduction of its panoramic dimensions into a formal essence brings new meaning and clarity to the prairie experience.

Possibly no other term in contemporary art has been more broadly misapplied and misinterpreted than abstraction. Except for the most photographic realism in painting, all painting could be said to be the abstracting of the particular from the whole organized and presented to serve the needs of the individual artist. That this process could and

often did lead to non-objective formalism is not to suggest that all non-objective painting is abstract art.

Tanabe's continuing development and search for universality in his work has moved through abstraction to non-objective formalism as evidenced in his banners and to a lesser degree his relief mural for the department of agriculture in Ottawa. What gives his current work its power and essential meaning is his extension of the abstraction

process and its attendant formalism back into the interpretation of the prairie space, with its division of sky and earth, the subtleties of field and fallow and the interruptions of contour and silhouette revealed through light and shade. In the process, no extraneous information disturbs the silent order of his paintings. The technique of laying on the tones and overtones, so refined and controlled, contributes its share to the silent poetry of his images.

The criticism has been made that his paintings are too well-mannered and too deliberate. If this is so, it must be in part a response to the

cultural heritage of his Japanese ancestry in which the written expression of the language is the epitome of visual abstraction and Sumi-e painting and calligraphy the culmination of technical, a emotional and intellectual discipline.

One should visit both exhibitions, but in doing so, two aspects should be examined. In the Thomas Gallery one will find a number of sketches which have preceded the final paintings and which reveal the consistency of the artist's passage from concept to finished work at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, in which the exhibition is titled The Land,

1972-1976, several of the early works and the first of the land series trace the emergence and development of the thematic subject and contribute greatly to a perception of the artist's process.

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