

**Ihor Holubizky, Walter Klepac, and Christopher Cutts, *Kazuo Nakamura: The Method of Nature / La méthode de la nature*. Oshawa, Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2001, 126 pp., 11 halftone, 16 black-and-white, and 25 colour illus., \$20 Cdn.**

**Bryce Kanbara, *Tashme<sup>2</sup>: Early Work of Kazuo Nakamura*. Toronto, Gendai Gallery, Japanese-Canadian Cultural Centre, 2001, 12 pp., 10 colour illus., \$6 Cdn.**

**Richard William Hill, *Kazuo Nakamura: A Human Measure*. Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, 2004, 78 pp., 15 halftone, 27 black-and-white, and 48 colour illus., \$26 Cdn.**

**Brian Grison et Brett Stevens**

Volume 32, numéro 1-2, 2007

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069598ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069598ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

#### Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

#### ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

#### Citer ce compte rendu

Grison, B. & Stevens, B. (2007). Compte rendu de [Ihor Holubizky, Walter Klepac, and Christopher Cutts, *Kazuo Nakamura: The Method of Nature / La méthode de la nature*. Oshawa, Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2001, 126 pp., 11 halftone, 16 black-and-white, and 25 colour illus., \$20 Cdn. / Bryce Kanbara, *Tashme<sup>2</sup>: Early Work of Kazuo Nakamura*. Toronto, Gendai Gallery, Japanese-Canadian Cultural Centre, 2001, 12 pp., 10 colour illus., \$6 Cdn. / Richard William Hill, *Kazuo Nakamura: A Human Measure*. Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, 2004, 78 pp., 15 halftone, 27 black-and-white, and 48 colour illus., \$26 Cdn.] *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 32(1-2), 107–110. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069598ar>

---

## Book Reviews

### Comptes-rendus de livres

---

Ihor Holubizky, Walter Klepac, and Christopher Cutts, *Kazuo Nakamura: The Method of Nature / La méthode de la nature*. Oshawa, Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2001, 126 pp., 11 halftone, 16 black-and-white, and 25 colour illus., \$20 Cdn.

Bryce Kanbara, *Tashme<sup>2</sup>: Early Work of Kazuo Nakamura*. Toronto, Gendai Gallery, Japanese-Canadian Cultural Centre, 2001, 12 pp., 10 colour illus., \$6 Cdn.

Richard William Hill, *Kazuo Nakamura: A Human Measure*. Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, 2004, 78 pp., 15 halftone, 27 black-and-white, and 48 colour illus., \$26 Cdn.

Since 1974 four solo exhibition catalogues have been published on the art of Kazuo Nakamura. The earliest one, *Kazuo Nakamura*, introduced and edited by Kay Woods and published by the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in 1974, contains the largest collection of Nakamura's infrequent statements. All later essays and articles about Nakamura that quote him depend on this catalogue. This review focuses on the three more recent catalogues, which publish the most scholarly discussions of Nakamura's art to date.

After years of little scholarly attention, the publication of three catalogues between 2001 and 2004 is significant. Three possible reasons for this development are Nakamura's declining health in the 1990s, recent positive developments in Canadian scholarship regarding the artistic contributions of non-European ethnic Canadians, and new interest in the development of abstract expressionist painting in Canada. Nakamura was one of the last living members of Painters Eleven, the group that introduced abstract expressionism to English Canada.

Despite being a member of Painters Eleven, Nakamura actually explored abstract expressionism only briefly. Partially for this reason, writing about Painters Eleven has tended to focus on the more "expressionist" and more vocal members of that group. This probably suited Nakamura; he was a rather reticent person, perhaps in part because he was a member of the Japanese community that sought sublimation after World War II as a result of its wartime internment. Indeed, with the dissolution of Painters Eleven in the early 1960s, Nakamura largely withdrew from public attention.

*Kazuo Nakamura: The Method of Nature* contains essays by curator Ihor Holubizky, art critic Walter Klepac, and Christopher Cutts, Nakamura's art dealer. Each writer focuses on mathematical issues in Nakamura's oeuvre. Holubizky employs the phrase "a loose grid ... of a non-radial pattern" (p. 14) in proposing a spider web as a possible reference point for interpreting Nakamura's inner structure paintings, a term the artist used to designate the theme of the visualization of the molecular struc-

ture of matter. When discussing the "heavily patterned" (p. 14) quality of many of Nakamura's abstracted landscapes, Holubizky cautions the viewer not to associate these "patterns" with the word's pejorative connotation with decoration. Instead, reflecting Nakamura's own use of "pattern," Holubizky employs the term "structural form," based on the concept that "atomic and cosmic structures had something in common, an order beyond the grid that humankind imposed in the search for classical order, and certainly not the Euclidian geometry of harmony that had for centuries been the compositional order" (p. 14).

Holubizky compares and contrasts Nakamura's conjoined pursuit of scientific "reality" and "cosmic insight" in his work with the "calligraphic, abbreviated brushstroke without an illusory perspective" (p. 12) in the work of abstract artists such as Joan Mitchell, Bradley Walker Tomlin, and Franz Kline. We agree with Holubizky's contention that "there are important distinctions" between Nakamura's interests and the concerns of abstract expressionist painters. As Holubizky correctly points out, Nakamura's concern for "pattern" rather than "expression" led him to mathematics rather than the painterly brushstroke (p. 12).

Holubizky maintains that Nakamura pursued painting that "allows us to imagine the unseeable, or unknowable" (p. 12) within the structure of nature. Holubizky sees this transcendent perceptual inner-sight as akin to humanity's spiritual ties with nature, which he associates with Ralph Waldo Emerson's description of this relationship as the "form of the formless" (p. 12), a phrase loaded with Emerson's poetic vision of mankind's yearning to create order in a vast and chaotic universe. However, we contend that part of Nakamura's journey was to remove the "human" and spiritual from his work. His move from realism to abstraction is the first step in this journey, and his later research, expressed in the *Number Structure Works*, is almost algorithmic.

Walter Klepac focuses on the theme of mathematical structures that emerge in Nakamura's work of the 1970s. In "Kazuo Nakamura: The *Number Structure Works*," he notes that "the bulk of the work during this period consists of working drawings, drawn in pencil on large sheets of graph paper" (p. 41). He claims that Nakamura made systems art based in ideas that were being considered by conceptual artists with an interest in seriality. Within this context, Klepac discusses the work of Roman Opalka, Hanne Darboven, and Sol LeWitt, artists who also explored mathematics. Regarding these artists and Nakamura, Klepac writes:

Throughout the body of work by each of these artists one finds that the organizing structures belong to a single system of one kind or another. The grid, singly or in aggregate, predominates. The standardized format chosen by each of

these artists encapsulates and in effect reproduces that system in work after work (p. 42).

Klepac associates Nakamura's epistemological grid with two aspects of conceptual art: [the endeavour to convey] the idea that nature is knowable (p. 46); and the concern with identifying "invisible theoretical constructs and conceptual infrastructures that underlie and sometimes vastly exceed immediate experience, perception and common sense" (p. 45). Klepac sees a closer relationship between Nakamura's research and the work of the French artist Bernard Venet. However, Klepac thinks that while Venet adopted the syntax of mathematics, Nakamura tackled its content (p. 46). Even in his association of Nakamura with Opalka, Darboven, and LeWitt, Klepac admits that Nakamura was working toward a clear meaningful goal as opposed to the "meaninglessness" of process painting (pp. 42–43). While Nakamura was not a process painter, process was important in his practice. One can think of both the repetitive activity and the intellectual/mathematical process of calculation as compulsive meditative rituals through which he may have worked out the memory and meaning of his teenage internment. Viewing these drawings, and the occasional resultant paintings, we imagine the artist or even ourselves working through the meticulous algorithmic calculations and participating in his process of aggregation, summation, and conclusion. As Klepac writes, "Nakamura's *Number Structure Works* implicitly demand that the artist and the viewer alike play by the same rules" (p. 43). These ideas of process in Nakamura's work emerge in the other catalogues as well.

Klepac's closing claim that Nakamura's *Number Structure Works* "encompass the most recent advanced concepts of mathematics, physical as well as biological, and evolutionary theories" (p. 48) is too strong and does disservice to scholarship that connects aesthetics and science in Nakamura's art. It is too much to expect that an artist who uses science in his or her work should also be a cutting edge practitioner of that science. Not being a professional mathematician, Nakamura's work did *not* encompass the latest in mathematical research. However, this should magnify rather than lessen the beauty of his paintings.

In "Kazuo Nakamura's *Number Structure*," Christopher Cutts takes up and expands on the theme of Nakamura's utilization of mathematics and its connection to reality. Claiming that "the basic premise of [Nakamura's] works is to connect number structure with form and dimension" (p. 61), Cutts admirably elucidates the numerical series and sequences like Pascal's triangle that appear in the *Number Structure Works*. He does not sacrifice mathematical accuracy for his explanation's clarity and accessibility to the lay reader. While there are a few errors, most notably the confusion of "algebraic equation" and "algorithm" (p. 72), they do not seriously undermine his smooth

passage over mathematical ideas that might otherwise obstruct the fantastic patterns that Cutts demonstrates admirably. As well, his discussion of the geometric and structural connections of these sequences – Fibonacci numbers in naturally growing forms, Catalan numbers in triangulations, and polygonal and polytopal numbers, especially in *Drawing 3* – is excellent.

Although we agree with Cutts' primary thesis that Nakamura is connecting the patterns and structures in numbers and sequences with form and dimension, it is crucial to emphasize that understanding the mathematics is *not* equivalent to understanding his paintings. Cutts clearly and concisely makes almost all calculations in the *Number Structure Works* accessible, and he breaks the mathematical barrier that might otherwise intimidate a viewer. In essence, although he gives the viewer the mathematical keys to the paintings, he does not hand over the meaning. In terms of the logical progression of ideas, Cutts' essay should have preceded Klepac's writing.

The second catalogue (and exhibition), *Tashme<sup>2</sup>: Early Work of Kazuo Nakamura*, offered Canadians the first view of the many small oils and watercolours that Nakamura produced while interned at Tashme, British Columbia, between October 1942 and November 1944. The main essay is written by curator Bryce Kanbara, and a shorter essay is written by art critic Gary Michael Dault. This little catalogue is significant because it acknowledges the internment and the necessity for the ritualized healing process that it engendered. Presenting Nakamura's early work for the first time, the catalogue also shows us the artist's fascination with nature as expressed in a humanist realism that is absent from his later works.

In his introductory essay, "Tashme Squared," Kanbara does not discuss Nakamura's later use of linear pattern, number structures, or other mathematical systems. Although Kanbara briefly traces the beginnings of Nakamura's study of linear perspective, his main focus is biographic, concentrating on the artist's internment, and alluding to its trauma.

In "Kazuo Nakamura: The Trajectory to Universe," Dault indirectly discusses the appearance of mathematical systems of ordering or representation when he writes that Nakamura's "'reflection series' from the early 1950s often portrayed shorelines of staunchly vertical trees" (p. 7), a kind of view that Nakamura first worked with while living in internment. While being true to nature, Nakamura's use of mirror imaging is an indication that even his earliest work can be positioned within his research toward the larger structural patterns in nature. As Dault indicates, "the 'reflection paintings' were thus more about gridding and mapping, than they were about bucolic expression" (p. 7). Reiterating Nakamura's concern with dimension, Dault quotes the artist's acknowledgement of his research toward a "universal language" (p. 8) and his insistence that he was a realist rather than an expressionist – and for emphasis we should say

Nakamura was most a “realist” when his paintings were their most “abstract.”

The third catalogue, *Kazuo Nakamura: A Human Measure*, contains essays by curator Richard William Hill, an interview/conversation between mathematician John Mighton and Hill, and a short piece by novelist and art-writer Kerri Sakamoto.

In “Kazuo Nakamura: A Human Measure,” Hill suggests that “there remains a lingering question about the idea of mathematics as art. Think of the piles of [Nakamura’s] graph paper calculations. Do these works stop being about mathematics at some point and simply become mathematics?” (p. 9). Hill’s two-part answer reiterates the meaning of Nakamura’s processes. His first answer is that “‘pure’ science and mathematics seem constantly tinged with a network of ‘impurities’: culture, history, even individual psychology” (p. 15), possibly referring to the trauma of internment. The second is that, because Nakamura seemed to believe his art had become mathematics, “the painted versions are a concession to those of us who cannot appreciate them without help from forms we recognize as aesthetic” (p. 15). In other words, the paintings serve to help convey the process of Nakamura’s mathematics to the layperson.

Related to the idea of process in Nakamura’s painting, Klepac writes in his essay in *Kazuo Nakamura: The Method of Nature* that “associated with that activity is an almost compulsive need on the part of the artist to work through, detail by detail, virtually the same labor and time intensive task, day after day, in work after work” (p. 42). Taken out of the context of an art exhibition catalogue, this could describe the process of mathematical research. The viewer of Nakamura’s paintings gains a sense of this process, but that is not all. For Nakamura the process is not an end in itself; rather, in his number structure paintings, he shows us a segment of an infinite calculation, and then takes us to the moment of mathematical insight by demonstrating that these patterns and equations allow us to grasp the behaviour of the entire universe. The painted *Number Structure Works* are a successful use of aesthetic language to convey the beauty and totality that mathematical scientists feel in their work but often have difficulty expressing to a layperson.

In the conversation/interview, “The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics,” Mighton and Hill discuss the experience of viewing Nakamura’s paintings. This complements expressions of viewers’ experiences that appear in several other catalogue essays. For example, Kanbara states in “Tashme Squared” that “because [Nakamura] is entirely guileless in applying the linear perspective device, we are led, as if by the hand, to comprehend the way it works and its dramatic effect on eye and mind” (p. 1).

Hill’s interview with Mighton is the most difficult of the catalogue essays to review. The title and early discussion in the interview refer to a debate within the mathematical community

about the epistemological status of mathematical objects, mathematical truth and the utility of applied mathematics.<sup>1</sup> This arises in the interview because Nakamura believed “that ‘number structures’ represent . . . reality at its most fundamental level” (p. 19), and his paintings are a celebration of this connection.

Although Mighton finds the connection between mathematics and nature problematic, he points out that many of the sequences and patterns used by Nakamura are patterns that do occur in natural processes. In this sense, Nakamura succeeds in his program of displaying a connection for us. Mighton suggests that mathematics is also used by writers and artists for its ease in transcending human imagination and experience, the simplicity of its expositions and questions (due to the precision of its language) in contrast with the depths to which the questions lead. Mighton sees this dichotomy between simplicity and depth in Nakamura’s paintings; simple calculations that quickly reveal a deep complexity. Mighton also discusses the complementary principle that mathematical scientists are often guided by aesthetic requirements in their equations, emphasizing that science and art are very connected despite the popular impression that they are not. Finally, he reinforces Nakamura’s use of process when he says, “I think the paintings do express what it feels like to do mathematics” (p. 23).

In “The Distance Between Zero and One,” Sakamoto acknowledges Nakamura’s pursuit of mathematics when she refers to his struggle with the “representation of the infinitude” (p. 29) and to grids in his art. However, her essay is primarily personal and poetic, not concerned with Nakamura’s interest in mathematics. She meditates on possible psychological and metaphoric meaning in his art, developing her interpretations with linkages between his biography and her own. Stylistically, her essay balances the more arcane discussions of the other authors in the catalogues. However, the very lightness of her touch is vulnerable to the misinterpretation that Nakamura was first Japanese-Canadian and then an artist rather than an artist first and then one with Japanese and Canadian roots. Thus we fear that Sakamoto’s essay might perpetuate the marginalization of Nakamura and his important contribution to Canadian art. As well, while it is a small example of Sakamoto’s dependency on and perpetuation of previous misreading of Nakamura, her claim that he was a self-taught artist, even before internment, is inaccurate. In high school, his brother introduced Nakamura to the science of perspective. Further, before 1942, Nakamura was taught applied-art in high school by Jock MacDonald – the future spiritual leader of Painters Eleven. The older artist taught graphic art and design classes at Nakamura’s school in Vancouver and, in all probability, peppered his lectures with his well-known enthusiasm for the relationship between art and science. Indeed, before World War II, Nakamura wanted to become a

scientist. Finally, once the Nakamura family was allowed to move to Toronto, the young artist entered and completed studies in the art department of Central Technical High School, which also advocated an association between art and science.

These catalogues admirably tackle the mathematics of Nakamura's work and begin to suggest a relationship between internment and his paintings. Thus we support Kanbara's and Sakamoto's call for other, broader, analyses and interpretations of Nakamura's work. If anything, historically, Nakamura's art has been too closely bracketed by his involvement with Painters Eleven, and now that he is being studied for the first time outside the history of that group, he is possibly being marginalized by the apparent dominance of mathematics *per se* in his art. For example, one area of Nakamura's oeuvre that has virtually never been discussed is his sculpture. The presence of twelve excellent photographs of sculptural work at the end of the last catalogue

without more than passing comment in any of the accompanying essays is a telling example of the incomplete state of scholarship regarding him. Such research might be a useful small step toward a deeper acknowledgement of Nakamura's contribution to Canadian art.

BRIAN GRISON  
Independent Scholar, Victoria

BRETT STEVENS  
Carleton University

#### Note

- 1 The many sides of this debate are not appropriate for this review, and we refer the reader to [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy\\_of\\_mathematics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy_of_mathematics) for a good introduction.

Malcolm Thurlby, *Romanesque Architecture and Sculpture in Wales*. Almeley, Herefs., Logaston Press, 2006, 384 pp., 503 figs. and 15 plates, £17.50.

Logaston Press, with man-behind-the-scenes Andy Johnson, is rapidly gaining a well deserved reputation for publishing quality books about architectural and archaeological subjects at prices that not only make them extremely good value but almost irresistible to the potential purchaser. Malcolm Thurlby's association with Logaston began with his 1997 volume about Dore Abbey and continued with his highly successful study *The Herefordshire School of Romanesque Sculpture* (1999). This was followed with a recent detailed study of Tewkesbury Abbey with Richard K. Morris. A book on Romanesque architecture in Gloucestershire is apparently in preparation. In this latest offering Thurlby has turned his attention to the Romanesque architecture and sculpture of Wales.

The book is divided into eight chapters, some of which have themes that follow chronological and subject orders. Others relate more to regional divisions in the principality. Chapter one deals with Chepstow and Ludlow and includes Chepstow Priory and the great keep at the castle. Recent work at Chepstow by Rick Turner has led to the suggestion that the keep was the work of William the Conqueror, but Thurlby opts for an earlier attribution to William fitz Osbern (1067–71). This would be a very early date for such a great tower, but he argues his case persuasively from the observation of various architectural details (for Turner's own views, see *Chepstow Castle its History and Buildings*, ed. Rick Turner and Andy Johnson, 2006, pp. 40–42, also by Logaston Press). Thurlby suggests the same patron and an early start of construction for Chepstow Priory Church of St

Mary. His description of the priory church is long and very detailed and is probably the most extensive now in print of this long neglected but important church. Ludlow Castle is of course in England but is included here because of its extensive Norman remains and its relevance to buildings in Wales and to West Country Romanesque architecture. Thurlby discusses in detail the unusual dado arcade of the former gate tower, and this expands into an informative account of the development of the cushion capital with the opinions of various experts rehearsed. This includes a valuable discussion of the possible Anglo-Saxon sources of this feature in Anglo-Norman buildings. He goes on to describe the details of the unusual circular chapel in the castle bailey.

Chapter two deals with "Norman Church Architecture of the March and Glamorgan down to 1120." Here Thurlby highlights the series of carved lintels that have survived in the parish churches, characteristics of which he links to Roman sources such as the frigidarium of the Roman baths at Nice-Cimiez (Alpes Maritimes). Chapter three, "Castle, Cathedral and Monastery post 1120," changes tack somewhat. This chapter covers many major monuments: Llandaff Cathedral, Monmouth Priory and Castle, Eweny Priory, St Dogmael's, Margam Abbey, Manorbier, Usk Priory, and Llanthony Priory, as well as several other sites with lesser remains. The relatively brief description of Monkton Priory touches on the possible Cistercian influences in the design of the church, such as in the barrel vault in the south transept. Here I think Thurlby has missed the significance of the Monkton design. My opinion is based on looking beyond the detail to the overall structure, where we can see the remains of a barrel-vaulted nave with lower barrel-vaulted transepts and presumably an original lower barrel-vaulted presbytery. This is