

# Nobuko Tanabe's Seamless Contemporary Synthesis of Eastern and Western Aesthetics

That juncture once famously denied by Mark Twain, where East and West meet, has become a popular crossroad in recent years, traveled frequently in both directions by many of our most urbane artists. Few, however, make that journey as naturally or successfully as the Japanese painter Nobuko Tanabe, first reviewed in these pages in 2002 and then again in 2008.

Over the years Tanabe has refined her style from an early Minimalism encompassing elements of Color Field painting and Abstract Expressionism to the highly personal manner of tachiste abstraction that distinguishes her work today. All throughout, she has employed a technique of gluing gossamer Japanese papers to her canvases, which she wrinkles in various ways to create rippled textures that lend her work an unusual tactile appeal.

This works splendidly with Tanabe's use of color, which is invariably vibrant, as seen in the series she calls "Wave," perhaps in homage to the great ukiyo-e master Katsushika Hokusai, but which also suggest other, more Western influences.

In "Wave Blue," a work in acrylic, gesso, Japanese paper, and glue on canvas, for example, the brilliant hues of bright blue and yellow and the rhythmically swirling lines immediately call to mind the meteoric energy of the thickly painted cosmic forms in Vincent Van Gogh's "The Starry Night."

While so-called "appropriation" has long been an accepted practice in contemporary art, Tanabe brings a much more personal element into play in this painting by virtue of her crumpled paper technique, with which she reciprocates in her own more calculatedly conceptual manner the love that Van Gogh felt for the art of her country. After his first encounters with Japanese art at the Japanese Pavilion at the 1867 World Exposition in Paris, as well as in a gallery next door to the one owned by his brother Theo, he started collecting postcard reproductions of ukiyo-e prints, which he pinned to the walls of his studio for inspiration. Even while employing Japanese paper in the manner that she does, to create an effect resembling the oil impasto once peculiar to Western painting alone, Tanabe preserves a symbolic sense of her own national identity in the process of creating



"Blue Wave"

ambitious mainstream contemporary art.

She also asserts a connection to her cultural heritage in yet another abstract work comprised of a large circle centered on the canvas. Here, the reference would appear to be to the "Enso" (or circle) so ubiquitous in Zen Buddhist painting and calligraphy, an all encompassing character which stands for enlightenment, as well as strength, elegance, the universe, and perhaps any number of other things. In traditional representations, the enso is drawn with ink in one swift stroke. In Tanabe's painting, however, it is constructed in relief in her usual glued paper fortified with gesso and stained with fiery red and orange hues with bits of green woven through. The texture and the luminous hues also make this particular circle resemble one of Van Gogh's thickly painted suns, with the equally bright background suggesting the residual halo of its rays. Yet when one looks closely, it is possible to perceive the dark trace of a black outline, particularly at the bottom of the circle, as if the artist began by drawing the traditional Zen circle in ink before building up its textures with layers of paper to nearly sculptural thickness. Such traces of

tradition add additional weight and depth to her aesthetic enterprise.

Although much Asian art is monochromatic, Tanabe herself is a consummate colorist. Her colors glow with subtle tonal variations that become especially noticeable when she employs a single color, as in a totally red painting in her new series where the underlying striations created with crumbled paper swirl like waves of molten lava. Indeed, confronted with Tanabe's red painting — such an animated opposite of Mark Rothko's melancholic, quietly smoldering monochromatic canvases — one is put in mind of the frequent volcano eruptions of Sakurajima Volcano in Japan, which reportedly spew huge crimson plumes thousands of feet in the air.

For while Tanabe's work is not only related to that of Rothko and other more gestural New York School painters like Pollock and de Kooning, as well as the Color Field paintings of Jules Olitski, her form of abstraction is invariably

allusive. Studying some of her "Wave" paintings — particularly one in which the tactile blue tides appear activated, as well as illuminated with fiery orange reflections, by a small lunar-looking orb slightly left of center in the composition — one also thinks of the eccentric American painter Albert Pinkham Ryder's mysterious nocturnal marinescapes. One arrives at this association not only from having recently viewed a slide show of Ryder's paintings accompanied by a recording of the Japanese pianist Yoko Kanno's composition, "The Cloudy Road," and having been reminded once again of how seamlessly the Western and Eastern aesthetic sensibilities can be made to merge in art. But also because the mixture is especially potent in the paintings of Nobuko Tanabe, who assimilates the best of each tradition to create her own singular synthesis.

— Maurice Taplinger

Nobuko Tanabe, Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, April 16 - May 4, 2013  
212-268-0026 Wed. - Sat. 12 - 6pm