

CANTERO

カンテロ

Nº 2



10 al 24 de Marzo de 2009

March 10th to 24th, 2009

3月24日までの第10回

SIXTY IS REALLY LIKE KINDERGARDEN

Interview with craftman Hiroshi Miura. Translated by Mizuho Ota.

– *What are these?*

– Flowerpots.

– *Oh, I see. For the cherry blossom season?*

– I saw a paiting in a cedar door at Nagoya Castle, thirty years ago, with that design in it. And since then I have always wanted to make it, and I took decades to finally complete it. In Kyoto palace they have festivals during the Spring, and they have all these karts in this beautiful garden and women in beautiful kimono watch everything from a beautiful bridge. Before beginning to work on something, it's important to visit places like Kyoto. Old places, mountains, the ocean we always go to see before making something beautiful. Red and white is a very good for luck. A good color combination.

– *We are doing research on craftsmen like himself, and also homemade ways of craftmaking...*

– So this is perfect! ... The shape and size of this vase is perfect for anyone to make the flowers look beautiful, so even if you don't have any training in flower arrangement anyone can put in flowers and make it look beautiful. There are certain shapes that make everything look beautiful, I realized this recently.

– *Ooh...!*

– So art doesn't always mean beautiful things like gems or gold.

– *We completely agree.*

– There is beauty in everything, but this has been forgotten in Japan.

– *Why do you think it has been forgotten?*

– People aren't noticing that beauty is in simpler things, they are forgetting it. Craft exhibits today show beautiful lacquer and gold objects, but they are not practical, you can't really use it. If you dress up yourself with jewelry or beautiful clothes, that's just beauty that comes from outside. But true beauty must come from inside, beaming out.

[Takes from the wall framed bas-relief of shingle roof. Sprays it with water spray]

– No one puts water on their paintings, right? (laughs)

This is like the rain. As it dries up, the shingles dry up as well. There is momentary beauty in rain, in rain on the roof. And as you watch it dry up, it goes through different stages of beauty. Even just one shingle has that kind of deep beauty. Now it's drying up, see?

So even if you go out look at scenery, it's always different: sunny days are beautiful, rainy days are beautiful. But you have to be in some sort of state, one of mental calmness, to see the beauty of scenery.

– *Do you think that people forgetting of the beauty of things is related to losing a state of calmness?*

– Yes, I think so. Even in soy sauce containers there is beauty, but people don't see it.



– It's funny because part of our project is going around these Tokyo neighborhoods, regular neighborhoods, and people can't figure out why are we interested in these things. They think it's cute or curious...

– We thought that perhaps in Japan it would be different...

– Do you drink tea?

– Yes, thank you.

– Have you been at the *Mingueikan* (Craft Museum)? It's a beautiful building. I made a bathtub for them. Usually people have to go through auditions, but I got requested to do it. [takes out small buckets, called Rabbit Bucket]

– *Miho*, how did you find him?

Mizuho: I lived around the corner, so I would always take this road to go to school, so I always knew that this was here; always saw that fishbowl at the front door and the wheel. One day I decided to talk to him. He is awesome because he's like 'I can teach you things because I'm old and experienced but you can teach me things I don't know, too.'

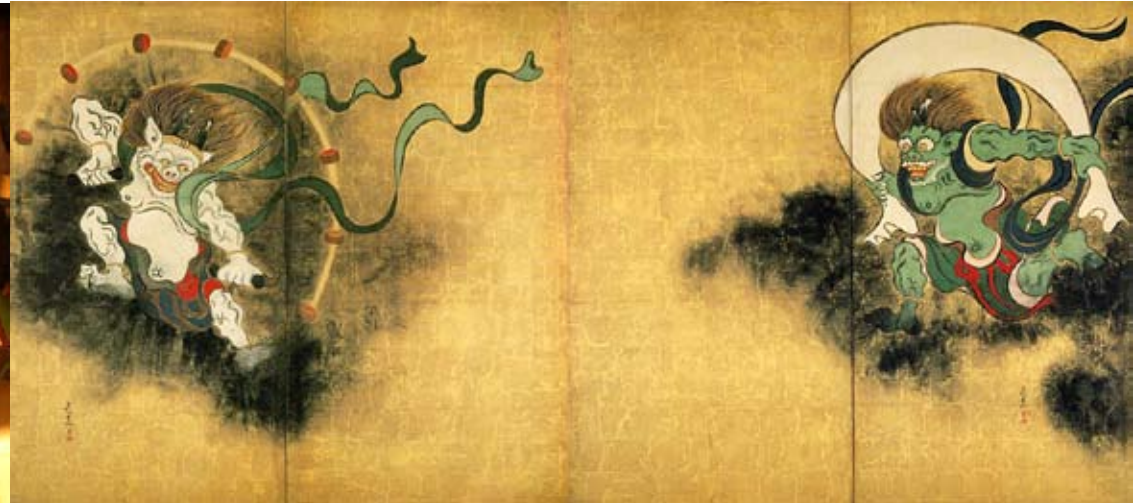
– I might be having a show at the Tokyo Electricity Building, and was thinking of showing this wheel because this is the original way to make energy, using a natural source. This doesn't cause any pollution, no harm to nature.

Mi: These are for sake...

– This kind of wood is called Yoshinosugi, a kind of cedar. In the Edo period, sake was carried by ship in barrels made out of this wood from Osaka to Edo. So, in the travel the sake would shake with the to and fro of the ship, and the flavor of the wood would go into the sake, making it more tasteful. In my work, wood is not the only component. Time is really important. Before, trees were cut down and slipped down the mountains through the river, and stored in the river bed. So clean water cleansed the wood, and by the time it was brought to the city it was ready to be used for craftmaking. But nowadays they cut the tree and immediately use it. So all the sap come out. So time and water are part of my job.

[talking about the water-wheel] People used to move this before. In Holland, because they have rivers, the shape evolved into something similar to this. There used to be an elevator that you could use with the energy coming from this type of wheel. In these Japanese water wheel the empty space is really difficult. This is something characteristic of Japanese beauty. The space where is nothing is very important. For example: in China, this would be filled with all sort of decorations. I will not judge which is better, because it's all cultural.

Do you know *Fujin-Raijin*?



It's a two-set picture of two devils, one of thunder and one of wind. But mostly, it's about space. There is a kind of spacial beauty to it. Did I tell you I am also a calligrapher?

– What you say makes so much sense. It reminds me of the space of silence in poetry and music, too. Like in Japanese poetry is really very important how you manage the silence in your reading.

– Yes!... In calligraphy too, it's not just the ink part, it's also the space. There is usually a rhyme

pattern, specially in chinese poetry, between the verses. English poetry has rhyme, and japanese poetry has rhyme, but not in japanese popular songs. So it's special. Old chinese poetry got imported into Japan hundreds of years ago, but in the original versions they have all kinds of special characters inserted just for the sound of it. So the original ones, if read in Chinese, it sounds really beautiful. But if it's translated in Japanese, much is lost.

– Like in the Opera. Each character have their own musical motif, so that you can recognize them immediately when they enter the scene. It also happens in latin poetry.

– These hidden meanings are really important. But now chinese characters are getting simplified, but this is a mistake because it character has slightly different meanings and just because on the surface level it looks simpler; you still shouldn't eliminate them. Ancient egyptian characters are similar to chinese, they are pictorial. They are also very beautiful.

– Don't you think that calligraphy is also closely related to drawing? The other day we saw this poem by Ryokan, written on a folded screen. And we kept thinking how lucky you are, because when you write in japanese you also get to draw, form and content goes together and you can convey rhythm not only by using sound but also how it looks visually. In latin alphabets this is different.

– I love you!

Each character has a meaning, so you shouldn't have to think about the order; but 'great' teacher have made up all these rules for writing. It is a problem when there are a lots of teachers. Things get constricted.



I saw Ryokan's calligraphy when I was twenty, and I was shocked. He started as a buddhist monk, but never went into big temples. He lived in a period when buddhism was getting corrupted, so he removed himself from that world and did his own thing as an outsider. And his calligraphy comes from his way of life, his philosophy and that's the important part. – Next to the screen we saw, there were other examples from other Masters, but you could tell he was really in a totally different place, mentally.

– His stuff is pure. A lot of artists try to make their products look beautiful. But Ryokan, because he himself is so beautiful inside, he doesn't even try and that makes his stuff really great. That also applies to kindergarden kids. I was had a show at a Kindergarden. All my work was shown in the center of the gym, and the kid surrounded it. I was so nervous because I knew I was being judged. Prices and awards come from outside, not the inside. But a lot of artists want those, so art gets corrupted.

A lot of my friends have been named Living Treasures* but I'm not. And I don't feel bad for myself, because I know there's so much that I can do and they can't. Being a Living Treasure is something that comes from outside, so I'm fine with that.

I have a friend who is also a great professor: He's a researcher of land-art. Once, he came to visit to my house for some noodles. He smokes, but the way he has for lighting his cigarettes is very peculiar: he hits two stones. I said 'Wow, I didn't know you could do that. Where did you find those?' He said: 'If you go to Kyoto you can find these anywhere in the river.' Those stones are beautiful. Diamonds are beautiful too. But which one is more practical...? Well. They both take millions of year to form. In the end, it depends on what people value. Some people value friendship, some other things.

2.

– The first time we met you mentioned that recently you had realized that there are certain shapes that make everything beautiful...can you tell us more about this idea?

– It took me twenty years to realize that such absolute beauty existed...Are you cold?

– It's alright.

– I look at some of the work I made twenty years ago and think 'wow, this is absolute beauty' — but of course I didn't notice that while I was making them. I took me a long time to realize this.

– We were also wondering, and it has to do with that, that you were also saying how it takes a certain time to realize... so we were wondering, by growing old how it is for you seeing the

* In 1950, the Government of Japan began to designate certain individuals or groups who embodied intangible national cultural values as living human treasures, just as places or things of great cultural value are designated as national treasures, thus becoming eligible for special protection and support. Some of the ancient protected crafts are pottery, music, handmade paper, dolls, and swordmaking.



thing you made after twenty years? How do you see time affecting your work?

– Of course time has a lot to do with it, because you overcome a lot of problems and difficulties, and after that things start to seem a little different. I knew absolute beauty existed in Greece and other places, but I never knew it had existed in Japan. This is about what people think is beautiful, that is an eternal mystery for me, but at some point — out of clue — people start seeing absolute beauty, just like that. Both Picasso and Hokusai were still learning when they were very old, ninety years old. It is really a shame when people stop working at sixty and retire, because sixty is really like kindergarden, they just started learning.

A long time ago in Japan, people could get trained for maybe five or six years and then start selling their stuff, because they had done all the basics. A lot of people stopped there, because knew they could earn money from their techniques and skills, but some people keep working in their skills and their beauty and that's what differentiates the stuff-makers from the artists. A lot of people stop doing things in their sixties, when they've just learned their basics.

A long time ago craftsmen would have their studios all next to each other so they could see what they were doing in different fields, so they could steal other peoples skills and

techniques and integrate them with their own skills. So you would have a wide variety of skill, even thoughts and ideas. But nowadays everyone is so segregated from each other that, I think, the perception is very small and narrow. It's very unfortunate.

– And what do you think the role for craftsmen is now, in japanese society?

Because I am a craftsman, I only look at my work and don't really think about anything else. So I don't actively participate in the society. A craftsman loves his work, each step, until the work is completed. It such a pleasure that even the feeling of the knife cutting into the wood sort of settles in you, it slips into you.

– We were wondering if you could tell us about how you began in carpentry, and a little bit about the bathtubs you used to make. For us is shocking to make a bathtub out of wood, the modern western idea is that water and wood don't go together.

– I was making bathtubs for families, usually bathtubs would be made of all wood in public baths until the beginning of Edo Period, but for sanitary reasons they started to use less wood for public bathtubs, so I was just making them for families.

– At what age did you start?

Twelve. When I was seven or eight my parents didn't give me any toys, but they gave me tools for kids so I was making my own toys with my tools.

When I was really little I tried to pretend I was my older brother or my father, so I started cutting the logs for the fire. I wasn't just a game, because, looking back I realized that that's how I learned how wood works, exactly which part I should hit to make the wood break. Through things like that I learned how to work with wood and the basics of wood, even before learning the theories of wood.

That's how craftsmen get into the field, really early, seven or eight like a helper boy doing all these basic things, but they always have an underlying meaning. Because you learn it through the body and not through the head. Nowadays people try to learn the theories before learning anything through the body, so it's all backwards.

My grandfather was a boat-maker, it's all related, the technique, because in a boat you try to protect the inside from the water and in a bathtub is the other way around but it's the same technology, the same skills. Even if the piece looks pretty and neat you need to protect the stuff from the water and you need special skills for that. You can really tell if the skills are good or not once the wood is soaked in water and moving around, if it's still protected from water then, the skills are really good.

– *Could you tell us how a Japanese bathtub like the ones you make works?*

– I use really big nails to put them together. Really old and big ones, like the ones you can find in certain temples in Kyoto.

– *How do you make wood resistant to water?*

– I put two pieces of wood together, but since smooth surfaces don't glue right I put saw dust between them, to make the surface more bumpy. That way it bonds better. I think that's a skill that only exists in Japan.



Anywhere in the world in between those wood panels they put really soft leaves or tree bark and then seal it with sap. That technique is the same for Japan and southeast Asia, the kind of tree they use is a little different. In Japan, in old paintings you can see people putting tree sap on the outside of the boats to protect the boat from water. You can always look at those old pictures and learn a lot of things.

In England and France they don't have oak anymore because they've used it all for making boats. I was once in France, I saw a lot of sheep and grass, but no oaks.

– *Do you think there's a limit for the things that can be made out of wood?*

Because Japanese wood has a very good quality for crafts, we can use it for anything, we can even build boats or make houses and also use it for all the small crafts. But I'm not sure about foreign trees, they don't have the same quality. Now, because of acid rain and everything, good trees are decreasing. The best trees are those natural trees that have survived all the competition and natural selection with the other trees. Nowadays so many people have allergies in the springtime because there are so many cedar trees being planted, that's an indicator of how planted trees are taking over natural trees.

– *What do you think is more important about your work?*

The relationship with the material is the most important, for me that is the respect for wood, because they are usually quite old, much older than me and have all the history ingrained in each ring and I can tell what happened, if there was an eruption or something, for the narrowness or the texture of each one. So, respecting wood is really important.

There's no bad wood, it's just how you use it, if there's a hard wood you just use it for something that is suitable for hard wood and if it's soft you use it for something else. Even non-straight wood can be good for something, because in Horyuji which is the oldest wood structure in the world, in Nara — you should go see it — there's a huge beam holding the structure of the ceiling that is not straight, it's all curved but because it's a whole piece it's all connected, it's one thing, so it can take all the pressure and the weight. If it was a straight beam it probably couldn't hold the weight of the roof.

The local stuff for the local use is probably the best. Because Japan has so much rain and it's so humid, Japanese wood is very good for using with water, nowadays people bring wood from Alaska but it rots very quickly because that wood is not good with humidity. If you take the wood for the place of Japan that has the most amount of rain per year it won't rot, even if you put all the wet cloth on it for a really long time. I'm not saying that Japanese wood is the best in the world, it's the wood I'm used to and all the tools are made for Japanese wood, so it's best for me. I'm sure that in Argentina, Argentine wood is better for Argentine crafts.

Craftsmen usually know so much, experienced so much, but we are usually not regarded so highly in society because we are not good at talking. A lot of us know so much more

that all these famous academics but we have no way of expressing it to society, but you should know that we are really knowledgeable, through our bodies.

We are just very bad at presentations!

Its all about the feeling in the body. The sensation that I get for carving the wood, from shaving wood. If all the conditions are just right, when I'm shaving wood I get the sensation as if I were swimming in the ocean, the shavings that come out of the wood seem like waves, and its all trough the sensation, the body feeling, and its of course difficult to explain to other people but all the craftsmen have the same sensation that no one else can feel.

(...)

The value of things is so different for people, some people are more happy by seeing more zeros in their bank account, but they tend to be the stupidest ones. Because they were so many of them in the United States the economy suffered so badly. It just seems so stupid... I would understand it if they had an actual chunk of gold in front of them, but it's just something they don't even see. Even if I had so much money and showed it to you, no one is really happy, but if I show you what I can do with my skills, people are much happier; its universal.

We all have to remember to be thankful for the wood, and to think about repairing instead of throwing away.





IF THE HAND CHANGES, THE TREE CHANGES.

Interview with Yukio Murata, third generation bonsai artist of Kyukaen Bonsai Village, opened in 1929. With Mizuho Ota (translation), Cameron McKean (photographs) and us.

... They have to water them a lot, even three times a day in summertime.

Julian: *What about the nutrients? I heard that if you water too much you sort of drained the nutrients from the soil...*

Yes, we have to use fertilizers.

It's like Japan: since we are a small country we have to import all the food, so this is the same thing, but you put in into a small pot.

Mizuho: *I was just asking him how they shape the trees, he said that a lot of places use metal wire to bend them, but he says they don't do that. They just chop the branches while they appear.*

J: *So they just prune it.*

Naturally they try to shape it.

Cameron: *So they just let it grow... so they don't force it. They just take away things.*

(...)

Mercedes: *And why did they choose to cut instead of wiring?*

It looks unnatural that way. It's like plastic surgery on humans, it depends in whether you find it attractive or not, and we don't.

J: *It's amazing because they still get sort of dramatic effects, even just by not bending the*

trees. The pine tree over there... (laughs)

M: *And how do they learn the technique of pruning, by experience or do you have to learn?* My father is also a bonsai artist, so I would just ask him for an opinion and then just repeating that, eventually you start learning. Even nowadays I think "Oh, maybe I should take this part out..." but when I ask my father he points a totally different one (laughs). So it's a still learning process.

Mi: *Isn't that depending on the artistic differences?*

You still have to learn the basics, and once you learn all the basics, then is artistic difference.

M: *How do they decide the shape of each tree? Do they just watch it grow and decide what's more natural or how do they decide it?*

There are two ways. One is by having an image first and then try to shape the tree into that shape, and the second one is trying to see how the tree is growing and try to fit it with their natural grow.

M: *No tutors, just watching the natural shape.*

C: *Ideological battles...*

J: *Yeah, right?*

M: *Yeah, it's really hardcore. 'Wire? Wire's for sissies man.'*

(...)

J: *I read they are doing bonsai since 1929, so there's probably some bonsai he's grandfather did around here. And then his father took care of them and now he is... three*



generations taking care of one tree...

This is the same tree, one is going up and this one is going in V shape, so there's natural differences. That is an extra part. Is like shin hair.

M: *Do you grow them from seed or by cutting?*

These are from seed.

J: *How old are they?*

Three or four years.

All: *Wow!!!*

Mi: *I was so surprised because three or four years to grow these little things... But he said "For us three or four years is nothing."*

J: *Woa, right! His perception of time must be so completely different than most people...*

M: *Since this bonsai nursery started in 1929, there must be old bonsai around here...*

This is three or four hundred years...

All: *!!!!!!*

C: *So this go really far back... Do they know who took care of it before, or...?*

The really old ones are usually found in nature. We take them and pot them. This one has been potted for maybe 60 or 70 years.

M: *Yeah I heard about natural bonsai... they happen specially in cliffs, because you don't have much soil and they grow very slowly. It's a very exceptional condition and they are very hard to find.*

They found this in a swamp. They would carry it in wooden crates. This is my grandfather in the picture...

M: *You look a little bit like him (laughs). How is it that natural bonsai happens?*

In really bad conditions, trees grow slowly.

M: *But aren't swamps supposed to be full of nutrients for plants?*

It was a very cold swamp, so it wasn't very good for growing trees.

J: *I wanted to ask you about this idea of continuity... since you are the third generation taking care of bonsai, do you notice differences in the way that your grandfather or your father tend bonsai?*

M: *Are there different styles?*

It changes a lot. Also when the bonsai is bought, the change of ownership affects the tree. Even by the way you water it or apply fertilizer, the tree changes. If the hand changes, the tree changes.

M: *Are there certain rules or style particular to your family?*

Yes. Our style is natural.

[we go back inside] (...)

[looking at empty pots] You have to know all the shapes. If you wanna do something new, you have to have all the old knowledge.

C: *So, depending on the base you have to use certain species of trees? Or is it more about style?*





M: *Is it about composition?*

Yes, often there are certain combinations.

Flat pots are more fashionable these days.

But when they hang down, like this, you use deeper pots.

M: *So that they weight of the pot balances with the shape of the tree, right...*

For pine trees, we use pots with no glazing. Just simple clay pots.

M: *Because of the way the pine wood looks?*

Pine trees look almost the same all year around. Their color doesn't change that much.

So it's more neutral to use a simpler pot instead of the very colorful ones. [goes out]

J: *The seasons must be crazy around here...*

C: *It's actually all aesthetics, right? Decision don't seem to have to do with functionality.*

M: *Yeah... in a botanical sense, this is almost absurd.*

Mi: *It's funny, because he was saying that all the*

reproductive parts of the tree, the flowers and the fruit, retain their original size. It's just the tree that's small.

[Comes back with samples] This is the basic. But here, I broke the rule (laughs).

M: It's funny how he broke the rule, but in a way much more geometrical and simple... perhaps more contemporary or modern...?

Actually, I planned to do that!

M: *It makes sense because of the way the branches look—like lines.*

J: *What about his little companions?*

It a type of succulent. I like the combination.

J: *It's very bold.*

C: *And it's like a miniature ecosystem.*

M: *It's actually better for the plants...*

[Yukio's mom comes with tea]

All: Thank you!

M: *We were wondering, because his bonsai look like three-dimensional drawings almost, if he has background in composition theory... or if it's something he just learned by experience.*

Mostly it's through looking at bonsai, and also trying yourself... Because looking and trying is different, so it's both of them. I didn't use any books, because I was born into a family

that was practicing bonsai already—I have been looking at these trees since I was born, so all of this is in embedded in my head.

C: *So it's all experience... He doesn't make drawings or anything.*

We don't do it. But a lot of people do draw. We don't like drawing designs beforehand because then you try to fit the tree into that idea, and that's not really natural. We don't like that.

J: *Do you have any particular specie that you like best? It seems you like pines...*

It's really hard to choose which trees I like, but I can tell you which ones I don't like.

(laughs) Like this one, is really popular within the bonsai world, but we don't have these...

It doesn't seem to have any personality. It's a very strong species and can bear all the clip-pings and bending. It's very easy to shape and allows you to manipulate it easily, to show all your skills. So it's very showy.

(...)

J: *Do you have a favorite season for looking at your trees?*

Anytime other than the summer. In the summertime it's all green. Just green. In spring-time you can see the all the new buds coming out, and in autumn the color of the foliage changes and the leaves start falling, so in winter you can really appreciate the structure of the tree. But summertime is boring. Winter is also the best time to buy a tree, because the structure is very visible and bare. If you'd have the leaves, all the bad parts are covered, so it's difficult to notice. Sometimes, when you buy a tree in the summertime, when winter comes you are disappointed (laughs).

M: *It's like dating a woman that wears too much make-up.* (laughs)

But I like women with beautiful make-up...!

J: *Who is interested in buying bonsai now? Is their clientele old, young...?*

Those who love nature and beauty. There's no particular age group. In Japan, bonsai is regarded as an old-person hobby. Truth is, you grow old while your doing it... So eventually... (laughs)

M: *How old are you?*

Thirty-seven.

C: *I'm wondering why you have decided to do this line of work, instead of becoming a salaryman or something like that... Have you done this your whole life? Are you expecting to do it always?*

I was a salaryman* in Tokyo for five years. I wasn't that much into bonsai at first, but then I thought that someone had to do it to carry on with the family business.

M: *Do you like bonsai now?*

* Salaryman refers to someone whose income is salary based; particularly those working for corporations. In modern use, the term carries associations of long working hours, low prestige in the corporate hierarchy, absence of significant sources of income other than salary, wage slavery, and karoshi (death from overwork).

Yes. I mean, it's not that I didn't like it before...The reason I didn't do it in the first place didn't have to do with if I liked it or not. It's too close to me to actually like or get into. But I also wanted to experience what normal people do (laughs). Like go to school, apply to a job...

C: *What do you think now? This is so different from that life...*

This really fits me.

M: *Yeah, it seems like a good life...Living in tree-time.*

C: *So you must spend a lot of time thinking...*

In a lot of parts concerning bonsai is actually more important to do something than thinking about it.

C: *But even if you don't want to think about it, you're working with trees...it's a very solitary, personal thing.*

It's ideal not to think about it and go with the natural flow, but when you actually do it there are times when you start thinking...

C: *It's that bad? It seems their idea has to do with intuition...Do trees go bad if you think too much?*

Thinking is not bad, but doing too much on a tree is bad. The balance should be 70/ 30. 70% nature, 30% technique. How to decide which branches to clip is based on experience, and listening to other people's experiences.

M: *Which tools do you use?*

[goes fetch tools]

Mi: *It's funny, he said he clips with scissors but sometimes he also breaks them with his hands. I asked him about that and said that it gives a more natural feeling. It looks like it broke in a storm or something.*

[brings tools]

These were made by the first Bonsai tool company in the world. My grandfather helped them in developing these.

M: *Are these your grandfather's?*

Yes. They are really expensive, so we couldn't buy them. You can use them for thirty to forty years. (...)

Mi: *When is a bonsai done?*

At this moment, this one here looks complete. But then, from now on, one of these branches might grow in a funny direction too much and then we have to prune it again. This one is not ready at all. I don't know what to do with this one... (laughs). Maybe cut here, or here...

M: *I would leave this one and this one... (laughs)*

C: *I wonder is there are long debates where you call friends and start discussing what to do. It's a serious decision! Like, a three-hundred year old tree...Can you imagine? Who would prune it?!*

If you go to a bonsai class or school, people do that. But personally I don't like doing it because I'm not interested in other people's opinion so much. But I go to the teachers that I respect for an opinion.



J: Because, of course you have to sell them, but probably you get attached to them too... Do you get to see your bonsai again after you sold them?

Those that I sell, sometimes I get asked to come in and work on them, like a service. But we don't really sell the ones we love most. The ones that we buy from outside, it's easier to sell, but the ones that we grow from seed it's really hard.

C: What do you think for the future for bonsai? It will go into decline?

Popularity is going down... things are getting difficult. Mainly because of two things: the first one is that people don't have the space to put bonsai anymore, the second issue is that bonsai need certain amount of care and you can't go traveling, you have to be there all the time.

Mi: It's funny that you mentioned that space is an issue, since bonsai are small...

Well, actually is not so much about physical space but the conditions of that space.

You need sun and good air flow, and in Tokyo is really difficult to get these conditions.

Mi: These plants come for really poor conditions and that why they are so small, but once they are turn into bonsai it seems they take up a lot of care... So I thought that was kind of funny (laugh) Why is this?

If you take care of them, it just grows into wild. But if you really pursue beauty, it just takes a lot of care.



KITCHEN REVOLUTION!

Interview with Yoyo-San, who runs a Veggie Shokudo once a week, every Wednesday in Koenji. With Darryl Wee (translator), Cameron McKean, Yoyo's friend and us.

Mercedes— So, Darryl was telling me that there's this store, the one across the street, then the one with the garden on the roof, and your restaurant... how does it work? are they just a group of friends from life that moved here and started doing things?

She said she came quite late, but originally they had all this shops that were doing things under one name, something like "Amateur Revolution"

Yoyo— Amateur Riot, Riot

So they first started with an internet radio as well, but later on they started doing it in different shops so they had numbers for each shop, this is shop number 9, the other one is 14. But there's no 1, 2, 3, 4, there's not 14 shops, juts different numbers. And its separated, they each have their own place.

Mercedes— And do they do different thing in each shop? You cook for example...

Yes, some sell recycled clothing, there's a space where they do events —the one with the garden on the roof- three shops are closing...

Julian— Does it work like a Co-op or each shop manages their own?

They have their own shops, so we don't have any relationship in business, each shop is individual

Mercedes — Is more like a conceptual relationship, of ideas?

Yeah.

Mercedes— We are really interested into the whole Amateur concept, the idea of being able to do things yourself even tough you have to learn how to do them and maybe you don't do them right. Being able to learn to cook and do it yourself, or being able to build something, or doing it yourself or DIY* movement, but applied not only into esthetics and art but also in daily life...

Darryl— You mean as a business model?

Julian— It could work for business too

Mercedes— Yeah, it should work for business, I don't know how. So, I don't know.

She said these shopping street is quite old, so there's shops here that have been here for a lot of time, but some of them started closing or going out of business, so they want young people to take over and start new things, so instead of dyeing the shops actually continue. You know that there's a system here where you have to pay a down payment

* Do It Yourself (DIY) movement..The term DIY began being used in the 1950's referring to house improvements people could do without having to pay professionals. In the 1970's the term got related with the punk movement when bands started self producing their own records, labels, tours and publications, music fanzines that appeared with the use of photocopy quickly branched off into several fields, including tutorial zines that teach special techniques.

to rent a shop or an apartment if you want to rent it, you have to pay 3 months rent or 6 months rent. So they don't do that, so its easier for people, young people, to come here and start new shops.

Julian — Do shop owners do that?

They have a relationship where they know each other and they are friends so they don't have to charge you that fee.

Julian — So they have lived here, the owners, for a long time.

Yes they have lived here, so they know each other.

Actually, the event space, the one with the roof garden, they had to go trough a regular release contract and pay all the stuff, so its not all, but some of the shops. And then there's this grocery store that is gonna open a few stores down and they have a more friendly relationship.

Mercedes— So when did it started?, the whole movement that she was saying, the Amateur Riot.

Yoyo — Maybe five years ago

M— So its kind of recent, that's good!

J— Well, I guess is an obvious question, but why?

She says she didn't really set up to join this group, but somehow, trough people around her she got involved slowly. But there's this guy, Matsumoto-San who runs the shop down the street, and she said he is more of a charismatic character and more influential, since the early days he's been involved in various activities. Like last year he was on the Sug-inami district city election so they had a stage in front of the station and they were doing a concert

Y— Only he didn't want to win the election, juts do a party.

So he was the one that said that 'this space was empty on Wednesdays so why don't you do the veggie shokudo on Wednesdays'.

M— I tough you were here all week and only on Wednesday did the restaurant

Y— No, I'm not the owner of this shop.

D— Yes, sometimes I ask for some of the bottles behind the counter...

Y— No, no, they are not mine.

M— Please tell us about your cooking, your recipes, how did you get into cooking?

She said actually, at first she didn't have much experience doing this but she had kind of an image, an ideal image of a café. And at first it wasn't even once a week, maybe once a month, "if I could do it that would be good" she thought. So it became popular and people started liking it.

Y— So I didn't have any experience in the cook (cooking)

M— But why do you cook? Di you always cooked, learned when you were a child or did you just started cooking?



Y— I started cooking when I started Veggie Shokudo –claps and laughs-. I've always been interested in food, food is something very important in my life. And when I'm in the city living, is difficult to have a good food, good quality food everyday. Its expensive.

M— *Its expensive, and quality food should be available for everyone, so it shouldn't be expensive. Less of all organic food. We really like this Japanese farmer, maybe you know him, Mosanabu Fukuoka.*

Y— I don't know that much about him

M— *Well, we have a book from some guy that was in his farm and he wrote like an interview with him. And actually he was saying that, he was really angry with organic food being so expensive.*

Y— Its all very expensive now.

D— Well, part of it is like a lifestyle now, trendy...

M— *Yeah, the Natural House style –laughs- "Ill just put a little bit of dirt on your daikon and sell it to you for 30,000 yens"*

Well, living in the city as she said can be kind of expensive when you want to eat well, but since they know a supplier, they have kind of a direct relationship with what she's cooking, and that's a better relationship, its cheaper and direct. Instead of going to the supermarket.

Y— Also I have a question when I go to the supermarket I pay, but I always have some kind of ...question?

D— Suspicion

Y— What is this prize for?

M— *How do they prize this?*

Y— So, so, so, so (yeah, yeah, yeah). Where this vegetable come from?

M— *And why is there three carrots in the bag and not four? –laughs- and why are the so*



clean?

J— *How did the relationship with the people in Kamakura doing the food began?*

Y— I met X in the Veggie Shokudo. But my friend, who lives in Yokohama runs a children art school, they invited me for a workshop with children, in this workshop I met other people who make bread and have a bakery in Kamakura and this bakery, sugoi, very very nice.

J— *We should go visit, we love Kamakura*

Y— Its in the market

M— *We'll come back next week and maybe you can tell us where it is so we can go visit*

Y— So, there I met this person, and he, now he moved, but he used to live there. And he lived with David from New Zealand and they had a farm in Kamakura, then I started to go there.

M— *So, there you started the providing*

Y— And David, he said, I can teach you how to make bread, with the, you know, natural east, why don't you come work in the bakery? and I think, "Oh, I wanna work" but already, there's many people there, they didn't say nothing when I start, they said "come, come" ... so, its not work, I just go and help them...

D— She got paid for the first time yesterday –laughs-

M, J— *Congratulations!*

Y— So, every Tuesday I go there in morning, and I buy vegetables, and help bakery, and after I come back to Tokyo I prepare for Veggie.

M— *So all your food is seasonal*

Y— So, so.

M— *No tomatoes from Chile...*

D— She says, the tempura thing we just ate, thats a spring vegetable

Y— This morning I take from garden, my parents have in their garden, so this morning I took.

M— *It was really good. Food should be like that, food should always be like that. What happened?*

D— Tomatoes in December

Cameron— *How did you became a vegetarian? Your family? Religion?*

Y— No, no, no, my family loves meat –laughs-

Cameron— *So, how? Its very strange in Japan*

Y— Yes my family was a little shocked that I became vegetarian. What happened is that I travelled to India, and then I eat only vegetarian food for a month, I never eat for a month only vegetable. I thought if only vegetable maybe my health would be bad and have no power, but I always have a lot of power so.

J— *So you knew it was false that only meat keeps you powerful*



Y— And also, at the same time I read this book from Merzbow, about the study of noise... from this musician

J— *A noise musician? He's a vegetarian?* –laughs-

Y— He's vegan! –more laughs-

Cameron— *He's vegan, really?*

D— He explains this relationship between his music philosophy and being a vegetarian. So, she read this book and it was very important, and she started relating with all this musician she likes and they two were vegetarian, and she wasn't but she thought that there's a special character to them, or that scene has a mood, why don't they eat meat? what's the connection between their music, their character and being a vegetarian? she started being interested so she read that book. When she lived in France too, there was this, she lived in France for some years...

J— *Oh that's interesting, the noise movement and vegetarians... totally unexpected.*

M— *What's your t-shirt? I like it, "FOOD NOT BOMBS"**

Y— Its kind of a group

M— *A band?*

Amigo de Yoyo— No, a group distributing food for free, vegetarian. World wide movement.

D— There's a movement in each city, they started...

* Food Not Bombs is a franchise activism movement composed by independent collectives that serve free vegan and vegetarian food using mostly sub-plus food from groceries, bakeries and bakeries under the ideology that myriad corporate and government priorities are skewed to allow hunger to persist in the midst of abundance. <http://www.foodnotbombs.net/>

Y— Maybe in NY, someone started distributing vegan food in the street, and other people in other countries knew this movement and they started

M— *Oh, they were all doing it at the same time, they just got together?*

Y— Yeah, in France, etc.

M— *Well, that's a way to stop wars, food not bombs.*

J— *Do you think growing food is like revolution?*

Y— So, so, so so

D— She says is like a DIY thing, handmade things.

Our friend Amy was in Japan for a year making a documentary about female musicians in Tokyo, so she was here and went to Keio's shop and she told me there's was this demonstration or something in Omote-Sando, the big street, and she said there was something... I don't know, was there vegetarian stuff?... Anti War Food Festival.

M— *What did she said about food and revolution?*

D— She said that in terms of growing yourself and distributing yourself is kind of a revolution. We are changing things.

Y— Kitchen Revolution!

M— *That's how revolution happens!*

D— Start small right?

J— *You should totally read Fukuoka, I think you would like it very much...*

M— *He is so hard-core, he is so hard-core he doesn't even use compost!*

She has her parents house in Kio, that is kind of in the suburbs of Tokyo, they have plants, that hasn't been used for a long time... so she just started las week actually, last sunday, cutting the weed so she just started using that to grow. She says is a new and exciting

feeling to be able to do it yourself.

Y— So, so, so, so, exciting

J— *So now is a good time to read that book! –laughs- Sorry to insist –more laughs- but he is all about observing nature and the relationships... so he plants clover, white clover, because is good for the soil. So he doesn't use fertilizer, not even compost.*

Y— Compost no?

J— *No, no compost. Only watch. Don't touch anything.*

M— *He's very good, because he says at the beginning is very hard to grow like that, because your firsts crops are not gonna be good but the when you start to understand your own land. And he says is not a system you can apply to every land, you have to watch your own land and lear how your land works and see what grows naturally, what is planted, how it works and how it balances itself and then you can start to grow your own thing there and try to incorporate your species. He's idea is very beautiful: observing, understanding, and then acting.*

J— *And also the great thing is that is not only the idea, but in terms of production he was producing as much as a commercial farm with chemicals and fertilizers. He was doing as well as them.*

M— *That was why he was so angry, because he would say "I'm making this, this is organic and its cheaper for me, because I don't waste money on fertilizers, why should it be expensive? I has to be cheap, so in that way, everyone would have access to good food".*

Y— So, so, so. Do you know the name of the book?

J— *Its "The one-straw Revolution"* , we have it in english but I bet in japanese is much more*

* Fukuoka, M. One Straw Revolution: The Natural Way of Farming. Emmaus, Pennsylvania: Rodale Press, 1978. Download available at <http://www.soilandhealth.org/>

** Fukuoka's farm is actually in the island of Shikoku, southern Japan.

better. (...) And you could actually go visit his farm until he died, last year, 92 years old.

Y— Honto? -really?-

D— Where was this farm?

J— *I think it was on the south, maybe actually near Fukuoka**.*

(...)

D— One thing I also think is interesting about Yoyo-San is that she once told me she used to be working in a gallery and involved with musicians the art world, originally, and then, one time she told me she just got a bit sick of it, the kind of commercial scene, so she turned into farming.

(...)

Y— Do you want to see the garden?

J&M— *Yeah, of course, we'll love to.*





Cover Drawing by Hiroshi Miura

Mejunje (Mercedes Villalba y Julián Gatto), se realiza gracias al apoyo de Tokyo Wonder Site y la Cancillería Argentina. Mejunje (Mercedes Villalba and Julian Gatto) is a project supported by Tokyo Wonder Site and The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Argentina.

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