

PAINTING PEACE

Art in a Time of Global Crisis

KAZUAKI TANAHASHI



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TO MAYUMI ODA
my dear coworker for life on earth

Artists need the world;
without the world
there can be no art, no artist.

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Bristlecone Pine

Bristlecone pine trees form sparsely spaced groves on high deserts in the western United States. Some of these trees, alive now with their bare trunks crooked, twisted, and torn, were already standing when King Ashoka renounced violent aggression in his Mauryan Empire, which was dominant in north India in the third century B.C.E. Many of the trees we see today were growing when Sunzi wrote *Art of War*—his discourse on economy, diplomatic alliance, intelligence, and strategy for the survival of a small kingdom during China's warring era in the fifth century B.C.E. Some of the trees still living were a couple of centuries old when Egyptians began to build pyramids around 2700 B.C.E.

These oldest living things on earth are found on the White Mountains, southeast of Yosemite, in California near Nevada; and near Wheeler Park in eastern Nevada. "Younger" bristlecone pines are also found in Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico.

The fact that the bristlecone pine can live to be older than four thousand years was discovered by Edmond Schulman, dendrochronologist, in the 1950s; his study was published in 1958 soon after his death. In 1964, Donald Currey, a geographer, found the oldest-looking tree on a mountain near the Nevada-Utah border and cut it down with a chainsaw. By counting its annual growth rings he determined the age of the tree as four thousand nine hundred years old. (I often wonder why he did not wait to conduct his study until a technology to measure the age of the tree without cutting it was developed. This is one of the incidents that demonstrates scientific barbarism.)

The Patriarch Grove, spread over gentle hills of light gray sand and ragged limestone gravel, is located at eleven thousand feet near the top of the White Mountains. Corpses of bristlecone trees are scattered all over the

barren ground, creating a large spread of surreal, desolate landscape. Just like the aftermath of a sweeping storm, broken-off trunks remain here and there, mixed with living shrubby trees with trunks covered in brown bark and branches holding green needles.

Some of these trees have been lying on the ground for over seven millennia. Through their phases of standing and lying, they have witnessed human civilization since its dawn, when agricultural society began to form about ten thousand years ago. A visitor there is immersed in the awesome presence of these wise and persevering beings.

These trees have responded to their dry and harsh environment by growing slowly, keeping the wood extremely dense and the crowns compact. Grown-up trees are less than fifty feet tall. The lack of bacteria and fungi, related to the sparsity of leaf litter and ground vegetation, keeps the wood from decaying.

Davis Te Selle, a printmaker friend, sat on a hillside of the White Mountains, took out a glass plate, and started to make a detailed landscape drawing on it. I walked around near him while making quick drawings in my sketchbook. I wanted to capture the wildly eccentric deformation of the trunks and branches, whipped and shaped by countless sand and snow blasts. Branches coiled around each other like snakes. Exposed wood grains around knots flowed like streams along rocks. The radically shifting thickness of a trunk resembled a sensuous feminine body. The tip of a torn-apart root was the beak of a mysterious bird.

It was in July 1998 when my family and I visited the White Mountains with a group of unique individuals. Mark Gonnaman, a graduate student at Stanford University in Buddhist studies, had organized the trip. Davis and his fiancée, Stephanie Kaza, were the illustrator and author, respectively, of *The Attentive Heart: Conversations with Trees*. Stephanie had given us a list of things to bring. Her advice to bring gallons of water was extremely useful, as there were no water facilities in the campground where we stayed in the lower part of this national forest.

Linda and I were fascinated by the on-site briefing by Stephanie, a specialist in biology and environmental studies. Our son Ko, age twelve, asked

her many questions about birds. I showed our daughter, Karuna, sixteen, how to adjust the apparatus and shutter speed of our camera. She and I went off the trail looking for young bristlecone pines, and were delighted to find a sweet little baby plant, only a couple of inches high.

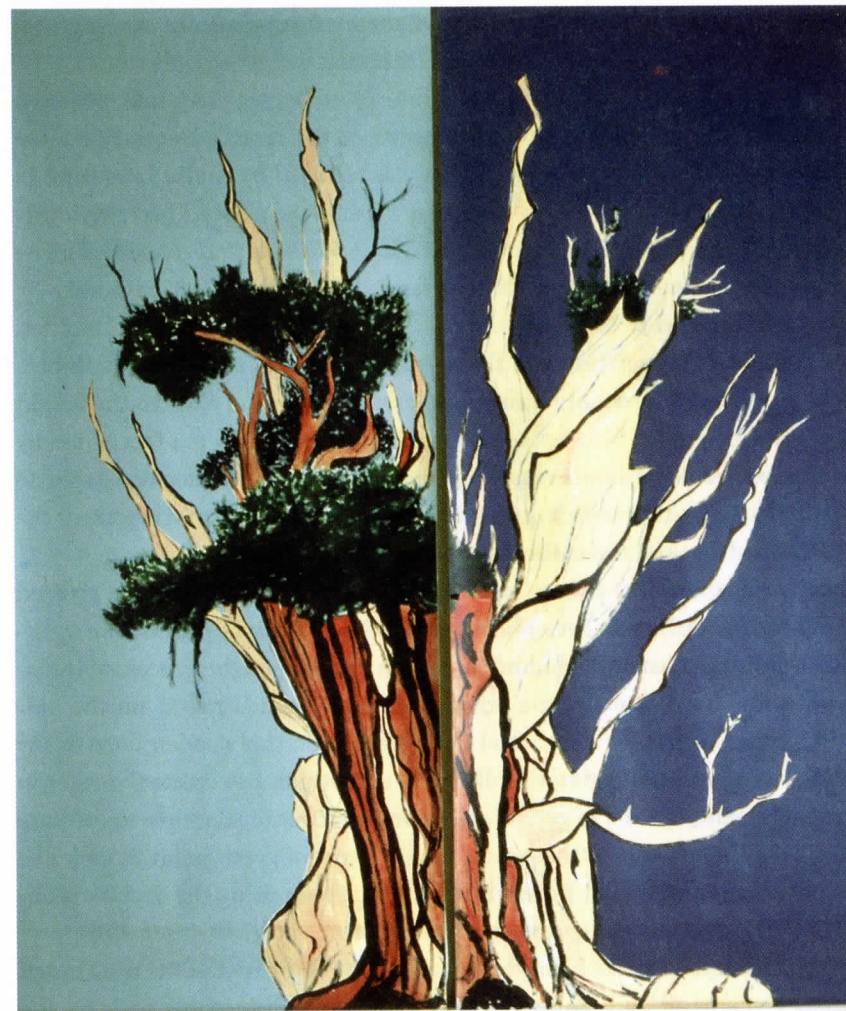
I first heard about this plant when Gary Snyder gave a reading of his life-work *Mountains and Rivers Without End* at a church in Berkeley soon after its publication in 1997.

Japhy Ryder, who was Gary's character in Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*, said in that book, which was first published in 1958, "I will do a new long poem called 'Rivers and Mountains Without End' and just write it on and on. . . . It will be packed full of information on soil conservation, the Tennessee Valley Authority, astronomy, geology, Hsuan Tsung's travels, Chinese painting theory, reforestation, Oceanic ecology and food chains." Just as Japhy predicted, it took Gary forty years to write this monumental series of thirty-nine poems that draw from his journals recording his wandering in rural and urban areas, observations on natural history and philosophy, and spiritual and artistic experiences.

The climax of his reading in Berkeley was his presentation of "The Mountain Spirit." He explained that he had been influenced by a Noh play called *Yamamba* (Old Woman in the Mountain), a fourteenth-century masterpiece by Zenchiku Komparu.

In "The Mountain Spirit," the poet climbs up the White Mountains and hears the voice of a spirit at night. They chant verses to each other. (At the Berkeley reading Gary chanted some lines in a deep Noh-style voice.) Then the spirit and the poet dance the pine tree together: "old arms, old limbs, twisting, twining / scatter cones across the ground / stamp the root-foot DOWN."

Later that year, Stanford University was to host a series of events celebrating *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. Mark Gonnaman, the main organizer of the event, asked me to create a backdrop painting of a bristlecone pine for Gary's reading. A traditional Noh theater in Japan has a simple and austere setting: A painting of an old pine tree occupies the wooden wall in the back, indicating that the stage setting can exist at any time anywhere and allowing the characters in the play to tell where it is they are.



Bristlecone Pine

Gary Snyder represents the best of the prophetic American mind, one that synthesizes wisdom traditions of the world. Known as one of the key poets in the Beat movement of the 1960s, Gary has inspired a great number of intellectuals with his imaginative and meditative vernacular writings, expressing his wild, whole, and ecological thinking.

As a practitioner of Zen and an admirer of Dogen, Gary had created a beautiful, solemn reading on audiocassette of the monk's essays titled *The Teachings of Zen Master Dogen*, which was released by Audio Literature in 1992. The text was selected from *Moon in a Dewdrop*, a book I had previously edited. The epigraph of *Mountains and Rivers Without End* consists of a line from Milarepa and lines from Dogen's fascicle "Painting of a Rice Cake."

I felt honored to have the opportunity to work with him again. Besides, the creation of a backdrop and the painting of a large tree would both be a new experience for me. My idea was to create a painting close to the height of the stage—twelve feet. But a canvas of the size eight by ten feet or ten by twelve feet would be cumbersome to transport or store. So I decided to create a pair of four-by-twelve-foot scrolls. The panels of scrolls would represent the contrasts of day and night, life and death, feminine and masculine.

Taking theatrical effects into consideration, I made a rather stylized small-scale sketch and sent a photocopy of it to Gary for approval. The medieval European masters' technique of using a grid helped the process of transferring the drawn lines of the original sketch to pencil marks on the pair of large canvas panels, which had been stapled on the wooden floor in my studio. I used a housepainter's roller with acrylic paint to create flat skies in the background. I tried to get a watercolor-like effect for the skin-toned bare stems and branches. For the leaves, I used layers of green paint to look like oil paintings. And finally, I drew black contour lines using the decisive techniques of East Asian calligraphy and ink painting.

A wide line in matte black delineated a part of the root of the tree. I used glossy black paint and wrote, "5,000 + 5,000," as an invisible wish for the long life of the tree, and of humanity for ten thousand more years.

We are not separate from these bristlecone pines living at high altitudes. Their longevity has paralleled the course of civilization. And these trees

standing now will watch the future of human society unfold. Their time is our time.

After his reading at Stanford, Gary was speaking with his friends and I went to join them. Gary saw me, pointed to my painting, and said, "A real bristlecone pine looks just like that." I thought it was a kind, upside-down remark.