

Carlos Runcie-Tanaka

The Passion and Pulse of Clay

Article by Jan Garden Castro

AT 52, CARLOS RUNCIE-TANAKA HAS SURVIVED A near-drowning, a heart attack and two following surgeries. Eighteen years ago, Runcie-Tanaka met James Turrell in his studio in Flagstaff, Arizona. Turrell advised the young artist, "Peru will be a difficult scenario for your work, you should think about moving to the US . . ." Yet his homeland of Peru has sent him to represent his country at art biennials in Venice, Sao Paulo, Havana, Caracas, Lima and Cuenca. Runcie-Tanaka's art is, aesthetically, in the highest ranks.

A trifecta of events suggests that Runcie-Tanaka's art is valued. Since the heart attack in 2007, he has had museums waiting in line. In 2008, ICPNA (Instituto Cultural Peruano Norteamericano/the Peruvian North American Cultural Institute), one of Peru's leading cultural centres in Lima, gave him a large solo show featuring his glass crabs along with an endless path of white paper and clay figures suggesting a body without its skin. Crabs are a personal symbol for the artist. At 36, he survived a near-drowning at the same location where his Japanese grandfather, at 36, drowned. A vision of

crabs lifting his body and carrying it somehow revived (and saved) the artist. Crabs also symbolise the meeting point of two territories: water and land. The crabs are versatile, land/water creatures with mythic personas, such as carrying other lives on their backs. In 2011, the huge ICPNA catalogue documents both the artist's exhibition and his major work to date.

The next museum waiting for a show was the Station Museum of Contemporary Art in Houston. James Harithas, its director, met the artist in 1991 at the fourth Havana Biennial; since then, he has been one of Runcie-Tanaka's mentors. The central installation for the exhibition, titled *Fragmento*, was *Tiempo Detenido*, (Standstill or Arrested Time). Among the 30 pieces in this installation, one figure reclining on a bed of red crystal marbles has a broken chest with the marbles rising out of it. Critics have suggested that this fallen figure stands for the 60,000 peasants and others killed by Shining Path guerrillas and by the subsequent Fujimori government counter-attacks, which caught the mountain people in the middle during years of



violent unrest in Peru in the 1980s and 1990s. Or, the artist ventures, the work may foreshadow his own heart attack. This work “was born” for the Lima Biennale in 1997 and has since been exhibited in important group shows curated by the Argentine art critic based in Peru, Gustavo Buntinx. Harithas first saw it in Lima and later invited the artist to show the work in Houston. The show opened in June 2009 following Runcie-Tanaka’s recovery from heart surgery. In February 2010, the exhibition *Fragmento* travelled to Grand Forks, North Dakota, by invitation of Laurel Reuter, Director of the North Dakota Museum of Art, in a joint venture and with The Station Museum of Contemporary Art.

One thing leads to another. The curators and director at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, saw the work and expressed an interest in purchasing this along with *Progresión Orgánica* (Organic Progression), a long, horizontal, flute-like construction of broken pottery shards produced by the artist in 1989. Its deep earth hues and undulating patterns are striking. In February, 2011, Runcie-Tanaka returned to Lima from a short trip to Houston for the MFAH Latin American Experience Gala and Auction. After almost two years, this major transaction was complete.

Runcie-Tanaka is a Peru native with a mixed British, Scottish and Japanese heritage. The artist’s

Background image, all pages: Desierto al Sur de Lima.

Facing page: Desierto al Sur de Lima.

Above left: Into White/Hacia el Blanco.

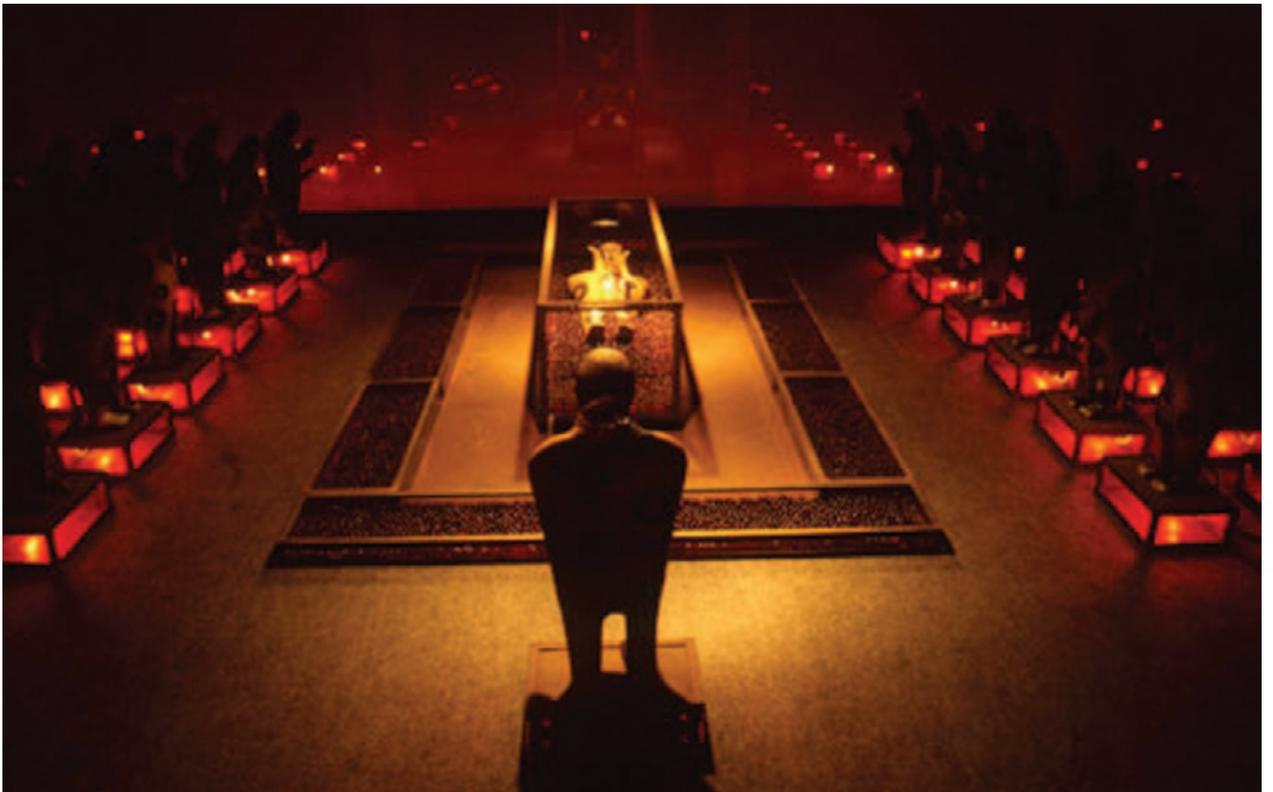
Top right: Vessels (Detail).

Above: Objects at Puruchuco (Detail).

paternal grandfather was an early aviator and aerial photographer.

Runcie-Tanaka’s education includes philosophy studies at Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, followed by art studies in Brazil, Italy and Japan. Next to the artist’s family home and cactus garden, he has built a large studio where he produces ceramic art and a range of distinctive functional pottery. He uses stoneware clays and local materials fired in gas kilns that reach temperatures of 1300°C–2,375°F.

Runcie-Tanaka’s work has graced the major



Above and below: Installation View of Tiempo-Detenido at the First Iberoamerican Lima Biennial/Centro Cultural de la Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes, Peru.





museums in Lima, including Museo de Osma, Museo de la Nación, Museo de Arte del Centro Cultural de San Marcos, the Museum of Art in Lima (MALI) and the residence of the US Ambassador to Lima. The Osma Museum featured endless rows of large ceramic figures whose hands were in different positions. The artist's vocabulary of forms includes hands, orbs made from ceramic shards, incised and collaged vessels and biomorphic abstract sea and nature forms. Carlos Runcie-Tanaka's art interrelates craft, philosophy, nature and the human hand – with its infinite meanings.



Jan Garden Castro is an art writer, author of books on Georgia O'Keeffe and Sonia Delaunay and a Contributing Editor for *Sculpture Magazine*. Carlos Runcie-Tanaka's numerous exhibitions, collections and honours may be seen at his web site: <http://www.carlosruncie-tanaka.com/>.

Top left: **Bowl.**
 Top right: **Pitcher.**
 Above: **Vasija-Objeto (Vessel-Object).**
 Inset left: **Carlos Runcie-Tanaka.**
 Below: **Progresión Orgánica (Organic Progression).**

