

Art in the Garden

Urban Green: Small Trees for Small Spaces

Keshiki Bonsai by Kenji Kobayashi

of Sinajina, Tokyo

Summer 2011



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Nestled along a quiet residential street in the Jiyugaoka neighborhood of Tokyo is a contemporary bonsai studio named Sinajina (sheena-jeena), where Kenji Kobayashi is leading a grassroots movement to bring people and nature back together in 21st-century Japan.

“Sinajina presents exquisite miniaturizations of natural landscapes. Yet this is bonsai with a difference,” says Dr. Jared Braiterman, a cultural anthropologist who has researched how green spaces make Tokyo a livable city. “Unlike the centuries-old art form of traditional bonsai, Mr. Kobayashi uses young plants and experiments with a much wider variety of pots and styles, many of which he designs himself. He is proud that his contemporary approach has introduced small-scale plants to a younger audience.”

Mr. Kobayashi started his career as a student of landscape architect Hachiro Sakakibara, one of the Portland Japanese Garden’s former directors. At his suggestion, Mr. Kobayashi traveled to Portland to study the relatively new saikei style of bonsai with Masa Furukawa of Japan Bonsai in Portland, as Sakakibara himself had done when he worked at the Portland Japanese Garden in the 1970s. Developed originally by Toshio Kawamoto of Tokyo, saikei is a 20th-century offshoot of traditional bonsai in which miniature forests of young trees were used instead of the seasoned single specimen trees cultivated over centuries in traditional bonsai. Returning to Tokyo, Mr. Kobayashi took this newer style one step further, encouraging young urbanites to pick up a trowel and bring a little piece of nature into their busy lives.

At Sinajina, Mr. Kobayashi hosts regular classes in which customers can create and maintain their own

exquisite miniature landscapes. “Actively caring for plants,” Mr. Kobayashi insists, “is the best way to connect with nature. City dwellers can learn about life cycles, witness seasonal change and growth. It’s not enough for city people to visit the countryside for a day,” he says. “They must find a way to bring nature into their daily lives.”

This summer’s Art in the Garden exhibition brings Mr. Kobayashi back to Portland after a 15-year absence for an exhibition of work created on-site in the weeks leading up to the exhibition. Many of the works in this exhibition were created in original ceramic vessels made by artists of the Oregon Potter’s Association, while others were created in Kobayashi’s own designer containers. This coming together of cultures and art forms lies at the heart of the Portland Japanese Garden, which has been a creative bridge between the two cultures for almost half a century.



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