

Freeing Bonsai from Bonsai

Questioning tradition and exploring creative collaborations
at the LAB Session 4

By Katherine Wimble Fox

All photos by Pacific Bonsai Museum



Figure 1: Above, all three compositions as displayed at the Pacific Bonsai Museum. From left to right, “succulent composition” of *Pachypodium succulentum*, Pacific Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii* var. *menziesii*), and limber pine (*Pinus flexilis*).

With so much that is different in the world today from just one year ago, it makes sense that bonsai artists would respond to radical cultural changes with a shift in approach. Now is a time when artistic traditions, in particular, are ripe for major reconsideration. Traditions have their place—to ground us in the past and allow us to express honor for those who came before, among other things—but we can also question adherence to traditions and evaluate their usefulness in achieving purpose, such as producing swoon-worthy artwork expressing a zeitgeist like nothing seen before.

On August 15, 2020, Session 4 of Pacific Bonsai Museum’s multiyear LAB project was held outdoors at the Museum.

Curator/LAB Facilitator Aarin Packard and LAB artists Austin Heitzman, Ron Lang, and Ryan Neil assembled the three final compositions and revealed them to a small gathering of masked participants and a worldwide audience via Instagram Live. The timing obviously wasn’t planned, but coincidentally the LAB concluded amidst seismic cultural changes brought on by the covid-19 pandemic and a worldwide reckoning with racism.

From its inception, following benefactor Millie Russell’s question, “What if the pot came first?” the LAB project set out to question tradition by resequencing the tree>pot>-stand order in which bonsai are typically created, laying out permutations (stand>pot>tree, pot>tree>stand) designed to push the experiment to its furthest extremes. In doing so, the project sought to both question what it means to practice bonsai today and potentially refresh the practice by modeling a new approach to collaborative art.

There is a good case to be made for practicing bonsai in a different relationship to current tradition. As Neil argued,

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Figure 2: Above from left to right, PBM Executive Director Kathy McCabe, LAB patron Craig Russell, PBM Curator Aarin Packard, LAB patron Millie Russell, LAB Artist Ryan Neil, LAB Artist Austin Heitzman, (LAB Artist Ron Lang joined by video on a laptop on the podium), Videographer Steve Hyde.

“The majority of what we accept as bonsai is built off the economy of Japanese bonsai as represented in the week-long snapshot of the Kokufu Exhibition. We don’t exist in that snapshot.” Furthermore, he added, “Bonsai in Japan is a highly-codified, cultural representation. What we do (in American) bonsai would not be accepted as bonsai in Japan.” As in previous Sessions, the artists returned to a discussion of the possibility of a need for a new name for their practice, or, at very least, a new approach.

The artists working in this experiment had to work in the face of extreme uncertainty. Each got a turn to start a composition which they took as an opportunity to throw down a challenge to the next artist to take the composition and run with it. Within their own refined sense of craftsmanship, each artist explored form, material, style, subject matter, and composition to see how far they could get from their ordinary working process. Neil explained what a rare opportunity it was. “We had the support from the Muse-

um, the freedom to explore, and the provocation to ask the questions,” noting just one requirement: “The LAB required submission to the process, and it bred something beautiful.”

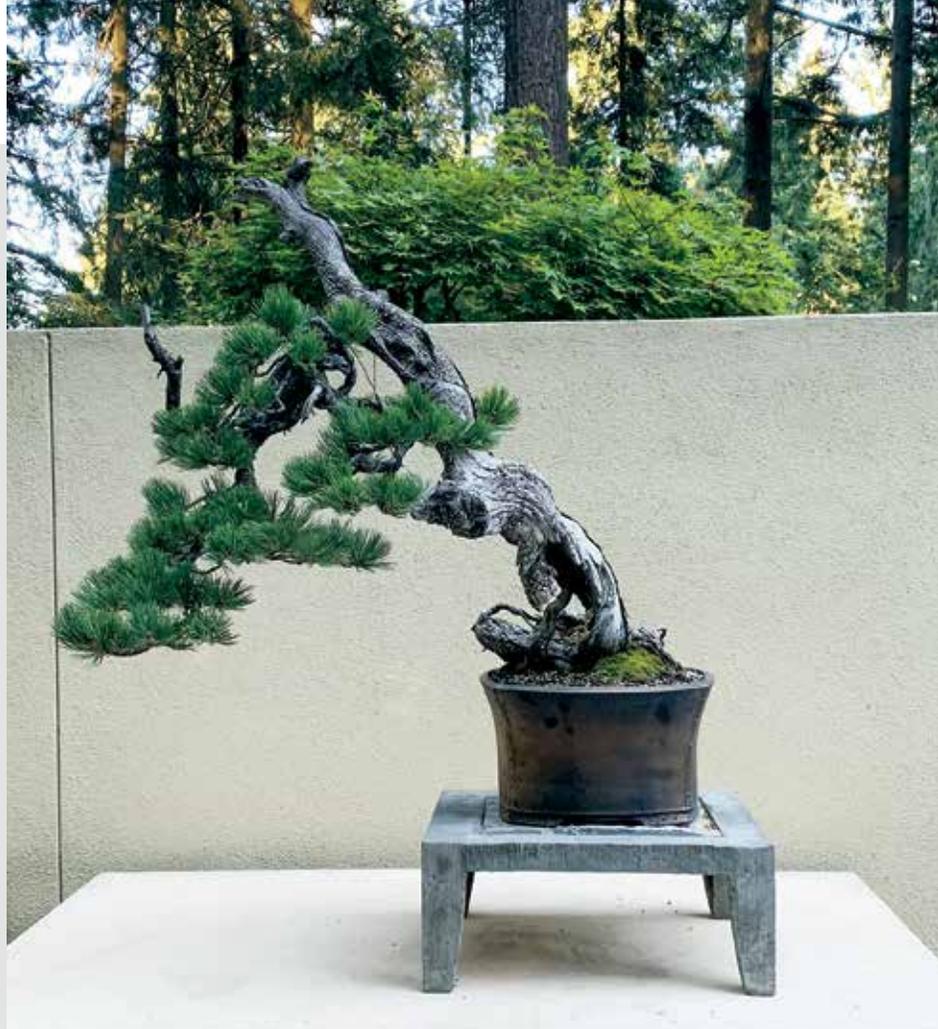
Reconfiguring the whole creative process was challenging but necessary. Heitzman declared, “If you want to break away from tradition, you won’t get there from tweaking little things. You need to start from square one and dispense with everything you take as a given.” The ‘givens’ he was calling into question: that he produce a wooden bonsai stand, for a particular bonsai, that functioned as a table, used for impermanent displays, in tokonoma-like indoor spaces. As the

“The texture of the concrete, faux-metal, texture of the deadwood and foliage create a ‘study in texture.’”
 ...Aarin Packard



Figure 3: Above left, Austin Heitzman impressed his concrete stand with wood textures.

Figure 4: Above right, limber pine, *Pinus flexilis*, composition: the shape of the container and stand are the most traditional form but the materials are very unique.



LAB proceeded over three years, he evolved his work to systematically dispense with one given at a time. By the time his third work emerged, Heitzman, primarily a woodworker, even dispensed with wood entirely except in texture, creating a stand built, as he described, “as one would build a bridge” in welded, rebar-reinforced concrete cast in wooded forms. Into the top, he impressed the texture of an old log he found washed up on the banks of the Columbia River. Rationalizing the approach, he said, “Wood-as-texture is not as constraining as wood-as-structure and concrete will allow the stand to live outside, at the Museum.” He also saw a reason to use formwork to create a concrete that looks like wood, noting, “It is both honest and deceptive at the same time... a bit like bonsai.”

At Session 4, for the first time, Heitzman’s concrete stand met Neil’s Limber Pine (*Pinus flexilis*) potted in

Lang’s ceramic-posing-as-metal container, forming a composition that Packard called “a study in texture.” Its slightly curving legs and overall size mirrored the curves and proportions of Lang’s container. Packard reminded all that this work was essentially the ‘control composition’ following the traditional sequence of tree-pot-stand, and not unexpectedly, resulted in a final composition that was the most similar to typical bonsai display.

The next composition to come together was the one that Lang started which followed the sequence pot>stand>tree. Lang’s response to the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed home that was the setting for Session 1 was to create a hearth-like container in which to stoke a site-specific artwork. Here, the idea came to fruition. As it was placed on Heitzman’s house-like, copper-clad stand potted with Neil’s root-over-rock Pacific Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii* var. *menziesii*), a beam of light appeared from the surrounding woods. Seeing the whole composition dappled in shadow and light, Lang concluded, “What we did essentially was produce site-specific bonsai for the Museum’s Pacific Northwest forest setting.” Furthermore, Neil pointed out, “Every piece of this is pure PNW: the tree, the stone (collected from Mount Adams), the barberry accent plant (selected from hundreds



of plants Neil considered), the architecture in which it was made... it all came together. The tree even has a big, structural root 'saddle' that grabbed the stone like it was always meant to be there."

Next, the yet-unnamed "succulent composition" was assembled (or rather, hacked) onsite with seconds to spare before Session 4 began. (The tree wouldn't go into the pot without sawing out a small piece of the clay container, apropos 2020.) Seeing the final composition, Packard and Neil reminisced about their journey to find a suitable tree for the composition. The list of needs was long, the logistics complicated. Because Heitzman made a wooden stand, it could only be displayed indoors, and because Lang perched a smallish, Mesa Verde-inspired, geometric clay vessel near the top, the planting pointed towards a cascade-style succulent. Neil and Packard started searching for an arborescent succulent, eventually leading them to Southern California where they pondered hundreds of options at eight succulent specialty nurseries. They knew they had found "the one" at the last stop: The Tropics Inc. in West Hollywood, but they had to convince the nursery owner's son to sell the rare, ~80-year-old *Pachypodium succulentum* to them, and then drive it back non-stop through the night to Portland, OR. After selective pruning and an angle adjust-

ment, Neil completed the composition with unique accent succulents and a light-colored sandy medium. In totality, the composition is most unexpected. "The stand is vertical, the small pot doesn't touch the ground, the species has probably never been used before as a bonsai, light-colored sand is a bonsai 'no-no', the bonsai depicts an arid environment that hasn't been reflected in bonsai... there's a lot of magic there," said Neil, adding, "Of the three, I'm most proud of this composition."

Reflecting on the project in totality, Pacific Bonsai Museum Executive Director Kathy McCabe asked the artists whether or not they thought the LAB would inspire a different approach among the bonsai community in consideration of the tree-pot-stand-setting totality. Neil answered, "Yes. I now understand that the pieces need to live together as a composition. And clients have already started coming to me

Figure 5: Above left, Pacific Douglas Fir, *Pseudotsuga menziesii* var. *menziesii*, composition: The composition as a whole strikes a remarkable balance, considering how delicate the tree is compared to the weightiness of the pot and stand.

Figure 6: Above right, the shadows of the composition highlight the delicate branching of the Douglas fir.



Figure 7: Above left, closeup of the "magic" that Ryan Neil refers to in the article.

Figure 8: Above right, succulent composition: The arborescent Pachypodium succulentum spills out of Lang's container perched in Heitzman's stand.



requesting considered compositions. The entire, experiential piece is now the thing that they want."

Returning to the question of the need to reconsider adherence to tradition, McCabe wondered, "Is this just a matter of preference, as one would prefer traditional versus contemporary art? Does bonsai have to be one thing?" Packard responded, "When I look at the Limber Pine composition, it looks like what we would call 'contemporary bonsai' with the modern textures (concrete, metal), but the other two, they are so evocative. They're coming from a completely different perspective. We (gathered here today) have seen enough bonsai in our lives... when you see something new, you know it." Heitzman concluded that the results of the experiment show that, "There is a discernible difference. When you mix up the traditional order, everything

gets stripped bare. You are free. The LAB allowed bonsai to be art without the constraints of it being bonsai."

The boundary-pushing, site-specific, considered totality gets to the heart of what bonsai does: bring culture and nature together in an artwork representing nature--or an abstract feeling of nature--in miniature. The marriage of the tree, pot, the stand, and the site creates the entire thought: a dialog that takes the viewer to the next level. Concluding the Session, Packard expressed the hope that, "These are the first ripples in the pond that will continue to inspire creativity beyond what was considered possible." McCabe vowed, "This is just the beginning. Pacific Bonsai Museum will continue to ask the question, 'how do we best contribute?' to the art, the craft, the practice... the spirit of bonsai."

Video and audio from all the LAB Sessions were recorded for an upcoming documentary about the project. You can support the making of the documentary by contacting Pacific Bonsai Museum at info@pacificbonsaimuseum.org. When available, information about how to watch and listen will be posted at www.pacificbonsaimuseum.org. Stay tuned!