



Takao Tanabe's painted journey

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It's the kind of day Takao Tanabe loves: grey and moody, rain blurring the outlines of trees and buildings, thick clouds obscuring the light. Not that this low-pressure weather is in any way reflective of his mood or his energy. He dashes into the West End coffee shop where we've agreed to meet, throws himself onto a low sofa, and begins to play with my audio recorder. "What's this?" he asks in pseudo alarm, then says: "Test! Test!" At 85, Tanabe is one of Canada's most esteemed senior painters, acclaimed for his early gestural abstractions and his later realist landscapes—and clearly not the slightest bit interested in contemplating retirement.

Tanabe's face is virtually unlined, he has the smooth hands and slender fingers of a much younger man, and his conversation is punctuated with boyish laughter. In the hours before meeting with the *Straight*, he travelled to Vancouver from his home base in Errington, near Parksville on Vancouver Island, and zipped around to a couple of appointments. He was planning to fly to Calgary the next day for the opening of a show of his recent paintings at the Paul Kuhn Gallery, this little junket to be followed by a return to Errington, more work, more appointments, and then another trip to the mainland for the launch of *Chronicles of Form and Place*, his major drawing retrospective at the Burnaby Art Gallery.

Curated by BAG director Darrin Martens, the show is composed of 60 works on paper, covering the years 1949 to 2009 and spanning an equally broad spectrum of styles and materials. When not painting in oil or acrylic on canvas, Tanabe has worked in watercolour, ink, graphite, pastel, gouache, and coloured pencil on a range of papers. "Most of the drawings in the show are finished works," he says. "I don't think I've used any of them as studies for paintings."

As revealed in the exhibition, Tanabe has sketched in pastel or drawn in watercolour in many of the places his restless feet have taken him, from the foothills and mountains of southern Alberta to the abandoned villages of Haida Gwaii, and from the cobbled streets of Mykonos, Greece, to the farms and fields of Denmark. Sipping coffee and tapping a pen vehemently on the table, he lists some of the other places he has visited, many of them with his wife, Anona Thorne. "Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Australia, India, Thailand, Japan many times, Peru..." He recounts an early, uncomfortable visit to dusty villages on the ancient Silk Route in far western China and, more recently, "hitchhiking" by plane and helicopter to research stations and mining camps in the Canadian Arctic. "I haven't carried my pastels with me for the last 20 years," he reveals. "I take a lot of photographs."

In addition to his travel and landscape drawings, the BAG show features a number of calligraphic abstractions, executed in recent years in *sumi* (Japanese ink) and acrylic on paper. These works consciously revisit materials and techniques Tanabe first encountered in 1959, when he won a Canada Council grant to spend a year in Tokyo, learning traditional Japanese ink painting and calligraphy. "My idea was to go to Japan, study, look around, and see if I was Japanese," Tanabe recalls. At the time, a few misguided North American critics had remarked upon the "inherent" Japanese-ness of his art, as if style were a genetic attribute. "I quickly came to the conclusion that I wasn't Japanese, I was a foreigner."

Tanabe was born and educated in Canada, fully immersed in western culture. He studied art in Winnipeg, New York, and London, England, and in his 20s looked intently through the art museums of Europe. Still, he was interned during the Second World War in a camp in the Slocan Valley, along with his family and thousands of other Japanese Canadians, and this gross injustice left a lasting mark on his psyche. Some of that experience seems to linger, unconsciously, in the darker works on view at the BAG, the nighttime landscapes and seascapes.

“Curators and critics have their own ideas about what they see in my work. That’s not the way I see them,” Tanabe says. Then, looking out at the rainy street, he adds, “But who knows?”

Chronicles of Form and Place: Works on Paper by Takao Tanabe opens at the Burnaby Art Gallery on Friday (November 25) and runs until December 22.

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