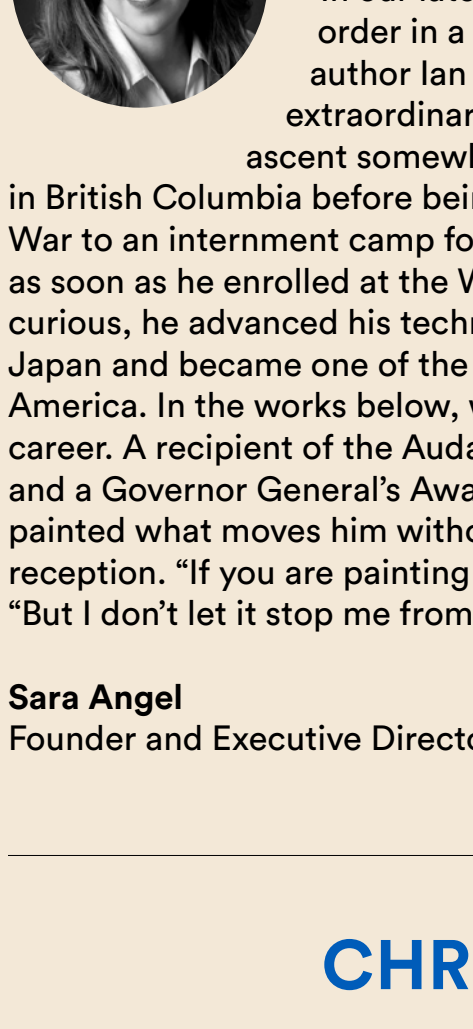


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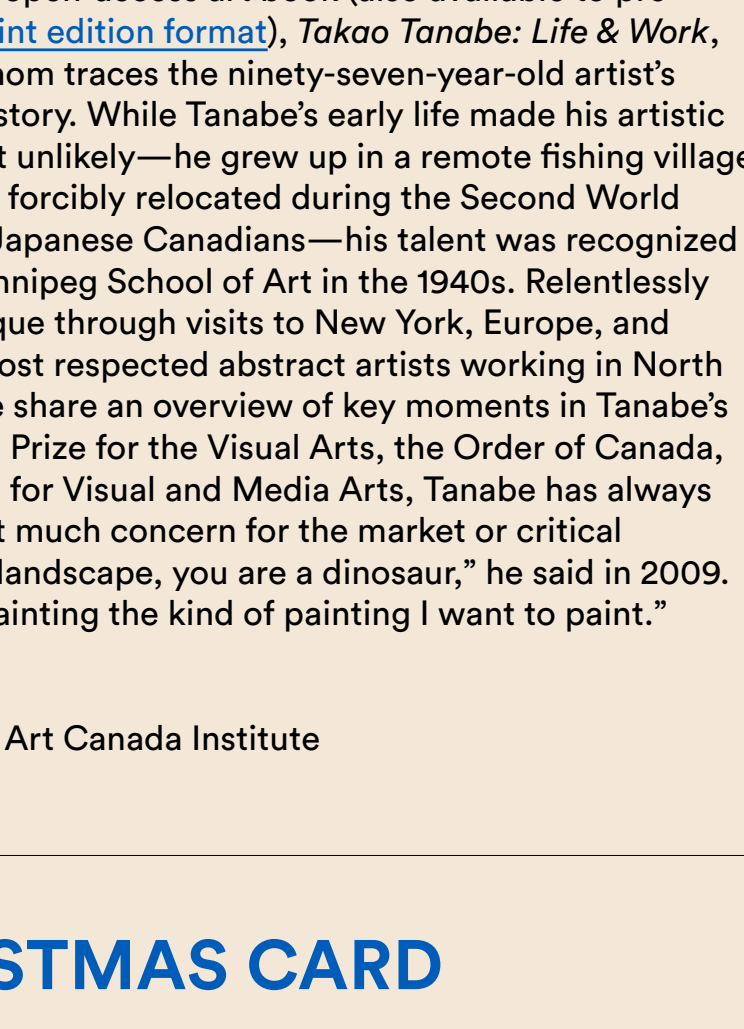
TAKAO TANABE

CANADA'S LEGENDARY LANDSCAPE ARTIST

Despite limited exposure to the arts in his youth, Takao Tanabe is revered for his ability to distill landscapes into evocative images that blur the lines between representation and abstraction. Today, the Art Canada Institute celebrates the publication of [Takao Tanabe: Life & Work](#) by Ian Thom, which delves into the artist's prolific career as a painter, printmaker, educator, and creative visionary.



Takao Tanabe in his Vancouver Island studio, 1987, photograph by Eliza Massey.



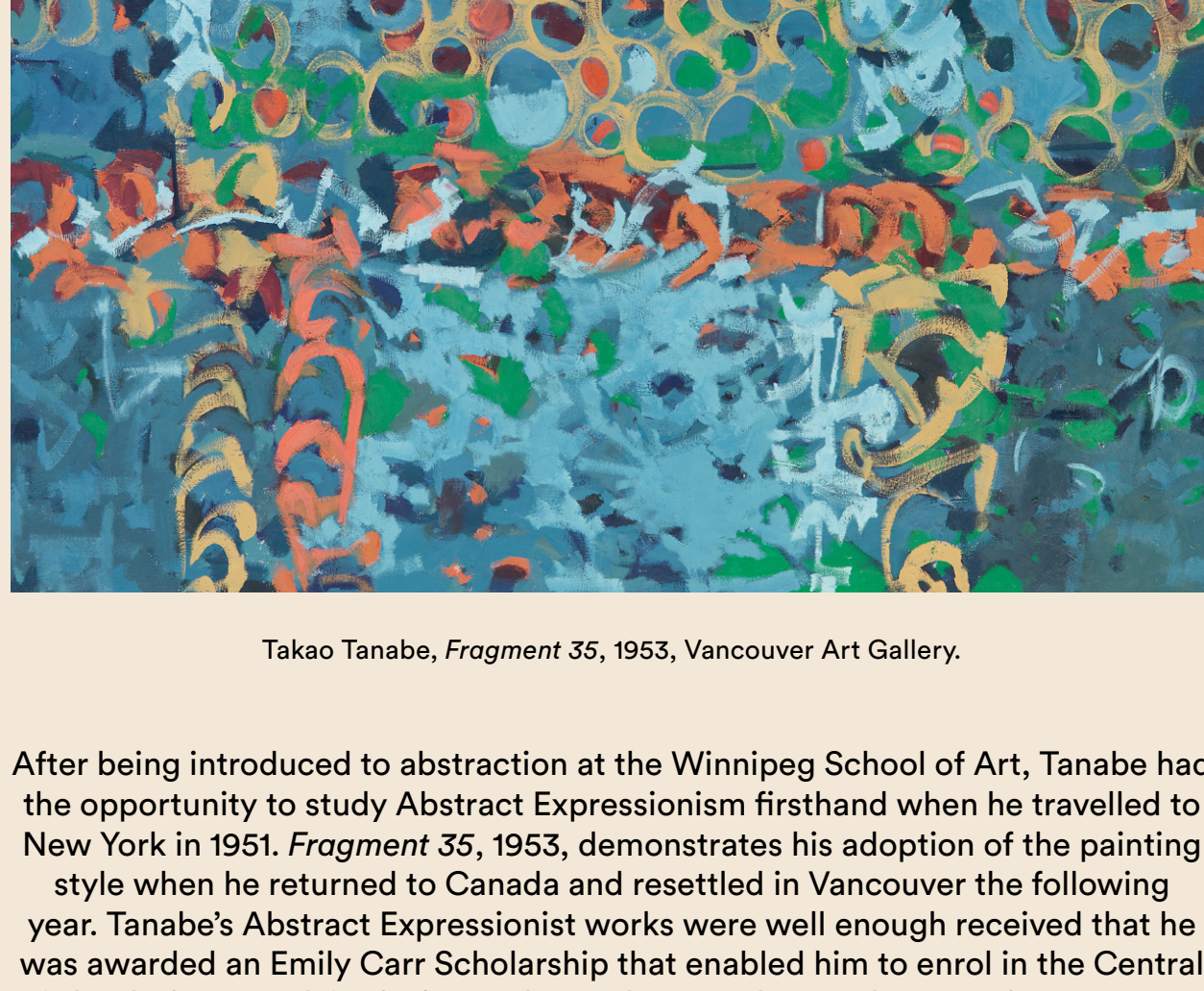
Takao Tanabe, *Cormorant Island, Looking South* (detail), 2015, private collection.



Through his paintings, prints, and other works of great depth and subtlety, Takao Tanabe (b.1926) has been transforming the way Canadians view landscapes for the past six decades. In our latest open-access art book (also available to pre-order in a [print edition format](#)), *Takao Tanabe: Life & Work*, author Ian Thom traces the ninety-seven-year-old artist's extraordinary story. While Tanabe's early life made his artistic ascent somewhat unlikely—he grew up in a remote fishing village in British Columbia before being forcibly relocated during the Second World War to an internment camp for Japanese Canadians—his talent was recognized as soon as he enrolled at the Winnipeg School of Art in the 1940s. Relentlessly curious, he advanced his technique through visits to New York, Europe, and Japan and became one of the most respected abstract artists working in North America. In the works below, we share an overview of key moments in Tanabe's career. A recipient of the Audain Prize for the Visual Arts, the Order of Canada, and a Governor General's Award for Visual and Media Arts, Tanabe has always painted what moves him without much concern for the market or critical reception. "If you are painting a landscape, you are a dinosaur," he said in 2009. "But I don't let it stop me from painting the kind of painting I want to paint."

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

CHRISTMAS CARD

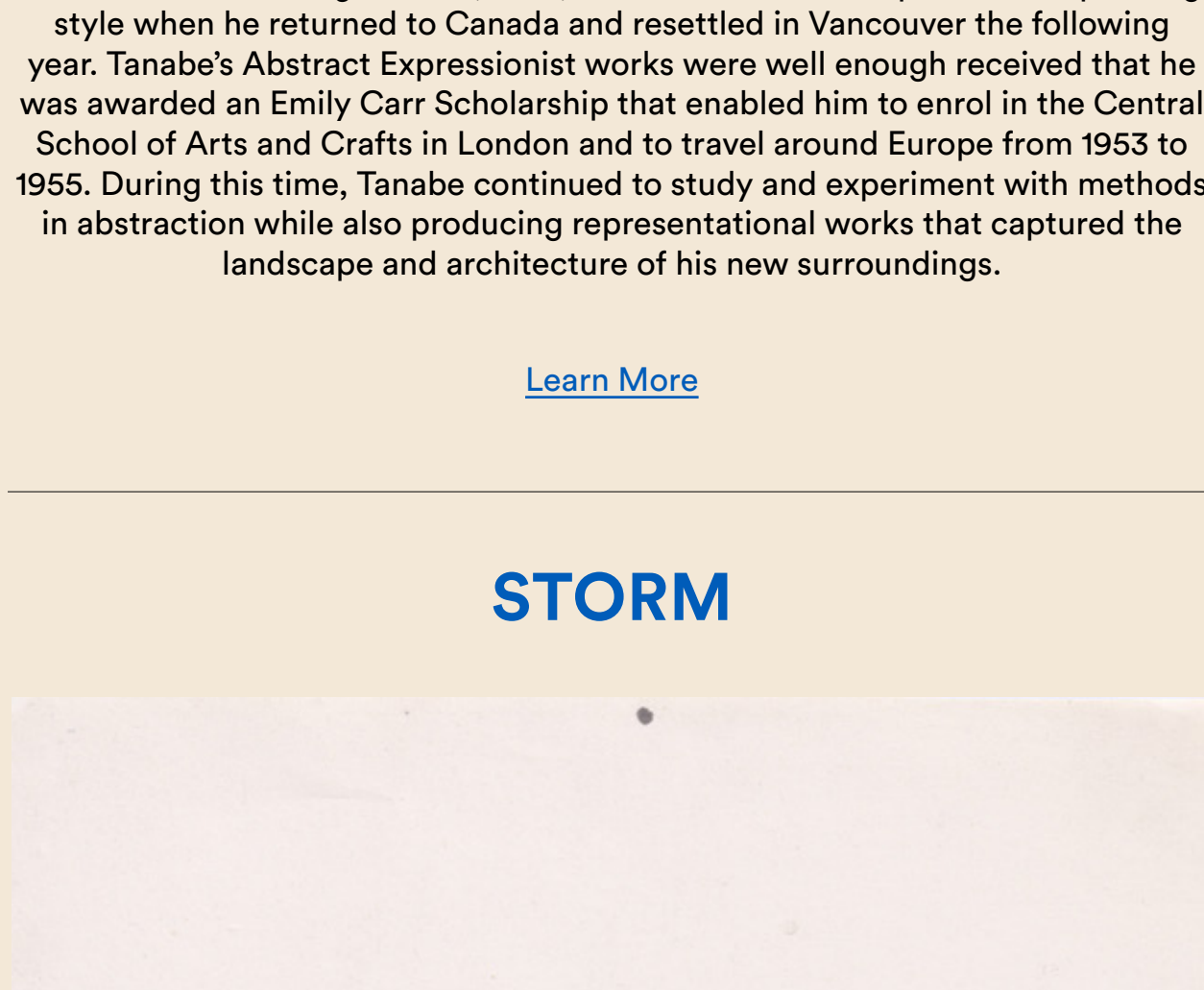


Takao Tanabe, *Christmas Card*, c.1948, Winnipeg Art Gallery.

One of Tanabe's earliest works, this linocut landscape was made while the artist was at the Winnipeg School of Art (WSA) under the tutelage of painter Joseph Plaskett (1918–2014), who would become a lifelong friend. Tanabe had moved to Winnipeg after the end of the Second World War to join his siblings, who were working as indentured farm labourers. On the lookout for a viable career option, Tanabe, who didn't have a high school diploma, enrolled in an evening sign-painting class at the WSA. Plaskett immediately recognized the young man's talent, declaring him a star. Although Tanabe is known primarily as a landscape painter, printmaking became a key part of his later work.

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FRAGMENT 35

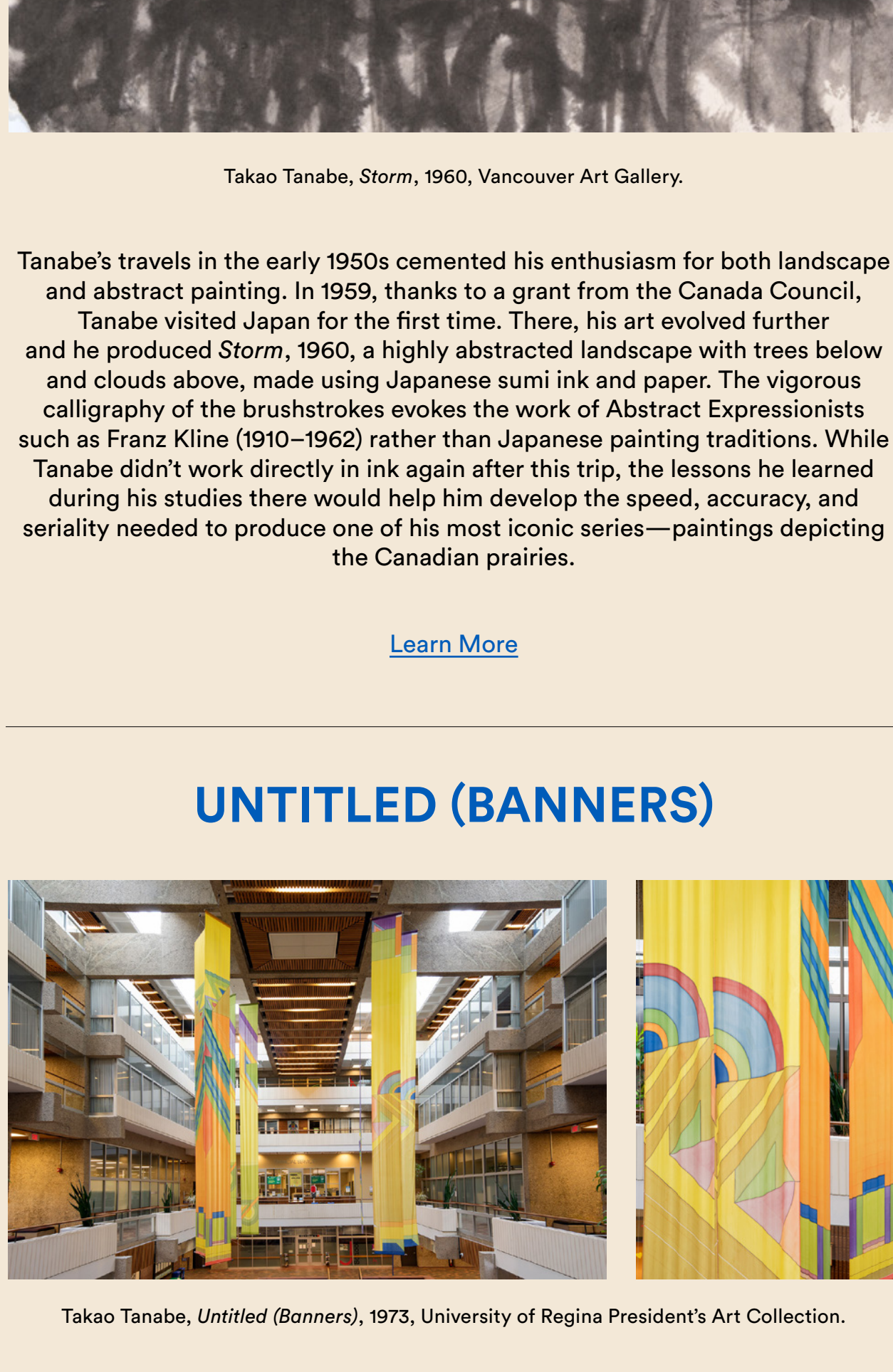


Takao Tanabe, *Fragment 35*, 1953, Vancouver Art Gallery.

After being introduced to abstraction at the Winnipeg School of Art, Tanabe had the opportunity to study Abstract Expressionism firsthand when he travelled to New York in 1951. *Fragment 35*, 1953, demonstrates his adoption of the painting style when he returned to Canada and resettled in Vancouver the following year. Tanabe's Abstract Expressionist works were well enough received that he was awarded an Emily Carr Scholarship that enabled him to enrol in the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London and to travel around Europe from 1953 to 1955. During this time, Tanabe continued to study and experiment with methods in abstraction while also producing representational works that captured the landscape and architecture of his new surroundings.

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STORM

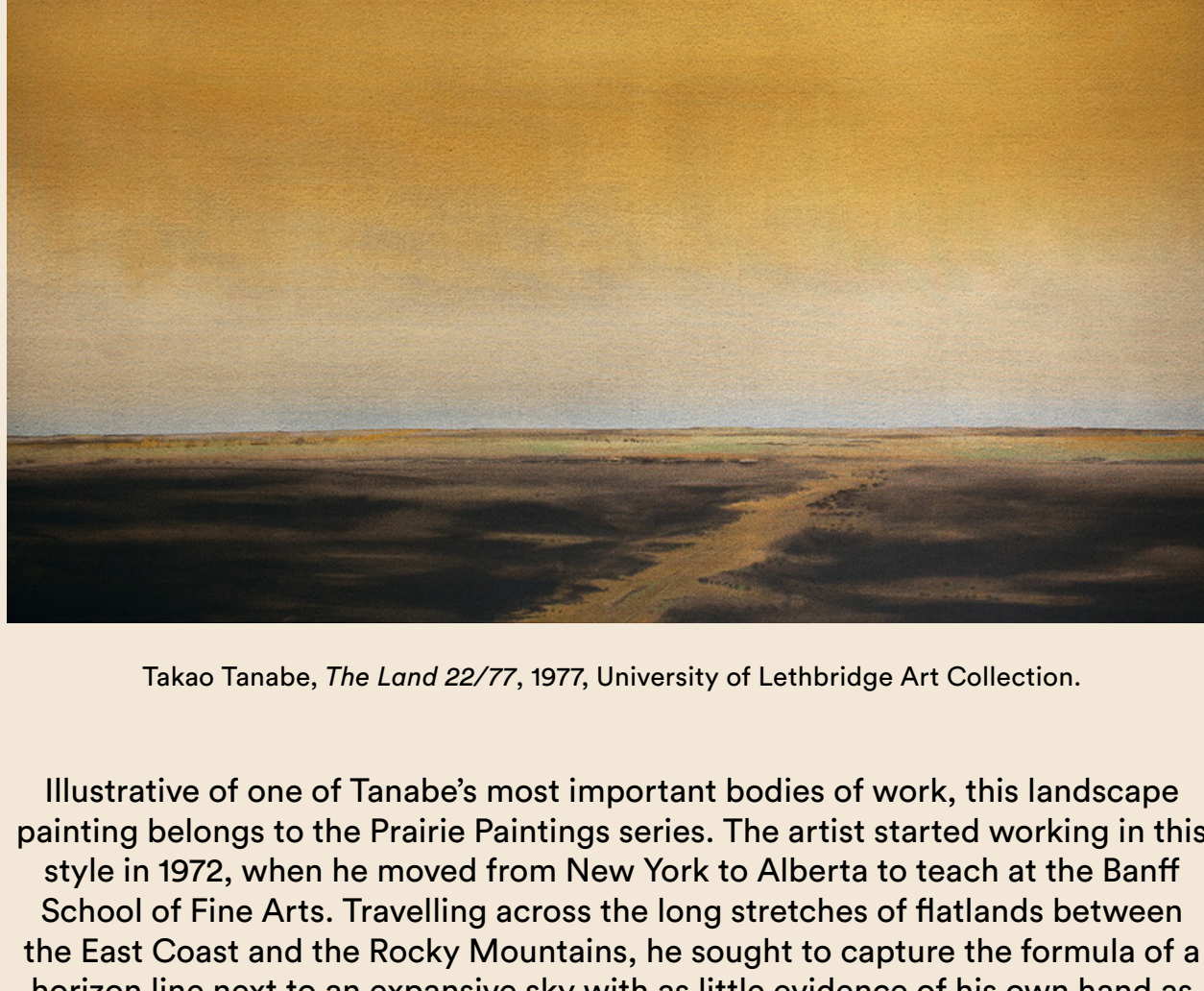


Takao Tanabe, *Storm*, 1960, Vancouver Art Gallery.

Tanabe's travels in the early 1950s cemented his enthusiasm for both landscape and abstract painting. In 1959, thanks to a grant from the Canada Council, Tanabe visited Japan for the first time. There, his art evolved further and he produced *Storm*, 1960, a highly abstracted landscape with trees below and clouds above, made using Japanese sumi ink and paper. The vigorous calligraphy of the brushstrokes evokes the work of Abstract Expressionists such as Franz Kline (1910–1962) rather than Japanese painting traditions. While Tanabe didn't work directly in ink again after this trip, the lessons he learned during his studies there would help him develop the speed, accuracy, and seriality needed to produce one of his most iconic series—paintings depicting the Canadian prairies.

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UNTITLED (BANNERS)



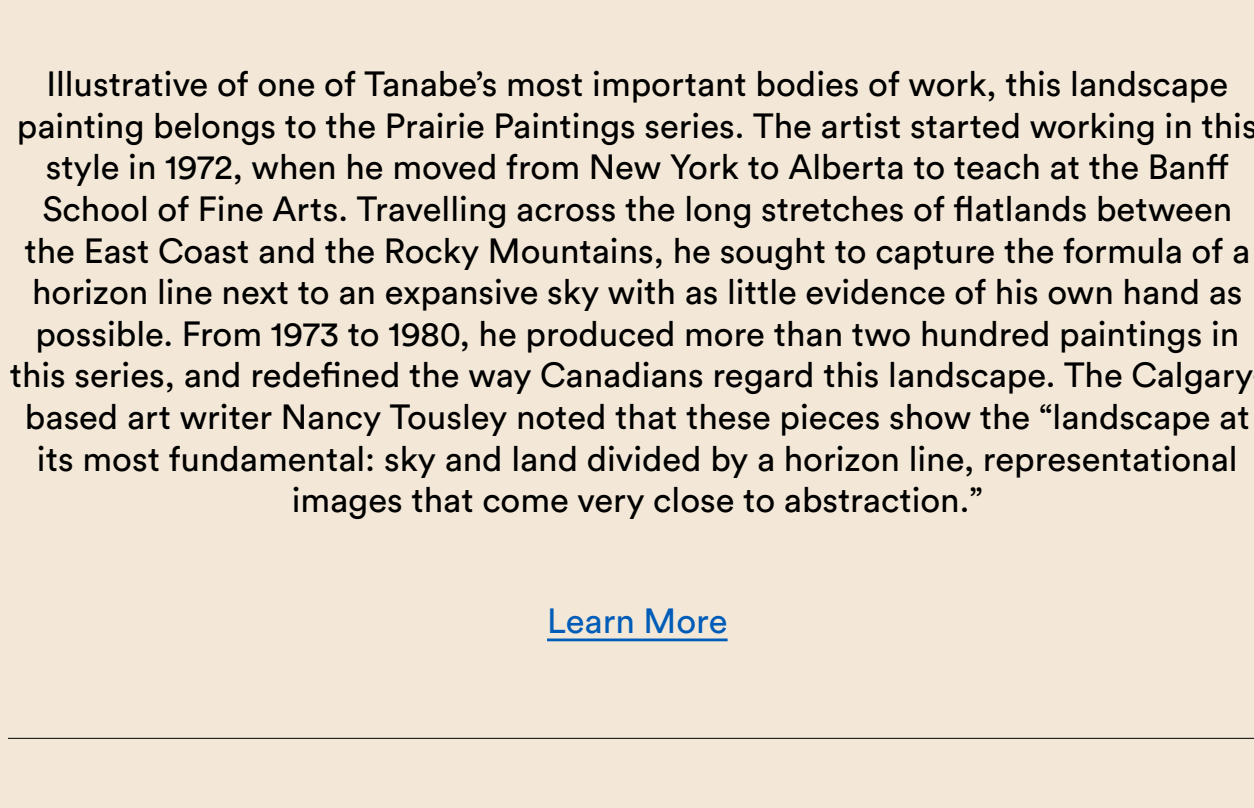
Takao Tanabe, *Untitled (Banners)*, 1973, University of Regina President's Art Collection.

While Abstract Expressionism guided many of Tanabe's early works, he moved away from the style in the mid-1960s and early 1970s. In 1973, Tanabe created these large-scale nylon banners for the University of Regina. They play with bright colours and geometric forms in the hard-edge style, but as critic Roald Nasgaard noted, Tanabe's works are decidedly "eccentric." Commenting on Tanabe's paintings from the same era, Nasgaard said that the "colours turned high-keyed and commercial and were laid down flat and unmodulated," which can be traced to the artist's early interest in sign painting.

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THE LAND 22/77



Takao Tanabe, *The Land 22/77*, 1977, University of Lethbridge Art Collection.

Illustrative of one of Tanabe's most important bodies of work, this landscape painting belongs to the Prairie Paintings series. The artist started working in this style in 1972, when he moved from New York to Alberta to teach at the Banff School of Fine Arts. Travelling across the long stretches of flatlands between the East Coast and the Rocky Mountains, he sought to capture the formula of a horizon line next to an expansive sky with as little evidence of his own hand as possible. From 1973 to 1980, he produced more than two hundred paintings in this series, and redefined the way that Canadians regard this landscape. The Calgary-based art writer Nancy Tousley noted that these pieces show the "landscapes at its most fundamental: sky and land divided by a horizon line, representational images that come very close to abstraction."

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STRAIT OF GEORGIA 1/90: RAZA PASS

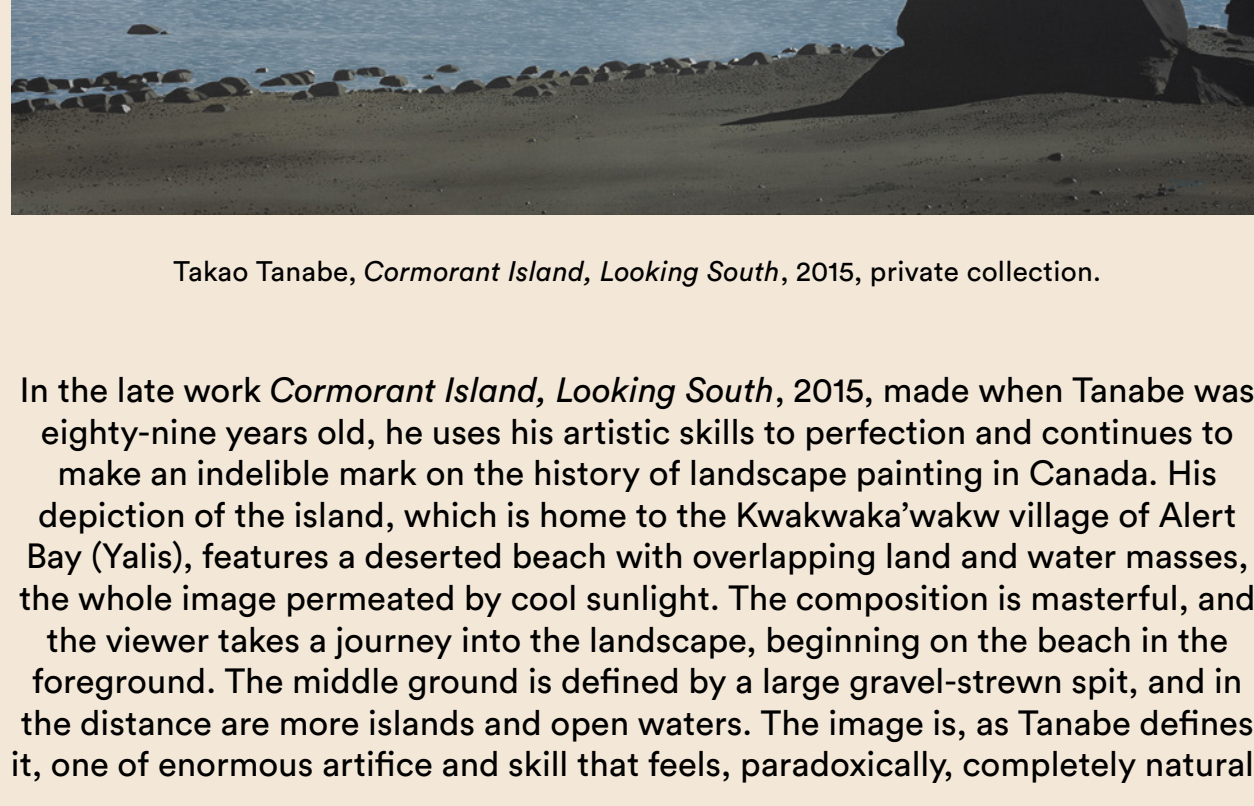


Takao Tanabe, *Strait of Georgia 1/90: Raza Pass*, 1990, Audain Art Museum, Whistler.

In the 1980s, Tanabe moved back to the West Coast, where he began a series of canvases of West Coast landscapes, including the majestic *Strait of Georgia 1/90: Raza Pass*, 1990. In this image wreathed in mist, we are placed high above the water and look into an empty but profoundly rich landscape. The overlapping islands move from dark to light, brilliantly marking a visual and psychological journey. With this and other coastal works, Tanabe makes a dramatic shift from the way he approached his earlier prairie subjects—the paint is applied more slowly and methodically, but the results never seem laboured.

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RIVERS 2/00: CROOKED RIVER

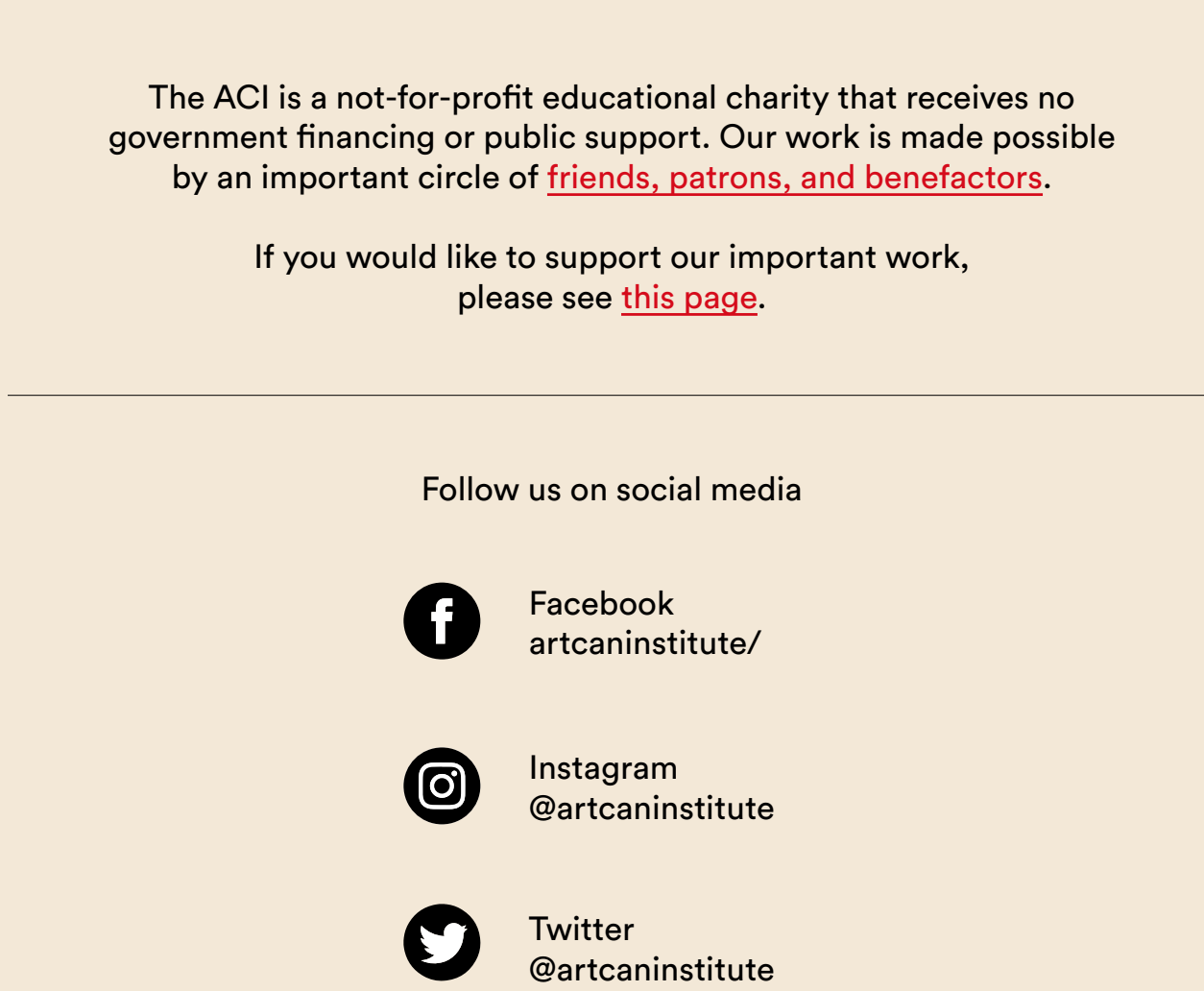


Takao Tanabe, *Rivers 2/00: Crooked River*, 2000, Vancouver Art Gallery.

From 2000 to 2001, Tanabe decided to embark on a series of six paintings, including *Rivers 2/00: Crooked River*, 2000, that took the rivers of British Columbia as their subjects. These complex works are the result of lengthy trips to the interior of the province, where Tanabe documented significant sites with his camera and then returned to his Vancouver Island studio to paint them. In *Rivers 2/00*, Tanabe creates a dense wealth of visual information on the canvas by completing at least six different rounds of painting over several months to build up the dense and complex surface that he sought.

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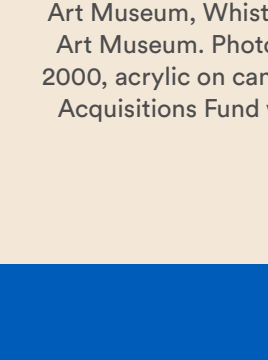
CORMORANT ISLAND, LOOKING SOUTH



Takao Tanabe, *Cormorant Island, Looking South*, 2015, private collection.

In the late work *Cormorant Island, Looking South*, 2015, made when Tanabe was eighty-nine years old, he uses his artistic skills to perfection and continues to make an indelible mark on the history of landscape painting in Canada. His depiction of the island, which is home to the Kwakwaka'wakw village of Alert Bay (Yalis), features a deserted beach with overlapping land and water masses, the whole image permeated by cool sunlight. The composition is masterful, and the viewer takes a journey into the landscape, beginning on the beach in the foreground. The middle ground is defined by a large gravel-strewn spit, and in the distance are more islands and open waters. The image is, as Tanabe defines it, one of enormous artifice and skill that feels, paradoxically, completely natural.

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About the Author of *Takao Tanabe: Life & Work*

Ian Thom is an art historian and curator who has worked extensively in Canadian public art museums, including the Vancouver Art Gallery, the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario, and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. He organized the exhibition *Takao Tanabe: Printmaker for the Kelowna Art Gallery* in 2023. Thom notes, "I have admired Tanabe's work for many years. My organization of a major exhibition of his work, *Takao Tanabe*, in 2005 was a pivotal point for me in understanding the enormous range and power of his achievement. I quickly realized that he is an artist of both exceptional originality and remarkable skill. It has been an honour to revisit Tanabe's work and re-examine his enormous contribution to Canadian visual culture."

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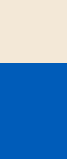
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