



Interview with Kara Tanaka

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Part of tips

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Kara Tanaka, *A Sad Bit of Fruit, Pickled in the Vinegar of Grief*, 2010
installation view, fiberglass, enamel, linen, steel, wood, anodized aluminium, resin,
210 x 1510 x 94 cm, Photo: Dario Lasagni

Kara Tanaka (1983, Modesto, California) presents her first solo show in Europe at Collezione Maramotti in Reggio Emilia. *A Sad Bit of Fruit, Pickled in the Vinegar of Grief* offers a meditation on the destiny of the human body and the desire of immortality within western culture. The thirteen empty embalming tables affixed to the wall are the image of an opposite view, a means to reach a deeper consciousness and spirituality.

S.S. Let's start from the titles of your exhibitions and works: they are always very engaging and somehow mysteriously suggestive and it looks like you have a deep interest in the written word. How do you compose them? Do they come before or after the work is finalized?

K.T. My process is like this: several months are spent working on the idea just researching and developing, then the last two or three months are production. As I'm doing the research up until that point, that's usually when I develop whatever the titles are. The aim is usually just to evoke another layer of things to hint at, maybe add a different approach to what the work might seem at first sight. For this installation the topic is the disappearance of the body, which through the title is related to another natural phenomenon of fruit being pickled to use later. The body is having the same process happening to it, so the title becomes an alternative way to begin to enter the work. For this reason words are always very important to me.

S.S. The statement of this project for Collezione Maramotti ends with a question: "What does it mean for a waning empire to reject methods of death immortalization in favour of a repentant disappearance?" What is your answer to this question?

K.T. That is my question still. I feel the act of disappearance is a generous act, because as a species our development is just a process of evolution. The human species always had to dominate whatever it could – nature, science – so we could continue conquering all down the line. But to disappear is a rejection of those kind of ideas. I just feel like a lot of what we know about ancient cultures is derived from death practice.

S.S. A big part of your work is concentrated on a reflection on the body and its destiny after death. In *A Sad Bit of Fruit, Pickled in the Vinegar of Grief* and other works this fate is treated as a combination or a dialogue between transcendence and technology. Why have you decided to connect two worlds apparently so distant from each other?

K.T. I don't think they are so separated. I feel we are using them to achieve those ends. Trying to use technology to achieve transcendence. Throughout history technology has moved so slowly, and now we are on

time period of technological development that, I am sure, we will see in our lives the crossover or maybe the melding of human and machine. We spend 95%, maybe more, of our energy on maintaining the body and such a small part of our consciousness is devoted to things outside of the body. Maybe technology will help with eliminating disease, and any biological hardship so instead we could concentrate more of that focus on some exploration or explosion of consciousness. I think it is actually possible in fifty, maybe a hundred years.

S.S. So technology is an instrument to find something more spiritual?

K.T. Yes, maybe. One of the things that is completely fascinating to me is that for so long Buddhists had this idea that the whole universe is just energy and we're all just self reflected on each other, cause and effect, a very simple kind of energy. And then as our sciences are developing we understand that everything is actually made of energy.

S.S. The choice of the materials, in particular, is very precise and technical and recalls a futuristic imagery of spaceships and aseptic environments. What is the symbolic quality of these materials? How do you select them?

K.T. Materials are very important to me, I like to touch everything inside to understand my relationship to other objects and the intimacies of a material. The materials I choose usually are directly related to whatever the project is. For this installation, they are utilitarian in a way, in the sense that they are made of fibre glass and then coated with an epoxy finish like a bathtub, exactly like actual objects that could be used in real life. If we never can get a picture of the future, I just try to strip it down a little bit, using a pristine white, a blank surface, it can be anything.

S.S. You declare a clear rejection of the "desire of immortality" of contemporary society exploring the political side of this question. What's your perception of the current social and political situation in your country? And how does this influence your artistic production?

K.T. When I was researching trying to figure out what was, in Italy, the common interaction with the body in post life practices, I found that it was mostly influenced by Catholicism. In the United States embalming became popular during the Civil War, and the reason that they had it is that they developed the technology on the battlefield, simply to bring the body back to the family so they could have one last look at the person they loved. But for me the idea of the embalmer as an image-maker, trying to reproduce some image that will be immortalised for someone else, represents a huge false statement. The dead are the people that you loved, you know how they looked. What is that desire of having them undead for a moment? I feel it's a very strange need, but I know it is a very common practice all over the world to have a viewing ceremony or a wake to have some kind of closure. Other cultures move against this. For example, most Hindus are cremated, Jewish people tend to be buried within 24 hours, none of this embalming business exists. The death practices are shifting at the same time so I feel it's a very political statement to disappear today. So many new practices have been developed later like eco-friendly burial, a different kind of disappearance that is generous to the earth and is actually nurturing it. Since our whole existence we've been destroying the earth, it is almost like an atonement for centuries of doing terrible things to the world.

S.S. Most of your works are sculptural installations, but you also use drawings. Is drawing a step of your projects or a different side of them? Are you interested in other media?

K.T. Sculpture is my favourite medium. I'd rather build something so that I can be in a room with it, have an experience with it. When I build a sculpture I like to come around from another side, the title is one important aspect for me and drawing is another one. Since the method that I work involves thinking, producing, and then thinking again, that end part usually entails some drawing activity. What I do is to revisit what just happened and to use drawing both as a meditative process and as an expanding field. The ones I made here for the catalogue, represent the budding of ideas behind the sculptures. The loving care of the last washing of the

K.T. When I lived in London for one year I did not make any sculpture there. It was just impossible: tiny vehicles, tiny spaces and high costs. The LA stereotype of people being separated because they are in the car all day is true. But I like it, for me it's time to think, time to see. LA is the perfect city to build sculpture especially because the Hollywood industry is there, and they are used to build anything for sets and since computer graphics became so popular, people who fabricated things are having less work and it's easier for artists to work with them now. I feel it's possible to do pretty much everything you want to do there.

S.S. What are your projects for the future?

K.T. I'm working on a new project right now. Usually while I'm building one project it is time for me to research for the next one, and so I started looking into other tales of immortality in relationship to esoteric groups of people throughout history. I'm taking a glance right now at a Sufi poet who wrote about a journey to find the immortals and also a Chilean film maker from the '70s who was doing the same sort of journey.