

FRESH SHEET

ANIMATED NERD

Jon Heder, the star of the nerd/cult movie classic *Napoleon*



Dynamite, is getting into the animation racket. He has signed a deal with Universal Pictures to develop both animated and regular ("live-action") movies.

Universal signed with Greasy entertainment, which is Jon, his identical twin Dan and their older brother, Doug. But he's the one they want.

HOLDING IT

The Firehall Arts Centre's production of *Urinetown*, the Musical has been held over to Feb. 5. **Barbara Barsky** has a previous obligation and must leave the show, so **Susan Anderson** will step in to join **David Adams**, **Jay Brazeau** and the rest of the energetic cast in this black comedy about a future when we can't pee for free. Tickets \$28/26, call 604-689-0926

SPEAK YOUR MIND

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Takao Tanabe's terrain

ART | The B.C. painter on the eve of his first Vancouver Art Gallery retrospective

BY AMY O'BRIAN
VANCOUVER SUN

Takao Tanabe has earned the right to be crabby. The B.C.-born painter is mere months from turning 80, has been painting for more than half a century, has received the Order of Canada — among a host of other honours and awards — and has paintings in every major public and corporate collection in the country.

Yet for some reason, until now, no one had thought to exhibit a retrospective of his work.

The Vancouver Art Gallery has had retrospective shows of Tanabe's contemporaries — Jack Shadbolt and Gordon Smith, for example — and retrospectives of the work of much younger artists, such as Rodney Graham and Brian

Humble? I'm not humble,' Tanabe says

From D1

ation until now. The show, which was first exhibited last year at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, has brought Tanabe perhaps more attention than he's ever had. And though he grumbles about the hours who have been coming going at his secluded Vancouver Island acreage, and the number of meetings and functions he's had to attend in Vancouver, there is a hint of smuggleonly glee in his comments.

"It's time-consuming. I'm asked to do this and do that," the artist says with a touch of self-importance while sitting in his spacious living room at his home near Victoria.

When asked whether he'd rather avoid the spotlight and avoid all meetings and interviews, Tanabe says: "What do you expect? Humble? I'm not humble." Tanabe, born in Seal Cove, British Columbia (part of Prince Rupert) is not particularly friendly — at least in the conventional sense. He greeted me during a recent visit to his soggy rural property was anything but courteous. The weather was somehow fitting for the accomplished artist. After he'd watched through the windows as I struggled in the mud on his driveway gate and bobbed around in the rain looking for the front door to his anguished wooden bungalow, he opened the door for a crack, peeked through the door and abruptly closed it, as if it were obvious.

When reporting for me at the "other side" Tanabe then turned his back on me as soon as I entered, offering a few hellos or handshakes, and seemed to my awkward — and "It's tediously obvious — comment 'Well, what did you expect?'"

"Good point, but not very hospitable." Bristling a bit from the cold welcome, I asked him point blank about his nickname, Crabby Tanabe. Instead of eliciting a hostile response, the question seemed to break the ice. The artist sat back, smiled a devilish smile and said, "I'm the most gentle, kind person here is."

"But I'm also opinionated. . . I try to tell the truth."

He openly admits that he's also been called bitchy and snotty, but says he's simply stubborn and likes to argue. His tenacity has proven valuable not only to his own career, but to Canada's visual arts community as a whole.

He tells the story of trying to get the ear of Sheila Copps — former minister of Canadian heritage — at a Canada Council reception several years ago when he first had the idea that a Governor General's Award for the visual and media arts should be created.

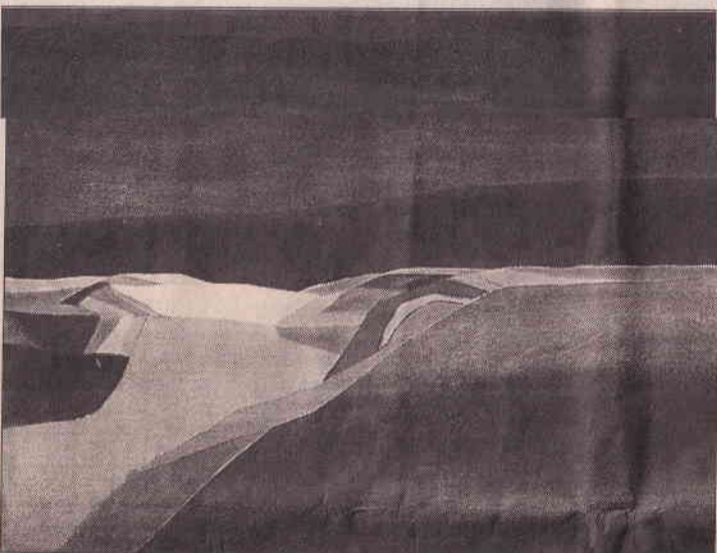
He manoeuvred with a friend to make sure she couldn't get away," recalls Copps. She gave him about 10 minutes of her time before he escaped after giving some assurance that her office would work on Tanabe's idea. The artist was delighted, but he realized that Copps may have been slightly disingenuous. It took three or four more years to slip back and forth to Ottawa where Tanabe says he was befriended by one bureaucrat to another — before the first recipients were finally awarded in 2000. Tanabe himself was awarded the prize in 2003.

"You give him room, the seemingly insular artist can talk and talk. He takes a good 15 or 20 minutes to tell the story of how



GLENN BAGLO/VANCOUVER SUN

Takao Tanabe, 79, stands next to his banners at Centre A. Show at the Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art covers his work from 1969 to 1973.



RANDY HARQUAIL/VANCOUVER ART GALLERY

Tanabe's 1972 work, North of Cortland.

he fought to get the Governor General's Award created, and when he finally notices that I might be paying more attention to the magnificent canvases on the walls or the sound of rain hammering the back porch, he stops to question my level of interest.

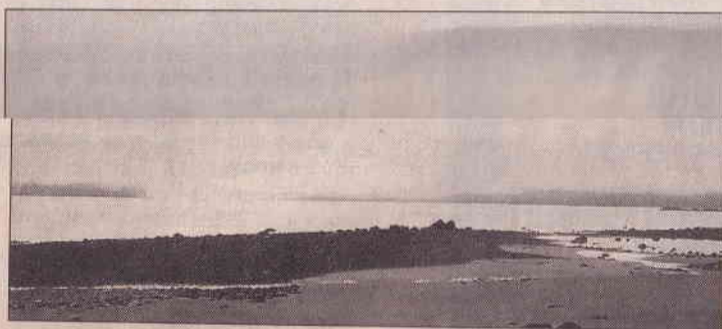
"Why do you want to hear this? It's kind of boring," he says. "Yes," I admit, "It is kind of boring."

I'm more interested in why he has all his awards — the Governor General's Award for 2003, the Order of Canada, the Order of British Columbia, and two honorary doctorates — hanging above and around the toilet in his tiny studio bathroom. Is it meant to be an indication of how he truly feels about large institutions? Or is it a comment on the somewhat arbitrary nature of awards?

He laughs and says, "It's the only place to hang them." Then, when pressed on the matter, he says brusquely, "I think we're finished here," and orders me to take off my shoes so he can show me just how crowded the walls are in the rest of the house.

Downstairs, the slightly cramped and cluttered spaces are filled with works by some of Tanabe's students — from his time as director of the Banff Centre art program — and works by his friends. There are portraits of Tanabe as a younger man by his friends Joe Plaskett and Jim Willer. A bunch of Tanabe's own paintings are crammed behind a storage fridge in the makeshift basement guest bedroom, which Tanabe says he's dismantling and guests, from now on, can sleep in sleeping bags on the studio floor.

Upstairs, in the window-rich loft-type space that holds the kitchen, living room and bedroom, one of his own giant grey landscapes hangs above the couch, while a colourful Tanabe rendering of a tiny English town hangs in the bedroom. On another wall, there is a collage of memories: dozens of photographs of him and his wife (who lives and works as a statistician in Vancouver and travels to the island on weekends) in exotic locations all over the world. Above the bed, there's another massive canvas —



TREVOR MILLS/VANCOUVER ART GALLERY

Low Tide, Hesquiat Bay (1994) is from Tanabe's own collection.

this one depicting a rocky outcrop on the north end of Vancouver Island. Tanabe dismisses it as a somewhat silly scene, but up close, the detail and accuracy are astounding.

"Every pebble on the beach is there. I paint every leaf or every pebble," he said earlier in the visit of a painting showing the Jordan River flowing into the ocean — a painting that took him five months to finish.

The process is exhaustive and takes Tanabe considerably longer than it once did. He says he can only paint for about two hours at a time because of a failed cataract operation and needs to take a "big long rest" after each session. (However the artist still goes skiing four or five times a year and travels as much as his schedule allows.)

Tanabe started painting these large — as long as six-metre — landscapes soon after he built his modest home on the island in 1981. They sell for \$35,000 to \$40,000, though Tanabe concedes he hasn't sold as many as he'd like. Many of the 60-plus pieces in the retrospective show are actually from Tanabe's own collection.

He recently finished a dark, brooding four-metre seascape that will be the final piece in the VAG retrospective (it wasn't finished in time for the Victoria exhibition). Asked about the

rather morose metaphor of having such a bleak image as the final piece in a life-spanning show, Tanabe brushes aside the suggestion.

"I like dark paintings. I love dark paintings," he says somewhat defiantly. "There's nothing ominous about a dark painting being the last in the show."

Many of Tanabe's coastal landscapes are grey, bleak and cold — much like the day I travelled across the Georgia Strait to see him. These are the artist's favourite kind of days and he paints them with an exquisite sense of motion and time.

In 1999, the artist gave an eloquent explanation for his affinity for grey days: "The West Coast has its bright, clear days where all is revealed, but I favour the grey mists, the rain-obscured 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 or overwhelming."

In the decades before he started painting grey coastal landscapes, Tanabe created an unbelievable spectrum of angular abstracts, magnificent life drawings, geometric banners (some of

which are now on exhibit at Centre A), Japanese-influenced ink drawings, and stark flat prairie vistas.

Jeffrey Spalding, a colleague of Tanabe's and the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia's director and chief curator, writes of Tanabe's stylistic shifts in the 172-page colour catalogue that accompanies the retrospective show.

"His work has made significant contributions to a procession of artistic movements. . . Each shift is the apparent antithesis of the prior," Spalding writes. "What does it tell us when Tanabe indulges such variety? What can we expect from him next: a return to abstraction?"

During my visit, Tanabe pulled out a binder filled with photographs of his recent work. He flipped past dozens of B.C. landscapes — some from the interior, some from up-island — and then gave me a teasing glimpse at what he's been working on recently. I catch a mass of red and black shapes, but little more than that. All I can tell is that the images are definitely not coastal landscapes — for which Tanabe admits his interest "is fading."

He says he's not yet ready to show the world the red and black pieces, but he seems excited and pleased about his future work.

It's these little glimpses of almost childlike excitement that betray Tanabe's non-curmudgeonly side and his remarkably unwavering passion for creating art. And, as I step out into the grey, cloudy late afternoon, Tanabe forgoes a handshake for a slightly awkward, sideways hug, leading me to believe that the "crabby" label is perhaps a tad unfair.

aobrian@png.canwest.com

The Takao Tanabe retrospective continues at the Vancouver Art Gallery until April 17. An exhibition of Tanabe's banners (1969 to 1973) is on at Centre A until Feb. 18.

Elevating the reputation of

Takao Tanabe's work hangs in every major public and corporate collection in the country

BY JIM GIBSON
CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

— VICTORIA

Painter Takao Tanabe watches as a visitor closes the deer-high gate to his eight-hectare property on scenic Vancouver Island. In a ball cap, baggy pants, and scruffy runners, Tanabe looks more like an aging market gardener than the holder of the Orders of B.C. and Canada just interrupted from work on a \$35,000 painting.

Tanabe's T-shirt is the tip-off that the 76-year-old is connected to Ottawa's cultural politics. It promotes a past Japanese and Canadian orchestral exchange at the National Arts Centre.

There's a wariness to his greeting once his visitor has parked near the artist's old Saab, newish pick-up, and sporty Miata of a startling yellow at odds to the muted West Coast blues and greys of his signature landscapes. But then Tanabe had been evasive since first contacted in March after his \$15,000 Governor General's Award for Visual Arts was announced.

At that time, he came across as all edgy humility. "What else is there to do that's interesting," he said about the life of an artist, "and still involves living from hand-to-mouth."

Perhaps he had good reason for this touchy diffidence. His works are in every major public and corporate collection in the country. He's had a solo show annually since 1971. Yet he has not achieved the household name status of even the pop star of coastal painting, Toni Onley.

Tanabe's contribution to Canadian art is more than just what's on canvas. He's credited with elevating the reputation of the art department at the Banff School of Fine Arts during his tenure in the '70s. He's long been an advocate for the arts.

Yet despite his long-standing painterly credentials, Tanabe had yet to receive his due in the form of a major retrospective by a pub-

lic gallery. Nor did he expect one, predicting last spring it "won't happen in my lifetime."

But his droll pessimism is not that of a man suddenly realizing he's running out of time. Instead, ex-wife Patricia White remem-

Vancouver art galleries are collaborating on a touring retrospective for 2005.

Tanabe leaked the good news in the call firming up the day's visit.

"Where's your tape recorder?" groused Tanabe after a desultory

handshake, arguably the country's most prestigious — a solo show every other year. "I don't have the energy," he says, explaining why he's now cut them each back to one show of new work every three years.

tionism. In his 20s, he studied in New York, including classes with one of the America's pioneer abstract painters, Hans Hoffman.

"Who's dis?" says Tanabe replaying the German's weekly student critique sessions. "A hand

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His CV lis New York, I with his first in Winnipeg older sibling end of the Se agreeing to n the coast, th internment t endured in 19

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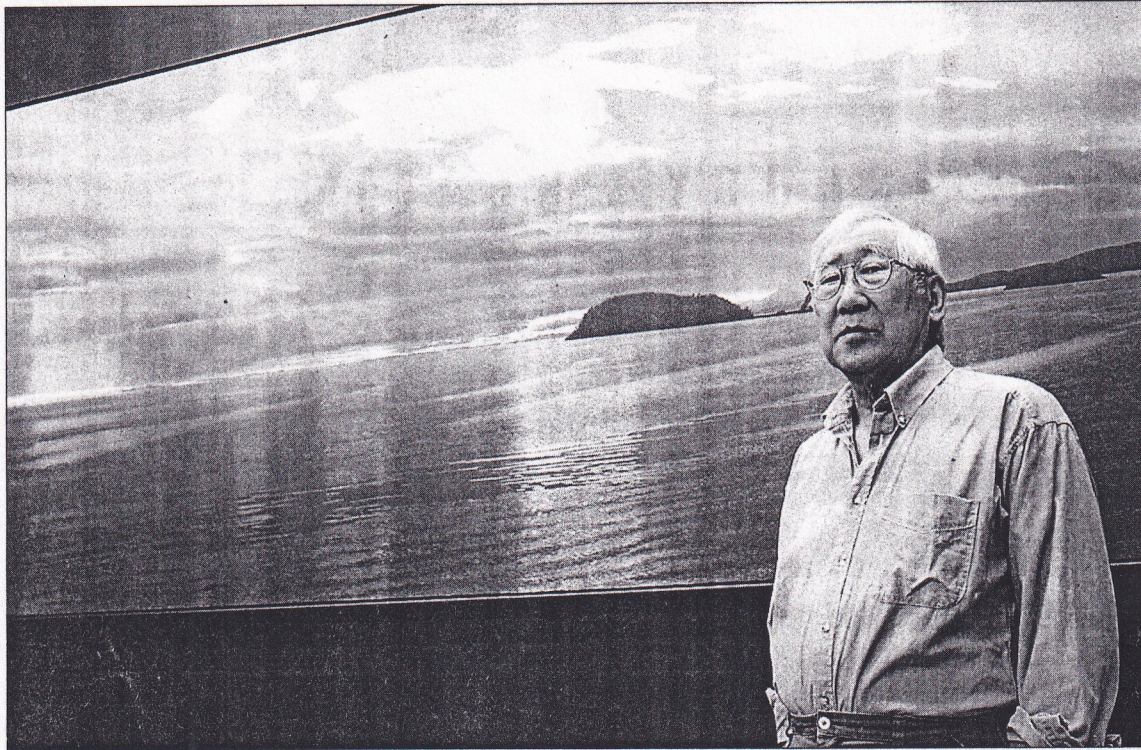
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DARREN STONE/VICTORIA TIMES

Takao Tanabe poses with his latest painting in his Errington studio. Tanabe is a holder of Orders of B.C. and Canada.

bers Tanabe thinking he was always the wrong age at the wrong time. In his 30s, the 50-somethings such as Jack Shadbolt and B.C. Binning rated all the attention. When Tanabe hit his 50s, the arbiters of art had discovered the under 30s.

But, now in the wake of his Governor General's award, Tanabe may finally be the right age at the right time. The Victoria and

handshake. Tanabe's touchiness has other artists affectionately dubbing him "Crabby Tanabe"

Ignoring the real-journalists-don't-use-tape-recorders retort, he leads the way to his studio. Its entrance is at the back of his glass and cedar two-storey house, where decks descend to a pond, once stocked with trout until others beat Tanabe's fly rod to them. His home is located in Errington, near Parksville, about 150 kilometres north of Victoria.

There are several small-for-Tanabe acrylics on the wall and one well-rendered drawing of undergrowth, mistaken as something Jack Shadbolt might have tried before his looser Hornby Suite period. A bad assumption. Tanabe is scathing, then incredulous, that anyone would expect a Shadbolt in his studio. "He hated my guts. He was a jealous old man," he says of a B.C. icon held in only slightly less reverence than Emily Carr.

But all these are dwarfed by the 10- by 5-foot acrylic stretching across the studio's back wall, just above the long table on which Tanabe paints. It's destined for his Calgary show and a likely \$35,000 price tag.

At one time, he guaranteed his three commercial galleries — including Toronto's Mira God-

The huge painting is the panorama from the early morning ferry leaving Port Hardy Bay. Its atmosphere could be any West Coast early morning. "It doesn't matter, the visuals of the coast are always obscure... It's misty, it's mysterious.

"All these wonderful features are right there in your face [yet] the land doesn't stick up at you. Its mystery is what I like. I wonder what's around there," he says, beckoning towards the islands in the background.

But the painting's watery foreground proved a challenge, ultimately forcing Tanabe back to a tedious technique which had taken its toll both on his eyes and patience. The early morning light on the water lacked the "magic" Tanabe wanted.

"I guess I have to go back to little dots," he decided. It's an exacting technique, roughly requiring six layers of 30 painted dots per square inch. He paced himself by working in 30-minute stretches.

"I'd fiddle with the sky, then do more [dots], then go over there and look outside, and come back. After two or three hours, I'd quit."

There's some irony to Tanabe having moved to comparative exactness of landscape after devoting his earlier years to the looser style of abstract expres-

would go up, and he'd say 'oh ja,' and then depending on his mood, spend 10 minutes critiquing."

Twice Tanabe wrangled his big paintings into the back of a cab and headed across town for Hoffman's critiques. There seemed little point in returning a third time after Hoffman gave his work a quick glance, and then declared "You know das very good."

By the time Tanabe came to Banff in the '70s, he was moving away from abstraction. With its distinct division of flat land and sky, the prairie seemed the ideal subject through which to make the transition. "I deliberately looked for where the prairie is as flat as you can get it," he says of those earlier paintings.

An excursion in the early '80s to the Queen Charlottes brought him home both artistically and geographically to the West Coast. In the late '60s, he and his American-born wife left Vancouver for Philadelphia where White did her PhD in social welfare. By then Tanabe was making a living as an artist after stints moonlighting at commercial printing and teaching. He had had lucrative public commissions in Ottawa and Winnipeg.

It seemed the right time to go. He was becoming too comfortable with the trappings of a mid-

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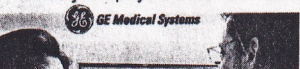
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SPECIALTY

Artist's true spark lights up woodblock prints

THE life's work in painting begun some 50 years ago by British Columbia artist Takao Tanabe seems destined to stay stuck down among the footnotes in the story of western Canadian landscape art. While no art historian, I think things should be otherwise. To be sure, Tanabe's portrayals of Canada's western islands, waters and marine weathers have always been modest — though not thoughtless. And if he has surely made more routine, over-the-couch pictures than he should have, he has also created enough serene, involving coastal seascapes to merit respect, and a second look.

The show of 17 recent acrylic paintings, woodblock prints and

other works on paper now on view at Toronto's Mira Godard Gallery offers a good opportunity to give Tanabe's art that look it deserves.

The gallery's ground floor is largely given over to the large marine canvases for which the artist is today best known. Using paint thinned down to the consistency of watercolour or ink, Tanabe stains his canvases with the tints and lights of moist ocean air, creating an anthology of the terrain's myriad moods, and of the artist's shifting sense of himself within that dramatic landscape.



ART REVIEW

TAKAO TANABE

New Works 1994-1995

At the Mira Godard Gallery in Toronto
until April 5

Reviewed by John Bentley Mays

The atmosphere invoked by *Q.C. Is. 3/95 Dawson Inlet* (1995), for example, is very still, almost melancholy, delivering a sense of place almost too inhumanly vast, too

beautifully grand for comfortable human dwelling. *Strait of Georgia 1/94* (1994), portrays a smouldering, sulphurous sunset, suffusing the otherwise peaceful ocean with a subtle, undefined menace. Another sort of indefinite menace — this time icy rather than fiery — arises in *Strait of Georgia 2/94* (1994) from Tanabe's clouds and water, all rendered by metallic greys and chilliest white.

It is tempting to see in this display of painting a rather familiar art of late career, executed by a creator more concerned with mor-

tality and the inscrutable future than he was in earlier years. A sense of distant mystery, of impending travel toward the unknown, pervades the canvases. This brooding, romantic meditation on the journey of no return is communicated nowhere better here than in the related pencil drawing (1989-1991) and the beautiful photo-etching (1994), both entitled *Inside Passage*.

This late-life melancholy is brusquely qualified, however, when you go downstairs to see Tanabe's recent prints. Exit the philosophic

senior artist, meditating on fate by the sea; enter Takao Tanabe the interested experimentalist, working up his marine motifs into gritty, luminously coloured images pulled off rough-hewn blocks. These traditional Japanese woodblock prints, realized in co-operation with Vancouver printer Masato Arikushi, are technical masterworks, intense and crisp, and touched by a certain lively, youthful light largely absent in the canvases. After seeing these rough lovely graphics, I am inclined to think we've been looking for the heart of Tanabe's art in the wrong place — in his painting, rather than in the printmaking to which he has long brought so much wise, joyful vitality.