



The Artist  
and the  
Scientist

Art,  
Nature, &  
Consciousness

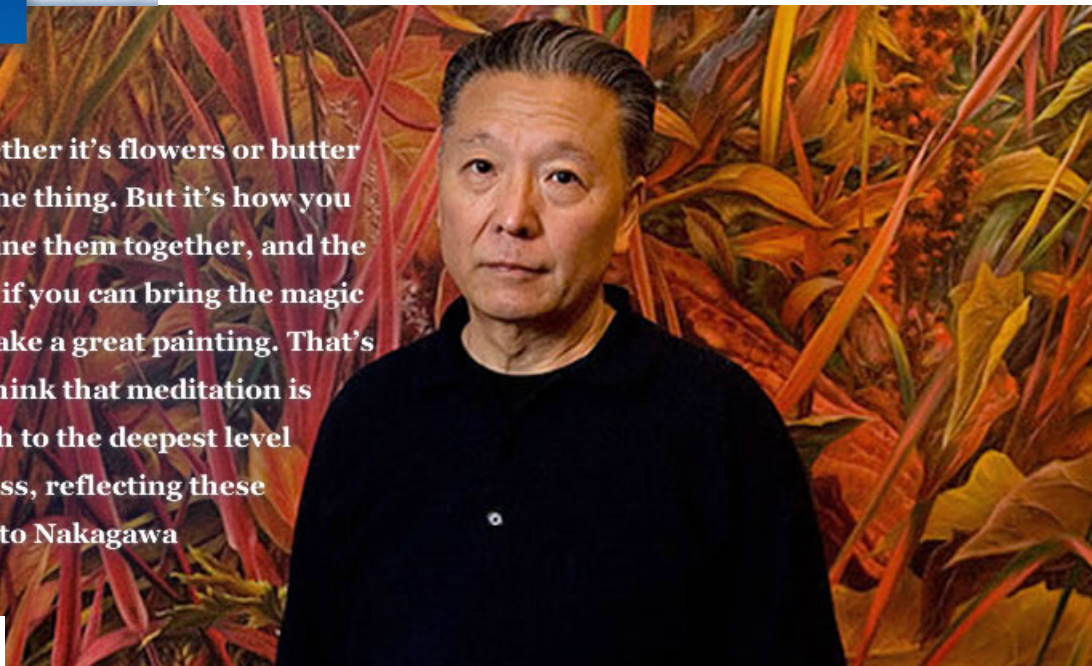
MLG:  
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Monet of  
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ISSUE 7

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## Art, Nature, and Consciousness: A Roundtable Discussion with an Artist and His Gallerist

BY LINDA EGENES

Naoto Nakagawa comes from a long line of Japanese poets, artists, and philosophers. After growing up in Takarazuka, Japan, he emigrated to New York City as a teenager in 1962 and quickly established himself as a painter and performance artist. His paintings have appeared in over 25 solo exhibitions in leading New York galleries and in group exhibitions at the Guggenheim Museum, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Venice Biennale. His work is included in many public and private collections in the USA, Europe, and Japan, including the New York Museum of Modern Art and the National Museums of Modern Art in Osaka and in Kyoto. Nakagawa has taught and lectured at, amongst others, Columbia University and Parsons School of Design.

*Hudson, the owner of the gallery Feature Inc., was profiled in the [December 2012 issue](#) of Art in America. As a dealer noted for introducing many popular artists, such as Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, Raymond Pettibon, Tom Friedman, and Takashi Murakami, he is a leading figure in the American contemporary art*



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scene.

*One spring morning, Enlightenment met with Naoto and Hudson while they were preparing a solo exhibition of Naoto's most recent work, his "Earth Wave Paintings," at Hudson's gallery. In this fascinating discussion, they explore the role of nature and consciousness in Naoto's work as well as the influences of both the artist and gallerist in the process of making art.*

**Enlightenment: How does nature play a role in your art?**

**Naoto:** In the area near Kobe where I grew up there is a beautiful river—the Muko River—and beyond it is the majestic Mt. Rokko. Almost every evening, I would sit on a rock in the garden and look at the mountain and watch that magical moment of nature—sunset—when the sky turns red, orange, and yellow. I saw hundreds of teeming bats, dragonflies, and mosquitoes, each aiming to eat the other. This abundance of nature is gone, unfortunately, as so many houses have been built there now. The beauty and magic of nature that I experienced is no longer there, but that experience is deep inside of me.



I remember reading the autobiography of Arshile Gorky, an important artist who came to America from Armenia and is known to be the link between the European art movement and the American movement—a bridge from Picasso to Matisse to abstract expressionism. He painted symbolic nature, involving natural forms, abstractions, and life-and-death kinds of feelings.

An interviewer once asked him, "Where do your images come from?" and he said they came from nature. He grew up in Armenia until he was about 13 years old, and the way he described his deep connection to nature there, I thought, "Wow! This is very similar to my own experience." His creative process is like a memory. So I must be doing something like that, too.

**Hudson:** Nature is probably the unifying factor in all the art that you've made. Each piece is a different expression of that central theme.

**Enlightenment: Has the practice of meditation helped your painting to evolve in this direction?**

**Naoto:** Yes. If you look at my paintings up to 1972, they were very much about manmade objects, such as a comb making love to a stick of butter. I was thinking of a second, urban nature defined by Marshall McLuhan—a manmade world created by humans. There was no natural, organic thing, no trees or leaves or flowers in those paintings.

Then there is a perceptible shift in my paintings in 1973, only one year later. People often ask, "What happened to your art between '72 and '73?" I learned to meditate for the first time in

1972. I think before I started Transcendental Meditation I was a kind of artist-in-rage or something. I had arrived in this big city. I felt foreign. I felt alienated. At the same time I wanted to be accepted and to participate. And I had some very good dealers exhibiting my work.

But when I began to meditate I went deep inside of myself for the first time. It was the thing I had been looking for, for a long time, but couldn't find. And I think one of the wonderful things about practicing TM is that not only did it give me the experience of going deep inside, it also put me in touch with the source of my creative impulse. It gave me a knowledge of the wellsprings of my creative source in the deepest level of consciousness. We are always conscious of physical, tangible things, but TM gave me a tool to reach the source of thought. So that was a very big discovery for me.

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In my work, there was a dramatic transformation from my early paintings of almost violent encounters

We live in this vast universe and we're very tiny, tiny beings, but we have inside us every attribute of the incredible universe. So the deeper I can go inside of myself, the more I should be able to bring new layers of perception to others. And when I began to meditate, it connected me to the universe; like a tube of electricity, it connected me.

between objects to a new, deeper connection to and acceptance of existence and the things around me. In my new still life paintings, a mysterious connectedness between objects emerged, and a few years later, when I moved to Vermont, nature made an appearance in my work. It was as if I found a correspondence with my youth in nature-filled Japan. As the years have passed, nature has taken more of a central role in my work.

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**Enlightenment:** Can you explain the image that you described earlier as "a comb making love to butter?"

**Naoto:** Butter is sort of soft and organic, and the comb and scissors are sort of phallic symbols. And I think that this male-female combination, the manmade and the organic, continues

today throughout my work.

**Hudson:** In your most recent work, the concentric rectangles could represent the more masculine forms and the imagery of the foliage and flowers could be said to represent the feminine. You have that interplay occurring in much of your earlier work as well. While it appears differently, essentially it's the same discussion.



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About a year ago, I was at Carnegie Hall with my wife, listening to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with about 200 choral singers, and half were female and half were male. It was the most amazing experience, an absolute contrast of the masculine and feminine. I think the truth of the universe has very much to do with this combination.

**Enlightenment:** This discussion reminds me of what art critic Eric Shiner wrote: "Naoto forces the viewer to make new associations, to think of alternative universes." Another writer thought you could be called a mystical artist. What do you think of those comments?

**Naoto:** I think that may have something to do with the way I grew up in Japan. I carry a lot of Japanese influences within me. I feel very connected to my grandfather, Kagaku Murakami, who was a kind of mystic painter himself. He practiced a form of tantric meditation, and he always meditated before painting. Kagaku is known as the last great *literati* painter. *Literati* means "scholar-painter"—a tradition that goes back 700 years in China and Japan. He died in 1939, so I never

really knew him, but I heard many stories about him from my mother.

He used to go up into the mountains and spend all day looking at nature, without sketching or drawing. I know exactly what he was looking for. Through his meditation he was getting in touch with the source of



nature, the creative force.

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art, it opens my eyes to new meanings, it raises my consciousness, and creates this tenderness, an appreciation for humanity and for life.

It's like constructing a poem—a poet uses mundane words, but it's how you put the puzzle together that makes it extraordinary. It's the same with painting—everything I paint, whether it's flowers or butter or scissors, is a mundane thing. But it's how you paint it, how you combine them together, and the colors and the forms—if you can bring the magic out of them, you can make a great painting. That's what it's about. And I think that meditation is another vehicle to reach to the deepest level of my own consciousness, reflecting these beautiful forms.



"Every artist puts himself as being one with the piece of art, whether he is a sculptor, a painter, a singer—whatever the piece of art he is creating, he is absolutely

When he died a publisher compiled his writings into a philosophy of art. I have read that book many times because it contains much wisdom. He wrote, "The act of painting is a prayer in a secret chamber." I really love this passage because it's so private and so spiritual. His legacy may have something to do with the way I connect with nature.

**Enlightenment:** One interviewer said something similar of your approach to your work—he described it as very devotional, very monk-like.

**Naoto:** When you paint you are not on stage. I'm not an actor, not doing something to please someone. It's a very private act, and in order for a painter—at least for me—to create something extraordinary out of the ordinary, I have to shut myself off from the world and allow my consciousness to go inside as deep as I can to bring something extraordinary to the viewer. And I know for myself, when I see something extraordinary in

**Enlightenment:** Naoto, I'm wondering how Hudson nurtures your creative process and how you worked together to create this exhibition?

**Naoto:** I don't know how he does it, but Hudson has the ability to encourage, to draw something out of each of the artists he works with. My paintings have become more developed, more radical, more risk-taking. As a result, in many paintings I made a leap into completely new territory.

**Hudson:** Basically I observe, point to things or ideas, and make connections or comments; it is probably the underlying understanding, support, and appreciation that give strength to my presence. I don't attempt to be definitive, as it's the artist who has to make the decisions.

In this type of situation, much like a lot of the art I enjoy, I generally prefer a communication that is tangential or loosely circles around things rather than addressing these delicate and complex matters directly. I keep it open; the artist hones it down.

**Naoto:** And this may have something to do with us both being meditators. At first I didn't know that he was a meditator. And I don't think he knew that I was a meditator.

I don't know how we found out. I think there's some kind of undercurrent, maybe something that we share deep down in our consciousness.

**Enlightenment:** You've both been practicing the

absorbed in it. This absorption of the inner being into the outer surface value of his creation is a joy to him, a very great satisfaction. Every piece of art is an expression of the life of the artist and, as such, every piece of art is the joy of the artist. The creation is a great joy, a very great joy because it is the expression of life.”

—Maharishi, 1970

paintings that are the most incredible works of art.

**Transcendental Meditation technique for over 40 years. In addition, Hudson has learned the TM-Sidhi<sup>SM</sup> program, which is an advanced program. Hudson, do you also feel that this ability to see into each artist is connected with your meditation practice?**

**Hudson:** Yes, of course. I feel there is an increased awareness that I have evolved to, and I feel that it comes out of meditation. It simply is. When you move from closing your eyes in meditation to opening your eyes and reengaging in the world, you feel that increased awareness. And after many years of doing that, the awareness lasts longer and it's taken into the day.

**Naoto:** Sometimes people comment that I am very centered. And I think that centeredness is like an anchor inside of me that's really unshakeable. I think that meditating for so many years has something to do with this.

***Enlightenment: And the future?***

**Naoto:** The mountain is in front of me. So I keep climbing and hopefully I can reach the summit. I'm probably halfway up now. Probably I'm dreaming, but my obsession is to create