

PERU'S CONTEMPORARY SCULPTORS

Crafting New Social and Cultural Identities

BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

Peru's sculptors range broadly in ethnicity, processes, and materials, yet many share a keen awareness of their country's cultural heritage. With a new president, a new culture minister, and surging tourism, Peru is still struggling to overcome its legacy of gang, cult, and government violence (an ongoing dilemma that resulted in more than 60,000 murders during the 1980s and '90s), racism, and poverty. From the capital city of Lima to Cuzco, to the town of Puno, Peruvian culture today continues to blend the historic and the modern. At 12,000 feet above sea level, Puno, located near Lake Titicaca, is rich in ancient culture; it is an isolated area, removed until very recently from the national project that is Peru.

Opposite: César Cornejo, model of MoCA installation for Galeria Lucia de la Puente at Art Basel Miami, 2011. Cardboard, wood, and paper, 42 x 50 x 45 cm. This page: Aymar Ccopacatty, *Chullo for a New Leader*, 2010. Knitted plastic bags, 9 x 5 ft.

IRMA ALVAREZ





Above: Rhony Alhalel Lender, *Link / Vínculo* (scale model), 2008. Cor-ten steel, acrylic paint, and graphite powder, .33 x .58 x .18 meters. Right: Cecilia Paredes, *The River Within*, 2010. Recovered crystals and monofilament, detail of installation.

Puno native Aymar Ccopacatty <www.aymart.org>, who studied at the Rhode Island School of Design, is proud of Puno's pre-Inca Aymara and Quechua heritage. He translates the textile traditions of his Aymara grandmother into non-biodegradable plastic weavings and knittings, plastic paintings, and art objects of all sizes. His objective is to acknowledge marginalized traditional crafts while critiquing pollution and waste. Ccopacatty says, "Obviously all this is in the interest of getting the bags out of nature, and back to serving a function, while helping people to reflect about how much we waste, and alternatives to this waste."¹ One of his favorite icons is the *chullo*, a traditional pointed hat with earflaps. Before the 2011 national election, he knitted a large-scale plastic *chullo* that could serve as a giant thinking cap for Peru's president. *Chullo for a New Leader* was constructed using oversized knitting needles made from PVC tubes with pointed wooden tips at one end. Ccopacatty divides his time between introducing technology to Aymara-speaking teachers and students in Puno and exhibiting and directing exhibitions in Lima that transform recycled materials into art.

While respecting the traditions of Peruvian artists such as Alberto Guzman, Joaquín Roca Rey, Jorge Piqueras, Cristina

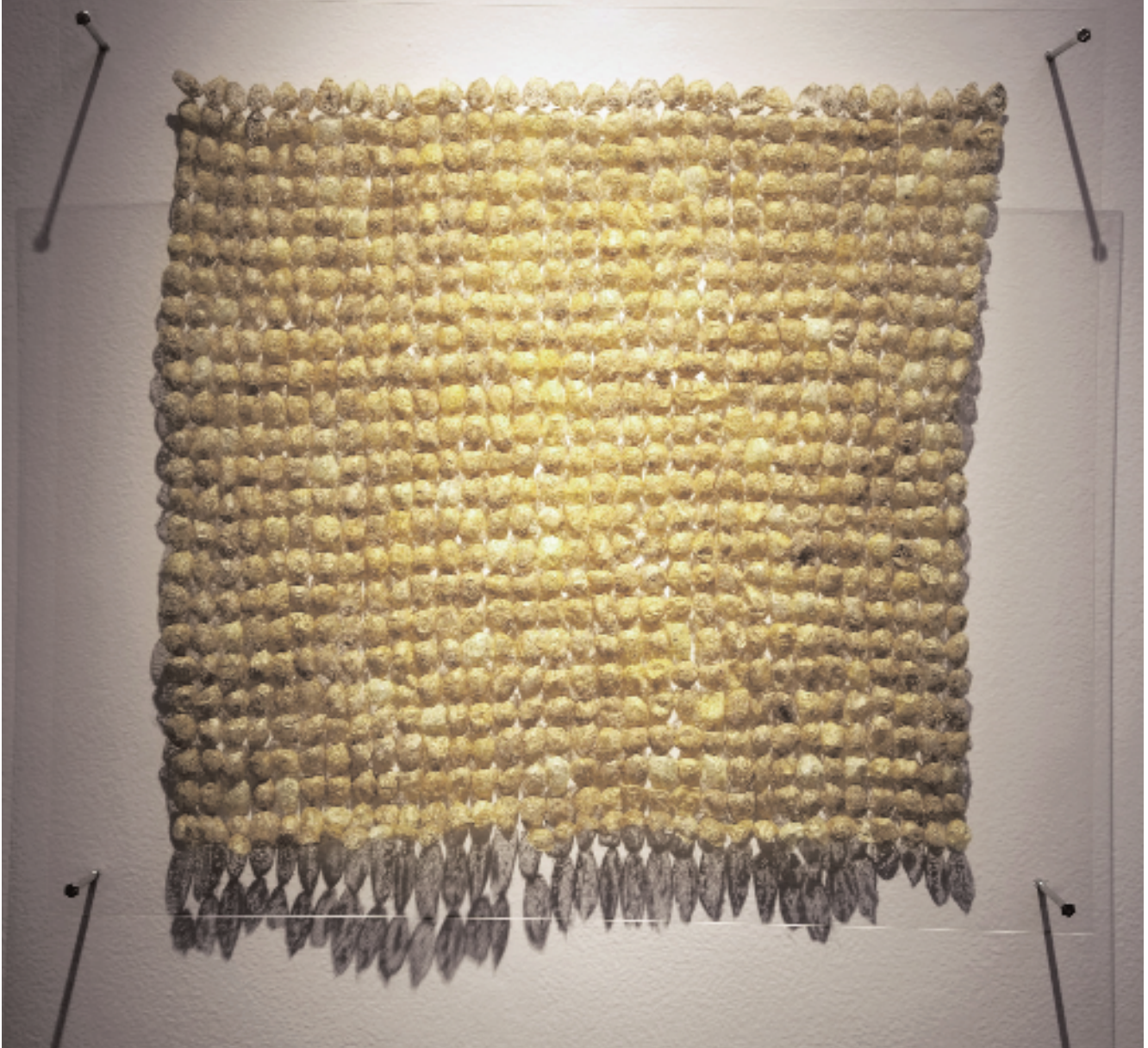
Gálvez, Anna Maccagno, Lika Mutal, Johanna Hamann, Sonia Prager, and Benito Rosas, the metal sculptor Rhony Alhalel Lender <www.rhonyalhalel.com> aligns his spare forms to various cultural traditions, from pre-Columbian and Andean to Japanese and Turkish. His public art commissions in key public squares include *La Marinera*, dedicated to Chabuca Granda, a well-known composer; *The Night Guard*, located at an important business center; *El Lector*, for the new façade of the Universidad del Pacífico; and *Signos*, a project for the Peru International Airport. Arriving passengers see a form resembling a fetus/question mark—indicating that Peru is still developing—while departing passengers see a human form/exclamation mark—signifying wonder at the pace of Peru's progress. After training at the school of plastic arts at the Universidad Católica del Perú, Alhalel studied painting, papermaking, and Zen calligraphy in Japan and later encouraged his compatriot César Cornejo to do the same.

Cornejo's work <www.cesarcornejo.com> addresses how socio-political, environmental, aesthetic, and economic issues in Peru translate into international contexts. His ongoing Puno Museum project, initially funded by New York's Creative Time, is a collaborative endeavor. Cornejo works with



Puno residents to improve their dwellings by adding modern design to traditional houses; for an agreed-upon period, he then helps them transform those spaces into galleries showing contemporary art. With its unique blend of the traditional and the modern, public and private, the Puno Museum gives a new kind of life to contemporary art, encouraging interactions among tourists and visitors, city residents, and artists with varied backgrounds. The temporary house museums offer immediate anthropological, cultural, and economic exchanges on many levels, and in many directions, forming a new model for community development.

In 2005, Cornejo created *La Cantuta* to commemorate the July 18, 1992 kidnapping, torture, and murder of nine students and a teacher at La Cantuta University by a government death squad. The bodies were found buried on the outskirts of Lima, and government officials were later tried and convicted for the crime. Though a public monument was planned, it was never built, and 13 years later, it was still radical to mourn this loss of life publicly by using art to grieve and rebuild community. Cornejo's project brought together more than a



Above: Cecilia Paredes, *Tapiz*, 2010. Abandoned chrysalis and thread, 39 x 40 in. Right: Cecilia Paredes, *Necklace*, 2010. Porcupine quills and linen, 9.5 x 8 in.

thousand citizens and students to make 60,000 black paper flowers commemorating every victim of violence in Peru.² *La Cantuta* consisted of nine flower-covered student desks and one teacher's desk in a setting landscaped with black flowers. Making art to remember the dead during a repressive period when such behavior was risky created a collective memory. It was also a synecdoche, a microcosm of mourning for a nation still afraid to mourn. Cornejo's work was featured at Art Basel Miami Beach in 2011, and his solo show "El Cambio" is on view at the World Bank in Washington, DC, from March through June 2012.



ALEX BRUCE

Like Cornejo, Carlos Runcie Tanaka, Cecilia Paredes, and Ishmael Randall Weeks show their work on the international stage. Lima-based ceramic artist Runcie Tanaka <www.carlosruncietanaka.com> has taught and exhibited internationally and has represented Peru twice at the São Paulo Biennial.³ He and sculptor/performance artist Cecilia Paredes and many other Peruvian artists have had solo shows at the International Center for Peru and North America (ICPNA), in Lima.

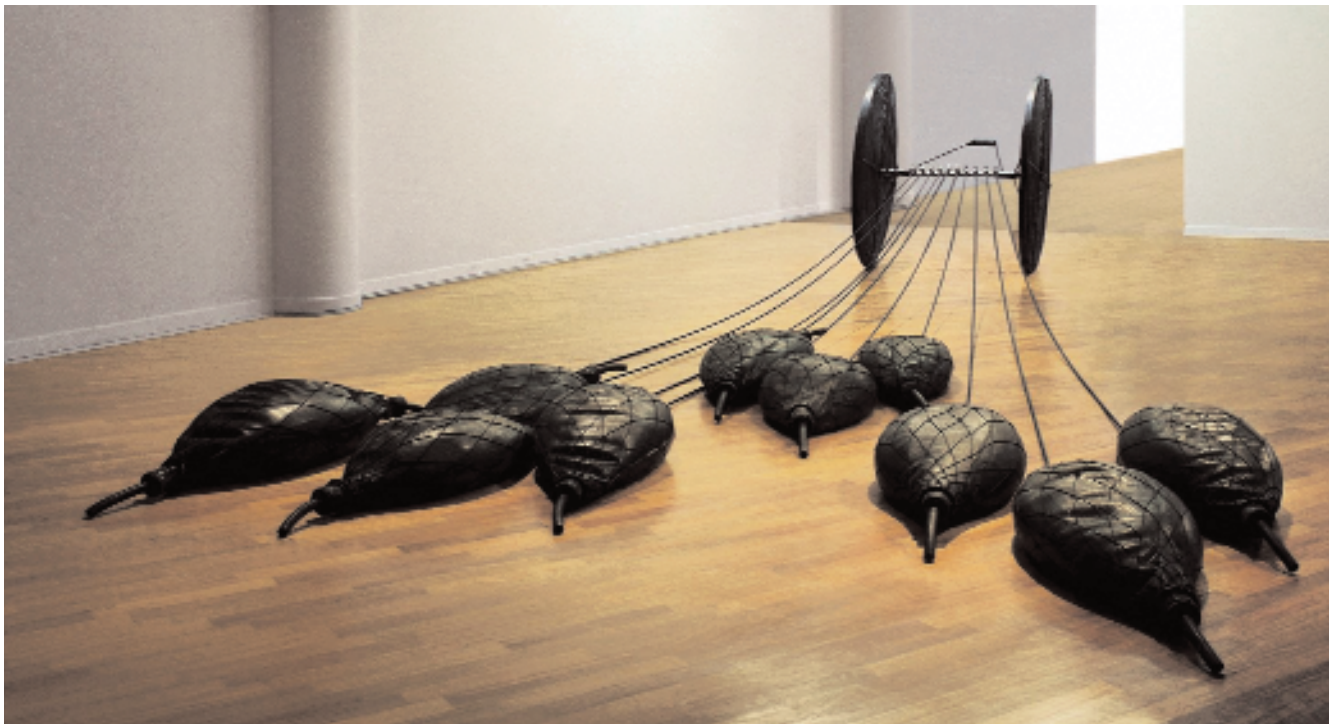
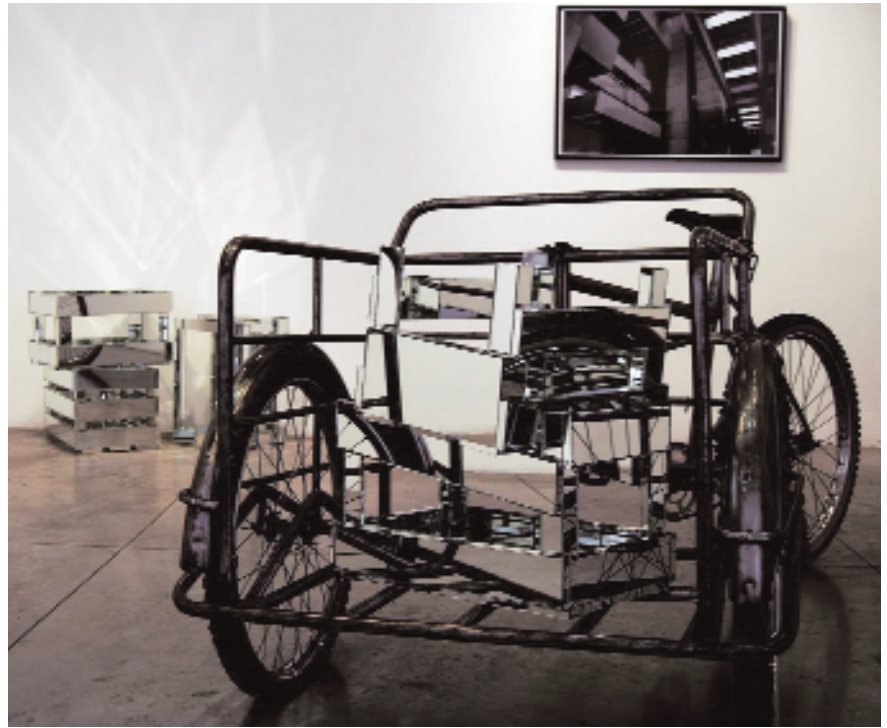
Paredes <www.ceciliaparedes.com> divides her time among Lima, Costa Rica, Philadelphia, and other locations, including China and Spain. She uses unusual and symbolic materials such as butterfly cocoons, which have a natural fluorescent quality. The work featured in her 2010 solo exhibition “The River Within” at the ICPNA was composed of elements gathered in far-flung locations. Paredes traveled to the highlands to find cane for *A Light I Gathered*, a fragile woven shelter referring to the shantytowns

Right: Ishmael Randall Weeks, *Huacales*, 2008. Mirror-covered market crates and light, dimensions variable. **Below:** Ishmael Randall Weeks, *Progreso*, 2006. Used tires, steel, inner tubes, netting, sand, and water, 132 x 856 x 334 cm.

that highland immigrants piece together for shelter. In the Amazon, she collected porcupine quills for *Necklace* and rain sticks for *Ucayali*, a musical tribute to the Amazon in which bamboo instruments filled with musical pebbles were wired to sensors

that triggered them to play when viewers approached.

Ishmael Randall Weeks <www.randallweeks.com> was raised in Ollantaytambo, a small town between Cuzco and Machu Picchu. Much of his work, as he says, “comes



BOTTOM: PABLO HARE



David Zink Yi, *Untitled (Architeuthis)*, 2010. Burnt and glazed clay, 575 x 115 x 29 cm.

from thinking about that culture, about migration, mobility and change.”⁴ His father, Robert Randall, was a writer and ethno-historian, and his painter mother, Wendy Weeks, still lives in Peru. At Bard, Weeks studied with Elizabeth Murray and Judy Pfaff and worked for Gillian Jagger. His lengthy exhibition list includes representing Peru

in two biennials, a gallery-sized installation at MoMA PS1’s “Greater New York” show (2010); a tribute in rubber to Vallejo for New York’s Museo el Barrio Biennial (2011); and installations at Dublin Contemporary and at the Drawing Room in London (2011).

In Lima, the ICPNA, which is notable for its openness toward showing a range of

innovative work, provides an important gathering place for contemporary artists. The Museo de arte de Lima, a magnificent example of Lima’s eclectic architecture circa 1870, shows international artists and art from earliest times to present. The political art of Fernando Bryce, born in Lima in 1965, was recently featured. MAC, a new building for contemporary art in the Barranco area has remained unfinished for decades but is slated for completion in 2012. Although the contemporary art scene in Peru leaves much to be desired, Alhale Lender cites three “interesting facts”: “New private foundations, cultural institutions, and municipalities are organizing competitions for public sculpture. Today most of the best-known sculptors and highly regarded pedagogues in the field are women. And finally, sculpture is no longer a three-dimensional figure of a saint or hero in the middle of a park.”⁵

Many Peruvian-born artists live in other countries and exhibit internationally. Berlin-based David Zink Yi recently exhibited *Untitled (Architeuthis)*, a 660-pound, room-sized ceramic rendering of a prehistoric squid surrounded by its inky residue, as part of his solo show at New York’s Hauser & Wirth Gallery. Conjuring ancient oceans, this elegant yet grotesque form seems to be a metaphor about nature, history, and myth. Grimanesa Amoros, a sculptor and mixed-media artist based in New York, has recently shown in Madrid and Finland; her work incorporates social history and explores notions of personal and community identity. Whether at home or abroad, these contemporary artists combine keen aesthetics with a sense of social history. Through talent and networking, they are forging their own paths.

Notes

¹ E-mail from Ccopacatty, June 4, 2011.

² Some reports count almost 70,000 victims.

³ For a detailed analysis of Runcie Tanaka’s work, see *Sculpture* May 2011: pp. 28–33.

⁴ E-mail from Weeks, August 2011.

⁵ E-mail from Lender, June 17, 2011.

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