

February 12, 2007

Around the world with Takao Tanabe

By SARAH MILROY

At 80, the much-feted British Columbia landscape artist is the subject of a touring retrospective, now at Ontario's McMichael Collection, writes SARAH MILROY

KLEINBURG, ONT.

-- Takao Tanabe, one of Canada's leading landscape artists and a former pioneer of Canadian abstraction, is waiting for me at the front door of the Hotel Intercontinental on Toronto's Bloor Street West.

The day is bitter cold, and his winter coat is pulled tight around him as he climbs into my car, his black cap set securely atop his silvery head of hair. Freezing rain had delayed me on this Saturday morning, but he is surprisingly patient about my lateness, particularly considering the day he has in front of him: an interview with me about his touring retrospective at the McMichael Canadian Collection in Kleinburg, north of Toronto, a tour of the exhibition with a group of docents at the gallery, then, down in Toronto, a pit stop at Mira Godard Gallery in Yorkville (where I ran into him again later in the day) and, finally, a corporate-sponsor dinner back at the McMichael and another tour.

Given his reputation for being a bit on the irascible side, I was braced for the worst, but as we made our way up Bathurst Street on our way to Kleinburg it was clear that he has mellowed with the years. The show was installed and looking good; the opportunity to review his life's work a welcome benefit of old age, which seems suddenly to be upon him. Tanabe turned 80 in September.

As we drive north, we talk about some of his friends who have died, among them my mother, Elizabeth Nichol, who was his Vancouver dealer for decades. We talk about his current life, on an inland piece of property close to Parksville, on Vancouver Island (he and his second wife, a statistician named Anona Thorn, also have an apartment in Vancouver, where she works midweek), and he asks me about the ages and whereabouts of my children. I think to myself: I cannot be objective about this man. I have known him all my adult life. Inextricably, his art is tied up with the idea of home.

We drive and we chat, and when we turn into the McMichael parking lot I point out the blue-and-pearly-grey promotional banners displaying his painting of the Pacific ocean and the coastal mountains, and we laugh at the contrast to this godforsaken backdrop of slush and midwinter grey, so far from the sea.

How could these paintings possibly make sense here?

Inside the gallery, we begin the interview, and the first thing that we talk about is his childhood in the remote outpost of Seal Cove, on the outskirts of Prince Rupert, where his Japanese-born father worked as a fisherman, and his mother took her place in the fish-freezing plant. "We were very poor, but we ate well, if you like fish," he remembers. "Of course, our life was disrupted during the war, as so many people's were," he adds matter-of-factly, alluding to the family's forced internment in a camp when he was 15 years old, first in Vancouver and then later in the Kootenay mountains of the British Columbia interior, near Nelson.

"My father was not a happy man," he says, describing his father's later life in Winnipeg. "Imagine it; you grow up in a Japanese village, you live on the ocean all your life and then you end up on the Prairies?" He gives a little shudder. "He

became very depressed and three years later he was dead," he says, "but I don't want you to write that in the paper."

He gives this to me as an order, making a little waving motion with his hand as if to erase the information, but it's too late. The revelation clings to the pictures stubbornly for the rest of the morning: the heavy swollen grey clouds off the Pacific that he has painted for the past 20 years or so, clouds that hang over the dark coastal waters like omens ("I only really like to paint misty days," he later tells the docents), and the blank expanse of the prairies that he painted before that, in the seventies, while he was heading up the visual-art program at the Banff School of Fine Art -- pictures that seem to search for spirit and find it in a breath-like horizontal sweep of the brush across the canvas. More than anything, his prairie pictures feel silent, the startling green grass growing beneath the blue sky, soothed by the wind. They are as empty as empty can be.

Moments later it becomes clear that our time together is conflicting with his obligation to give his docent tour, and I decide to go with the flow. Our tête-à-tête becomes a tête-à-trente, as Tanabe and the Vancouver Art Gallery curator Ian Thom present his exhibition to the assembled volunteers.

We start with his first abstract pictures, made in the fifties, like his dark composition enlivened by textured starbursts of colour (red and ochre), and another primitive-looking abstract -- celadon green, black and grey -- that recalls Jackson Pollock in his earliest days. These, Tanabe says, were painted at the Winnipeg Art School, under the influence of his teacher Joe Plaskett, who had been to New York and experienced abstract expressionism firsthand, studying with Hans Hofmann and with Clyfford Still in San Francisco.

Soon Tanabe made the move to New York to check things out for himself, beginning a lifetime of restless exploration. He took drawing classes from Hofmann at night, and studied by day at the Brooklyn Museum of Art School, where visiting artists included Franz Kline and Ad Reinhardt. (His loose circle of fellow artists included Philip Guston, Joan Mitchell, John Kacere, Paul Brach and Mimi Shapiro.) These early pictures feature a kind of light hooking, lilting stroke (I find it again in his much later seascape of the Queen Charlotte Islands, made four decades later), demonstrating a variety of approaches to laying down paint. He saw it all.

Tanabe bounced back to Canada, touching down again at Winnipeg, Banff, and in Vancouver, where he continued to make abstract paintings and to work as a graphic designer and printer with his friend Bob Reid. He started to exhibit his work and continued to develop his eye. A trip to London and around Europe on a motorbike in 1953 (funded by an Emily Carr Scholarship, awarded by Lawren Harris) broadened his grasp of the history of Western art, and deepened his attachment to British abstract painting.

Having explored Europe, his inner pendulum swung east, and he set off for Japan, to study with the calligrapher Yanagida Taiun, and to practise *sumi-e* painting with Ikuo Hirayama. ("I thought after all these years of being called a Jap, I'd better go and find out if I was one," he tells our group, with a jocularity that feels forced.) It was from *sumi-e* practice that he adopted his habit of painting on the canvas while it lies flat, developing the "one-shot" gestural approach that he used in the prairie paintings that followed, but he declares that the Japanese sojourn only deepened his sense of belonging to the Western tradition. (After all, the abstract expressionists embraced the gesture as much as the Japanese *sumi-e* painters.) Every step of the way, Tanabe has been at pains to distance himself from assumptions that journalists and critics make about his essential Japanese-ness.

"I was starting to make some money in Vancouver," he tells the docents. "I had one friend saying to me: 'We should go halves on a sailboat', and another one saying, 'You should buy two lots at Whistler. It's going to be big,' and another one saying, 'waterfront on the Island is going to be a great investment.' I had a nice house in West Van. I said to my wife, 'We've got to get out of here.' "

They took off again: New York, then a long spell at Banff beginning in 1973, where he headed up the visual-arts program for six years, splitting with his first wife along the way. His transition from abstraction to landscape came at this point, inspired, he says, by looking out the window during his many commuter flights, and by his long solitary drives from Winnipeg to Banff. His final return to B.C. came in 1980, where he set out to find his current home, and make his many late-career paintings of the coast, ending up where he began.

In a back gallery of the McMichael exhibition, we come upon these large, rather austere pictures, the mountains muffled in low cloud, the sea blue-black and forbiddingly cold. Looking at these B.C. scenes clearly takes Tanabe back to his earliest days, and the dark, wet world that he captures in the crisply detailed realism of his late style.

"The Japanese all lived down at the bottom of the hill. We did the fishing," he says, remembering Seal Cove, and its racial divide. "The white folks lived further up. They ran the freezing plant." He also remembers the town's little skating rink, for the use of the white children.

Other memories surface, like the time he watched the sawmill burn down. It was the third one to go up in flames in the small community, leaving yet another charred ruin on the otherwise pristine shoreline. Listening to him talk about it today, you can still sense the four-year-old's fascination with the fiery calamity and its silent aftermath.

After Banff, it took Tanabe a while to settle on a locale for his homecoming. "I started out in Victoria and I would rent a car," he recalls of his return to the coast in 1980, "and I started making these trips north to look for a place. It took a couple of years. The waterfront was too expensive now -- my friends had been right, back in the seventies -- and all the building activity was going on there." He screws his face up in distaste. "Eventually, I found a 25-acre place for 50,000 bucks -- inland but not too far from the sea. It had a cabin on it with a dirt floor, and it was being lived in by hippies," he remembers, describing the parcel of land where he now lives, often alone, in a house he designed and built for himself.

Tanabe gave the hippies a year to find another place. "They were happy for that, and they went away peacefully, but they left behind some chickens," he remembers with a smile. "Then, a year later, they came and got the rest. And that was it."

Takao Tanabe continues at the McMichael Canadian Collection in Kleinburg, Ont., until May 21 (905-893-1121).



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