

Night Prairies: new drawings by Takao Tanabe

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Contemporary painting derived from landscape flourishes in western Canada as it does in few other parts of North America. On the prairies, this orientation has generally taken one of two directions: Color-Field Abstraction that through scale, color, composition or internal forms alludes to nature and the land, or more traditional landscape painting that renders the factual appearance of individual places.

Takao Tanabe's prairie landscapes lie between these two polarities. They are specific to the prairie region without being descriptive of specific places and, although abstracted by the reduction of landscape to its most basic elements, are firmly tied to the experience of nature. Place is generalized in favor of an evocative, idealized geography whose essential character is intensified by the elimination of detail. Tanabe seeks to match his sensations of place with a compressed and succinct style which is closer to the distillations of poetry than it is to more fully fleshed narrative forms. What is felt as much as what is seen gives form to Tanabe's conception of the land.

A recent series of graphite drawings, exhibited as a group for the first time at the Glenbow Museum (September 22–October 28), has grown out of Tanabe's investigation of a new direction for the landscape paintings. The elements of the landscape are reduced even further in the drawings but, much as the use of landscape as a subject has given greater strength and conviction to Tanabe's formerly abstract painting, these drawings bring to his landscapes new qualities that expand their meaning.

Since he began making paintings of the prairie in 1972, Tanabe has limited his formal means by applying paint in thin washes and reducing his earlier bright palette to fewer and more muted tonalities. His increasingly graphic painting style has reduced a more complicated way of handling land forms to simple divisions of the canvas. Sky and land meet to define the horizon. Only the subtlest articulations of the middle distance are allowed.

Intrigued by the experience of standing on the prairie at night, Tanabe has returned in the last two or three years to earlier ideas he had about black-and-white paintings, a subject that has been on his mind periodically since he studied sumi-e and calligraphy in Japan from 1959 to 1961. Sumi-e techniques have influenced the landscape paintings in the limitations Tanabe has placed on his palette, his handling of the brush, and in the rapid

application of color washes to the canvas. Most recently, Tanabe's affinity for the rich chromatic values of black sumi ink prompted the technical resolution of the very dark, almost black drawings in graphite on paper, capturing the thick atmosphere of the prairie night with a success he has not yet been able to achieve in paintings.

Tanabe refers to the darkness of these graphite drawings as a kind of twilight. What interested him most in looking at the night landscape occurred on certain nights when a vague distinction between the darkness of the sky and the land was visible, the land always seeming slightly darker than the sky. Within this vast dark-filled space, the possibility of seeing shape and form in the land remains. Even more importantly, perhaps, the overwhelming magnitude of prairie space as seen by daylight is completely transformed in character by darkness and the revelations of faint light.

The re-creation of an immense space with the flat land beneath it stretching away as though to infinity has been one of the most evocative aspects of Tanabe's landscapes. In the acrylic paintings, a final water wash tinted with black and applied to the entire surface of the canvas settles into the interstices of the weave and breaks up or dematerializes the color washes underneath, superimposing a minute, regularly broken pattern of muted tone overall. The washes retain their wet look after the paint has dried, heightening the sense of atmospheric space. The often-used slightly elongated proportions of the rectangular format of the paintings emphasize the horizontal scan and suggest the panoramic vistas of North American landscape painting of the nineteenth century. The horizontal sweep and breadth of the land in Tanabe's prairie paintings is part of a Romantic tradition that places the viewer in a particular relationship to nature. The eye is drawn to the far horizon, and the compression of space, not unlike that of the photograph, positions the viewer at the edge of a natural spectacle whose mysteries are unfolding beyond him.

Under the transformations of darkness this landscape of space takes on even more mystical overtones, but very specific ones. The dark, dense atmosphere of the night drawings, thick with color and vibrating with reflected or internal light, disorients the viewer, making his position ambiguous in relation to what he sees, just as the absence of light in the prairie landscape at night distorts distance and scale and seems to bring the land somehow closer. Atmosphere in the drawings

becomes physical, substantive and almost palpable. The sense of mystery is increased.

Tanabe was unable to obtain these effects with black acrylic paint. About a year ago he began to make the graphite drawings as a way to work through his ideas about black-and-white paintings in a smaller format. In graphite he found a sympathetic material, with tonal values similar to sumi ink but with vastly different textural possibilities. Reduced scale and more condensed composition have allowed him to lift the restrictions he placed on the handling of painting materials and this redirection of discipline has led him to a richly inflected and painterly use of the graphite.

Unlike Tanabe's quickly executed paintings, the night drawings require hours of work, putting down layer over layer of graphite, rubbing, erasing, reworking tones, and building a network of angled vertical and horizontal strokes over the surface of the paper until the right density of graphite and the desired tonal modulations are achieved. For Tanabe, the slow motions of building tones with graphite are an antidote to the tensions of painting and are a relieving, meditative process.

The drawings themselves evoke the experience of standing alone in the dark. Swimming darkness stops the eye, requiring an adjustment of vision to search out the light and the barest forms it illumines. Space is expressed not as an air-filled volume but rather as an almost impenetrable shadow-filled mass. A timeless sense pervades the otherworldly night aura. In the darkest of the drawings, where contrasts are minimal, the nocturnal world becomes an almost seamless, enveloping creation in which land and sky are conjoined by the unity of color. The viewer is invited to project himself into this space by the immediacy of its presence.

In all of the drawings, the tangibility of this dark, spatial phenomenon results from a use of the graphite that treats the color of the material and its material substance as indistinguishable properties. Individually, the drawings are varied by Tanabe's choices of technical possibilities, of texture, finish and subject. The use of line as a descriptive element defining contour is kept to a minimum. It is employed most often as a loose fragmented net laid on the drawing surface over rubbed tone or built directly on bare paper. The whiteness of the paper provides the source of the indeterminable twilight. The sheen acquired by layered graphite or by hard strokes gives a reflected light that is in constant flux as one's angle of



TAKAO TANABE

Prairie Hills C, 1979

graphite, 27½" x 39½"

Photo John Dean, courtesy Glenbow Museum, Calgary

vision changes, at first obscuring then revealing the surface. Velvety-dark, light-absorbing color is achieved by abrading the paper and drawing over the roughened area.

The variety of the drawings suggests a range of experimentation that avoids formula for specific effects. The atmosphere of *The Land A* (1978), created almost entirely from rubbed graphite, is a soft vaporous stuff faintly illuminated along the low horizon. The only interruption of slightly shifting modulated tones occurs at the horizon and in a few very dark, brushlike strokes that angle off to the right, establishing the foreground and suggesting an entry to the spacious night. This softness is counteracted by a rain of vertical strokes in *The Prairie Hills A* (1978) that reflect light with a dark shimmer, revealing a gentle swell of land just lighter than the sky. The uncovered bottom edge of the paper adds to the suggestion that the darkness hangs like a veil. The faint glow of light caught in a weave of crossing graphite strokes in *Foothills I* (1979) seems to rise from behind the almost level profile of the darker land. In all three drawings, the low indirect

moon, seems to grow from an emanation of the land itself.

Interspersed among the very dark drawings is a smaller group that continues to explore Tanabe's initial interest in black and white. In *Prairie Hills C* (1979) black land is starkly contrasted with a grayish-white sky lightened by strokes of erasure of a rubbed-graphite ground. The irregular patchwork of quick strokes showing darkness behind an unnatural white light carries the dramatic quality of sudden change in the landscape caused by atmospheric disturbance. Broken light seems to both rise from the land and fall toward it as though the light were a physical substance caught in turbulence that has torn apart the wholeness of its fabric. The horizon slants down toward the left, giving the land its only overt movement and suggesting the disruption of the prairie's level expanse by the rising foothills. Both land and sky seem to move against the same flat plane, as separate protagonists held in equilibrium by the stability of the black land that fills the bottom half of the drawing. Somewhat mannered in their Expressionist qualities, the black- and white drawings remain closer to the

illustration of sensation than to the fuller re-creation Tanabe has accomplished in the cohesive encompassing atmosphere of almost total darkness. In the night drawings, image, sensation, and drawing materials are inseparable.

The night has a thousand associations but Tanabe's night scenes will admit only the most elemental ones, maintaining the mysteries of perception without recourse to overburdening interpretations. This is a source of their strength. Although the twenty-odd night drawings completed so far do not all achieve an equal level of successful resolution, the strongest show the resurgence of ideas from early in Tanabe's painting career that are revivifying his preoccupation with the landscape. Making use of a medium employed only peripherally in his work until now, Tanabe's description of the night landscape has fused material and technique at the level of content. The resulting drawings have the compelling presence of finished and independent works standing slightly apart from the main body of Tanabe's art and adding a new depth to his vision of the prairie.