Nakagawa’s Sight
By Alexandra Munroe

Nakagawa told me once that he used to eat live insects when he was a child growing up in the mountainous suburbs of Kōbe. I wondered naively if this was customary, or rather an effect of the dire poverty of the immediate postwar period. No, Nakagawa remarked, I ate them because I loved them.

As an adult, too, Nakagawa, who is one of the great recent practitioners of nature morte, devours nature. This urge to overtake his subjects, to visualize and execute his chosen forms with sensational intensity, marks his paintings as both extremely primal and extremely cerebral. His obsessions force the edgy coexistence of things earthy and hallucinatory, of things actively decaying and long-petrified, of absolute artifice and pure nature. This paradoxical view of nature has influenced all three significant styles of his painting: the Pop Art still lifes of the 1960s; the Photo-Realist still lifes of the 1970s and early 1980s; and the supernatural still lifes of earth that he has been painting since the mid-1980s. Whether hard-edge or painterly, his brush depicts objects with exquisite and equivalent detail regardless of their scale or distance from the viewer, creating what appears to be a world of superhuman vision. As if everything were seen from the perspective of an insect, up-close and exaggerated.

Nakagawa left Japan at the improbably young age of eighteen, in 1962. He came by boat to New York with all that immigrants from America’s former enemy state were allowed bring: $500 and an overcoat. The war had ended just seventeen years before, and barely a decade had passed since the U.S. Occupation had officially ended. He left home, secure in his family’s faith in his talent but a complete unknown to either the Japanese or American contemporary art communities, committed to living the rest of his life as an artist New York. There are factors that made this remarkable leap possible: His maternal grandfather, Murakami Kagaku, was a widely revered modern ink painter in the Japanese literati (bunjin) tradition, and his paternal grandfather, Nakagawa Eijirō, was Kagaku’s patron and collector. Nakagawa had long felt the privilege, indeed a sense of destiny, to honor his parents by pursuing the lofty passion that had bound his family together for two generations. Another factor was Nakagawa’s proximity to the Gutai Art Association, whose exhibitions and journals he encountered through Motonaga Sadamasa, a Gutai member and his neighbor, as well as his junior-high-school art teacher, Kikunami Jōji, who would later join the group. Gutai’s bold overthrow of the Japanese academic salon system and unabashed alignment with Pollock and de Kooning left an impression on the young Nakagawa, who realized early on the difference between orthodoxy and avant-garde, between the dreariness of the School of Paris and the vitality of Abstract Expressionism.
From Gutai, he understood that painting was always in the process of being reinvented and that its center now was New York. Nakagawa remembers attending Gutai’s legendary first onstage presentation at the Sankei Kaikan in Osaka in 1957—in particular a smoke-filled stage produced by Motonaga—and seeing International Sky Festival, held at the Takashimaya Department Store in 1960.

In the decades since, Nakagawa has pursued his art with single-minded devotion. His life is entirely centered on his studio practice. His devotion is austere, monk-like. While he has observed all of the major art moments and movements of postwar and contemporary art in America, and has befriended international poets, painters, feminists, dancers, and conceptual artists all along the way, his world has grown narrower and deeper as the years pass. His south-facing loft windows are blanketed over to allow the yellowish light of his fluorescent studio bulbs to illuminate his large canvases during the darkest silences of night. He may spend months, even years, on a single painting. Such stoicism is a welcome respite from the market-driven art-producers whose news dominates the fashionable art magazines, but it has left his work far less recognized than it deserves to be.

This retrospective exhibition at White Box offers an extraordinary opportunity to reassess the art of Naoto Nakagawa. Most astounding are the mural-size still lifes of the 1970s, made when the artist was in his twenties, suggestive of the Pop Art style. Warhol went to see his shows at O.K. Harris. On one hand, Nakagawa’s hard-edge acrylic theaters are linked to American Pop by their flat surfaces, their orgy of everyday consumer products, their florid palette. But they are equally reminiscent of another Japanese painter long unrecognized in the West: the Surrealist Okamoto Tarō. In Okamoto’s iconic paintings of the late 1940s and 1950s, brightly-colored machines morph into monstrous mouths of teeth and zippers rip through the eyes of fish. Like Nakagawa, Okamoto exploits realism to present a vision of surreal horror, to comment on the absurdity of violence, and to reflect the deformity of humanism in a post-atomic world.

Nakagawa’s ambition of sheer scale and bizarre narrative, his disturbing show of saturated color and exaggerated forms, mark these early paintings as unique achievements for their time. Long hidden from view, they are testament to one artist’s dogged pursuit of truth in painting.