

## CAMERA HOUSE

Clemente Higa interviewed by Pablo Hare  
Jesús María, Lima, October 2011

**Hare** Clemente, for how long have you been repairing cameras?

**Higa** Forty one years

**Hare** How did you begin?

**Higa** I started a bit circumstantially. I was studying at San Marcos University, in the 70s. It was a convulsed time, with a lot of student protests, and I didn't really know what to do. And then I saw an add from the Casa Hindú in the newspaper, requesting apprentices. The Casa Hindú was an important house that was dedicated to sell photographic material and they had a technical department. They represented most of the Japanese brands, except Nikon, which was in someone else's hands. Brands like Canon, Olympus, Pentax, Yashica...

I remember it was December, December 1970, almost at the end of the year, when I applied to that apprenticeship. There were more than a hundred applicants. The general manager was in charge of the selection and he chose three people, I was among them, and he told us it was a new year's gift, that we could start on the first working day of 1971. I worked there for seven years more or less. Almost until the end of the military government. During that time Morales Bermúdez was governing. Another convulsed time. In 1977, when there were many union protests, the government decided to promote a law to get all the union leaders fired, and I came out among them.

**Hare** What was your position in the union?

**Higa** I was simply the secretary. Of course the target was the general secretary of the organization. Our's was a small union organization that didn't participate in the general strike called by the general workers' union of that time. But as I was telling you, the government used that decree to fire people, in other words to get rid of the union leaders. So with that decree I was simply out in the street. Then they told me that what they had really wanted to do was to fire the main leader and that I could go back. But out of principle I told them: "if I go back all the others have to go back too". And of course that was not the case, so I said: "I'm not returning". And that was the starting point for me to become independent.

**Hare** Was that the national strike that marked the end of the military government?

**Higa** Yes, they fired three thousand union leaders.

**Hare** What was the training at Casa Hindú like?

**Higa** There were other technicians working there. The first day I went in and they told me: “the broken cameras are over there, pick the one you like and see if you can fix it”. I remember I picked up a Minolta, and they never told me that was the most complicated camera. So I spent about a month taking it apart and putting it together again, but I couldn’t fix it. In the end, out of pure intuition and stubbornness, because the others, maybe out of jealousy, didn’t want to intervene and tell me “do this, do that”, I managed to repair it, without any kind of technical assistance.

**Hare** I would have imagined that when an apprentice arrived they gave him some initial technical training, where you could learn the basic ropes of how to fix a camera

**Higa** Sure, that’s the ideal, that you could find an environment in which you have an instructor, someone to teach you. But there were only technical instruction manuals, most of them in English and, well, you had to pick up those manuals and following some instructions, take the cameras apart. What they wanted was basically people with skills.

**Hare** And after the Casa Hindú you set up your own private business?

**Higa** Yes, and I partly thank that law. Sometimes you say: “you have to start somewhere”. In 1978, the first months of 1978, we opened a business in Miraflores, in Porta street. And I’ve been working independently ever since.

I opened Camera Service with Kowa Fuchigami, a colleague who also worked at Casa Hindú. When he saw that I resisted going back there, with that indecent proposal, he joined the cause, handed in his resignation and we opened up in Porta street. Our society lasted for about a year. Then, with the help of a friend, I opened Camera House in San Isidro, in block number 11 of Rivera Navarrete Avenue. I was there for about seven years. On the seventh year I had to give back that place, because my friend had to sell that property to go live in the US. I am very grateful for that gesture which lasted for seven years. So I had to look back again towards Miraflores, where I am now, in Larco avenue, block 11.

**Hare** Why Miraflores and San Isidro?

**Higa** Simply because I saw that it was an interesting market. People with more resources, better cameras. But in time I realised that the difference wasn’t such, because this “business” of photography touches everyone. People with little money dedicate themselves to photography as a means to earn a livelihood. People with more money have it as a hobby. I think anyone can develop a thing for photography, that’s my impression.

**Hare** Can you recognise some sort of change in the volume of work you’ve had? I mean that, like everything in Peru, in times of economic crises...

**Higa** It doesn't fall. People always come back. I have clients that have been with me for forty years. Forty years, and they keep being faithful. I treat my clients more like friends than clients, no? I feel that in the personalised relation. And that's what satisfies me, it's not a cold treatment, more than anything it's a friendly one. And that's what's allowed me to stay in the business for so long and keep my clientele. Maybe some of them have stopped turning up for one reason or another, I can't tell, but most of them have been happy with the way they've been served.

I once went to an eye doctor and he told me, "I used to go to your shop with my father, when I was 15". And at that moment I was being seen by that 15 year old boy for some eye problem that I had.

**Hare** You were born in el Callao, your parents?

**Higa** My father was born in Cañete. He came from Japan in my grandmother's belly, one of the first immigrants. As I say, my dad was designed in Japan and assembled here in Peru. And my mother was born in Puente Piedra. Both coincidentally had the same surname, but they were not related... things of life.

**Hare** In your home, was there an attempt to keep some of your grandparents' traditions alive?

**Higa** Generally, in Japanese homes, beyond having gone to school with Peruvian classmates, or having eaten olluquito con charqui\* like any other Peruvian, there's always that Japanese education. Respect for others, respect for your elders, and it's because of those concepts that, in spite of the fact that I have never been to Japan, my ways are like that, oriental. Patience, respect... they are a heritage from my grandparents. But my father, in spite of his having been conceived in Japan, always used to say that his life was going to take place here in Peru. So, in my case and that of my brothers, we haven't studied in Japanese schools. Because the Japanese colony had schools that the children of immigrants used to attend. Initially I studied in el Callao. The first years of schooling. We then came to Breña, to a neighborhood public school. And I then continued my studies at the Gran Unidad Escolar Mariano Melgar. It was there that I did all my studies, primary and secondary schooling, those were happy years.

**Hare** And then to San Marcos University?

**Higa** Well, in those times we had to follow general studies. I had the intention of going on to engineering, electronic engineering. As I already told you, those were rather convulsed times, there were more strikes than class hours, and I had to do something. That's when I left my studies. Let's say that I preferred practical things, I wasn't too keen on theories, on listening to class. From a very young age I was the one that after Christmas used to dismantle my siblings' toys to see

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\* Typical Peruvian dish.

what was inside. I practically think that it is there that all this technical curiosity was born, of wanting to know how things are made.

**Hare** Did you have some kind of political affiliation?

**Higa** As a student, and especially one in San Marcos, where there was a political effervescence. I was politicaly on the left... those were romantic times, when every student was on the left, even at la Católica University there was a stronger tendency towards the left. I did not belong to any party, I was just a sympathiser, like any young rebel. I was even tempted for a scholarship to study at the Soviet Union, can you imagine? In the famous Patrick Lumumba University, where most of the Latinamerican scholarship students of that time used to go. Luckily I stayed here.

And now that I've got to know more about the reality of things, I think I'm more of a liberal than anything else.

**Hare** Have you ever made pictures?

**Higa** For me photography is more like a hobby. I take pictures sporadically, and I've got negatives where there are all sorts of pictures, I don't know whether they are showable or not. Of course there's the photo albums. Later, with my late marriage – I was married almost at 35 – most of the existing albums are family albums. I even had a small lab set up here in the house, but then we needed a place to put away the family car, and it was destroyed, there wasn't enough space.

**Hare** Laboratories are never a priority...

**Higa** Most people set them up in their bathrooms, so you can imagine what happens when there's a family emergency.

**Hare** Have you been in Jesús María since you got married?

**Higa** I've lived here, in Jesús María, for some twelve or thirteen years. And I hope I'll stay living here. My mother lives some three or four blocks away from here.

**Hare** Have you got any children?

**Higa** I had two children, but one died of a sad illness, it has already been about fourteen years since I lost one of my children. Now I've only got one left, the eldest, who will be graduating as an industrial engineer next year.

In the workshop I am leaving no heir, no one to continue my work. As it tends to happen, children don't want to continue the professional life of their father. Although he does have a penchant for photography. But this activity, when they decide to come and pick me up some day, so to speak, will simply remain as history. But I hope to continue for many more years. I am currently 63 years of

age, my father is 96. He says we are long-lived, so I hope to continue for some thirty more years.

**Hare** Has your business always gone well?

**Higa** Yes, fine, I've never had any troubles. Of course, as long as there's people who require your work, you're never going to lack food on your table. You'll always have at least some money. But in spite of the fact that this is my livelihood, I think I work more for the love of it than anything else. If I put a certain price on my work, it's simply so that I don't offend anyone, because there's many people who tell me: "why are you going to charge me so little?" The truth is that I don't make any distinctions between my clients, I don't really consider if the work is going to take me more or less time to solve. I don't know... in principle this is a job that requires very high concentration. And as I've told you, no one, not even my wife, has come into my workshop. Many people have asked me why is it that I only open my shop for such few hours, only an hour and a half every day. And it's because in that way I spend more time working here than serving the clients. And I prefer to offer a good service than spending time with the clients, I prefer to dedicate myself completely to repairing a camera, so that the work comes out well and the client leaves satisfied, no matter whether I've spend too little time serving them.

**Hare** How has the change from analogue to digital affected you?

**Higa** Photography is one of the activities that has suffered the most violent changes. Nowadays everyone has a camera. To the distress of many professional photographers. Now you go to a wedding, or some event, and everyone has their digital camera. And the changes have been violent. I receive more digital than analogue cameras. And the change has somewhat made my job easier. In the case of analogue equipment, because there are many integrated mechanical pieces, you have to put the whole camera apart, piece by piece, in order to find the solution. In the case of digital equipment nowadays everything is modular, it's like putting a computer apart, made up only of different plaques. I think that, technologically speaking, the change has been good. The work has become easier, faster, you can serve a client in less time. Logically there are problems and problems, and not all problems are of the same origin. When we speak about technology there are practically no ceilings, you have no idea what might be coming. There are many people who have doubts about changing from analogue to digital. Because they say that analogue is better, that the quality is better, but digital is reaching very interesting levels.

**Hare** Do you play the piano?

**Higa** Well there's a wall piano over there. My son was learning to play it and the teacher said he needed to buy a real piano, not an electronical keyboard, so as to feel the pressure on his fingers. We bought a very cheap one, I tore it apart myself, I cleaned it and changed the broken pieces... I play it by ear.

**Hare** And that Chinese violin?

**Higa** Well, it somehow occurred to me that I should buy a Chinese violin, which is played vertically, unlike conventional violins. And I also play it by ear. Not even my wife has heard me playing. I lock myself up. Or I find some time when I won't bother anyone with its very high-pitched sound. I play it eventually, when I have a problem with some camera and I want to put my mind to rest in search of solutions. And then I get back to my work feeling calmer.