Vicús and Tallán Roots: Polo Ramírez

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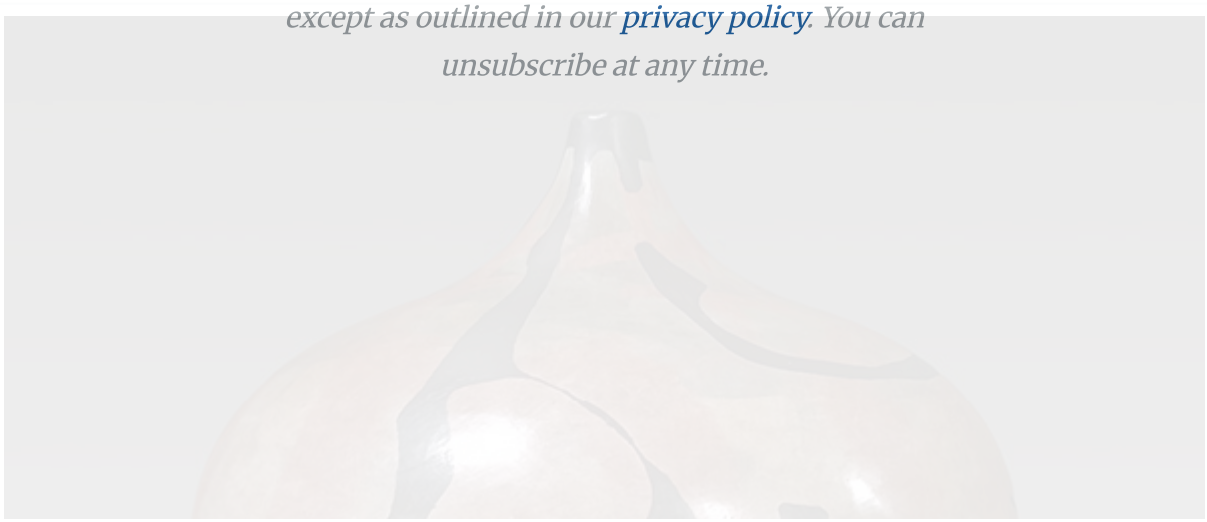

Polo Ramírez' vessel, 20 in. (51 cm) in height, ceramic, fired to cone 6 in an electric kiln, smoke fired in a metal drum, 2020.

On the far north coast of Peru lies an arid plain caught between the towering atmospheric blockade of the Andes to the east and the Pacific Ocean to the west. In this region named Piura, almost no rain falls, crops are hard to grow except in the river valleys, and native plants offer little shelter from the harsh elements. However, digging into the layers beneath the surface of this narrow strip of desert, archaeologists have discovered a rich ceramic history, including objects made as early as 2000 BCE. Long before the Inca established their dominance in Peru, the Moche civilization thrived here, and two other groups of people, the Vicús and the Tallán, also left ceramic evidence of their ancient presence in Piura. Not only are there surviving vessels from these communities in boldly imagined human and animal figures, but some of their methods of working with clay have also survived. Polo Ramírez is a contemporary ceramic artist, born in 1966, who traces his heritage as a potter back to his Vicús and Tallán ancestors.

An Unimaginable Journey

Ramírez's childhood in Chulucanas, Peru, was spent immersed in the pottery-making traditions of his parents and grandparents in view of Cerro Vicús, the landmark hill that yielded some of the iconic pieces made by his predecessors. Each week, beginning when he was five years old, Ramírez and his father, Mingo Ramírez, rode on a donkey cart to the nearby lagoon where they dug clay from its banks to replenish the family supply. Then, Ramírez and his older siblings helped their father mound the clay on canvas spread across the ground next to their home and, together, they wedged it barefoot. All members of the family were engaged in handbuilding ceramic wares,

utilitarian vessels they pit fired under a cover of pot shards and fueled with dry tree branches. The first pieces Ramírez crafted were small animals and *pájaritos silbadores* (whistling birds) before he learned to make water jugs and storage jars, seated on the ground, shaping each pot cradled between his feet with a wooden paddle and a stone.

1 Polo Ramírez in Miami studio, using a pre-Columbian paddle-and-stone method, 2000. Photo: Mariana Israel.

2 Polo Ramírez' vessel, 25 in. (64 cm) in height, ceramic, fired in an electric kiln to cone 6, smoke fired in a metal drum, 2000.

However, in spite of their constant industry, poverty overwhelmed the close-knit family and, as a child of eight, Ramírez was forced to undertake an almost unimaginable journey. Traveling alone on a cargo truck that took two days to arrive in Lima, Ramírez found himself in the notorious La Parada market, thrown together with many other newly arrived migrants from all over Peru who were also desperate to improve their economic circumstances. With no family and no support, Ramírez lived alone on the street, scraping together employment selling fruit or cleaning houses. Escape from these brutal conditions came at age sixteen through re-entry into the world of ceramics when Ramírez was given a government scholarship in 1982 to attend a technical school in Lima, the Centro de Desarrollo Artesanal.

Revelation and Transformation

For Ramírez, the next two years were the beginning of his expanding awareness of art making, at first through exposure to a wider view of Peruvian artists as well as to craft techniques that were new to him such as throwing on the wheel. After graduating, the pots Ramírez made and sold opened the door to an odyssey that eventually encompassed four continents, beginning with a trip to Paris in 1989, where he was inspired by the paintings of the European modernists—particularly the colors of Paul Gauguin—and the struggles of Vincent Van Gogh to achieve a life in art. Another point of revelation came in 2001 when Ramírez met Jun Kaneko at the annual art festival in Gulgong, Australia, and was introduced to Kaneko's approach to working on a monumental scale.

3 Ramírez applying engobes to a vessel, to be fired in an adobe kiln at 1650°F (899°C), for the project "Chulucanas Monumental," in Chulucanas, Peru, 2015.

4 Ramírez unloading a smoked vessel from the adobe kiln, for Chulucanas Monumental.

Continuous and wide-ranging travel was instrumental in Ramírez's transformation from a potter who made 25–30 functional pots a day to an artist whose work embodied an aesthetic aligned with a deeply felt philosophical outlook. Ramírez says, "What I learned from other artists nourished my soul and liberated my artistic expression." But, the more Ramírez experienced beyond his roots in Chulucanas, the greater his commitment to the cherished methods of his family and to sharing those methods and

the history they represent. He says, “I was always completely sure of continuing the pottery tradition of my ancestors.”

Keeping the Tradition

Ramírez begins with an elemental connection to the earth, still sitting on the ground to make his pots, the mat on which he sits, he says, is his studio. The full physical engagement with the work goes beyond shaping the pieces with his hands and feet. He cuts his own hair to make his brushes, and he burnishes the painted areas of his pots with oil from his face, which he transfers to the skin of the pot with a small river rock that has come down to him through five generations of his family. His tools consist of the round stones he presses against the inside of the evolving piece and the carob wood paddles he gently thuds against the outside. Smaller pots are pit fired, while larger work is fired in kilns built with adobe bricks. The primary shape of many of his pieces is derived from the ovoid mud nests of the chilalo bird, the Pacific Hornero, found throughout northwest Peru. “Nests,” Ramírez says, “that don’t break apart in the storm.”

5 Polo Ramírez’ vessel, 25 in. (64 cm) in height, ceramic, fired to cone 6 in an electric kiln, smoke fired in a metal drum, 2020.

6 Ramírez smoking pots in a metal drum, 2020.

The components of each piece create a narrative that grows out of an emotional response to the materials. A shape to which Ramírez frequently returns is “la madre,” referencing his own mother, Nita Zapata, as well as Mother Earth. These pieces swell in

a maternal silhouette that is softly indented as the work culminates in an opening at the top, suggesting a seated figure wrapped in a shawl. The treatment of the surface continues the symbolism. When the work is leather hard, Ramírez uses the tip of a broken piece of hacksaw blade to carve a rough pattern across a section of the pot, even to make it “grotesque.” The texture evokes the aspirational but difficult journey of life, “la dureza de la vida,” which offers a contrast with the smooth sections of the surface to express the duality of human existence. To complete the work, Ramírez applies a palette of emblematic colors to parts of the surface, pigment from volcanic rocks mixed with clay to make engobes: red for blood, green for fertility, yellow for the sun, and white for the spirit. “Color,” he says, “allows us to paint the circumstances of our lives.” Finally, the work is often smoked with mango leaves to add a black luster.

7 Ramírez showing the essential tools: paddle, stones, hacksaw blade, and small river rocks for burnishing. East Creek Art, 2023. Photo: Joe Robinson.

Through the frequent residencies he accepts—most recently at the Boca Raton Museum of Art in Boca Raton, Florida; HistoryMiami Museum in Miami, Florida; and East Creek Art[1] in Willamina, Oregon—Ramírez positions himself as a ceramic artist and a cultural historian. He has also taken the further step of transforming his early experiences with clay into his own version of a legendary tale for children about the origin of ceramic production in the Vicús/Tallán community. In *El Tata y el Chilalo*[2], the character Chilalo is the potter bird, the pájaro alfarero, a reddish-brown bird with a curving bill and an insistent whistling call who becomes the teacher of a curious, eager child, offering day-by-day instruction in making vessels from clay based on the bird's nest-building skills. The book, published in 2019 with lyrical illustrations by Kyoko Shimizu, is inspired by Ramírez's memories of his days at the lagoon with his father, which for him was a "magical" time when he felt close to the earth and had a pervasive sense of being part of an enduring community in a sacred place. Now a resident of Miami, Florida, Ramírez carries the world of Chulucanas with him as he continues to open out the possibilities within the traditions he embraces.

8 Ramírez displaying the sequence to the work, seven days to firing, East Creek Art, 2023. Photo: Stephanie Arnold.

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1 East Creek Art is a historic ceramics facility located in the foothills of the Oregon Coast Range, where the first anagama kiln west of the Mississippi was built in 1983 by Nils Lou, Tom Coleman, and Frank Boyden. Run by Joe Robinson and Aubrey Sloan since 2015, East Creek encompasses indoor and outdoor kilns and workspaces spread across 20 wooded acres. Residential workshops are held throughout the year with an emphasis on building community through a commitment to advancing work with clay.
2 Tata is the abbreviated form of Tatarabuelo or great-grandfather. The use of this affectionate term suggests this is the story as it was told by Ramírez's great-grandfather to his grandfather.

Unfamiliar with any terms in this article? Browse our glossary of pottery terms!

Topics: Ceramic Artists, Functional Pottery

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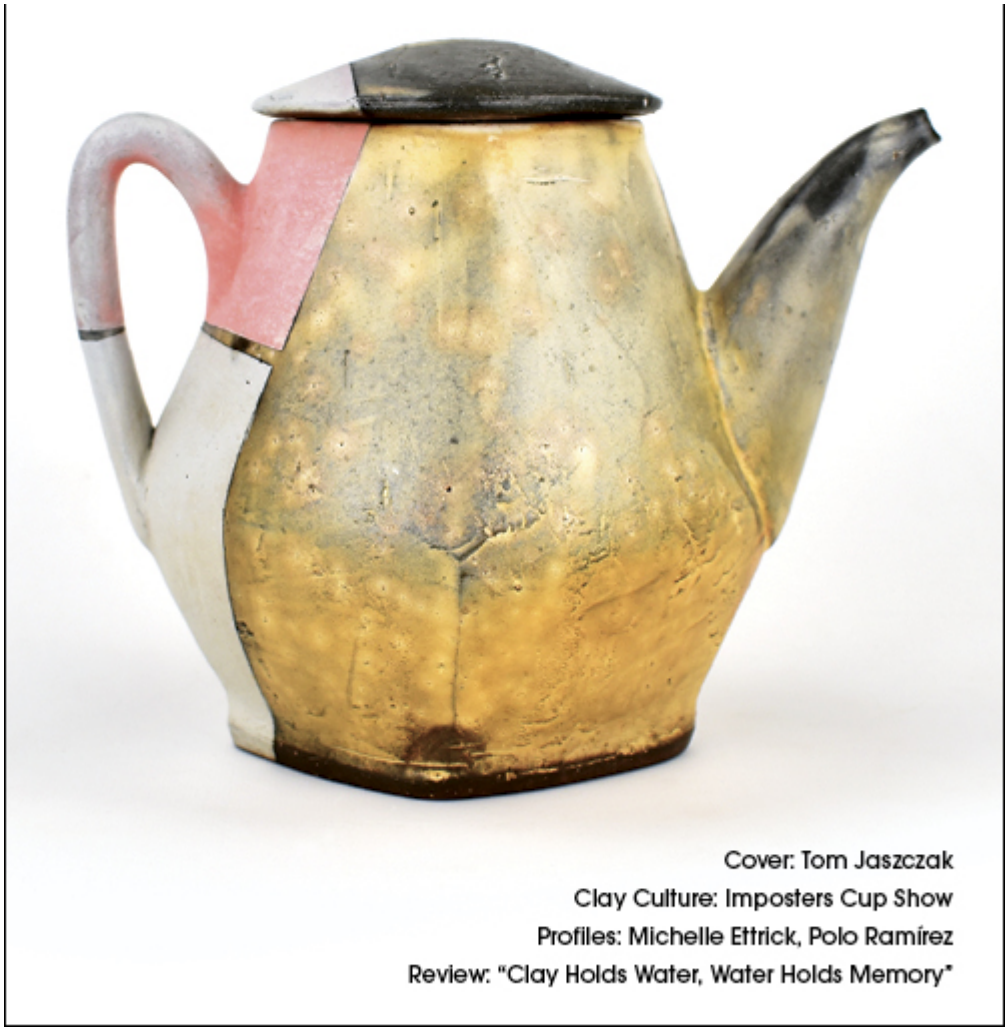

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