

“Through art you just want to connect to someone’s heart”

VON FRANCISKA NOWEL CAMINO · VERÖFFENTLICHT 14/10/2019 · AKTUALISIERT 14/10/2019

Part 2/3: A Conversation with the Peruvian Artist Carlos Runcie Tanaka

FNC: In the past, you also taught at different universities. Who influenced your journey in becoming an artist?

CRT: Now when I think about it, Joni Mitchell and Cat Stevens, were perhaps one of the most important influences for my art [laughs]. Of course, artists like Isamu Noguchi, Tilsa Tsuchiya, Van Gogh, José Tola, Emilio Rodríguez Larraín and Jorge Eduardo Eielson among many others inspired me too, but music has helped me create a visual resonance in space – which is perhaps one of the strengths in my artworks.

Also my inspiration for ceramics comes from the pre-Columbian tradition and from the craft movement. Through the reading of books from Bernard Leach and Hamada Shoji, two wonderful master potters who came together in the 1920s and decided to join efforts to give value to simple pots, that were not even meant to be regarded as things of beauty in the museum. They were both a significant influence on studio pottery of the twentieth century and contemporary ceramic design, two major figures of the mingei folk-art and the arts and crafts movements. They both chose wonderful examples of ceramics produced by unknown craftsmen and took them to another level of artistic appreciation. Coming back to the British roots, I am thinking of William Blake who also comes from the craft tradition and also is an influence for me.

FNC: But what were you looking for when you started creating art?

I was just trying to connect with the world surrounding me. The shy young man who first spoke through his songs, and then decided to use his hands to create forms. Ceramics is special material because you are connected with the natural elements –



Carlos Runcie Tanaka: *S/T*, 2017, Litoral, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, MAC

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Lima, Peru Photograph: Juan Pablo Murrugarra

never wanted to travel far / I only wanted a little bit of love / So I could put a little love in my heart / I only wanted to sing my song well / So I could ring a small bell in your heart“.

“*Back to Earth*” was his last album before he stopped singing for almost 40 years. When he stopped, I began with my clay art in the early 1980s. Even if we come from distant worlds, we both had life changing experiences with the ocean. The wave and strong current that did not allow him to return to the shore and, the wave that left me stranded on the shore in 1994. That was my first encounter with the crabs, who since then are an inherent part of my art.

FNC: Talking about Stevens, are you religious?

earth, wind,
water, fire – and
their process.
Especially while
firing the pots
and objects in
the kiln, this
special energy
comes out.

Through art you
just want to
connect to
someone’s heart,
so your heart can
keep on beating.
There is a very
wonderful song
by Cat Stevens “(*I
Never Wanted*) *To
Be A Star*“ with
the lyrics:

*“I never wanted
to be a star / I*

CRT: I respect all religions. I was raised as a Catholic even if I do not attend church liturgical services [laughs]. But I am sure that I have a connection with an essence



Carlos Runcie Tanka: Into White / Hacia el Blanco, 2010 Instituto Cultural Peruano Norteamericano, Lima, Peru, Photograph: Carlos Rojas

that moves everything and that I still call God. Sometimes I think that I'm doing art in a special way for my afterlife, for a longer journey, just like the old pre-Hispanic cultures in Peru, they produced *Huacos*, ceramic pots, that were placed in the graves to accompany a person's afterlife. I have this sense of eternity, of permanence, endurance.

FNC: I don't understand time in a linear sense, in which the past is just the rest of the present. For me, time can be better understood in a cyclical sense, where the past is the future, which is experienced in the present. In this concept, the three times coexist. The past (and the future) exist in the present moment. This phenomenon can be found in your exhibition from 2004 and in the exhibition you had this summer in the Amano Museum, where your ceramics were presented next to ceramics from pre-Columbian times. How do you think about time?

CRT: We cannot edit time... Time has its own pace and rhythm. I think there is somehow a timeline, but it cannot be broken or separated, it can open up in certain moments, making wavy lines and sometimes the line ends up in a circle. This is how I imagine time, circular motions and moments.

I cannot control time, the nature of things and life events all come together, it is almost like mixing everything together. Somehow it doesn't matter if you were in Japan in 1979 or if you went to Italy in 1982 and sang those songs in the streets. It all comes together at one point as memory, as a lively and sharp event. So, the past contributes to our present. The present was the past in a way, but it moves towards the future. Translating this concept to my artwork, you reach this point, where you stop thinking and let things happen – the life experiences come straight out. You can't control it, the process just flows.

Not long ago someone said to me that he was so impressed with my artwork because of its timeless quality. At first sight, he thought the ceramic figures I had produced – the *Personajes* – were old, but after having observed them for a moment, he also thought they were futuristic. I was touched by his words because he felt that certain essence that allows people to forget about time. I think he felt that my objects somehow did open time and broke the line, maybe to establish that continuous thread again, the circle of time.

FNC: All of your works are testimonies of your life experiences. Can you tell us a little bit about the process of creation?



CRT: Yes, this is correct, my artworks rise from life experiences. And some of the most powerful installations remember life threatening experiences such as being a hostage of the revolutionary group Tupac Amaru in 1987, who took by assault the Residence of the Japanese Ambassador in Peru; I also remember being thrown from the sea by a huge wave, being stranded on the shore and opening my eyes to find hundreds of crabs, following the Crab that becomes a kind of mentor, a guide and a friendly friend to follow. The crab is also a metaphor for a creature that can survive between the land and water, remembering old migrations.

Getting back to the idea of time and belonging to a place, what these events taught me is that life experiences happen and people respond to them in a certain way.

I remember when I used to sing, I would instantly have the connection with the chords, the rhythm and melody, the voice would immediately touch someone's heart. It was a real and a direct connection from one heart to another heart – flowing like a heartbeat. Music is one of the most powerful things because it is not only the words, it is the melody and the rhythm. That resonance, that connection that makes things happen immediately. With the visual arts and the objects maybe there is another layer, there is more time to see the objects again, to have a second thought, to come back and relate to them. With music the connection is immediate, no barriers, just that magical instant where the hearts come together through rhythm and sound.

Making art is like writing literature or poetry. The material is my own vocabulary and what I produce becomes the words that I want to express. And no matter what you do and how you do it, through art you are telling stories. You are telling your own story the best way you can. The only thing that worries me now is how to keep true to myself in my work, how to be earnest to myself.

Part two of three of the Interview with Carlos Runcie Tanaka will be published on Thursday, the 17th of October. Read the first part now:

