

SAN CARLOS' CLAY

In 1961, weighing his fifty years of work with clay, Bernard Leach, perhaps the world's most known and renowned potter in the field of the plastic arts, expressed his conviction that beginning with the present century the potter must be an artist, and that non-industrial vases should be judged as works of art. "The question about whether a ceramist is an artist or not becomes, thus, a vital problem", he concludes immediately, not without allusion soon after to the role that critique plays in the generation and solution of such a problematic. In that sense, it does not cease to be lamentable that in our countries, be it because of ignorance or generalized prejudice, almost all criticism has unjustly relegated pottery to the backyard of the plastic arts (among which painting and sculpture are always preferably highlighted), cloistering it to the domain of the so-called 'minor arts', or quite simply, to artisanship.

At this point, it is pertinent to read anew what the great painter Paul Gauguin- who would also venture with awe-inspiring genius to the art of clay, just like Miró and Picasso- wrote in 1889 about the situation of that art in the Universal Exhibit in that same year, lamenting that the so-called *connoisseurs* were incapable of enjoying the beauty and depth exhibited in the ceramics pavilion.

Pottery is not a futile activity. In our history's most remote times, among the Indians of America, one finds that their art is constantly in its favor. God made man with a piece of clay. With a bit of clay and another bit of genius. In its present state it is utterly uninteresting; place it in a kiln and it will cook like shrimp and change its color. Firing at low-temperatures will transform it lightly. One must wait until a much higher temperature is reached, so that the metal it contains may arrive at the point of fusion. I believe this is an interesting subject and, nevertheless, out of ten educated people, nine pass through this section with extreme indifference. What can we say about this? That they simply do not know what is at stake.

(In *LE MODERNISTE*, Paris: July 1889)

But him who in this case *does* know what is at stake (and let us leave critics to bury their critics) is Carlos Runcie Tanaka (Lima, 1958), potter of brief but astonishing trajectory, who from his very beginnings has felt the imperious necessity of working with clay, melting along with it, in hopes of turning his work not only into a medium in order to make a living, but also heartfelt art and fire that expresses his most profound passion, and which communicates his most intimate life.

To our understanding, two of the main motivations which drive the work of our cherished artist are the following: to embrace the universality of ceramic origins and to delve into his own individuality and adventure. In what concerns the former, Runcie Tanaka, taken by the *élan* of his double blood and fate, which first drove him to Japan to submit himself to the rigorous discipline of distinct traditional masters as an apprentice (*deshi*), and after that to Italy and Brazil, where he would alternate with colleagues from all over the world and with which to this day he maintains a vital and artistic dialog. Runcie's exploration, I insist, does not dodge the national. Rather, conscious and marveled by the rich Peruvian tradition, he incorporates in his own work not so much the manufacturing techniques or those of autochthonous detail, as much as in the usage of certain materials and of some forms and decorations (birds, fishes...) that remind him of his longing for universality. With this we refer basically to his opting for equilibrium, for the true equilibrium which consists in that state through which man maintains a natural interrelation between his interior and exterior capacities. Confucius used to say it: "A wise man is him who in his maturity can make natural use of the gifts with which he was born."

But how to achieve that equilibrium, and thus, that longed for wisdom, without knowing what the artist holds within him? It is then that we retake the second motivation which we intuited in Runcie, that is, Runcie himself becoming obsessed in discovering his own face in the clay that waltzes in his hands; Runcie preparing for work, always for work, as it is done by those who become masters. And there he is, kneading the mass, contorting in the edge, modeling the hands, glazing the bones, forging a new heart every day in the kiln. And in the kiln is where work and man embed. Like a tiny hell, the kiln, or better yet, like a brief purgatory after which the product will fall torn to pieces into the hells of oblivion, or ascend transfigured by fire and by love. The routine of fire and of the hands that imprint the everyday rhythm in that restless search wherein the artist perseveres and sometimes despairs. That is why, without abandoning its starting point, the vessel, on occasion, deforms the pleasantly rounded, castrates that which was a whole, granulates the smoothed, wrinkles the lean. It is the everyday struggle with the angel of mystery and the arcane. The artist tries to listen between his hands to the life that, not being conscious of being supervised, not for that stops fleeing, always. But, let us understand, Runcie's pottery is not agonic or tormented, even if it is true that some of his pieces attempt to cry out "an I-don't-know-what remains mumbling", as San Juan de la Cruz would say, upset hands forge a work which transcribes a strange joy almost without showing any trace of angst and tribulation. On the contrary, the usage of straight and curved lines, of plain and convex surfaces, the steady contrast between lean and cracked surfaces, are explanatory that the majority of his creations reveal to us a suspended tension among all of its elements and make us think in the artist's own equilibrium, which he has achieved by himself.

The detained contemplation which every one of Runcie's pieces are endowed with reminds us of the great ceramist Hamada, who used to say that the good pieces had been made with self-confidence, "like a man descending onto a hill in the middle of a fresh breeze". There is much of that in Runcie, besides the pleasure that invades the artist upon witnessing the blooming of objects from his hands, in which he shall eat, drink, admire, be acknowledged or vituperated. There is always something primordial, mythical in each ceramic work delivered by the kiln, through which not only originality is reached, but also true origin. The artist's words still resound: "I only attempt to maintain alive the initial creative movement". Ah, what a great life it is if at home, every morning, every object could be built anew by our hands! In a letter to his brother Théo, Vincent Van Gogh tells him that "it is precise to preserve something of the original character in a Robinson Crusoe". To do it all, to redo it all, to give to every object a supplementary gesture. From then on, to be active during the day there is no better thing than to repeat to oneself: "Every morning I shall think in Saint Robinson".

The fundamental quality that any kind of ceramic work with an artistic pretension should have is the life itself in one or more of its forms: interior harmony, nobility, purity, force, generosity, and even exquisiteness and charm. Runcie Tanaka's work, young still but laborious and heartfelt, both in consciousness as in chance, is the life of an artist who, like Crusoe, maybe one day will have to be canonized.

Renato Sandoval, (Taxi magazine, year 1987)