

Introduction

In a time when ceramic objects are primarily utilitarian and the practice of ceramic art is looked upon in the United States as merely a craft or a minor art by many artists, educators, and the art establishment, the country of Peru has given the world a great artist working in clay. His name is Carlos Runcie Tanaka. He is a native of Lima, Peru, a teeming multicultural South American city of over eight million inhabitants.

Clay is the material that shapes Runcie Tanaka's vision and his highest aspirations. Ceramic art is a fusion of physical and conceptual processes that have an ancient source and, in the hands of an artist, a contemporary resonance and meaning. In other words, Runcie Tanaka's ceramic works of art have the aura and the formal imprint of classical ceramic art at the same time as they engage modern issues of ethnicity, identity, fragmentation, and death.

During the course of his development, Runcie Tanaka absorbed the lessons of traditional ceramics and pioneered an approach that went beyond obvious formal references to ancient or modern Peruvian, European, or Japanese ceramic art. His early ceramic sculptures are discrete objects that evoke natural forms found in the ocean or the desert. Like his origami crab installations, some of his ceramic installations not only reflect his passion for the organic forms of life in the ocean but also serve as a symbolic reference to the Japanese emigration across the Pacific.

Runcie Tanaka's sense of space is consistently grand and expansive. In several of the desert installations, I am reminded of the Zen garden, and in others—the installations with figures—I perceive a connection to ancient indigenous religious sites. Together with video and photography, his early ceramic artworks and installations tell a complex story of coming to terms with his English, Japanese, and Peruvian ancestry. As he matured, his focus changed from personal and familial to universal human issues, in particular the fragmentation that takes place during a civil war.

The civil war in Peru (1980–2000) caused terrible economic turmoil, social and psychological fragmentation, and an untold number of unnatural deaths. Runcie Tanaka's response to this calamity was a series of ceremonial figures with individual hand gestures, which appear to have ancient indigenous roots and at the same time stand for contemporary man. At the center of the installation titled *Tiempo Detenido / No Olvidar* (1997–2008), surrounded by twenty-one witnesses, is a bleeding figure symbolizing a mortally wounded Peru. As a memorial to a terrible war, it is almost without equal.

At the end of the war, Runcie Tanaka began using ceramic fragments that had been damaged in the firing process. With an understanding of the healing capacity of art,

he began repairing, symbolically, if you will, the psychological disorders and broken spirits of his people by creating powerful images of ethnic unity. For example, *Manto* is a masterpiece that unifies multiple disparate ceramic fragments, or shards, that represent the diversity as well as the fragmentation of the Peru's population during the years of bloodshed.

Diversity and justice represent the highest ideals of civilized society; however, in times of civil war, diversity without justice can create a dangerously fragmented society. Carlos Runcie Tanaka's genius is to unify fragments that symbolize the diverse identities of the people of Peru. The installation titled *Huayco / Kawa / Río* (2003–06) consists of twelve extremely heavy, natural clay balls embedded with ceramic fragments and fired in a kiln at thirteen hundred degrees. Each one is a fully realized paradigm of creativity and spiritual inspiration. Together, they symbolize a complex society in the process of rebuilding itself after awakening from years of horror.

To my mind, Runcie Tanaka stands shoulder to shoulder with Peter Voukos, Irv Tepper, and Mel Chin. His highly sophisticated approach to art encompasses the search to find his inner self, honor his familial and artistic ancestors, and communicate his unique grasp of sculptural form as well as his insights into humanity, nature, culture, and history.

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