

SHOZO NAGANO: TWILIGHT AND EVENING STAR

by Edward Moran

For nearly forty years, I had the privilege of knowing Shozo Nagano as artist, as mentor, as camerado, as friend. I witnessed his style evolve from traditional sumi drawings to ambitious shaped canvases that at first depicted minimalist geometric and crystalline forms. His paintings later incorporated draped fabric and finally human figures, both male and female. He also created many renderings of the rose, which he considered the most elegant of blossoms—one that symbolized the mystical perfectibility of the human soul. All of these motifs are represented in this exhibit, which is not meant to be a retrospective but merely an intimate gathering of works by friends and collectors in the area that he called home for the last third of his life.

After Shozo died in December of 2007, I discovered a work-in-progress in his studio which was undoubtedly his last work. I have titled it “Last Rose.” It depicts a yellow rose ascendant over a human body, arms extended in a transfigurative pose that represents both abjection and triumph. Though the iconography may call to mind a specifically “Christian” theology, it really belongs to the narthex of heaven where all men and women can foregather in a peaceable kingdom that transcends narrow ideologies. It should be noted that the paint is applied unevenly, with much dripping that seems uncharacteristic of Shozo’s otherwise meticulous work. This is because in his latter days he suffered from severe arthritis that prevented him from handling a brush. Yet he painted bravely to the end, knowing that for him, art was a vocation, not a career.

Next to “Last Rose” is a painting that played an important role in Shozo’s last day on earth. The Saturday he died, I visited him in Palmerton Hospital where he lay amidst a bounty of roses, gifts from so many friends and neighbors. One of his doctors entered the room. Instead of dispensing medical advice, he told Shozo that he admired his work because he had grown up with one of his paintings. It turns out that the doctor’s parents had purchased one of Shozo’s geometric pieces at a New Jersey gallery back in the 1970s. The doctor told Shozo how much joy he had received over the years thanks to this painting. About an hour later, the doctor returned with the painting in hand. Shozo was in tears. He told me afterwards that it was the most beautiful tribute he could have received. I think Shozo realized that his work on earth had been accomplished. Later that evening, after his visitors had departed, Shozo gave away his roses to the other patients, stripped himself, and lay down under the sheets to slip away into eternity. Unable to paint any more, he offered his own body to the universe as a final canvas. It was just this week that I learned that the doctor’s own father—the man who had purchased the painting years earlier—also died that night.