

Report on the talk 'Beauty in Shadows: Tanaka Isson's Paintings from the Japanese Southern Islands of Amami Ōshima'

[April's Third Thursday Lecture < https://www.sainsbury-institute.org/events/beauty-in-shadows-tanaka-issons-paintings-from-the-japanese-southern-islands-of-amami-oshima/>](https://www.sainsbury-institute.org/events/beauty-in-shadows-tanaka-issons-paintings-from-the-japanese-southern-islands-of-amami-oshima/) was a fascinating and beautiful talk given by Singaporean art historian, **Dr Eve Loh-Kazuhara** [< https://www.sainsbury-institute.org/fellows/eve-loh-kazuahara/>](https://www.sainsbury-institute.org/fellows/eve-loh-kazuahara/), focusing on the little-known story of Tanaka Isson, who having been enrolled at the prestigious Tokyo School of Fine Arts, discarded what might have been an illustrious and much celebrated career in Japan's mainstream art world for obscurity amongst the resplendent beauty of Amami Ojima Island's abundant natural landscapes. As a result, as Eve so articulately explained, the works of Isson have, until recently, been little known to the general public, even within the land of the rising sun. Yet the *nihonga* paintings on display were surely some of the most impressive imageries to date that have graced the halls of Norwich Cathedral's Hostry as part of the Sainsbury Institute's enchanting Third Thursday Lecture series.



Tanaka Isson's Paintings in exhibition at Hôtel Salomon de Rothschild, Paris, in 2018. © Graziella Antonini.

Eve captivated the audience by narrating a common theme in this most human of stories, which embodied the struggle for both independence and recognition. On the one hand, she explicated how Isson had rejected his peers and mentors in search of greater meaning and connection among nature on the remote southwest island of Amami Ojima; on the other, what emerged was a deeply insecure character who strove tirelessly for recognition from those who in one sense he had turned his back on by leaving the Tokyo art scene. This contradiction has been left to art historians to interpret, as expressed through the rich pigments and fabric of Isson's *nihonga*, but the effects are breathtaking for all to see. Eve elucidated how Isson's positionality and personality had given rise to a uniquely developed first-person perspective, bathed in backlit shadows of natural awe, through which to depict Amami's stunning scenery – ranging from the Russo-esque to picturesque landscapes with subtle hints of impressionism.



Dr Eve Loh-Kazuhara at The Hostry, Norwich Cathedral.

As such, in what might be seen as an ironic but not inglorious twist of fate, Isson's collection of *nihonga* paintings – recovered by nearby villagers from his modest and secluded hut dwelling on the islands after his death – finally gained acceptance, recognition and acclaim

from beyond the grave. In her closing remarks, Eve generously invited the audience to draw their own conclusions about the meaning and implications of Isson's life and works, from his self-portrait as a screw pine to iridescent sago palms, as well as offering her listeners a (quite literal) taste of Amami's unique island delights.

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