

In August, We Sat Down to Talk About Music, the Past, the Present, and the Future

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Part 1/3: A Conversation with the Peruvian Artist Carlos Runcie Tanaka

The artworks of the Peruvian artist Carlos Runcie Tanaka, who has his British and Japanese Roots combined in his surname, refer to pre-Columbian ceramics and traditional Peruvian, Japanese and European practices. He represented Peru in ARCOmadrid 2019, the 12th Havana Biennial, the XXVI Sao Paulo Biennial, the 49th Venice Biennale, and the I Bienal Iberoamericana de Lima. In August, we sat down to talk about music, the past, the present, and the future. We discussed how all references of time can be combined into one material.

By studying pre-Columbian ceramics, researchers have developed several interpretations about the lifestyle and cosmovision of the ancient Peruvian people. Many of the techniques and motifs included in these traditional practices are still being passed on to communities throughout the country today. This ancestral knowledge is a fundamental element of identity. Therefore, ceramic is a material that has made the generation of historical discourse and the preservation of cultural memory possible. At the same time, ceramics are connected to aspects of our daily life. As objects of daily use (such as mugs, plates and bowls) they contribute to the fulfillment of basic needs. They are also included in ritual and funerary practices. In conclusion, the use of ceramics can be understood not only in a practical sense, but in an artistic sense as well.

FNC: You came to art through detours: In 1976, you began to study philosophy at the Faculty of Humanities at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. Why did you decide to study philosophy?



View of Carlos Runcie Tanaka's garden

CRT: I think philosophy was the closest thing to music, which I was not allowed to study. Since I was eight years old, I wrote songs, played the guitar and the piano. But I just

played by ear, without instructions. I was a self-taught musician, writing many songs. Maybe I was not so good at lyrics and poetry but the songs were okay [laughs]. They were very personal songs – like self-portraits. That is why I first wanted to be a singer-songwriter. I would listen to Cat Stevens and the folk rock from the 1970s and 1980s. Later, Joni Mitchell became a strong inspiration for me. She brought her special sensibility and music, an atmosphere full of open sounds, words and rhythm.

Before taking philosophy, my first choice was archeology. Since I was a child, I was attracted to the old pots and the ancient history of Peru. I often went to museums to see the old pots usually placed inside display cases, which were filled with thousands of beautiful objects. My father wanted me to go to the university in order to study business school or economy to have a safe and promising future. I followed his advice and, as I could not be a musician I said to myself: “I have to do something close to music, close to my songs” and my father agreed with my choice to study humanities and philosophy at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, even though he was a businessman. I am really thankful to my father for not pushing me too much.

FNC: Why did you decide to abandon theoretical studies?

CRT: My approach to Philosophy was through words. It was fun until I had to read and write about philosophers like Nietzsche and Kant, thenceforth I really felt that the

tight structure would destroy my enthusiasm. The rules became more rigid, the words began to hit me hard and I could not write the essays that were required. So, I asked my professors if it was possible to quit. I loved to read the texts, but when it came to the assignments and the essays, especially about the German philosophers, I said to myself “no more”.

If
you



Carlos Runcie Tanaka: Tiempo Detenido (Time Arrested – Standstill), 1997, Centro Cultural de la Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes, Lima (Peru), Photograph: María Inés Vidal

want to finish school, you have to follow the rules. So, I decided to quit, three semesters before finishing my studies because I realized that I could not follow those rules, and the theoretical studies were not for me. Then, I decided to go *on the road*, like the musicians. My father was skeptical because he thought that I would never survive in the art world. And here I am, 40 years later, still trying to survive in the art world. It's been a long and winding road – like it is sung in the song from the Beatles. I took many detours, I stayed in Japan for three years as an apprentice to a Japanese master potter, I also stayed in Italy for four years learning ceramics to have a broader view of art and tried to get from life what I needed at the moment to keep on expressing myself.

FNC: Japan, Italy ... you worked in a lot of places and always came back to Lima, Peru. What did you learn elsewhere that you couldn't learn in Peru?

CRT: The years in Italy taught me to speak with my hands – with gestures. I would never talk and express myself like I do it today, if I had not been in Italy. I was young,

in my early 20s, and I was very contrived as a person. Those four years in Italy gave me another sense of myself, of space and architecture, the experience to be touched by art, the tactile experience of literally touching art in the museums. There were no guards and no cameras at the time in 1983. So, I really carefully placed my hand on the surface of a painting in Florence and thought, “Wow, it breathes – Now, I know a little bit more about art”. I also took an introductory ceramic course at the Istituto Statale d’arte di Sesto Fiorentino, so Italy gave me somehow the formal art education that I didn’t receive at the University as I was taking Humanities and Philosophy studies in Lima. Also, meeting artists like Nino Caruso, Salvatore Cipolla and other inspiring people was an enriching experience.

In Japan, I was more introverted, even more shy than I had been in Lima. I remember being so shy and silent, that only at reunions with friends and family I could have a louder voice. When my friends asked, “Carlitos can you sing us a song?”, only then I would fill the room with words and music. But eventually I traded music for clay and ceramics. And since then I sing my songs through my installations, my artwork, like a singer-songwriter.



In Japan, I learned ceramics

Carlos Runcie Tanaka: Desierto al Sur de Lima (Desert South of Lima), 1987, Intervention at the Panamerican Highway Km45, Peru, Photograph: Javier Silva

apprenticing from master potters like Tsukimura Masahiko and Shimaoka Tatsuzo. I learned the craft and the spirit of Japanese ceramics through them, ceramic craft as a

way of life, not as a hobby, not only as work, but almost as a religion – it was a beautiful and intense experience. I also learned from them that you have to follow your own intuition, your own strength, and that it doesn't matter if there are failures or if a pot breaks, you have to keep on working with it until the end with full energy, without losing the intention, the trust. But I must confess, that besides all these things learned abroad in Japan and Italy, Peru and our vast cultural heritage gave me a very solid support to continue my dreams in Lima.

FNC: Did you ever consider not coming back to Peru?

CRT: I've been so lucky to be able to experience such different worlds. I could have stayed in Italy and Japan but finally both contributed to my return to my native country – I had the strong feeling that I had to come back to Peru. I decided that I could not be either European or Asian, even if I had a little bit of it in my blood, because one of my grandfathers is of Scottish heritage – Walter O. Runcie – and the other one – Guillermo Shinichi Tanaka – Japanese. I remember a song I wrote in my youth:

“*Man with no land / singing songs from many other lands / man with no land / singing songs from far away / I'm a man with no land / who sings his songs from heart and brain / songs that surely are his own / but a man with no land to own / and no land to belong [...]*”

When I left, I was searching the place where I belong, so that when I came back to Lima, I would know for sure, that the place for me was Lima – the coastal desert of Peru, where the water meets the land and where migrations take place. This notion of belonging and being part of a landscape, an inevitable sort of awareness can also be found in my artwork.

FNC: Using ceramic as a medium is traditional in Peru and Japan. Which part of your art is an expression of your Scottish roots?

CRT: Perhaps it's the isolation... puh, that's a tough question. My family name, Runcie, comes from a French sailor or fisherman who came to Cullen a small town in northern Scotland. I always have had a quest about my identity specially through my Japanese roots and also ceramics, a traditional craft in both Peru and Japan. The trip to Japan reinforced my identity and the affinity with Japan but, on the other hand, the trip to Italy gave me back my occidental heritage. But the British, the Scottish ancestry has not been explored as such, yet.

If I try to think about Scotland it would be the green and open landscapes, the rough coastal landscape and the ocean. I might start exploring all this now, maybe I can find something of it in my pieces.

Part two of three of the Interview with Carlos Runcie Tanaka will be published on Monday, the 14th of October.



Progresión Orgánica (Organic Progression), 2014, De lo moderno a lo contemporáneo. 60 Años del IAC, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, MAC Lima (Peru), Photograph: Juan Pablo Murrugarra

