

Mako Podcast Transcript

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Makoto Fujimura, Andy Murray

Andy Murray 00:02

There's a question I've been thinking about for some time. How do we create truly new ideas that move us forward that moves culture forward or moves our companies forward? So much of what we call new is really just an extension of the present. The post industrialized work world has been great for incremental improvements and efficiency, but struggles to generate cultures that can voyage beyond the land we already know. Few would argue today we need leaders with the ability to bring both left and right brain thinking to the moment or maybe better said a more balanced approach using both intuition and reason. Best selling books like David White's Crossing the Unknown Sea and Margaret Heffernan's Uncharted, How to Navigate the Future, they reference the importance of developing our intuitive capabilities. In essence, to learn to think like an artist.

Okay, so how do artists think?

To answer that question, I set out to reconnect with a brilliant artist who I knew would have a perspective worth hearing Makoto Fujimura. Mako is not only an amazing artist, he's also an accomplished writer who is just as passionate about the process of art as he is the outcome. In this episode, Mako and I talk about intuition and how it works in harmony with reason. We'll take a look back into history to 500 years ago, at a time when Europe was coming out of the Black Plague and how that applies to what we are going through today. We also talk about how artists look at constraints, mastery, and asking questions beyond the question. In the last half of the podcast, I turned the tables and asked Mako how he might use the approach of an artist if he were to take on a C-Suite job in a big company. And I can tell you now his answer was brilliant. Mako shares some practical stories from his work on the Board at Bucknell University. And lastly I asked him to look forward into the future and tell me what gives him hope. But first, let's start with Mako's backstory.

Mako 02:02

So I was born in Boston. My father is a well known research scientist. He was a pioneer in Speech and Hearing Sciences, when such a thing didn't exist. He was he was doing it. I was born in Boston, because he was doing his postdoc work with Noam Chomsky at MIT, and then went to Sweden, and then to Japan. So I ended up choosing American citizenship when I was 18. Because I, I came back to U.S. in middle school. And basically, that's kind of my identity. And I went to Bucknell University, where, by the way, I serve on the Board now thinking about this interface between creativity and imagination and practical solutions to challenging problems, especially in education today. But I went back and forth and I went back to Japan, as a national scholar, to study the Ancient art of Nihonga, Japanese style paintings. Spent six and a half years in a privileged position of basically being paid to do my art and, and to do have access to museums and temples and anything that I wanted to study in the context of my particular interest in 17th century Japanese art and history 16th and 17th century. So I did that. And I came back and had this vision to be an artist with my family in New York City. And we moved into

Murray Street and Tribeca, which became ground zero in 2001. And I raised my children as ground zero children. I'm now in Princeton, and having gone through various challenges, I am settled here, speaking to you from my studio, converted horse barn in Princeton and I have been my main work is obviously as an artist, but I have done a lot of advocacy work to help culture. I was a national council member appointed by President Bush in 2003. Due to my work, after the 911 reality post 911 reality I began to do cultural projects. And then I was asked by President Bush to serve on the National Council. So I did that for six and a half years and, and then learned a lot about how to be an artist and it was frontlines of culture war. And then and to see the effectiveness that artists, and poets and leaders can have jazz musicians can have in culture such as ours. And then I moved out to Princeton. So that's where I find myself today,

Andy Murray 05:38

I asked Mako how his international experiences has shaped the way he views the world today, and how it might affect his art.

Mako 05:46

For me, as I grew up, bi-culturally and not really fitting into any culture, that's the gift that that has given me is that I don't belong anywhere. I felt that you know, this kind of alienation, but then that became a huge asset for me as an artist, certainly, but also to see, you know, this ability to see beyond what, what the world was saying that you can assume, and so those are observational skills, I suppose,

Andy Murray 06:28

To see beyond what others see. To go beyond our tribal boundaries. That is a theme Mako consistently talks about any elaborates on it in his new book, Art and Faith, a Theology of Making. He says, "To be effective messengers of hope, we must trust our inner voice, our intuition that speaks into the vast wastelands of our time. In this way, we can train our imagination to see beyond tribal norms. So we can take in the VISTA of the wider pastures of culture. I often describe artist as border stalkers in our cultural ecosystem. They cross tribal norms to see the whole to navigate in between the walls erected to protect the tribes." Those words are not only helpful to explain the way of an artist, but can also be applied to anyone wanting to create something new to stalk the borders of our assumptions erected by our corporate tribes,

Mako 07:21

You know, Art plus Faith book that just came out of Yale, because of the title people think it's about faith, right? And it is, but but a friend of mine who deals with counseling CEOs of companies, said, "You know, this is the best book on work". And I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, Well, if you if you are able to interchange word work with making, right, what are we making, instead of asking how to justify work, we say what is it that we're making, then it liberates work from this kind of this drudgery of labor to, 'we're making a cathedral', we're making something beautiful, we're making a company that really, serves this particular need, and that elevates work as, as art. And I didn't obviously write it for that reason so it took me a while to think about it and to process it. I was just recently talking to him, and I said, "you're absolutely right, because if we can do that, and if I can see work, anybody else's work, Amazon worker, nurse, you know, as just as noble and beautiful as my own work, then that that's doing something into the world."

Andy Murray 08:59

When I first met Mako nearly 20 years ago at his studio in Tribeca, it was shortly after 9/11, and that event was still reverberating in almost every conversation about the future. He told me about his quest to answer the 500 year question, meaning, "What are we working on today that will be around 500 years from now?" It wasn't a question I'd ever thought about really. But it stuck with me mainly because of the context what was happening 500 years ago.

Mako 09:29

The work still continues through a movement called I-am-culture-care. And they are little groups everywhere that that actually talks about this. Maybe not this particular issue, but certainly in terms of thinking about culture and history. Yeah, 500 years ago, what was happening? Well, the black plague was happening. It's three generations were affected by this and we forget. And during the pandemic, I got even more interested in what happened directly due to the plague. And I note I think I might have told you when I wrote the essay, Fra Angelico and 500 year question that Fra Angelico was painting, as you noted when things were in turmoil. And I believe three Pope's were excommunicated in five years. And there were invasions and the black plague wiped out 1/3 of the population on Europe. And so how could anybody paint? You know, this is the question I asked myself and when you see Fra Angelico's paintings in Florence, so I write about this experience of going to the Met soon after 9/11 in New York and encountering these really small, but weighty works. They're just so powerful because they speak of hope in time when there was no hope. And this Dominican friar chose to paint and create beauty. As much as I'm sure he was involved in helping the neighbors. That made me think about, okay, so what last for 500 years? Here I am standing at the Met looking at these beautiful paintings. And these were literally done by hand 500 years ago by somebody who had a different kind of hope, than I could imagine. And so I look back and then during the pandemic, I did some more research and found out that Shakespeare built his Globe Theater outside of London because of the plague. And, and because it was kind of scandalous at the time, too. But he intentionally built it so that people can be quarantined to the classes and there was this class structure anyways, but this is part of Shakespearean theatre is to play one area of commoners versus kings and queens and princesses up on top. And so Romeo and Juliet is very about that, and is addressing and poking fun at creating out of this divide that is in front of you, basically. And so the audience knows exactly what's happening. And of course, Romeo does not understand the feigned death of Juliet because the messenger was quarantined. So this is right in this reality of darkness. And and yet this amazing art came out in the Michael Angelo, Da Vinci, Shakespeare Fra Angelico. So what is that about? So I began to think some more about this. And, you know, I used to say that so much of art and writing that we value today was born directly out of trauma, war, frontlines. So you think about Hemingway, you think about JD Salinger, CS Lewis, you're talking I mean, all these people experienced directly the trauma of war, TS Eliot, and Dante and you know, so forth, right. So So I said, you know, well, if you remove all the works of art and literature from directly influenced by war in trauma, you will lose 80% of the world's art. And then, during a pandemic, I thought some more about this, and I said, I don't know if there's any art, Emily Dickinson was writing during the Civil War, you know, so we go back to, Virgil, all these writings that we call civilization and art came directly out of times of darkness and trauma, and people were painting as if were creating work as if that was the only way to create something new in the context of severe scarcity. So, to me, this idea that art is a luxurious extra, you know, that's nice to have, but it's not essential to our survival. It's been said so many times it's fluff. It's not important. You know, why? Why do anything to promote artists? It's nonsense because this is the reality from which all, not just not just the arts and culture, but businesses, education, everything that we know to be life giving flows out in response and corresponding with, with some artistic products.

Andy Murray 15:28

I've been guilty in the past of using phrases like left brain to communicate rational analytic thinking and right brain as the intuitive creative side with not much thought really on the relationship between the two, other than to see new things that you have to create or want to create, you need to leverage the intuitive thinking skills. Mako's take on right versus left is quite different as he sees less divide and more harmony between the intuitive and rational elements of the creative process.

Mako 16:00

Right. So first of all, you know, you need both analytical rational and the emotional emotive, not emotional, but effective. And intuitive, right, the intuitive core is what you want, because intuitive core happens at the base of the brain, rather than left or right brain. So you want to get to the base because that's where integration happens. And in order to get there, though, you have to kind of do the backward movement of how we come to know anything know the world. When we are born. My friend who's a clinical psychologist says, you know, we learn things bottom up, right, left. In other words, when we are born, we learn things by touch, smell, taste, first body's come to know, hopefully, in a loving environment, nurturing environment, we we are able to grow out of our sensory what I call somatic knowledge into the first the affective side, were our feelings, grow first, if you're in the right context. Then the rational language, and so forth develops after that. And in education and in information, there is certainly we done the opposite, right? We force feed the left brain and force that into the right try to make it stick. So the marketers try to be all by creating this storyline that somehow connects the left to the right. When you have a need for this product. So we need a gecko to speak. So, so we identify with a gecko, and then that becomes action, some, whatever, whatever they were trying to get to. So we try to do the opposite, but it's very hard. Like, the challenges are huge, enormous in terms of us, you know, some people can do it, put in inflammation and actuate it, but most people can't. And so, we're finding out, especially during a pandemic, we had time to kind of recalibrate and think about this, you know, what endures? What lasts? Experience, is it something that is more resume building? Is it something that we consider success to be the center, as the bottom line to be the centers? Now, we can do it that way, but they tend to be converging tasks which, means that there is, we narrow down the outcome to, let's say, one successful outcome, and we deem that success, and we educate children, basically, to do that well, right? So, and yet, you know, I had a recently I had a conversation with the Dean of Engineering at Bucknell University. And, and he said, "Five years ago, what I was looking for are kids who can do that well, convergent tasks well, and process and analyze and, and do it quickly and efficiently and so forth. But now I have to look for students who actually think about the problem behind the problem. Who actually think divergently from the problems they're given not just to solve a fixed point of a problem, but to understand that there is a problem behind the problem and how they do that? How they create divergent taking. So you know, you do it through theater, through dance, you do it through the arts, you have to get back to the somatic and somewhat of a communal way of knowing. In order to do that you have to develop empathy skills. You have to develop a certain type of leadership skills that previous would have been considered to be something to avoid if you are trying to climb up the ladder of success. And yet, as the research has shown that kind of selective empathy is essential for the workplace, right? And, and the culture of the workplace is paramount in how people would come back to the office today, right? I mean, why not just do everything by zoom? Why not hire people cheaply all over the world? And you can do that, and you know, education too, why not just do everything remotely? Well, you can do that. But again, it's force feeding information rather than actual tangible experience of living and communities being together. And that requires a different set of ways that gifts that we need to cultivate. And the best way to cultivate that, by the way is through the arts, music, and theatre, and so forth.

Andy Murray 21:23

Mako describes the skill of demonstrating empathy, as core to growing our intuitive abilities. Empathy is really about learning to ask different questions that uncover what you don't know about a situation. I asked Mako what other questions should we consider asking to increase our ability to know things intuitively,

Mako 21:43

The idea flows out of the experiential reality for an artist. So a dancer knows her body more than she knows rationally how the body works, right? I mean, it helps to have that knowledge in case you get injured. Or you you know, you want to prevent injury, but the body knows, instinctively, like what it can do, and what it cannot do, and the dancer is to try to do the impossible. You're actually pushing back against the way you think it's possible. And that kind of thinking, and artists, you know, obviously, like me, are always trying to ask the impossible questions. There are works behind me called walking on water. And it's, it's simple question can we? Can we walk on water? And, and if art doesn't answer that, and it will be a mistake to problem solve that way, but it certainly poses the questions and the deeper ways. Yes, and, and so, you can get to the problem behind the problem. If you learn to do this, the challenge is how to do it collectively as a group. How to ask these questions more in an integrated fashion. And so you need both actually, the left and the right brain, you need the analytical and and and the effective that is integrated into something that we address holistically, rather than bits by pieces, bits and pieces.

Andy Murray 23:38

We're all familiar with the cliché, think outside the box, which means look beyond the familiar. What it doesn't mean and can fuel a misbelief is in order to be creative, we need to work without constraints. It is easy to imagine an artist's looking at a blank canvas as a moment when the imagination is limitless. And when we visualize the artists that way, as one without constraints, we know that's not the real world of work. In the real world, we never have enough budget time or resources that we think we need to do something truly new. I asked Mako how he looks at constraints and the artistic process.

Mako 24:16

So the answer is materials, no. And I listen to the materials. And of course, I create parameters around creativity, you know, limitations of your friends. So you limit if I were asked to do commission, I ask, "what's the work that you don't like?" you know, What color don't you like? And those are helpful to me. And then even if, if you have a particular type of work, the series that I've done in the past that they respond to, then it's not gonna come out the same, right? And every batch of minerals that I get from Japan and the right amount of Kite and so forth, is different. I have to understand. And also, because I mix, the pigments with hide glue, Japanese hide glue, the mixture is going to be different every time because the moisture level in here, the season, the temperature is all different. And all those things I don't think about, I just know. Like through years of failure. Like this is gonna work, this is not gonna work. And so by my body has learned a certain rhythm, it's almost like a liturgy of understanding and I walk into the studio, and I try to not think about a lot of things. Especially being highly self critical, or having these voices say, "Well, how about this? How about that?" I kick them all out. And then I kick myself out. And then let the materials start to speak on their own. My eyes know, right? When the mixture is right. When something is happening that I've never experienced before, even though I've used the same material over and over for 30 years, every time it's new. So there's some there's always the surprise. And now I'm you know, I delight in that. And I want that so I'm actually looking for it.

Andy Murray 26:41

I was finally beginning to put some pieces together based on what Marco was telling me. For him, learning his craft, how materials work, what is possible, all that he learns rationally becomes so mastered, that he knows what to expect intuitively without thinking about it. Then when the materials don't behave as he expects, it's in those moments of surprise that he begins to explore for new. This resonated with me, because I believe mastering one's craft at work is essential to the discovery process. Mastery helps you know, when you're experiencing something that is unexpected. And from that you can know what is worth exploring. Someone without mastery will really struggle to see what is the unexpected. However, in the work world, we rarely create by ourselves and interacting with people and knowing intuitively people requires a certain amount of being together. I asked Mako, "Doesn't zoom and remote or hybrid remote, make it much more difficult to know how others are feeling and thinking at the intuitive level?"

Mako 27:45

That's correct. And one thing that zoom has allowed though is I'm entering into your office right now you are doing to my studio, right. So every time we zoom somebody, there's something in the background, which tells you more about the person than what the person is telling you. So I've gotten good at playing the show and tell game. And actually, you're absolutely right, though, if I wasn't so highly sensitized to reading the group, you know, I'm so intuitive. I'm a high introvert, highly intuitive. So there's not a moment when I want to be in front of people. Right? But when I, when I do first of all, it takes a lot out of you because your intuition is on override and, and like taking in information. Even without you knowing, right, and you're reading the room, you're already processing what people are feeding, not just thinking but feeling. And when you walk into a room full of a boardroom or whatever, or any kind of classroom or church, you instantaneously you know. That's, how my makeup works. You know, what this culture is like. That can be depressing because you know on the surface they may say one thing, and you walk in and you're like, "Oh," you know, and you sit in the back, wear black, you know. But that's also something that you know, if it's applied to organizational psychology, or it's applied to the way that we understand our customers. That's like a critical information that the whole entire board needs, right? So I try to pay attention to that. And try to articulate it in a way that's hopefully translatable to the rational side.

Andy Murray 30:10

So far, we've been on a quest to understand what it means to think like an artist, I decided to flip the conversation on its head and asked Mako to imagine that he left the art world, and was now a newly appointed Chief customer officer at a fortune 500 company. And I wanted him to take us to the first 90 days, how would he approach the assignment, after of course, he got over the initial shock of such a career change.

Mako 30:33

The assumption is that it's a highly competitive world is scarcity filled, it's a zero sum game, you have to win at all cost. We have to produce something that is going to make us wildly successful. But that is a photo of like assumptions like, like, what is success? If you have it will be really, really happy? In terms of company's objective. You're assuming that it's a scarcity filled environment, but is it? Is there a model of abundance already built into the client base, that you are assuming to be not there. That you're creating your product in terms of creating desire for the product that they don't really want you set your thinking. But is that true? Or is it something that is, you know, we haven't seen yet and in that

case, you know, you have to directly interface with your customers and and live in the life that they live in order for you to truly incarnate or bring in these essence of what you are trying to do. And perhaps they can tell you what success is. More than you can.

Andy Murray 31:56

Okay, Mako totally delivered on that answer. From my experience, learning to get to the problem behind the problem is the art and science of great leadership. Mako then said something that surprised me, when I made an assumption around reasoning being far more developed than intuition in business today.

Mako 32:14

Right and again, the assumptions... are we really good at reasoning, if we're ignoring the intuition, right? It's because reason comes flows out of intuition, not the other way around. So you cannot force intuition to react with forced information. So, what are we doing in marketing? We're assuming that we can affect change, which the most enduring change happens in intuitive level, the integrated level,

Andy Murray 32:53

Bringing an artist way of thinking of looking at the problem beyond the problem and asking difficult questions, it's not only healthy for teams working on innovation, but also it's very relevant for teams at the top. One of the things Mako is involved in is in higher education. And He currently serves on the board of Bucknell University. He shared a story about asking a different kind of question, resulting in a different outcome than the board was considering. For me, the story Mako is about to tell about serving on the board shows he's keenly aware that not all ideas are going to work. And there's a humility to know and accept that.

Mako 33:32

My experience of serving on the board of Bucknell, I am the only artist. I was the only Asian when I got on there. Yeah, it's where I went. And I understand the context of higher education, the challenges of it. Of course, the pandemic, highlights that, but has been about that. About discovering things that...I have this kind of a churning wheel inside that it's always generating ideas, you know, at any moment, right. So, I scare people, because I say things that are just so outlandish. And I have to explain I'm not like saying this as a conclusion, I'm saying as a beginning of a process, so, thinking out loud, you know, so don't think that anything I say is, is true, but but in a board setting, right? It's absolutely critical to have somebody like that, like, throwing out like crazy ideas, like impossible things. Have we thought about this? What if we did this? What if, and, and, you know, I said in the beginning, I am experienced enough to know that if I can bat 300 I'm doing really well. So seven out of 10 ideas, you know, get thrown out of the window right away, that's fine. You know, these you got to bat right? And if one idea, sticks, then you change, you change something. And if I can tell you a story, a tangible story. Very first few meetings, I don't know how I, what am I supposed to be doing as an artist on the board? You know, I'm not going to give millions of dollars, and we were chatting, just getting to know fellow board members. And they said, "We actually have a master plan to build an art building, you know, \$15 million of the art building and I, you know, somebody needs to spearhead this. " And I said, so how many art majors do you have? It's like, 22. So you got to sequester 22 art majors, it is \$50 million. That doesn't make sense to me. Did we just vote to create a new building for school of management? They said, "Yeah, yeah, that's, I'm really excited about that." I said, Why don't we stick the art and Art history majors in there? And there was this pause, right. And, and the chair of our board was sitting behind me. And he turned around, he said, "Now, that's a good idea." And then the guy who was sitting across from me, he is a

board member gave millions of dollars to Bucknell and he said, "You know what, that makes so much sense to me, because I was an accounting major at Bucknell. But if you would ask me, "What class did I take at Bucknell that helped me the most with what I do as an entrepreneur, today successful entrepreneur," I would say it was my art history class. Because I learned how to see. So he said, You know, "I'm gonna do an endowed chair of an endowed position of a business professor and art professor together to, to make this building sing." So this one, one statement, crazy statement, right? It's literally so Bucknell has now a brand new school of management building, with art and art history, that will be announced this Fall.

Andy Murray 37:34

Shifting gears to the present, I asked Mako about his perspective, right now, in this moment. What is the thing that he's looking for? And to the form, he took me to the ancient art of Kintsugi, a metaphor for now.

Mako 37:49

Well, you know, I talk about Kintsugi in my book, which is, I can't even show it to you. This is a pottery that been mended with gold. And I love this metaphor. Because, you know, when things break in Western culture, we throw things away, or, you know, glue it back together. So it looks like it wasn't broken. Where in Japan, they highlight the fractures pour gold into it, making the Kintsugi bowl more valuable than the original. So, that's the question after the pandemic. It's not just to ignore it, get back to normal. It's how do we use what we have experienced, the brokenness we experienced and lament that we're going through, but pour gold into that. And I think that's for every business to do.

Andy Murray 38:48

Lastly, I asked Mako to turn to the future and to describe what is it that he sees that brings him hope? And once again, his answer surprised me.

Mako 38:58

Disruption gives me hope. It sounds crazy, but but but to me, all good things come out of the fractures, you know, and, and that's been certainly true of my life. And, you know, I, once you learn to walk into them. You can run away and many people do, and, and I do, but, you know, but the key thing is to stay with it and let it speak to you as you know, my materials have to be pulverized, to be layered and to be made beautiful, right? And that's very painful for minerals to go through. But the master craftsman, artisan is making sure that every pulverization counts into a new creation. And that's what I see in the world right now. And I don't know all of the details of how that would come to be. But as an artist, you know, I can see why Fra Angelico painted. As the one third of the population is dying with black plague. There's fear. There's invasion. There is even a question of can civilization survive? Right? And in the midst of that he found his answer. It was, it's gonna survive here. I'm gonna create one, here. And that led to the Renaissance. So it's like, okay that audacity that you mentioned to believe that what little thing that I do matters. My faithful presence let's say, at the desk that I'm writing my poetry you know if your Emily Dickenson, that's all you had. A 70 and a half inch by 17 and a half inch little desk. Woke up every every morning 3:30 in the morning to write. Even if no one knows that you're doing that. I think that audacity creates an imprint in history. And even if nobody sees that, you've done your work. And and so to me that so in that sense, this disruption and this time, horrific difficult time that we went through a very painful time, is one of the ways that I think I've learned to see. understanding the arts and literature. This is the, you know, in my end, there's my beginning, my beginning as my end, you

know, that kind of thing, where there's something that is being birth right now that the future generation will look at and say, Oh, that's beautiful. So that's what I hope to do in my work.