Episode 77 – Deborah Triplett – Whimsical and Wild

Wabi-Sabi

And now a personal word,

The legend goes that in the 1500s a young man named Sen no Rikyu sought to learn the Way of Tea. He went to tea master Takeeno Joo, who asked him to tend to his garden. Rikyu cleaned up debris and raked paths until it was perfect, then considered the immaculate grounds. Before presenting his work, he shook a cherry tree, causing a few flowers to spill randomly onto the ground.

The story has been retold many times in many ways. To this day, the Japanese revere Rikyu as the embodiment of wabi-sabi. Wabi-sabi is the art of finding beauty in imperfection. *Wabi* is simplicity. *Sabi* are the marks of aging and wear. Together they note the signs of nature and time.

Robyn Griggs Lawrence, editor of *Natural Home* magazine and author of *The Wabi-Sabi House,* said this about wabi-sabi in a 2001 article in *Utne Reader*: "Wabi-sabi understands the tender, raw beauty of a gray December landscape and the aching elegance of an abandoned building or shed. It celebrates cracks and crevices and rot and all the other marks of time and weather and use leave behind. …Through wabi-sabi, we learn to embrace both the glory and the melancholy found in these marks of passing time."

Wabi-sabi is deeply rooted in Zen Buddhism. Zen speaks of the three marks of existence: impermanence, suffering, and emptiness. Buddhism tells us that wisdom comes from making peace with these marks that are intrinsic to who we are. Wabi-sabi is a practice of grace and acceptance. One appreciates that wear and tear come with age. One appreciates that damage is possible and part of normal life. One appreciates that identity is an illusion as all things are in process of change.

Deborah Triplett embodies the deep wisdom of wabi-sabi. Her home is filled with sketches and drawings, with books and photographs, with wood and stone and paint—all with a patina of age, all imperfect and real. To step into her world is to sense freedom.

In 1965, *Vogue* magazine published photographs of the model Jean Shrimpton taken by Irving Penn. Penn was among the first photographers to pose subjects against a simple

grey or white backdrop. He sought the direct look. In the photograph, Jean Shrimpton is wearing a crown of flowers. Her eyes are blue and radiant. Her lips are parted. Her skin is flawless. She is eternal youth.

There is this side too to Deborah: the direct look and the photographer of decorative headpieces whose braided flowers are rich in mythology and meaning. Ophelia says to Laertes in *Hamlet*, “There’s rosemary, that’s for remembrance. Pray you, love, remember. And there is pansies, that’s for thoughts.” These flowers are in Deborah’s garden, Flowerhead Farm, whimsical and wild, evoking the flower child of Deborah’s teenage years: a young woman with flowers in her hair and love in her heart.

This is Deborah’s gift. This is her grace. She has lived this life.

I imagine Rikyu among the bloom and decay in Deborah’s garden. I imagine him among the sculptures and vines drawn to a rambling rose, a flower that is untamed, a flower that is fragrant and decadent and daring. He would gesture ever so certainly at the resilience of a petal. He would see both the transience and permanence of nature and time.

And Deborah would be there behind the lens.