Abstract

In support of my thesis exhibition *Andante: The Spirit of Prairies*, I examine my studio practice of painting landscapes in reference to the histories and conventions of landscape paintings as well as my own development of methods and strategies. I explore the experience of vastness and emptiness of Western Canadian prairies as a metaphor for unknown potentiality of life and its possibilities. The panoramic view of the prairies creates a feeling of expansion and continuum resulting in the sense of infinite space. My intention is to invite viewers to become visual explorers and discover many impressions and versions of the prairies in a slow meditative manner by means of contemplation and through imagination.
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Thanks be to God.
to my Dad in heaven
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Introduction

My practice focuses on the painting of landscapes inspired from Western Canadian prairies, exploring the experience of vastness and emptiness of the prairies as a metaphor for unknown potentiality of life and its possibilities. The stillness of prairies evokes the impression of slow rhythm which relates to the word *andante* in the title. *Andante* refers to a slow tempo of perceiving, usually at a walking pace. It enables the viewers to visually experience and explore many impressions and versions of the prairies in a meditative manner. The experience of emptiness, both literally and metaphorically, allows for the viewer to fill in the void by means of imagination. My expectation of the viewers is that they use contemplation as a way to interact with images and surfaces, materials and scales, resulting in an experience, which stimulates their imagination.

Our perceptual vision can never absorb the entire view of the landscape. We only see a sector of the scene. The optical limitation stimulates our notion of thinking beyond the boundary. Therefore the viewer must imagine the rest of the unrevealed scenes.

In my work, the depicted location is derived from direct experience, memory, imagination and invention as well as being influenced by the traditions and conventions of the histories of landscape paintings. The distant view of landscapes creates a sense of mystery in that the image is fading or disappearing whilst at the same time appearing to emerge. I reduce the details of landscape until it appears as atmosphere, as if the image is a record of some phenomena like lights, clouds, sky or distant haze. My painting process thus becomes a journey to discover a place and its mood and atmosphere rather than realistic depictions or descriptions of the landscape.
Mark Rothko (1903–1970) in his book, *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*, has defined mood as “a specialized form of sentiment”, closely related to sentimentality. Rothko tried to establish the evocation of emotion and mood through his paintings. For Rothko, “the quality of mood is based upon the association of certain specific emotions with the effects of light.” Often read as mysterious and solitary, Rothko’s paintings had the power to create a separate environment for viewers to feel the intimacy of atmosphere and spiritual silence.

In my thesis, I examine the subject of landscape in the works of landscape painters and a photographer. I also examine how artists have developed strategies and methodologies to depict the visual impression of a particular place, and how their works have influenced and informed my works.

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1.1 Claude Monet

Claude Monet (1840–1926) produced a series of paintings on the same subjects such as haystacks and water lilies. Painting the same imagery from a particular location as a repetitive motif is related to the artist’s personal interest in the place.

In the *Haystacks* (1890–91) series, Monet emphasized luminosity and vibrancy of colour reflected on haystacks by carefully observing them in various times of the day and seasons. He applied thick paints to create textures on the surface and add sensitiveness of materials. He also depicted haystacks momentarily in response to the optical phenomenon of light, atmosphere and colour, which conveyed the mood of the painting. Monet’s use of limited colour palette and his spontaneity to different conditions in nature created a dramatic effect of depicting sunlight. The unattractive subject of haystacks became a glowing expression exemplary of the Impressionist style.

Monet also produced paintings of *Water lilies* (1914–1926) from his private garden of Giverny in France where he developed a keen interest in painting water lilies. The garden inspired Monet by encouraging “the lively intensity of colours, drawing the spectator’s attention to their diversity, depth and shades.”

My initial impression on Monet’s paintings of water lilies, *Les Nymphéas* (1918–26), in the Musée de l’Orangerie was the absorbing power from the enormous scale of

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paintings. The paintings installed on the walls of two oval rooms created a panoramic view of the garden that invaded my perception. Each panel enabled me to experience the sense of pictorial space in the garden. The display of paintings created an environment that immersed the viewer in the paintings leading to the experience of being in the midst of the garden.

Monet’s choice of scale and handling of paints was clever in terms of maximizing the physical aspects of the garden mediated through materials. The surfaces and materials make the image of water lilies appear almost abstract upon close viewing. Monet also intensified the colour integration and light reflection in the layers of paints. The viewing distance of the paintings assures the viewers that the image of water lilies facilitates the experience of the paintings from a distance as if it is a replica of the garden of Giverny.

1.2 David Hockney

David Hockney (b.1937) produced a series of landscape paintings in East Yorkshire, England. East Yorkshire reminded him of his memory from childhood and his mother, so that he could easily find the personal attachment and resonance to the place.

Hockney painted the images of the same place throughout the whole year to record its changes which thereby convey different experiences of the place. The years of time he spent in California influenced his bright colour palette in the Yorkshire paintings as if it reflected the sunny days of California, not normally familiar in British landscapes.

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Hockney’s idea of landscape paintings is to intensify the visual experience of the place that he depicts more as an image than a visceral event. This idea is well represented in his choice of working from small canvases to gradually expanding the scale by adding canvases to make a bigger picture. By expanding the scale, he created a space that the viewers could experience a sense of looking as well as a sense of being in the landscapes.\(^7\) The vast scale of some of his paintings not only suggests the impression of open space but also absorbs the viewer in the experience of looking and seeing.\(^8\)

His paintings of landscapes create intensified experiences which are produced by inviting the viewers looking at the scene as if it was a reflection of Hockney’s perception. Each series of paintings has unique impression of seasonal atmospheres and temperatures reflecting Hockney’s own journey.

The locations suggested by my paintings specifically allude to the prairies, yet the place is invented or imaginary. With the elimination of human presence, the location appears to be barren, empty and not easily accessible. However, the prairie creates an extended view of panorama that stimulates a visual experience of looking from a distance. The topographical features of rolling prairies and its accompanying vastness and openness evoke both the infinity of space and stillness. My connection with the prairie is established through the mind and subjective perception, sensation and contemplation.


Chapter 2. Romantic Landscapes

2.1 J.M.W. Turner


Turner’s paintings were based on his observation and experience in nature. Yet the atmospheric and phenomenal effect in his paintings suggested his interpretation of nature. Instead of depicting and copying the elements in landscapes, Turner created optical experience in the paintings through his vision and imagination. The treatment of depicting colour and light were effective to enhance the prevailing mood of the landscape in his paintings.

In *Nordham Castle, Sunrise* (1845), Turner depicted dawn light. He placed a shadow over the subtle silhouette of the castle and created a soft contrast between blue and light yellow. The sense of light is alive and becomes a focus, so that it draws a viewer’s attention towards the sunlight. Such depictions are the reminiscent of ‘Claudian elements’, described as “pure, aerial light, classical architecture and a poetic sensibility.”

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2.2 Claude Lorrain

The French Romantic landscape painter, Claude Lorrain (1604–1682, also known as Claude) influenced Turner in the painting of atmospheric light. The treatment of radiant light made both Turner and Claude’s paintings poetic and sensitive. The typical element in Claude’s paintings is the suggestion of hidden light from the sun strongly casting the surroundings, usually lit from a low horizon. The depicted light often appears to be slightly dimmed in misty atmosphere.

The landscape in his paintings is idealized, exquisite and pleasurable, and captures atmosphere of the place and the tranquility of nature. Ian Warrell addressed in his book *Turner Inspired in the Light of Claude* that “Claudian ideal was an imagined composition dominated by golden light, rich colours, verdant trees and hazy distant aerial forms.”

The landscape in Claude’s paintings is normally located at a distance, often describes the time of sunrise or sunset with contrast to a darker pictorial space of the foreground. The depiction of the panoramic view of the site in his paintings enhances the cosmic experience of landscapes. Until the beginning of the 17th century, landscapes were treated mostly as backgrounds in the paintings of portraiture, religious and historical paintings. It was Claude Lorrain who culminated developing classical landscapes as a separate form

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of High Art. E.H. Gombrich states in *The Story of Art*, “The beauty of Claude's pictures lies in their serene simplicity and calm, in the clarity and concreteness of his dream-world, and in the absence of any loud effects.”

2.3 Caspar David Friedrich

In comparison with French landscape paintings by Claude, German Romantic landscape paintings were much invested with the evocation of emotions and the acknowledgement of natural phenomenon that conveyed mood.

Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) was a German Romantic landscape painter who created emotional experience of nature in the paintings. *Monk by the Sea* (1809) creates a sublime experience by drawing attention to a monk in contrast to the vast space surrounding. Friedrich focused on the experience of nature through the depiction of it. The emptiness of vast sky isolates and alienates the monk, yet creates a sense of longing and seeking of oneself in nature.

In my work, the prairie is represented as an idyllic place. The formation of land indicates a description of vegetation; creates a sense of belonging. The sky appears to be soft and blend in its subtlety of colours. Therefore, the prairie in my paintings becomes an ideal space to evoke the spirit of place rather than a record of geographical depiction of the place.

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Chapter 3. Sensations and Phenomena

The Impressionists tried to capture the radiance of light, as sensory impression of fleeting moments, and the changes of time.\textsuperscript{18} It has been claimed that they used light as a motif to convey mood through capturing the sensational impressions.\textsuperscript{19} Due to the difficulties of painting outside affected by weather conditions, most Impressionist paintings were fabricated in the morning or in the afternoon when the open air is more visible than any other time of the day. Time became an important element to be considered in the production of the work.

The time implied in my paintings is daytime between early morning and evening when sunlight is present and visible from the beginning to the end. Due to their vastness, the prairies appear to be absent from human interactions. The experience of nature becomes quiet and solitary when one is in the open space on the prairies. (Fig.1)

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image1.png}
\caption{Meghan Kim. \textit{Spirit of the Prairies}. 2013. Acrylic on Canvas. 14” x 65”}
\end{figure}


My visual depiction of prairies appears to be empty and flat, yet the impression of the prairie is also filled with light, colour and air. Light is indicative of the time which the painting addresses. The feeling of emptiness makes the viewer feel that he or she is the only person staring at the prairie as if there are no other viewers at the scene.

Appreciating the beauty of nature often comes from looking. We look up the mountains but we rarely look down. It is beautiful to see the ocean far away but we hardly imagine the depth. We look at the prairie and do not see the end of it but wonder where the entire view ends. The beauty of nature is not always something we can grasp, but we can sense.

Tonu Viik states that landscapes are phenomenon. It means that the landscape is not only about physical elements but also about subjective experience that involves consciousness.

The physical objects constituting a landscape must be perceived from a certain distance and angle, not from above as in aerial photos, and normally also not from the height of human eyes ... in order to experience something as a landscape we do not just need a certain scope and range of objects, but also a very specifically determined point of view towards then that enables us to create a perspective specific to landscape experience.20

Seeing the landscape is culturally determined because the place alludes to the features of geographical location. A sense of place allocated in the paintings is the primary perception of the landscape. How we look at landscapes eventually enable us to experience the sites as meaningful.

Michael Kenna (b. 1953) said, “The places I like to photograph are places of meditation, often holy places … I seek places that are empty, quiet, devoid of people, chatter and distractions.” Kenna often depicted the distant place in his photographs evoking a particular mood of solitude. The high contrast of black and white adds to the dramatic quality of the image, yet the scene appears to be serene and contemplative.

Takao Tanabe (b. 1926) mentioned the quality of *inscape* in his paintings in association with his experience in landscapes.

> Inscape reveals the intimate wandering of memory not fixed in place or time. Inscape is what emerges when landscape is penetrated, intellectually and emotionally … into a world of poetic sensibility … the evoking of a mood, a feeling about a landscape that I have [and] would like to get down on canvas.

The landscape is not only a place of an artist’s personal interest but also a place where the artist inputs meanings, emotions and feelings. The place in my paintings is where I rest my mind and connect with sentiments for seeking to invent an ideal landscape.

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22 *Inscape* was the concept proposed in the writings of the Victorian English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins.
The process of trying to reconnect with nature involves meditation, contemplation, and sensation. According to Edward Casey in his book *Representing Place: Landscape Painting and Maps*, the pictorial space of the landscape attains a sense of place in the paintings by “imposing on the sense of the beholder and inducing him to believe that he is gazing, not on canvas, but on scenes of actual and sensible nature.”²⁴

Different elements in landscapes affect sensitivity of the viewer’s perception. Looking at the scene from a distance creates unclearness in vision, as if the landscape does not reveal everything. However, imagination enables the experience of visual sensations of the viewers. Like a visual poetry that lingers in the trace of memory, atmospheric landscape evokes mystery and sensation.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes Impressionist influence on sensations as follows.

> The Impressionism was trying to capture, in the painting, the very way in which objects strike our eyes and attack our senses. Objects were depicted as they appear to instantaneous perception, without fixed contours, bound together by light and air.²⁵

Perception of the landscape affects the image in the paintings because it involves sensation and interpretation of the artist. Thus, the process of looking influences the artist’s inner expression in the process of painting.

My painting practice is based on the notion of looking and imagining. The kind of impression I find from the prairies is something that I would not have known if I did not

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come to live in Alberta. Where I grew up was a big, crowded city with many buildings and skyscrapers. It was difficult to find an open space where I could see the wide view of the sky. The sky was grey and gloomy most of the time. To see a clear blue sky was a dream. Now, when I am away, I always miss the experience of the openness of the prairie. Eventually the prairie has become a nostalgic metaphor that reminds me of the feeling of home rather than a dream place.

The sky on the prairie is high and entirely open. What I appreciate the most about the prairie is the openness, the feeling of revealing everything yet concealing at the same time. The prairie appears to be visually less attractive in the form of simple composition, but the simple repetition of the land, sky and a horizon provide a visual cue for the sense of infinite space.

Creating the impression of prairies in my paintings is similar to writing a letter to a friend who is not familiar with the experience of the vastness in the prairies. Looking at the prairies gives me a sense of comfort and calmness as if the prairie is a place of meditative beauty. The feeling of emptiness and timelessness felt along the flat land of prairies creates a sensation of being, the presence of self in the mood of absence where the vastness of the place overwhelms the mind of the viewer. What I am referring to is the experience of the sublime. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) defines the sublime as “a state of mind elicited by the representation of boundless or the infinite.”

Chapter 4. The Process of Painting

My painting process begins with the preparation of the canvases. When I cut down the canvases to stretch them up on the wall, the approximate scale and format is already determined. Looking at the blank canvas is a meditative moment. A drying time after applying gesso is always a moment of waiting and thinking. After gesso dries, the actual process of painting begins.

I used to plan everything ahead by producing many sketches before I started a painting. The first thing I did since working with the landscape as a subject was to get rid of the sketchbooks. Now I work directly on the canvas from the beginning to the end. Any colours or marks I put down, I am aware that I cannot erase them but only have to work with them.

The first layer is very important in terms of deciding the colour palette and general atmosphere in the painting. It works as a sketch. The location of the land and a horizon is composed during the application of the first layer. (Fig. 2) I work quickly to apply paint in order to work wet-on-wet. Acrylic paint has a tendency to dry fast, thus my response to the characteristics of the acrylic medium speeds up the process.

Figure 2. Meghan Kim. Process 1. *Spring on the Prairies* #3. 2013. Acrylic on Canvas. 14” x 65”
I usually start applying paint from the bottom up or slightly toward the middle where the horizon line is positioned. The reason I do this is because it works best this way to handle the dripping and spreading of paint washes to blend each other effectively. The process of applying colour is spontaneous and intuitive. Working with unexpected happenings on paint stains and brush marks is also a part of the process. (Fig.3) The brush marks hint the texture of how the images may look at the finished stage. In order to keep the washes translucent and thin, I often mix paints with the medium. However, I have to be careful about multi-layering washes to maintain the luminosity of colours and to prevent the danger of getting muddy and dull.

![Image](image.png)

Figure 3. Meghan Kim. Process 2. *Spring on the Prairies #3*. 2013. Acrylic on Canvas. 14” x 65”

By the time I apply several layers of amorphous washes, the process becomes less spontaneous but more of a thoughtful process. (Fig.4) As the paint layers gradually build up, I have to think where to apply stains in order to make it work with what is already painted underneath. Depending on how I want the image to appear at the end, the process of applying layers varies amongst paintings.
The drying time between the applications of each layer allows for a moment of contemplation. Once the painting is dried after applying several layers of washes, I can see how the actual colour stains start to appear. Then, I have to decide if I want to stop or add more layers. Making a decision of when to stop is not always easy. Sometimes I leave the painting for a few days once I feel it is done in order to come back and see it from a different perspective. When it feels right, then I stop. (Fig.5)

The final stage is to think about how to present the piece. I work with configuration and orientation of paintings. Sometimes I crop the image to make it work better. Building a stretcher occurs at this stage as well. After paintings are completely dry, I stretch them
on the correct size stretchers. The process is repetitive but the representation of the visual images of landscapes evolves as I repeatedly paint.

4.1 Sfumato

The blending and gradation technique I use with acrylic washes can be explained with reference to Leonardo Da Vinci’s (1452–1519) oil technique of *sfumato*. The technique of *sfumato* makes the images visibly unclear but blurred into softness. Interplay occurs between what is seen and unseen. Mellow colours merge into each other making the light and shadow much visible than its form. The haziness also helps to tone down the colour and creates imperceptible atmosphere in the paintings.

For Da Vinci, shadow was a means to display forms, and a sensor to indicate conditions in visual conception. He depicted shadow in the manner of smokiness without any suggestion of noticeable marks. The technique created a sense of diminishing and vanishing into infinite space with help of characteristics of oil paints. The effect was soft and delicate as if it responds to an optical illusion. Da Vinci’s introduction of seamlessness in his invention of *sfumato* suggested to the infinite subtleness and continuity in nature.

*SFUMATO* is the effective technique for light and shadow in terms of creating the effect between objects and visual perception. Alexander Nagel describes that in the use of

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sfumato, “objects were not shown in their absolute form but within conditions of revealing and concealing that could have meaning only in the experience of a viewer.”  

Similar to sfumato, I also focus on the effect of blurriness to soften and blend the harshness of brush marks in landscape paintings. Colour harmony and the control of running and spreading of acrylic paint, as well as the integration with layers are important in my paintings. The subtle layer of paint enhances the perceptual depth and distance; creates marks that work as a visual clue for elements in landscapes. (Fig.6)

Figure 6. Meghan Kim. After Rain on the Prairies. 2013. Acrylic on Canvas. 14” x 65”

Da Vinci stated, “Nature is full of infinite causes which were never in experience.” Sfumato technique connects Da Vinci’s idea of infinity in nature with the impression of the infinite open space in the prairies. The uncertain blurriness of the images also allows for the viewers to contemplate landscape paintings in their infinite imagination.

Chapter 5. A Horizon and the Distance

5.1 Experience

David Hockney mentioned the term *scenorama*\(^{31}\) as to create a feeling of losing oneself in landscapes. In Hockney’s case, the large scale of his paintings enhanced the effect of *scenorama* by making the viewers immersed in the paintings to experience the landscape. When I saw Hockney’s landscape paintings at the Royal Academy of Arts,\(^{32}\) I had a feeling of being in the middle of a landscape.

On the other hand, Michael Kenna invited the viewer to engage with the images closely. Kenna’s prints are relatively small in size, normally eight by ten inches or eight by eight inches square format. The small scale was effective enough for him to establish the connection between the image and the spectator by creating intimacy and a solitary impression of the place in depicting the beauty of landscapes.\(^{33}\)

In my paintings, the format of canvases parallels with the view of the landscape. In *Whitescape* (Fig.7) series, the format of the paintings was vertical yet close to square. The verticality creates a sense of looking out at the scene through the window. I focused on the subtle transition of colour and atmosphere of the imaginary space in winter landscapes rather than depicting the elements from a particular place.


In *In-Scape* series (Fig. 8), I changed the format of the paintings from vertical to horizontal to create visual images of the experience of the prairies.

Figure 7. Meghan Kim. *Whitescape*. 2012. Acrylic on Canvas. 60” x 50” Each. Exhibition in The Little Gallery, Department of Art, The University of Calgary. 3 December – 7 December 2012.

Figure 8. Meghan Kim. *In-scape*. 2013. Acrylic on canvas. 20” x 120” (Left), 14” x 163” (Right). Exhibition in The Little Gallery, Department of Art, University of Calgary. 25 March–29 March 2013.
5.2 Horizon

The sense of horizon has an effective role in my panoramic paintings of prairies. The presence of a blurred horizon along the rolling prairies minimizes the tension between the land and the sky. The canvas parallels a horizon. Slightly narrow height of the paintings does not create discomfort. Rather it frames the landscape at a certain level of perspective by creating either a feeling of looking from a distance on the prairies, or observing a scene of stillness from a narrow window inside.

![Figure 9. Meghan Kim. Green Prairies. 2013. Acrylic on Canvas. 16” x 66”](image)

The horizon impacts the viewpoint of the spectator. It is a compositional line that creates a sense of receding depth and distance between the foreground and the background. The lower the horizon, the more the sky appears and vice versa. As the horizon rises and the land reveals more space, the perspective becomes aerial. (Fig.9) The viewing distance, from the viewer to the depicted scene, is considerable. However the viewer’s position is located in the foreground.
5.3 Notion of Distancing

The notion of distance in paintings also affects the visual perception of the viewer. Viewers are expected to experience the scene consciously from a distance and are aware that they are also looking at the artist’s perspective.

The viewing distance suggested in the paintings functions in the same manner as poetry. John Ogden acknowledged the effectiveness of distance in reference to Wordsworth’s poetry, “Distance provides adequate room for lighting, atmosphere, and perspective to modify a scene.”\textsuperscript{34} In this case, he meant inner distance that is metaphorical and imaginative, which is also very similar to the experience of the paintings.

Seeing landscapes from a distance involves a kind of sympathy because the distance is detached from the painter and is imposed by the viewer when contemplating the scene. The paintings construct pictorial illusions that suggest distance is not just a measurement of an actual place but is an aesthetic perspective of how we perceive the scene in our imagination. Historically, 18\textsuperscript{th} Century art utilizes distance to romanticize landscapes in reference to philosophical and emotional effectiveness.\textsuperscript{35}


Chapter 6. Western Canadian Prairies

6.1 Takao Tanabe

Takao Tanabe created a series of paintings of Western Canadian prairies. The changes of light, colour, atmosphere and mood were central in his paintings. Tanabe was fascinated with the flatness of the prairie that gave him a sense of a romantic, subtle and simple place. His prairie paintings reveal ephemeral elements of atmosphere, light and the suggestion of time.

Series of landscapes are evocative of the vast landmasses of the prairies and the foothills country of Southern Alberta. The landscapes were not of any specific location but evoke a land both familiar and awe-inspiring to anyone who has experienced it… what is evoked is still beyond a specific place.

The evocation of mood conveyed in Tanabe’s paintings is similar to the mood created in Mark Rothko’s spiritual, atmospheric paintings. Both Tanabe and Rothko created images focusing on light, colour and atmosphere. Tanabe depicted prairies by focusing on the interaction of the most fundamental structures of land and sky divided by a horizon. They are representational but appear to be reductive. Rothko’s paintings, on the other hand, are non-representational.

Tanabe’s paintings create a sense of balance, often interpreted as Zen quality, which suggests emptiness of the space, yet an intimate sense of place for visual, emotional and spiritual journey.\(^{38}\) (Fig. 10)

![Image](image_url)

Figure 10. Takao Tanabe. *The Land #6*. 1974. Acrylic on canvas. 84.0cm x 142.5cm. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Permanent Collection Fund, VAG 74.40 © Takao Tanabe/Vancouver Art Gallery.

My works often refer to the essence of Zen gardens where people can reconnect with mind and nature by recognizing its beauty and spirit. Zen gardens are tranquil and devoid of any sense of tension; create spaces that viewers engage with imagination and self-awareness.\(^{39}\) The sense of emptiness presented in Zen gardens creates a meditational space where the mind can rest in calmness.\(^{40}\) The gardens are often set up as to be viewed from inside. The sense of viewing at a distance created in my paintings of prairies tries to produce similar qualities and experiences.

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Tanabe often used thin black washes in his landscape paintings to create a feeling of looking through a haze. His technique of thin acrylic washes conveyed characteristics of Sumi-e\(^1\) that portrayed a sense of atmosphere in openness, timeless and placeless in certain aspect.\(^2\) The aesthetic unity of the Western Canadian prairies with Japanese ink painting technique of Sumi-e reduced the subject into the most essential and minimal form of landscapes that informs abstraction as a metaphor for nature. Tanabe’s seeking of minimal forms in the landscapes without any distracting details captures the impression of prairie’s vastness, subtle nuances, and open spaces. (Fig.11)

![Figure 11. Takao Tanabe. The Land #20. 1977. Acrylic on canvas. 121.9 cm x 142.2 cm. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Gift of J. Ron Longstaffe, VAG 82.82 © Takao Tanabe/Vancouver Art Gallery.](image)

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\(^1\) Japanese monochrome ink painting

6.2 C.W. Jefferys

Another artist who painted Western Canadian Prairies is C. W. Jefferys (1869–1951). Jefferys travelled Western Canada and produced paintings of the prairie. He was attracted by the vastness in the prairies that he had never felt before (coming from England). The openness of a space and the beauty of sunlight on the prairies impressed him. He wrote about the prairies in his journal as follows.

... a landscape almost void of topographical features. Earth, sky, space and light are its elements. Such a landscape either reduces the mind to vacuity or lulls it to that abstracted reverie in which philosophies and faiths are born.  

Bertram Tennyson remarked that “we see in nature whatever we bring eyes to see.” Landscape paintings are not only the record of the place but also a visual impression of the place interpreted by the artist. The view of the landscapes is often conditioned by one’s feeling, experience, culture, and expectations.

Robert Stacey states, “Prairie art in general conveys an impression of gazing out rather than peering in.” In Jefferys’ paintings, foregrounds are dominant. The high position of the horizon indicates a sense of unreachable and lingering on its periphery instead of being in the landscape. Yet the dynamics of his landscapes exist in various colours, the depiction of atmospheric light and the moving clouds in the sky.


7.1 Michael Kenna

Michael Kenna’s series of black and white photographs of Japan, *Hokkaido, Japan* (2004–2012) (Fig.10) and Korea, *Shinan, South Korea* (2012–2013) (Fig.11) have qualities of Asian ink drawings. Photographs of *Hokkaido, Japan* were taken in winter. The strong
contrast in black and white reinforces the significance of simplicity and emptiness, and Zen-like space appears to be stark and near abstract.46

Kenna frequently revisits a certain place to document it over the years. He spent six months in Shinan, South Korea to photograph archipelagos as if he wanted to unveil the secret of the place or to seek for the unknown beauty in nature. He mentioned in the video whilst working in Shinan that, “nature is a master piece” because nothing seems to stay the same in nature.47

Kenna’s relationship with nature is established in the process of taking photographs of landscapes by capturing the ethereal quality of a place.48 His prints create the solitude of being alone to experience the landscape.

Kenna’s works are monochromatic. Working with black and white enabled him to notice graphic shapes of simple images, as well as brush mark qualities in nature to express the beauty, calmness and tranquility.49 The images in his photographs appear serene but the place appears mysterious and unreachable. Yet Kenna not only depicts the location of the place but also expresses atmosphere and mood, as well as what he sees and feels in the landscape.

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Conclusion

The influences on the painting of landscapes not only come from instances of the beauty found in nature but also from culture. The colour of sunlight, the formation of moving clouds, and the flatness of vast grasslands are certain characteristics of the prairies which also reflect how culture has formed our particular perception. Culture is always transitional and continues to evolve, so is nature. According to Landscape Theory, “the meaning of landscape is more than representing the land or country; it also includes the more abstract quality of a place that makes it perceivable as a land or country with its own particular qualities of cultural background.”

As discussed throughout the thesis, the revisiting of the same imaginary place represents the artist’s personal interest and the attractions of imagination. Experiencing or observing the changes of the imaginary place over a certain period of time is not about creating repetition but about the exploration of infinite beauty.

I include the word *andante* in the title of the thesis exhibition as I apply the notion of the slow discovery of prairies from looking and imagining. The rhythmic repetition of rolling prairies and a continuous horizon line slow down the perception of the viewers to experience an expansive view of panorama. Thus, the prairie encourages people to explore and experience nature by taking time slowly. It allows them to appreciate nature and its environments in a meditative manner, but not to be limited by time.

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51 Musical terminology of moderately slow tempo, normally considered faster than adagio but slower than allegretto.
The experience of the prairies is a meditative and peaceful one. I do not necessarily have to be in the middle of the field in order to feel the vastness of the prairies. My mind is already there when I look at them from a distance. I want my paintings to slowly evoke the mystery and serene impression of vastness on the prairies. The paintings of prairies also reveal myself. The fascination that I have experienced of the prairies has formed part of my painting practices as a painter, as a viewer, and as an explorer.

The landscape works as a metaphorical product of culture because it involves the specific place and peoples. Appreciation of the landscape incorporates ways of seeing as well as ways of knowing. Instead of representing a regional place in which landscape painting becomes scenery, I depict a pictorial space and invite viewers to become visual explorers.

Bibliography


