

The Japanese Painter Nobuko Tanabe Makes a Major Breakthrough in Her Most Recent Exhibition in Chelsea

It is always gratifying for a writer familiar with an artist's work to see a giant step in his or her aesthetic evolution. Such is the case with Nobuko Tanabe, a Japanese artist whose exhibition I reviewed at Montserrat Gallery when it was still located in Soho, in February of 2002.

At that time Tanabe was working in a more Minimalist mode than today and her paintings also encompassed elements of Color Field and Abstract Expressionism. A fascinatingly eclectic range of influences had been successfully assimilated by the artist, and some of her paintings took on a sculptural dimension, with the Japanese paper that she often glues to canvas crumpled to create rippling waves.

In her more recent solo show at Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, as it is now known, at 547 West 27th Street, in Chelsea, Tanabe still employs Japanese paper, along with glue, gesso, and canvas, but in a somewhat more subtle manner. Her paintings have become less sculptural—actually, considerably less so—and her unique collage paintings had now had taken on a more subjective, less formal, quality of intimacy. And while her early work had impressed me mightily, for bringing what I referred to as “an unprecedented degree of expressiveness to a basically reductive style,” I now felt even more favorably disposed toward her for having the courage to make her paintings less reductive and more personal, thereby enhancing their expressive qualities in unforeseen new ways.

It always takes courage, after all, for an artist to sacrifice one aspect of her or his work for another, especially when it involves the diminishment of a certain amount of formal impact. However, what Tanabe has gained is immeasurably greater: a firmer grasp on her own true voice and a purchase

on the limitless range of possibilities that present themselves when one breaks free of formalist orthodoxy and can explore uncharted regions of self.

Tanabe's breakthrough is perhaps

bottom of the composition, separated by a single broad band of white at the center. Yet its simplicity, which can be roughly compared to that of certain land and marinescapes by Milton Avery, is the source of its strength,

evoking a very specific and personal perception of a very specific thing, even while being as solidly grounded in formal stasis as a Dutch still life.

With an artist as obviously sophisticated as Nobuko Tanabe there are bound to be echoes of art history—as often as not unexpected ones, at that. Although the title of her smaller painting “Wave #2” might suggest a reference to Hokusai, one is actually put more in mind of van Gogh's “Starry Night” by its cosmic-seeming yellow and blue swirls. By contrast, Tanabe's “White” is



“Water Fall”

most clearly evident in the poetic work in gesso, acrylic, and glue on canvas that she calls “Water Fall.” Certainly this handsome horizontal composition, with its undulating inner textures and limited palette of deep ultramarine and pure white is one of her most literal images, evoking the thundering beauty and foamy rush of the natural phenomenon it is named for with a power quite the equal to Pat Steir's much discussed and celebrated paintings of the same subject, despite being nowhere near as overblown.

Indeed, although it is one of the larger works in her recent show, Tanabe's “Water Fall” (the title comprised of two words rather than one, suggesting not only the standard name for a specific natural phenomenon but the generic effect of falling water quite apart from it) is executed on relatively modest easel scale. It is also executed in a considerably more controlled mode of abstraction than Steir's paintings, which strive to capture movement with poured skeins of paint flowing downward from the top of the canvas.

By contrast, Tanabe's painting consists of bold blue areas at the top and

a purist composition in which the only coloristic contrast comes from the subtle shadows between the intricately swirling folds of the pure white Japanese paper glued meticulously to the surface.

Here, again, one sees the deepening subjectivity in Tanabe's new works, which, for all her multicultural awareness, seem more innately Japanese for their subtlety of sensibility than some of her earlier pieces. It is a quality that American artists such as Mark Tobey and Morris Graves, situated in Seattle and open to Pacific inspiration, strove for, but which Tanabe appears to achieve effortlessly. Certainly her fluent brush work comes out of the Eastern calligraphic tradition, although she is prone to jogging its rhythms expressively with the contradictory patterns of ripples and ridges that she creates with Japanese paper glued to a canvas support. At the same time, she has also assimilated Western influences wholeheartedly, particularly in her use of color, which can take on an almost Fauvist chromatic stridency in paintings such as “Poison-Flower” and “Roll-Red,” with its green, orange,