TANABE, Takao (b. Prince Rupert, British Columbia, 1926 / né à Prince Rupert (Colombie Britannique) en 1926)

Takao Tanabe is one of Canada’s most renowned painters who like a number of prominent Canadian artists of his generation (most notably Gordon Smith) has seen his art shift from a combination of expressionist and hard edge abstraction toward a more realist aesthetic taking landscape as its central subject. Tanabe enrolled in the Winnipeg School of Art in 1946. L.L. Fitzgerald was his professor, as well as the Canadian abstractionist Joseph (Joe) Plaskett whose abstract expressionist leanings at that time had great influence on the younger artist. He went on to New York for a period, where in the late 1950s he schooled under the iconic abstract painter Hans Hoffman. Tanabe’s turn to nature later in his career is not altogether surprising given this influence and Hoffman’s teachings which stipulated that even non-representational should be derived from the “distillation and analysis of forms drawn from natural appearances.” Nonetheless, it took some time for Tanabe himself to admit that he was “perhaps…always a landscape painter,” having spend much of the early part of his artistic life denying such associations. This was no doubt a product of his own connection to the land where he was born as the Tanabe family was relocated from Vancouver into an internment camp in the Kootenays in 1942. Despite challenging circumstances and what he calls an anger that lasted some thirty years, Tanabe has emerged as an influential Canadian artist whose extraordinary painting and printmaking capabilities are supported by his equally strong commitment to the Canadian art world itself. Tanabe has had countless exhibitions across Canada and abroad, was a teacher at the Banff Centre for the Arts for many years whereupon he reinvigorated the studio and residency program after his appointment as Head of the Art Program in 1973. In the early 1990s Tanabe started a campaign to establish a Governor General’s Award in Visual and Media Arts, a program that was realized in 2000. In 2003 Tanabe himself received a Governor General’s Award and in 2005 was the subject of a major retrospective exhibition organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery and Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, accompanied by an extensive catalogue published by Douglas & McIntyre.

Takao Tanabe has worked predominantly in a realist mode focusing on the landscape since the mid-1970s. His asserted foray in this direction began through observations and a fascination with the dry arid expanses of the Prairies and southern Alberta foothills, terrain offering to Tanabe’s painterly sensibilities strong minimalist sightlines and striking shifts in light and colour. In 1980, upon leaving his teaching position in Banff to focus full time again on painting the artist returned to his native British Columbia and bought an acreage on Vancouver Island in Errington, near Parksville. There he built a home and studio, where he lives and works to this day. He turned his attention to the expanse which surrounded him, especially the space where the ocean meets land and sky that he often observes and photographs on frequent ferry commutes across the Georgia Straight from the island to Vancouver, as well as North to towns including his birthplace of Prince George. Dawn, under
consideration for acquisition here, is a recent canvas by Tanabe that stems from one such trip “leaving Beaver Cove, near Pt Hardy on the ferry that travels the Inside Passage to Prince Rupert.”iii The large scale horizontally-oriented painting depicts the calm stillness of dawn ascending on this part of British Columbia’s coastal bounty. The focus of the painting by Tanabe’s own admission are the “crepuscular rays [which] is the technical term for the slanting light rays” that are seen jutting out of the predominant gray cloud cover in three sections of the work near a horizon line emphasized by a slight band of pale yellow just above a distant shoreline. The reflected rays continue downward in straight vertical columns that float along the solemn waters, pushing the first light of day downward and outward toward the space of the viewer.

A swirl of cloud in the upper centre of the skyline in Dawn creates a subtle bout of swirling disturbance within the otherwise peaceful natural expanse represented by the painter and that is dominated by reminders of Tanabe’s lingering mastery over abstraction. Crisp lines both vertical and horizontal to depict sea and sky offer about as much hard edge as can be afforded within this strong example of what Jeffrey Spalding describes as the BC painter’s “reductive realism.” Dawn, in Spalding’s estimation, represents “a fine resolution and amalgam of recent explorations in Tanabe’s work…The painting speaks eloquently of life on the coast; ethereal unearthly light invites us to reflect.” For his part, Tanabe himself revels in the formal tensions afforded by the defiant serenity of coastal life. To quote a passage from the artist that could easily be read with Dawn in mind:

The West Coast has its bright, clear days, where all is revealed, but I favour the grey mists, the rain-obscred islands and the clouds that hide the details. However much we desire order and clarity in all the details of our lives, there are always unexpected events that could cloud and change our course. Life is ragged. The coast is like that, just enough detail to make it interesting but not so clear as to be banal and overwhelming.iv

Please cite in the following manner:


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2 Takao Tanabe, as quoted in, Roald Nasgaard, “Adventures in Abstraction, or ‘Perhaps I was Always a Landscape Painter’,” in Ian M. Thom et al., Takao Tanabe (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005), 25.
3 Takao Tanabe, description of painting sent to Jonathan Shaughnessy in mailed correspondence, undated.