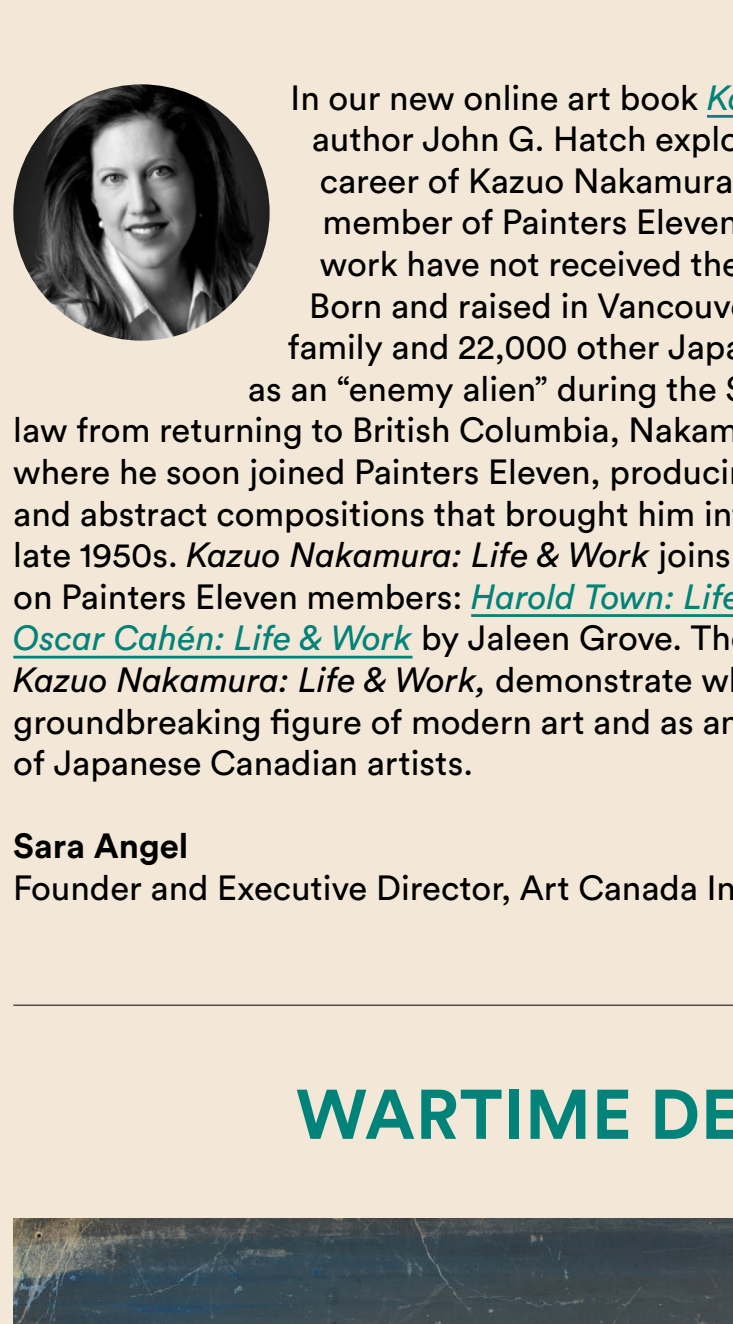
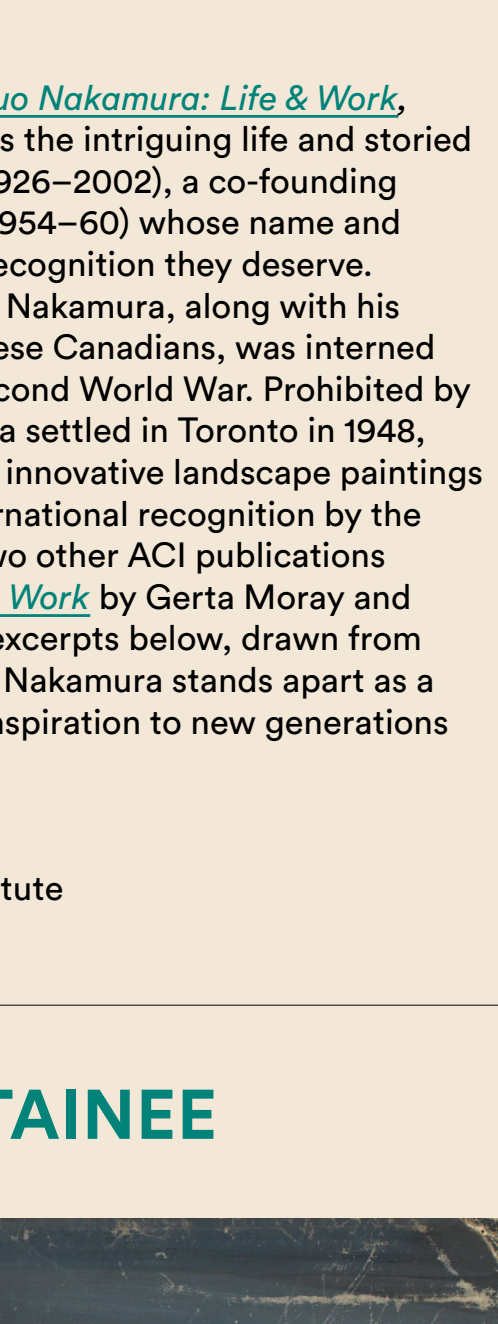


JUNE 11, 2021

CALCULATED BEAUTY

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF KAZUO NAKAMURA

Today the Art Canada Institute proudly publishes Kazuo Nakamura: *Life & Work* by John G. Hatch, which tells the story of how the Japanese Canadian Nakamura persevered through internment during the Second World War to become an internationally renowned painter and a creator of compositions inspired by nature, science, and mathematics.

Kazuo Nakamura, *Suspended Landscape*, 1969, private collection.

Kazuo Nakamura, 1957, photographer unknown.



In our new online art book [Kazuo Nakamura: Life & Work](#), author John G. Hatch explores the intriguing life and storied career of Kazuo Nakamura (1926–2002), a co-founding member of Painters Eleven (1954–60) whose name and work have not received the recognition they deserve. Born and raised in Vancouver, Nakamura, along with his family and 22,000 other Japanese Canadians, was interned as an “enemy alien” during the Second World War. Prohibited by law from returning to British Columbia, Nakamura settled in Toronto in 1948, where he soon joined Painters Eleven, producing innovative landscape paintings and abstract compositions that brought him international recognition by the late 1950s. *Kazuo Nakamura: Life & Work* joins two other ACI publications on Painters Eleven members: *Harold Town: Life & Work* by Gerta Moray and *Oscar Cahén: Life & Work* by Jaleen Groves. The excerpts below, drawn from *Kazuo Nakamura: Life & Work*, demonstrate why Nakamura stands apart as a groundbreaking figure of modern art and as an inspiration to new generations of Japanese Canadian artists.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

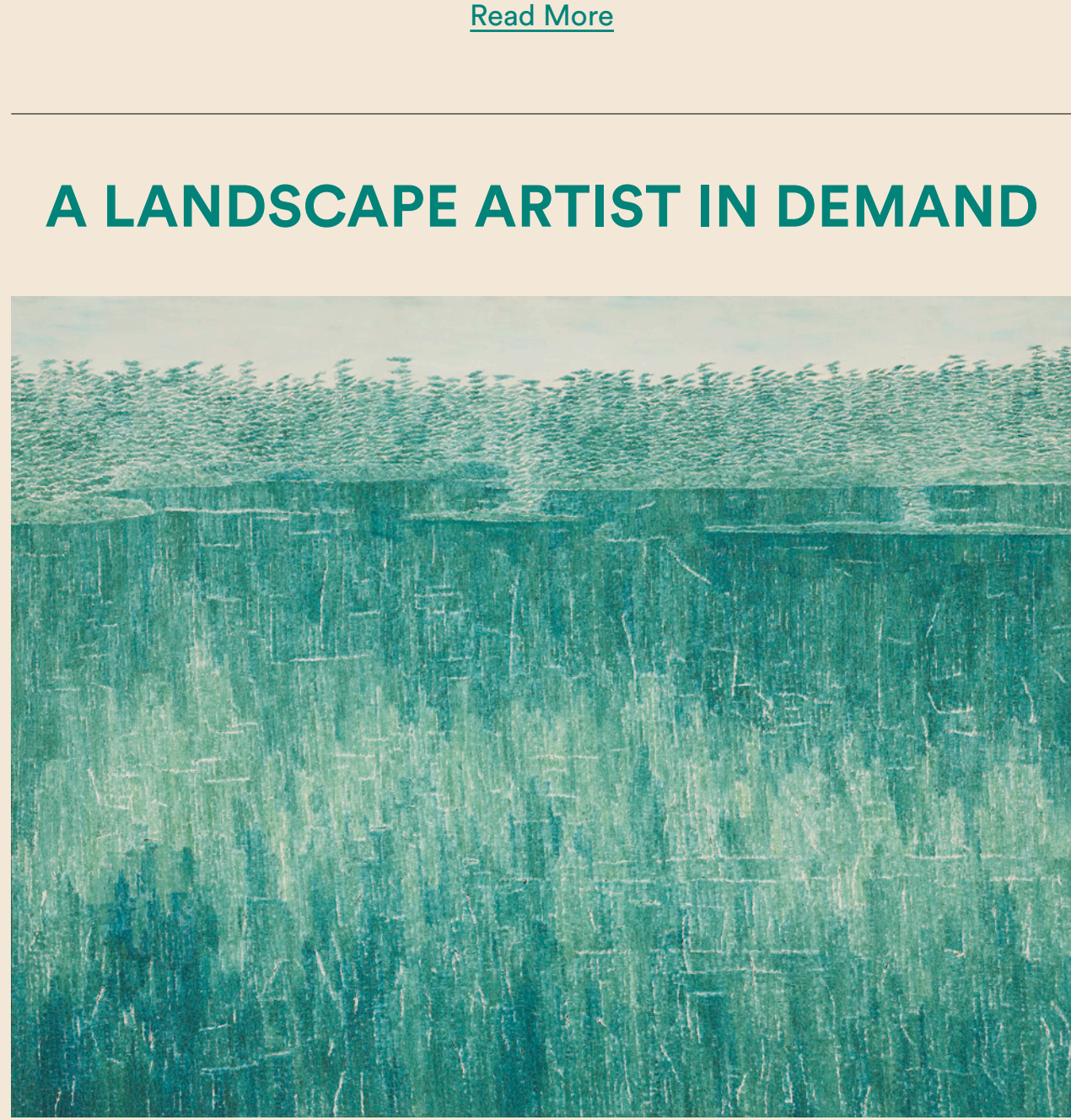
WARTIME DETAINEE

Kazuo Nakamura, *March 18, March 18, 1944*, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

Nakamura created this solemn evening depiction of the Tashme internment camp where he and his family were detained for nearly two years during the Second World War. The young artist had just turned sixteen when he was forced to leave his Vancouver home and relocate to Tashme. For Nakamura, art was an essential escape from the hardships of the camp. Performing manual labour during the day and attending evening high school classes, he spent his spare time painting—mostly nighttime scenes such as this one. Although Nakamura later commented that his experience as a wartime detainee “didn’t affect me much,” the works he produced at Tashme foreshadowed his lifelong search for meaning in the universe and the underlying order of nature.

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FORMING PAINTERS ELEVEN

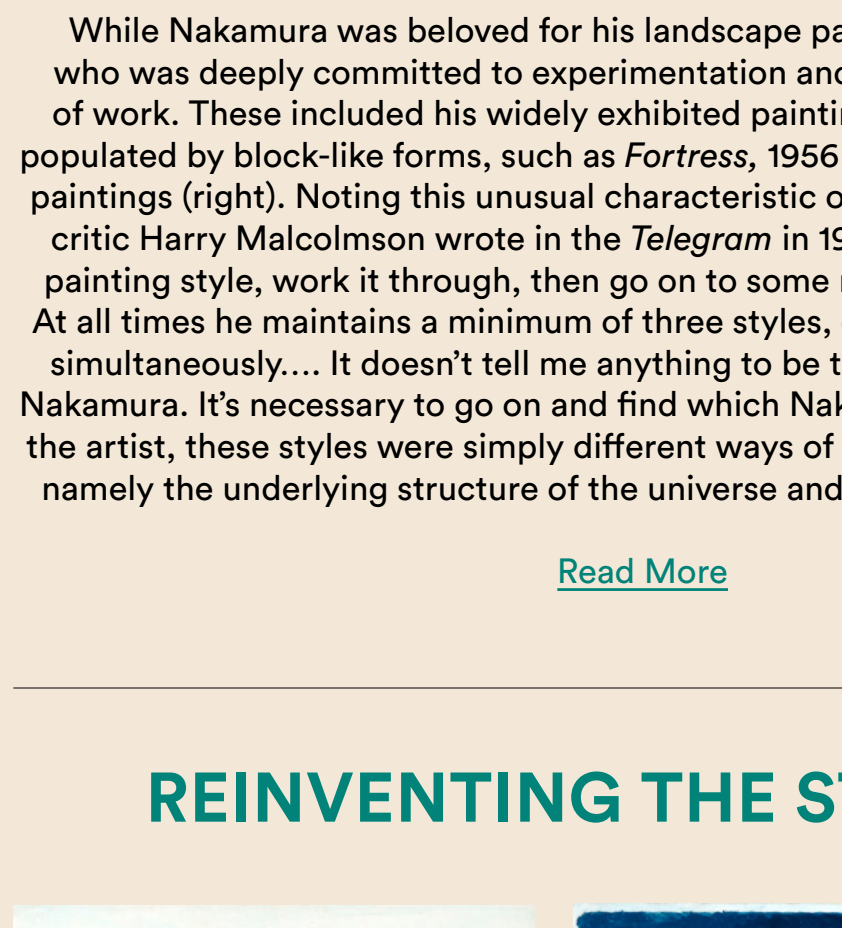
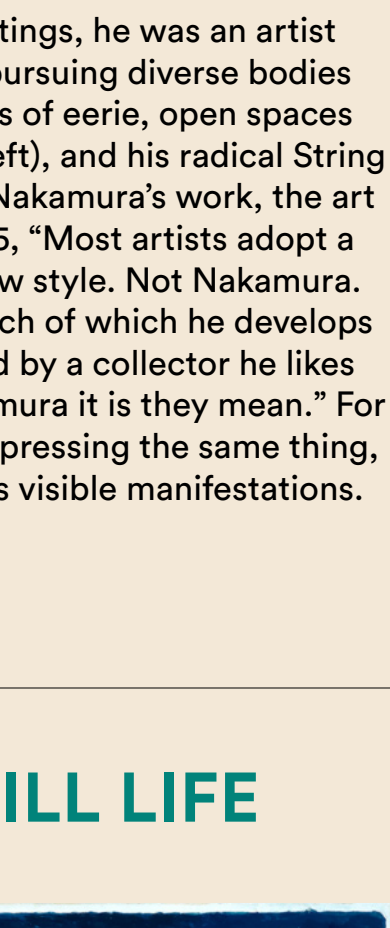


Painters Eleven at the Park Gallery, c.1957, photograph by Peter Croydon. Nakamura is fourth from the left.

Nakamura arrived in Toronto after the war, where he studied art with Albert Franck (1899–1973), who introduced him to Oscar Cahén (1916–1956), Harold Town (1924–1990), Walter Yarwood (1917–1996), and Ray Mead (1921–1998), all future members of Painters Eleven. Formed in 1954, Painters Eleven was dedicated to promoting abstract art to Toronto audiences at a time when it was radically new. Nakamura was developing a non-representational approach to painting when he joined the group. Painters Eleven’s first exhibition took place in February 1954 at Toronto’s Roberts Gallery, where the public was officially introduced to “the first rat pack of Toronto modernism,” as *Globe and Mail* art critic Gary Michael Dault put it.

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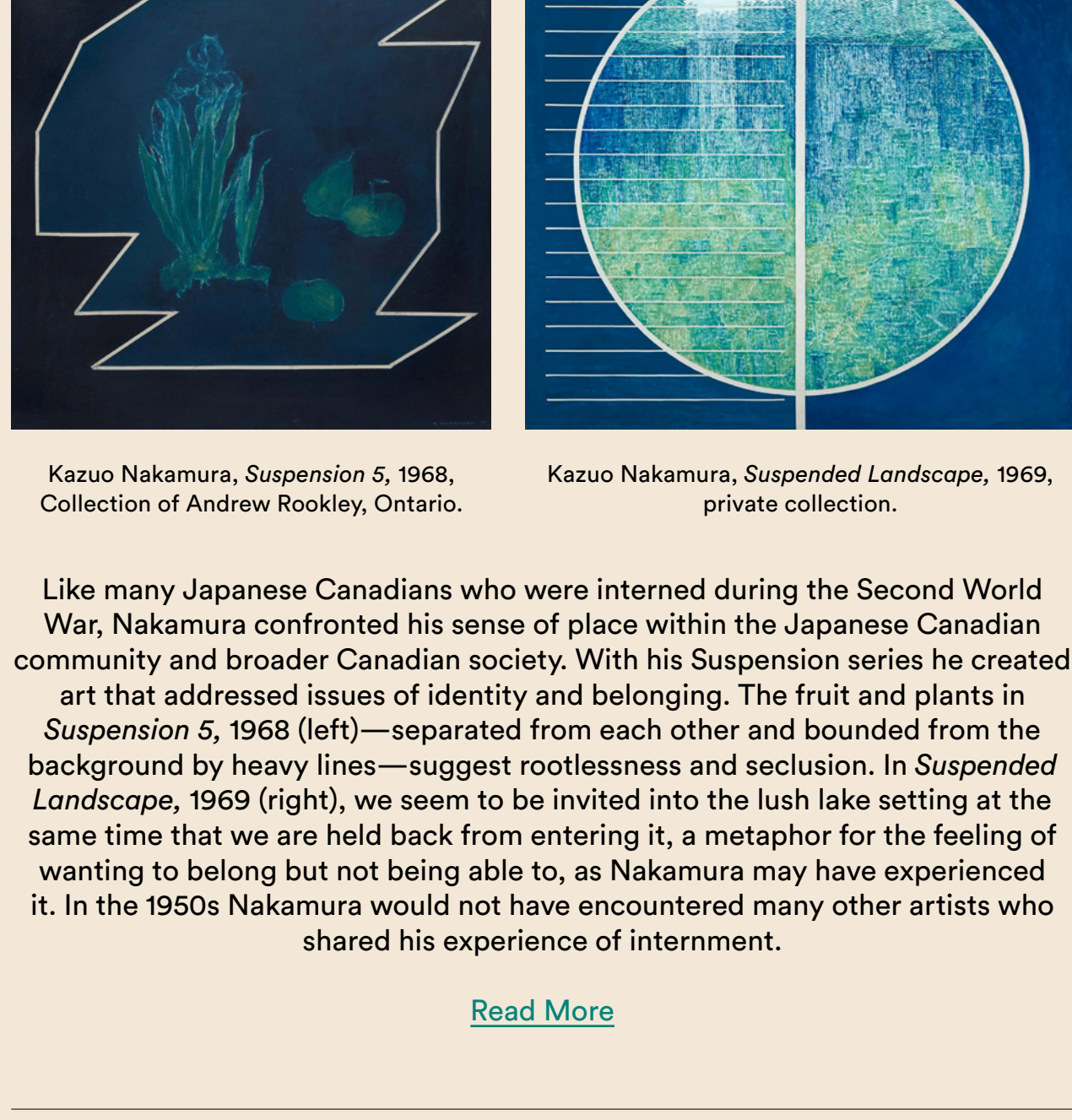
PIONEER OF MODERN ABSTRACTION

Kazuo Nakamura, *Inner Structure*, 1956, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.Harold Town, *Tumult for a King*, 1954, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa.

While part of Painters Eleven, Nakamura created works like *Inner Structure*, 1956 (left), that are far more subdued than the gestural and boldly coloured output of other members of Painters Eleven, such as Harold Town’s fiery *Tumult for a King*, 1954 (right). *Inner Structure* possesses a riveting haziness of colour and lines that, rather than displaying the influence of Abstract Expressionism, echoes the atmospheric effects of Impressionist paintings by Claude Monet (1840–1926) and the serene landscapes of Japanese painters like Kawabata Gyokushō (1842–1913). Nakamura’s distinctive compositions reflected his interest in revealing the universal laws of nature found in science and mathematics. As he explained in a 1993 interview, “Because of the war, and being interned, I lost time, and decided not to become a professional scientist, but to go into art.”

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A LANDSCAPE ARTIST IN DEMAND

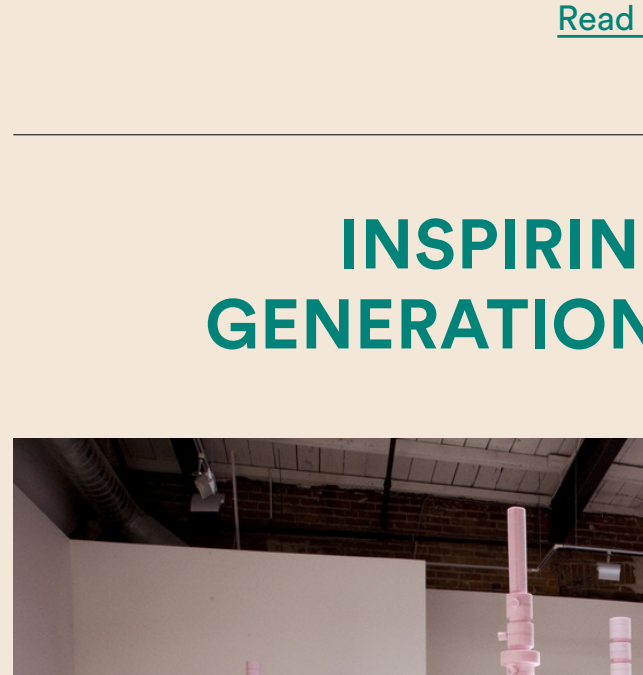
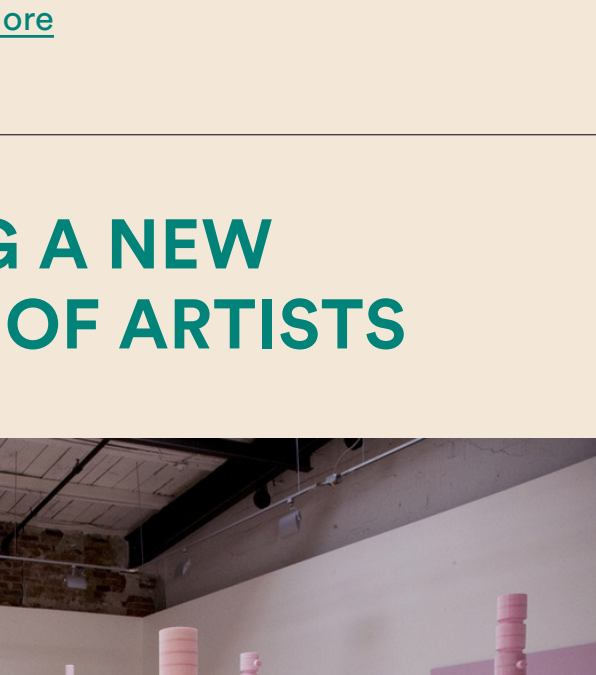
Kazuo Nakamura, *August, Morning Reflections*, 1961, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Though the other Painters Eleven members were committed to abstraction, Nakamura continued to produce images with recognizable subject matter, creating blue-green landscapes such as *August, Morning Reflections*, 1961, that became his most popular works throughout his career and what his wife Lillian would describe as his “bread and butter.” With this view across a lake to the forest on a distant shore, Nakamura constructs a complex, delicate pattern of reflections of the trees and sky in the water. The result of combining the lush green of the foliage with the blue of the water and ultimately the sky is almost monochromatic, a quality Nakamura ascribed to Japanese art.

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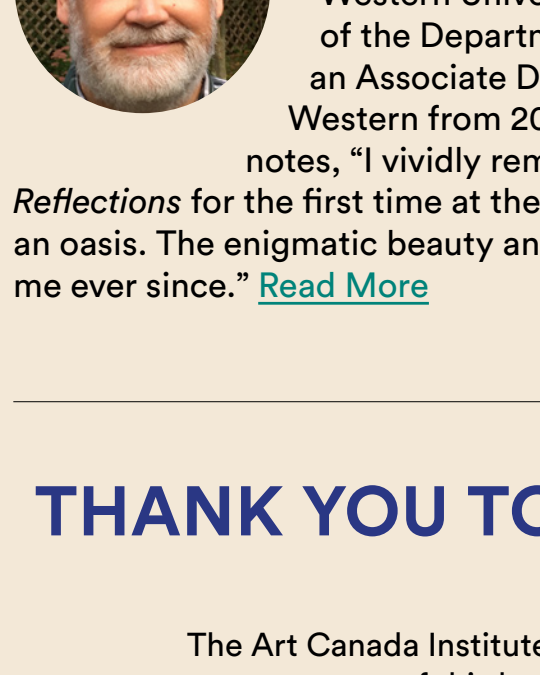
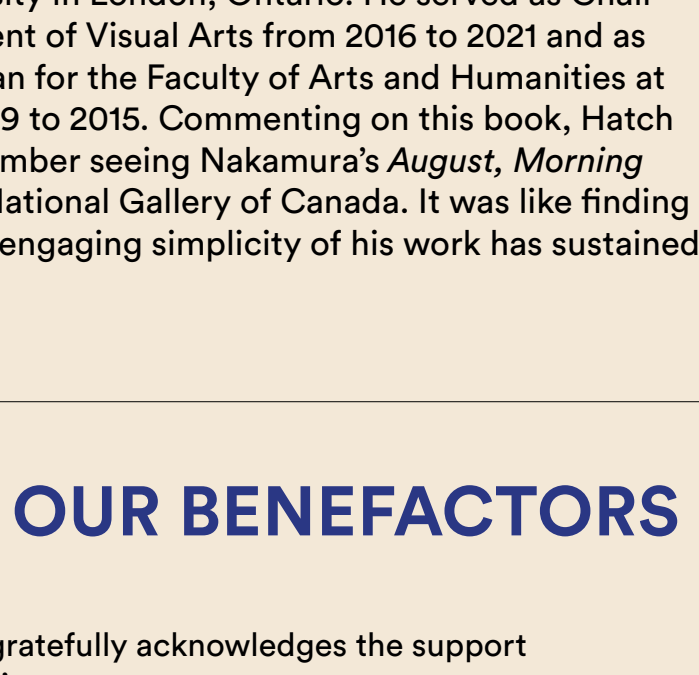
STYLISTIC CHAMELEON

Kazuo Nakamura, *Fortress*, 1956, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.Kazuo Nakamura, *String Painting*, 1957, Collection of Paul and Janice Sabourin.

While Nakamura was beloved for his landscape paintings, he was an artist who was deeply committed to experimentation and pursuing diverse bodies of work. These included his widely exhibited paintings of eerie, open spaces populated by block-like forms, such as *Fortress*, 1956 (left), and his radical String paintings (right). In *String Painting*, 1957, oil and string on tempered hardboard, 35.6 x 43.2 cm. Courtesy of Paul and Janice Sabourin. Photo by Kalamari + Demetrou (K+D). [10] Kazuo Nakamura, *Untitled*, 1964, oil on canvas, 62.9 x 50.2 cm. Estate of the artist. Courtesy of Christopher Cutts Gallery, Toronto. [11] Kazuo Nakamura, *Reversed Images*, 1965, oil on canvas, 81.3 x 86.4 cm. Private Collection. Courtesy of Waddington’s Auctioneers and Appraisers, Toronto. [12] Kazuo Nakamura, *Suspension 5*, 1969, oil on canvas, 51 x 55.9 cm. Collection of Andrew Rookley, Ontario. Courtesy of Cowley Abbott, Toronto. [14] Kazuo Nakamura, *Number Structure and Fractals*, 1983, oil on canvas, 71 x 101.7 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchase (39865). Courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada. [15] Louise Noguchi, *Shanghai Dragon*, 2008, installation and photographs. Courtesy of the artist.

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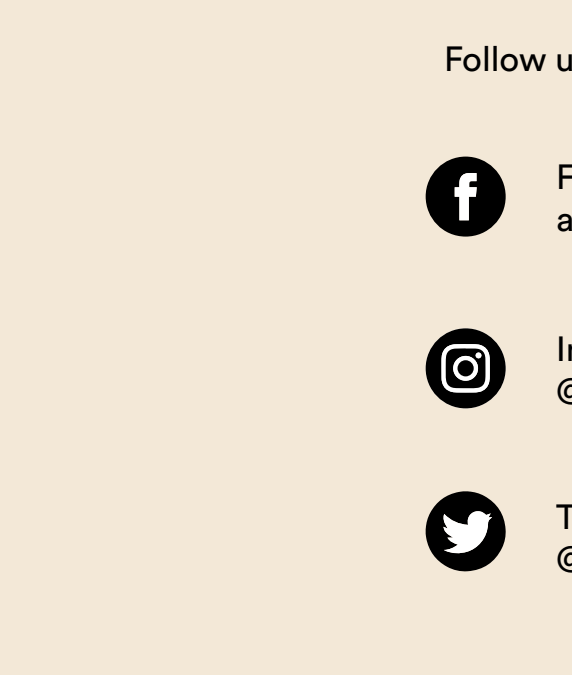
REINVENTING THE STILL LIFE

Kazuo Nakamura, *Untitled*, 1964, Christopher Cutts Gallery, Toronto.Kazuo Nakamura, *Reversed Images*, 1965, private collection.

Nakamura reinvented the still life genre with his enigmatic depictions of mirrored plants and fruits, including *Untitled*, 1964 (left), and *Reversed Images*, 1965 (right). In *Untitled*, the artist depicts two potted plants and their reflections. Similarly, in *Reversed Images*, two green pears and three green apples are laid out in a row against a dark blue background and mirrored immediately below. As Nakamura’s blue-green landscape paintings illustrate, by 1960 reflections held increasing importance in his work as symbols of another reality underlying our visible world. The pages of *Scientific American*, of which Nakamura was a voracious reader, were replete with mentions of symmetry in the 1950s and 1960s. Significantly, Nakamura saved an article from this magazine about the discovery of twin subatomic particles.

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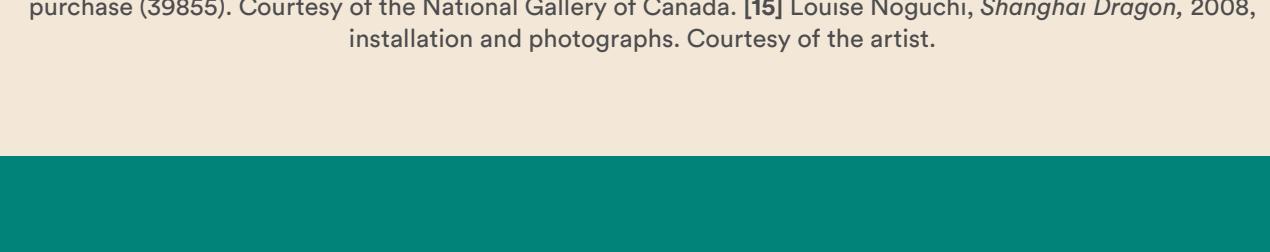
EXPLORING JAPANESE CANADIAN IDENTITY

Kazuo Nakamura, *Suspension 5*, 1968, Collection of Andrew Rookley, Ontario.Kazuo Nakamura, *Suspended Landscape*, 1969, private collection.

Like many Japanese Canadians who were interned during the Second World War, Nakamura confronted his sense of place within the Japanese Canadian community and broader Canadian society. With his *Suspension* series he created art that addressed issues of identity and belonging. The fruit and plants in *Suspension 5*, 1968 (left)—separated from each other and bounded from the background by heavy lines—suggest rootlessness and seclusion. In *Suspended Landscape*, 1969 (right), we seem to be invited into the lush lake setting at the same time that we are held back from entering it, a metaphor for the feeling of wanting to belong but not being able to, as Nakamura may have experienced it. In the 1950s Nakamura would not have encountered many other artists who shared his experience of internment.

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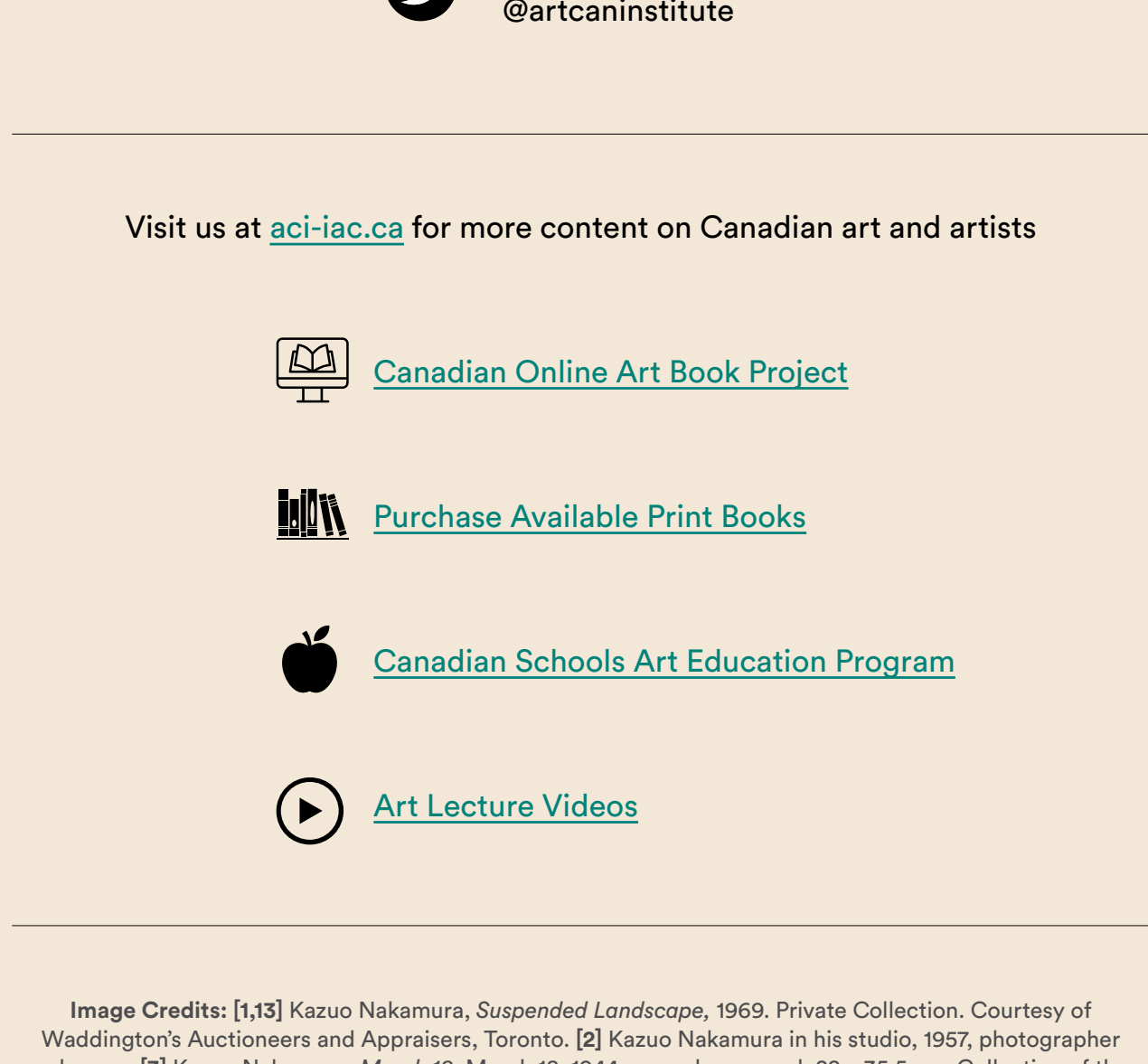
THE SYNTHESIS OF ART AND SCIENCE

Kazuo Nakamura, *Number Structure and Fractals*, 1983, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

For Nakamura, digits and their sequences described universal relationships. This principle is at the core of *Number Structure and Fractals*, 1983, part of Nakamura’s Number Structure series, which he regarded as his most important body of work. To create this group of paintings, he meticulously calculated numerical sequences which he wrote out on paper and canvas in a variety of grid patterns. Art dealer Christopher Cutts noted after Nakamura’s death in 2002 that “Kaz was looking for the Grand Theory.... This search was his holy grail, his challenge. He felt number-structure works constituted his legacy.” Although this series disappointed many collectors who associated Nakamura with the paintings he created while part of Painters Eleven and the blue-green landscapes, the artist maintained that the patterns and themes he was exploring in the Number Structure series lay at the core of all his earlier work.

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INSPIRING A NEW GENERATION OF ARTISTS

Louise Noguchi, *Shanghai Dragon*, 2008.

Nakamura’s success helped lay the groundwork for younger generations of Japanese Canadian artists, including Louise Noguchi (b.1958), whose monochromatic installation *Shanghai Dragon*, 2008 (above), reimagines the types of places where Hollywood action film heroes find inspiration. As Noguchi stated: “Kaz’s presence on the Canadian arts scene made it feasible to imagine that other Nikkei artists could become recognized in both the Japanese Canadian community and in mainstream Canadian society. Kaz validated the idea of being an artist in the community. Perhaps it wasn’t such a crazy endeavour.” Leading artists in the Japanese Canadian community today include Heather Yamada (b.1951) and Warren Hoyano (b.1954), and their successors, such as Emma Nishimura (b.1982) and Cindy Mochizuki (b.1976). The artist and curator Bryce Kanbara (b.1947) has documented the achievements of these artists and others, who were powerfully impacted by the legacy of Nakamura.

[Read More](#)[Learn about Louise Noguchi](#)

About the Author of Kazuo Nakamura: Life & Work

John G. Hatch is an associate professor of art history at Western University in London, Ontario. He served as Chair of the Department of Visual Arts from 2016 to 2021 and as an Associate Dean for the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at Western from 2009 to 2015. Commenting on this book, Hatch notes, “I vividly remember seeing Nakamura’s *August, Morning Reflections* for the first time at the National Gallery of Canada. It was like finding an oasis. The enigmatic beauty and engaging simplicity of his work has sustained me ever since.” [Read More](#)

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