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Review: Tsutakawas' compelling works are shown together in Seattle exhibition

By **Gayle Clemans**
Special to The Seattle Times

Master sculptors George and Gerard Tsutakawa, father and son, are just about as close as Seattle gets to having an artistic dynasty.

George Tsutakawa (1910-1997) was an integral part of the burgeoning Northwest art scene in the 1950s and is best known for the many water sculptures that he created for public spaces in Seattle, across the United States and abroad. "Fountain of Wisdom," designed for the plaza of the library in downtown Seattle, is a wonderful example of his stacked geometric forms, an approach inspired by "obos," the piles of rocks created by travelers in the Himalayas.

While the work of father and son differs in many ways, Gerard Tsutakawa also creates metal sculpture that is powerfully simple in form and full of associative potential. Gerard's most familiar piece is probably the large "Mitt" outside Safeco Field, although it is more literal and lighthearted than some of his other work.



WOODSIDE BRASETH GALLERY

Gerard Tsutakawa's 2007 "Uzumaki" in bronze.

The elder Tsutakawa would have been 100 this year, and Gerard was hoping that a local museum or gallery would mount an exhibition in remembrance of his father. John Braseth, owner of Woodside/Braseth Gallery, which has represented George Tsutakawa for many years, wanted to show Gerard's latest work. And so an exhibition was born.

Walking through the doors of the gallery, you can turn left to see the elder Tsutakawa's work in two galleries: a modest but thoughtfully selected showing of George's abstract landscapes, resonant Sumi ink paintings and a few metal sculptures. A small model for the "Fountain of Wisdom" proves that Tsutakawa's forms are so balanced and essential that they convey a lot of oomph even on a small scale.

There is not an abundance of George's signature sculpture here, which, although disappointing, does allow us to focus on the quieter, but nevertheless commanding, paintings. You can glance around the walls and quickly absorb the feeling of experimentation that drove many of the paintings. While they still represent reality — landscapes, mostly, in keeping with George's love of nature — they are cloaked in different abstract styles: thickly expressive, spiritually minimal or a blend of organic and geometric.

The mightiest surprise for me was to see how he manipulated the paper in the "Radiation Series," some of his most abstract paintings. The mulberry paper is thick with texture, creased and crumpled, adding a depth to the painted concentric circles and radiating lines.

On the other side of the gallery, you can find sculpture after sculpture by the younger Tsutakawa (Gerard, almost 63, must find it amusing to still be called "the younger" Tsutakawa). It's important to slow down to look at the nuances in these works. Surrounded by so many sleekly chunky bronze sculptures, it's easy to miss the slight irregularities along the edges, the handcrafted quality, and the variegated finishes that add sensitivity and gravity to the eye-pleasing forms.

For me, the most vital pieces are the ones that suggest infiniteness: the "Sea Circle" sculptures read simultaneously like a sun and a series of endless waves; the series titled "Uzumaki" ("spiral" in Japanese) bend metal in graceful looping forms that shift shape and interconnectedness as you shift your vantage point.

Together, the finely crafted work of the Tsutakawas represents the continuity of a certain approach to making art, a process that combines American abstract expressionism with the Tsutakawas' Japanese heritage. The deceptively simple forms extend beyond their contours to evoke feelings of spiritual calm or dynamic potential.

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WOODSIDE BRASETH GALLERY

A model of George Tsutakawa's bronze "Fountain of Wisdom." The fountain was reinstalled in 2006 near the entrance of the new Seattle Central Library.

EXHIBITION REVIEW

'Reflection & Abstraction'

George Tsutakawa centennial and new works by Gerard Tsutakawa; also "George Tsutakawa & Friends," selected works by Kathleen Adkison, Guy Anderson, Kenneth Callahan, Paul Horiuchi, Morris Graves, among others. 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays through Dec. 23, Woodside/Braseth Gallery, 2101 Ninth Ave., Seattle (206-622-7243 or woodsidebrasethgallery.com).

