

# Audain Prize doubles the honour

## Gathie Falk and Takao Tanabe to be recognized on 10th anniversary of B.C. award

BY JOHN MACKIE, VANCOUVER SUN    MARCH 30, 2013

In 2007, Gathie Falk's friend Gordon Smith received the Audain Prize for a lifetime of achievement in the visual arts.

"I was jealous," Falk recounts with a laugh. "He said 'You're next,' so I've been waiting year after year."

Her time has finally come. Thursday, April 4, the 85-yearold will pick up the Audain Prize in a ceremony at the Great Hall of the BC Law Courts Building.

"It's happening, and I'm overjoyed, absolutely and totally," said Falk. "I'm absolutely thrilled. Wouldn't you like it? No pain there!" Normally the Audain Prize is handed out to one artist per year. But this is the 10th anniversary, so this year they're handing out two Audain Prizes: one to Falk, and one to Takao Tanabe. Which is appropriate, because arts philanthropist Michael Audain said the idea of a provincial visual arts award came from Tanabe in the first place.

Tanabe is as excited as Falk to receive the honour, which is somewhat akin to being named to a B.C. artist hall of fame.

"I've been waiting for 10 years," said Tanabe with a laugh. "I am getting long in the tooth, as they say. I'm 86, going on 87. I've been painting since 1950, 1949. Well before you were born."

Vancouver Art Gallery curator Grant Arnold said both artists are the embodiment of what the Audain Prize represents.

"They've both made really important bodies of work here," said Arnold, the Audain Curator of British Columbia Art at the VAG.

"Gathie's had a really long career which has covered all sorts of different media and ways of working. Her early performance (art) work is really important, and she's continued to make really vital work right up to the present day.

"Similarly with Tak, who at different times has lived outside of B.C. but has spent the bulk of his career here. He has produced a really significant body of work."

Falk was born in Alexander, Man, grew up in Winnipeg and moved to B.C. when she was 18. She worked in factories and spent a dozen years as a teacher before finally becoming a full-time artist in 1965. But she made up for lost time, working in many disciplines: performance art, sculpture, ceramics,

painting and drawing.

In a bio on the National Gallery website, she said her work is a "veneration of the ordinary." The National Gallery has several Falk works, including the playful, surrealistic *Eight Red Boots*, eight ceramic red boots in a red cabinet. She's still very active: she had a new work at the Equinox gallery last month.

"It was of a papiermâché tree that was seven-and-a-half-feet high," said Falk. "It had branches that were cut, so it was a winter tree, but it branched out on all sides and had a very pale colour and a very beautiful surface."

Falk feels the Vancouver art scene has long been "quite special."

"When I sort of came on the scene, it was the '60s," she recalls.

"Nobody young now can remember that, because they weren't alive. But it was an amazingly lively scene, we were sort of forerunners of many things here in B.C., things that were not known in Eastern Canada, like performance art.

"So we were quite special then. And as we go along, we've become more diverse, because there are evermore students coming out of Emily Carr and all the other art schools."

Tanabe was born in Seal Cove, which is now part of Prince Rupert. He was interned with other Japanese-Canadians in the interior during the Second World War, and left B.C. in the late 1940s to study art in Winnipeg and New York. He bounced around before returning to B.C. in 1980.

"I went to study (in New York) for a year, back in the '50s, then I went to live there for five years in the late '60s and '70s," he said over the phone from his home near Parksville. "I've been to Japan for two years studying, I've been in Europe early on in the '50s for a couple of years."

In 1973 he was asked to become the head of the Art Department of the Banff School of Fine Arts. He had painted abstracts in New York, but had decided to switch to landscapes before he came back to Canada. The elegant, beautiful paintings were well-received - his work is now in 50 public collections and 120 corporate collections.

"The first series in 1972 was rather more abstracted," he said. "Then I moved on to a much more naturalistic style, after I saw the Prairies. More or less I've stuck to it.

"the Prairies were pretty straightforward, pretty abstract, just a horizontal line, sky, land. Out here on the West Coast it's a little bit more difficult to do that, because there's little islands and all that stuff. Mostly I've been working on trying to paint abstract landscapes. People aren't in it. Boats aren't in it."

Like Falk, Tanabe is still very active. He's currently working on a series of paintings for a show next

spring in Toronto.

"Oh, it's going to be very dramatic storms, maybe a sunset or two, and some smaller calm little islands from Newfoundland," he said. "I went to Newfoundland last September."

Michael Audain bought one of Tanabe's prairie landscapes 40 years ago. (He also owns some of Falk's work.) Tanabe went to talk to Audain several years ago when the artist was trying to drum up support for a national Governor General's Award for the Visual Arts.

"For many, many years there were Governor general's awards for everything - for literature, for the performing arts, for architecture, (but) there was no award for visual arts," Audain explains.

"The strange thing is, Emily Carr never won an art prize in her life, but in 1941 she won the Governor General's Award for literature, for her book Klee Wyck. But there was no recognition for visual artists in that manner in this country."

Tanabe eventually prevailed, and the Governor General's Award for Visual and Media Arts was created in 2000. (Tanabe won it in 2003, four years after he was named to the Order of Canada.) Tanabe then lobbied Audain for a provincial award for the visual arts.

"He lobbied the provincial government, the lieutenant-governor, (but) he didn't get anywhere with that, so he came to me," laughs Audain.

"I was reluctant to get involved with our family foundation, because I felt the Shad-bolts, Jack and Doris, were doing such a great thing with the VIVA award, and I didn't want to infringe on that.

"But I talked to Doris and she said to me, 'The more the merrier, Michael. We need to celebrate our most distinguished artists, because an awful lot of people, the man on the street, doesn't know who on earth they are, and they should be celebrated in this province.'" Ann Kipling received the first Audain Prize in 2004, followed by E.J. Hughes, Eric Metcalfe, Gordon Smith, Jeff Wall, Liz Magor, Robert Davidson, Rodney Graham and Marian Penner Bancroft.

The VAG's Arnold said the Audain Prize has become "the most esteemed award given out in the province."

"I think it's very significant, for a variety of reasons," he said.

"One of them being it's a great example of a patron of the arts providing really generous and important support for the art scene here (winners receive \$30,000). Which is particularly important given the relatively low level of support the province gives to the arts.

"The award is also very important because it's determined by a jury made up primarily of artists, so there's a sense of it being recognition (from) the community to people who have made a really long-

term commitment to producing work in this place."

Audain is "very pleased" at how the Audain Prize has turned out.

"We've never had anyone decline an award or anything like that, although some of (the winners) are very internationally famous artists," he notes with a laugh. "I've been delighted."

#### AUDAIN PRIZE CEREMONY

Thursday, April 4, 7: 30 p.m. Great Hall of the BC Law Courts, 800 Smithe Street

Admission: Free and open to the public

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