

# Six decades of Takao Tanabe

**RETROSPECTIVE:** Burnaby Art Gallery celebrates the renowned painter

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Internationally-renowned landscape painter Takao Tanabe is famous for his depictions of the B.C. coast. Born in Prince Rupert in 1926, the 85-year-old artist and recipient of the Order of Canada has more than six decades of work under his belt. Which is why the Burnaby Art Gallery is holding a retrospective of his work, covering Tanabe's artistic practice from 1949 to the present, including 60 never-before-seen pieces.

Tanabe chatted with *The Province* over the phone from his Vancouver Island home in advance of the exhibit. *Chronicles of Form and Space: Works on Paper by Takao Tanabe* opens Nov. 25 and runs until Jan. 12.

**Is there a particular piece in this exhibit that's more significant to you than others because it represented a new idea?**

Oh dear, you're pinning me down! Well, there's a series of works on paper that are dated about 1963, '64. In 1968, I went to New York for five years, but around that time what I was doing was painting in an abstract way using hard edge... but quite abstract.

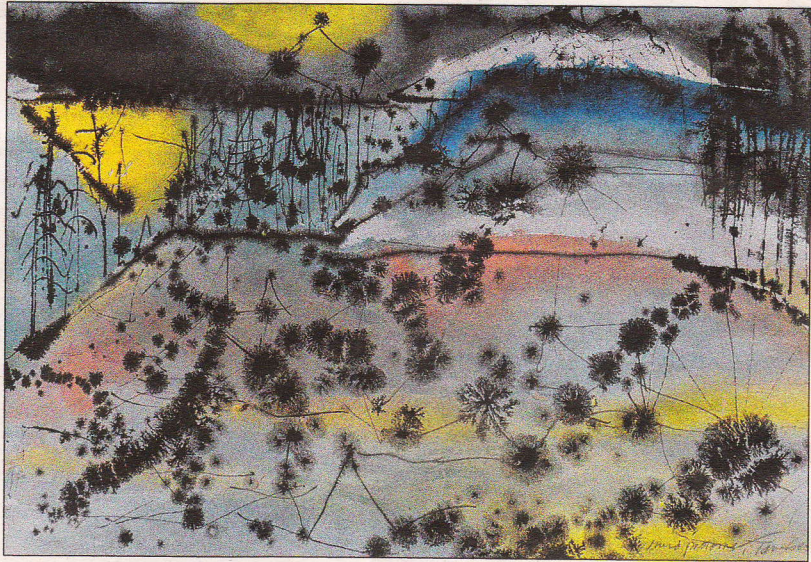
I'd been doing that for 20-odd years so, by that time, I was getting ready to move on. The paintings, the sketches that I [was] making were more or less abstract but there's a little bit of a landscape idea creeping in that I'm pushing. In fact, two summers before I went to New York, '66, '67, in the summer I spent a couple of months each time trying new, for me, a different way of painting a landscape. There were expressionistic, impressionistic and so on, trying different ways. I wasn't settled on anything.

**Your early landscapes were of the Prairies. What was it about the Prairies that made you want to paint it?**

In the early 1950s, a friend and I hitchhiked across the Prairies from Winnipeg to Banff. We worked there for a couple months and then hitchhiked back... So we're by the side of the road with our thumbs up and having to wait and wait and wait and looking at the landscape which is a very broad, flat, strong horizon line and we would say this is an impossible subject to paint and I think I must've hitchhiked across the Prairies three or four times back and forth. And always had at the back of my mind, somehow I'm going to tackle that.

**Where do you live?**

I live in a little village called Errington. Never heard of it, have you?



Takao Tanabe's *Mud Patterns* from 1953 is one of the many pieces from his 60-year career on display at the Burnaby Art Gallery. — SUBMITTED PHOTO

## Portraits of an artist



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**No, what's the population there?**

About three. [Laughs.] No, it's an unincorporated municipality so it might have 1,000 people spread out — well spread out, because on the particular two or three streets where I am, we're all on 25 acres of land so you don't see anybody.

**Why haven't you tired of painting the B.C. coast yet?**

Because you look at it and every 10 minutes, it changes. It's calm, it's wavy, it's dark, it's light. Mostly what I've been trying to paint in the last little while is storms — not when they're all settled down, but quite stormy and very dark sunsets, for instance.

**It sounds like you like to lead a more solitary lifestyle.**

I chose it because I've lived in big cities and it's very distracting. It's very hard to work and paint because there's

always something else to do. But out here, there's nothing to do but chop the wood, weed the garden and so on. And not be distracted by people coming over for a drink, or inviting me over for a drink [laughs].

**What advice would you give to a young artist?**

Just keep painting. Ignore everybody. Get a good dealer. I've been showing with the same dealer in Toronto — he started out in Montreal and now in Toronto. This year will be 50 years, same dealer... I think that's the way to go. The advice is paint some paintings and then look for a dealer. Don't try to deal with the public yourself because it's too much work, that's my impression anyway.

**Do you have any hobbies outside of art?**

I used to fly-fish but I don't do it anymore because I dug a huge pond, a lake outside my house at a great cost because I wanted to have rainbow trout. And for about five years I'd buy rainbow trout, little babies, a few of them actually made it to eating size, the biggest one was 14 and 3/4 inches... But eventually I gave up because the ducks would come in and eat them all, river otter came and so on. Everybody came and ate them except me, so I gave up. That's when I gave up fly-fishing.

**Do you have any hidden talents other than painting?**

No, I have no talents. I'm a grouchy old man [laughs].

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