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Timeless Mirai Mindfulness: Interview with Ryan Neil

Inspired by the video: “Mirai in the Wild - Crater Lake”

<https://vimeo.com/618586806>

<https://bonsaimirai.com/press>

IJE: What is the difference between Asian types of topiary (e.g., *Karikomi* and *Hakozukur*) and bonsai art and craft? Can this difference be a comparison, also, between idiosyncratic human preferences (arbitrary whimsical) versus exulting the feral and wild qualities/aspects of both the human practitioner and its focal tree?

RN: To clarify, it's important to understand that what we do at Mirai is not Japanese bonsai. Bonsai originally began in China as *Penjing*, which was an art form dating back to around 700 AD to 1100 AD. It later migrated to Japan between 1100 and 1300 AD, influenced by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. In its Chinese origins, *Penjing* aimed to capture profound experiences in the wild environment, essentially the power of nature in its grand, harsh, rugged, and beautiful expressions. The goal was to convey these experiences to human observers, allowing them to appreciate the profundity of nature and bring that essence home.

When *Penjing* moved to Japan, it encountered a culture that was known for taking art forms from other regions (Korea, China, the West) and applying a *shokunin* mentality—a pursuit of perfection over a lifetime of craftsmanship. While the Japanese recognized that true perfection was unattainable due to human imperfection, they appreciated the beauty in striving for it and embraced the *wabi-sabi* concept. Thus, Japanese bonsai, prior to World War II, shared the spirit of capturing wild moments and profound experiences similar to *Penjing*.

However, post-World War II, there was a shift in Japanese bonsai. With the influence of the Western world and the trauma of the war, traditional art forms in Japan, including bonsai, became more formalized and orthodox. Japanese bonsai started moving closer to *Karikomi* and *Hakozukur*, abstract interpretations of natural concepts applied in a smaller scale in Japanese gardens, which increased formality. Bonsai began to lose some of its wild quality.

In contrast, Mirai's approach is distinct. We are reconnecting with the profound experiences in the wild that Penjing aimed to capture. We immerse ourselves in the native environment, allowing all the natural elements to act on the trees. Through my skills and knowledge, I accelerate the interpretation of information from the native environment to create an aesthetic on a tree that embodies two or three centuries of influence in a single effort. The resulting aesthetic reflects the experience of working with the tree in its native surroundings.

This approach differs significantly from traditional Japanese bonsai. Mirai's focus is on compressing time while capturing the wildness of the environment through the Mirai Wild project. *It combines craft techniques and the pursuit of perfection with the aesthetic and experience of embracing the wildness of nature.*

Mirai's approach to bonsai is distinct from traditional Japanese bonsai. While Japanese bonsai has evolved towards greater formality and abstraction, Mirai's approach seeks to reconnect with the wildness of nature and is inspired by the American landscape, which remains relatively untamed compared to Japan. This contrast highlights the idiosyncratic human preferences and cultural influences that shape different approaches to the art of bonsai.

IJE: After the *Mirai in the Wild - Crater Lake* video...Could you expand on this thought: "...put those memories into that tree." Are those memories related to actual experiences in the wild?

RN: As organisms, our experiences are like a dream. They fade over time and continue to evolve, influenced by the ongoing stimuli and environment we immerse ourselves in. So, when we talk about "putting those memories into that tree," *it's important to understand that the memory itself is already a diluted experience. What we derive from applying that memory to a tree is a diluted representation of what originally came from that native experience.*

This is precisely why, no matter how powerful one's mind is or how committed they are to creating natural or wild compositions, if they are doing so within the confines of the built environment, they are inevitably creating a diluted semblance of the natural world. Immersing oneself in the native landscape, exposed to the elements, and compressing time through the high-level craft we employ in our projects, allows me and allows us to genuinely infuse those experiences into the tree.

The result is a personal realization of aspects that couldn't be quantified in that immediate moment, and perhaps may never be fully quantifiable. So, when considering whether these memories are related to actual experiences in the wild, I believe that when you return to the organized context of the built environment, it represents only a fraction of the relationship you are forming. It is an ephemeral concept steadily slipping away into a more organized and diluted representation of your memory of the wild or your experiences within it.

That's precisely why we chose to immerse ourselves in the wild environment – to have a literal, non-diluted, contextually informed, and accurate experience. And what we gained from that immersive experience fundamentally altered our perception of bonsai.

IJE: In the "Mirai in the Wild - Crater Lake" video you talked about the idea that the microcosm (inherent in Bonsai trees) embodies a grander environment. Can that "grander environment" be also imagined?

RN: The great gift of bonsai lies in its ability to be made in various ways, each of which may possess a different degree of accuracy. When discussing accuracy in bonsai, we must consider the artist's intention. Is it authentic to the context, the species, the environment, the culture, the individual, or the community? Each of these aspects can lead to different goals in the creation of a bonsai.

Regarding the microcosm embodying a grander environment, my approach to bonsai, particularly in projects like *Mirai in the Wild - Crater Lake*, involves creating trees in the literal context of the environment that would naturally act on the species. *The idea behind this approach is that when someone views such work, they should feel transported and connected to that environment. Through the work, a viewer may form a relationship, trigger a memory, become inspired, or develop a curiosity about that environment.* It might even instill a desire to

visit, experience, learn about, and become a part of that environment. This notion draws from the original intention of *Penjing*, a Chinese art form, and *aims to maximize the connection between art and its natural source*.

It's intriguing to present these wild, creative trees in an organized, built environment to people. These trees may appear untamed and unconventional, contrasting the clean and manicured appearance typically associated with bonsai. However, it's crucial to recognize that the clean and manicured aesthetic is a product of the built environment's organized context, which altogether presents a different artistic perspective.

This leads to an interesting question: Do these unconventional trees generate a more natural impression, or do people in a tame and domesticated environment require a cleaner, more organized form to allude to the natural environment effectively and abstractly? These questions we are exploring as we present this work underscore the dynamic relationship between art, nature, and human perception. Ultimately, I hope that any tree I create can transport and teleport someone to the environment that inspired its creation.

IJE: If the tree, as you say is a veritable story teller (of nature) about facts or sensitivities we cannot otherwise immediately or easily deduce ourselves (mineral content, direction of the wind, ...), what within us, psychologically speaking, responds to these cues?

RN: The tree serves as a remarkable communicator, conveying the story of the landmass to a human capable of interpreting its narrative. Through the tree, we gain insights into facts and sensitivities that might otherwise remain elusive, such as the consistency of wind direction or the mineral content of the soil. Essentially, what the tree accomplishes in a single moment would require a human being to comprehend within that landmass for hundreds of years—the myriad of challenges and elements shaping its existence. When we encounter a tree and possess the ability to perceive and understand its communication visually, we gain a comprehensive understanding of that landmass in an instant, thanks to this venerable arboreal narrator.

Psychologically speaking, our response to these cues can be understood as a deep respect for an organism that can endure conditions beyond our own capacity to endure or even survive. We lack the longevity to personally experience the scale of challenges that could create such a profound and dramatic representation of life and an indomitable spirit in the face of natural elements. Humans' enduring fascination with trees is rooted in our evolutionary history as primates, where trees were not just a refuge but a necessity for safety and survival from the moment of our birth. It's not surprising that many people have their earliest memories and a sense of home linked directly to a tree. Furthermore, the shape or form of a "tree," so to speak, can vary based on where individuals grew up and the first tree they experienced. This connection is deeply ingrained in our consciousness.

However, shifting our focus to the allure of ancient trees, wild tree forms, or those outside the norm often stems from the compressed sense of time they represent. It's the respect for an

organism that has endured for centuries, if not millennia, and the appreciation for everything it has weathered and witnessed. Through these exceptional trees, we can extract significant information about the landscape we now find ourselves standing in, enhancing our understanding of the world around us.

IJE: The French word “*terroir*” denotes a unique relationship between the quality of grapes in relation to atmospheric, topography, and soil composition. You talked about a tree bridging land to human. Can the reciprocal process take place: an urban-settled mind becoming “*feralized*” by the art of bonsai *in situ*, in the wild, or while obtaining existing trees in the wild (*yamadori*)?

RN: *Acknowledging that an urbanized or settled mind is already at odds with our natural state as living organisms is essential. This disconnect from nature can lead to various forms of physical and mental illness, a trend we observe increasingly as urbanization expands across the developed world. This phenomenon is unfortunate because it represents a departure from the inherent relationship between an organism and its native environment, a relationship designed to be embedded and reliant upon the land.*

It's akin to taking a whale raised at SeaWorld or an animal bred and raised in a zoo and attempting to reintroduce it into the wild environment for survival. Similarly, humans born and raised in urban environments may struggle to adapt and thrive in a native environment, as they lack the knowledge and experience of living and working in harmony with the land.

So, it's important to recognize limitations when we consider whether the art of bonsai in the wild or obtaining existing trees from the wild can "feralize" a domesticated mind. While such experiences can undoubtedly foster an appreciation for the drama of the landmass, the elements, and the wild, they may not fully transform a domesticated mind into a truly wild one.

Instead of attempting to "feralize" individuals, the more significant endeavor may be establishing a connection between the domesticated mind and its primal, genetically encoded relationship with the natural world. This involves reminding ourselves of the importance of maintaining contact with nature, preserving and protecting it, and assuming our roles as stewards of the landscape that has fundamentally shaped our existence. In doing so, we honor the profound connection between humanity and the environment that has given rise to all we are today.

IJE: Can the *yamadori* practice be considered an aspect of conservation of the white bark pine?

RN: The practice of *yamadori* raises many esoteric discussions surrounding whether it contributes to the conservation or exploitation of the native environment. The answer hinges on both context and intention. In one particular instance, the tree we were working on had been collected from a landscape facing significant fire hazards. Underbrush clearing was underway, and this specific tree was saved from being chopped down, uprooted, and removed as part of efforts to reduce the risk of wildfires—a pervasive issue in the western United States. Many

yamadori trees have experienced similar fates, sometimes serving as the last living remnants of a landscape that later succumbed to fire in the years following their collection.

From this perspective, can the practice of yamadori be considered a facet of conservation? Unequivocally. Some of the bonsai at Mirai, originally sourced as yamadori from various environments across the western United States, likely represent their species' oldest genetic expressions and phenotypes. They embody the regionally specific genetic character and coding of those species found in a particular spine of a mountain range or location that exists nowhere else in the world. This unquestionably contributes to conservation efforts.

However, let's take it a step further. When these miniature representations of nature are shaped and presented to the public, they can connect people to the native environment and the challenges faced by species like the whitebark pine, which is currently under significant stress and in rapid decline. This trend is not unique to the whitebark pine but is mirrored in many Western conifers across North America and indeed, in plant and tree species globally due to the rapid pace of environmental change brought about by global warming. These changes often outstrip the ability of plants to adapt.

In this context, when individuals are made aware and become connected to the conservation issues affecting native environments, it can inspire them to make different life choices. These choices may range from small actions, such as recycling or reducing consumption, to more significant decisions that lower their carbon footprint and contribute to a less consumptive lifestyle. This, too, is conservation. It is conservation on both a personal and broader scale, as it can positively impact the white bark pines and many other species facing similar challenges.

In essence, yamadori may represent one of the few methods for conserving the genetics of these particular trees. It also plays a role in raising awareness and inspiring action toward the broader conservation goals related to climate change and the well-being of our planet, which is increasingly vital as we grapple with our role as heavy-consuming organisms in an ever-changing environment.

IJE: In the “Mirai in the Wild - Crater Lake” video you say that Crater Lake is in fact a white bark pine refuge. Could you speak to the aesthetics of ancient trees [Jared Farmer (2022). *Elderflora: A Modern History of Ancient Trees*. NY: Basic Books], as the embodiment of their uniqueness and irreplaceability?

RN: *In the context of the Mirai in the Wild - Crater Lake, I mentioned that Crater Lake serves as a refuge for the whitebark pine, and more specifically, it houses the grandmother tree, which is currently the oldest known living white bark pine on the planet. Remarkably, this particular whitebark pine also possesses resistance to the white pine blister rust, a devastating threat to white bark pines across the western United States. The significance lies in the fact that Crater Lake is not just a habitat for this resistant ancient tree, but it also represents a source of genetic*

material for potentially creating resistant offspring. These offspring, in turn, could be instrumental in the efforts to repopulate and restore the white bark pine population.

Crater Lake's status as a refuge can be attributed to its unique geological and physiological characteristics. It provides an environment conducive to the survival and persistence of the grandmother tree and other ancient white bark pines. *The tree's extraordinary longevity and genetic resilience are a testament to both the conditions and the environment it inhabits. When observing a tree like the grandmother tree within the context of its unique and challenging environment, we are witnessing something truly special. This ancient tree defies the odds, enduring harsh conditions and overcoming numerous challenges, which the vast majority of its fellow white bark pine seedlings would never have even had a chance to face.* The specialness lies in the aesthetic qualities of ancient trees, where time has shaped them further and further away from their ideal, youthful forms.

Over the centuries, these trees have taken on a responsive, asymmetrical shape and growth habit that embodies the characteristics of their environment, including the influences of weather and topographical nuances. Their presence, marked by their size, scale, and the remnants of what used to exist, such as dead parts, reflects their unique journey through time. This journey underscores their irreplaceability.

The aesthetic of ancient trees reveals the power of time, the story of adaptation, and the irreplaceable nature of these living beings. Witnessing the presence of these trees, some of which can reach ages of 1,000, 2,000, or even 3,000 years, evokes a sense of awe. It's a reminder of the extraordinary odds that a seedling must overcome to reach such a venerable age. The ancient trees represent a rarity in the natural world, where the right combination of genetics, environment, and time has allowed them to persist against all odds.

In essence, observing ancient trees is akin to a transcendent moment, a glimpse of nature's incredible resilience and beauty, and a profound recognition of their unique and irreplaceable status in our world.

IJE: As a moment that one could interpret as ecopsychological insight, in the video you are seen carrying, with effort, a bonsai that you then work on a preferred location. To what extent is this act/journey a wish to return to “ferality”—even wildness?

RN: I believe it is. In fact, one of the recurring experiences I have every time I engage in these projects, of which we've completed five or six to date, is an overwhelming desire to stay. I find myself reluctant to return to the urban environment, to leave behind the artificiality of modern life, and, above all, to disengage from the concerns dictated by societal constructs and the superficial pressures that compel us to focus on trivial matters in the grander scheme of existence.

To what extent is the journey or act a yearning to return to a more primal or wild state? I would say it constitutes the entirety and the essence of the project. The reason we undertake these endeavors is to reconnect with a more fundamental state of being, one in harmony with the environment, where we can understand, experience, and allow the natural world to shape us as organisms existing within it.

IJE: Along the same lines of thought and feeling, to what extent do the opposing dynamics between the pastoral and the rugged are also an interplay between violence occurring naturally in the wild and overly prescribed urban aesthetics?

RN: Nature is this grand juxtaposition, isn't it? *What makes nature incredibly powerful and beautiful is the very same force that can potentially harm us. It's quite a paradox.* So, there's a significant and perilous parallel when we examine the violence that can occur in the wild, set against the backdrop of an urban environment that's become overly regulated and structured.

When I refer to an "overprescribed urban aesthetic," I'm talking about the meticulously planned, organized, and constructed urban landscape. It's designed to serve us, to improve our lives, increase convenience, provide shelter, ensure safety, promote health, simplify life, and make it more enjoyable. Yet, at the same time, there's a stark contrast when we consider the inherent violence in nature. This violence is what creates the breathtaking beauty that can evoke a religious or spiritual experience, urging us to capture, preserve, or bring it home. In my case, I strive to create compositions that remind people of the profoundness of those moments in nature.

However, there's a discomfort in the face of nature's violence, which leads us back to the comfort and safety of our shelters, to seek the organization and structure that society provides. As social organisms, our minds are naturally geared toward functioning subconsciously, allowing us to focus on a multitude of tasks simultaneously. Consequently, our desires and natural tendencies have led to the creation of unnatural societal structures and an overabundance of safety measures. These constructs often disconnect us from being fully aware of those moments in nature where the juxtaposition of beauty and violence feels undeniably right.

Ultimately, it's an experience that can be likened to a religious or spiritual encounter, bringing us as close as possible to a profound connection with the epicenter of the energy that permeates our unique and extraordinary planet—a floating marble drifting through space, which we all have the privilege to inhabit.

IJE: Wouldn't, upon reflection, identifying with a twisted white bark pine be also foundational of resilience—at the very least its metaphor?

RN: I would turn the question back to you and ask, what do you mean by identifying with a twisted whitebark pine? Someone can walk up to such a tree and simply acknowledge its age, thinking, "Oh, this tree is old." However, that person might break off a piece of deadwood

hanging from it, thinking, "I'll take this home," or even disregard it entirely, deeming it inconsequential.

In reality, when we interact with trees as humans, we are no different from the deer, elk, bears, moose, or any other creature in the environment. *We impact these trees, much like any organism that encounters them. Trees act as constant protagonists, absorbing all the stimuli from their environment and responding accordingly. This process endows them with an extensive sense of time, which often captivates us.*

So, when I identify with twisted whitebark pine, I can only express my profound awe at their resilience. I also recognize that a tree must have endured a lengthy and challenging journey for it to become so twisted and contorted. This further implies that the environment it inhabits has provided precisely what it needs to persist for such an extended period. However, there's a cost to living for every organism on Earth, and a tree is no exception. This cost involves enduring hardships, such as having limbs torn off, experiencing burns, facing pathogens and insect infestations, and enduring suffering and struggle. Yet, the strongest life force prevails, reproduces, and passes on genetics with the resilience to endure.

When I look at a tree and identify with its foundation of resilience, I see the entire spectrum of life's challenges it has faced and overcome. I also perceive its adaptation to the specific environmental conditions that allowed it to age gracefully. Metaphorically speaking, resilience doesn't merely imply resistance to adversity but the ability to withstand the inevitable toll that all living beings pay as they exist over time in this complex journey called life.

IJE: In other words, is *wabi-sabi*, in the end, reflecting resilience?

RN: I can't entirely agree that *wabi-sabi* crosses the boundary of appreciating the beauty of struggle and survival, rugged harshness, and profound resilience. I don't see that connection. In all actuality, *wabi-sabi*, based on my understanding from my time in Japan, particularly as it applies to bonsai, ceramics, and other aspects of art, *focuses on the human inability to achieve perfection*. It involves reflecting on the relentless pursuit of perfection over time, our proximity to attain it, and the realization that perfection remains elusive due to our inherent imperfections. *Wabi-sabi* invites us to appreciate the beauty in imperfection, acknowledging that, despite our earnest efforts, we cannot attain perfection as flawed beings. The touch of humanity in a crafted object, marked by imperfections, is remarkable. It celebrates our human endeavor to reach perfection despite falling short.

However, in the native environment, none of these human constructs like wabi-sabi matter. In the natural world, wabi-sabi doesn't apply. It's a societal concept that is widely accepted. There's a more profound conversation to be had about nature's relationship with entropy and our human relationship with entropy. Our connection with entropy is entirely unhealthy. When we observe nature's relationship with entropy, we see a balance that should be ideal. If we replace *wabi-sabi* with the concept of entropy, we can explore a more meaningful discussion.

IJE: The art of bonsai operates on longer time scales. Patience seems key to the art. How does “self” carry through time in bonsai aesthetics? Its practice?

RN: Much like a tree in its native environment, bonsai is the great orator connecting human beings to the landmass. One can interpret the elements acting on that landmass through a tree over time. Bonsai acts as a time capsule, preserving the story of the landscape it originated from, whether it endured fire or remained untouched, whether it fell into disrepair or thrived. This story also encompasses the collector, their skill set, their history, and the subsequent journey of the bonsai—where it's been, where it was taken, and the motivations behind these choices.

Within the bonsai, the initial styler interpreted the raw material, shaped it, and altered its structure, leaving an indelible mark on it. The bonsai carries with it both the successes and failures of its journey. It represents the exchanges between various hands and the diverse aesthetics of those who modified its form. Despite domestication, the tree is not immune to the whims of nature's random acts.

As a result, you witness the accumulation of the richness of the human story within the bonsai—*a time capsule encapsulating its existence before humanity's influence and its evolution as humanity began to interact with, inform, and reshape the tree, leaving an enduring narrative of its journey through time.*



We are extremely grateful to Leah and Ryan for facilitating this interview and taking the time to engage in this conversation. Ryan’s eloquence, erudition, and know-how, and also, his Zen “beginner’s mind,” come through so legibly causing us to seriously consider Mirai practices as a long-term and veritable “ecopsychological” endeavor, second to none.