

Earth

In a certain way everything is made of earth. A precious material. Its abundance makes it no less odd to feel –it is so difficult really to feel that everything is made of earth. What a unity. And why not the spirit too? My spirit is woven out of the finest earth. Isn't the flower made of earth?

Clarice Lispector¹

Earth and "the earth" –*la tierra*– summon up a so broad range of meanings, concepts and representations that it would be pointless to try naming them all. It is more than an element of nature, it is a material culturally associated with the primeval, the fertile, and the cycle of life. Religion, music, literature and the visual arts have striven extensively to encompass this signifier, and the plethora of references may, at moments, lead to certain commonplaces.

In the Bible –and where more than in Genesis?– earth is presented as the origin and the end of human life. In the words of William Shakespeare, earth is nature's mother, and its tomb. In its figure of the Pachamama –the term for Mother Earth in quechua language– it is worshipped by various peoples of the Andes. In Greek mythology Gea, goddess of the Earth, is conceived as the element out of which all the races of divinities emerge. And in recent times, the interest too in the finitude of natural resources –essential for our subsistence–, aroused by excessive extractive activity, has made the Earth (and its earth) the focus of ecological discourse.

While we no doubt come from earth, feed ourselves from it and will return to it, it is undeniable that these valid truths have grown rather shopworn from over-repetition. The artists who make up this show, however, approach the representations connected to earth with high sensitivity and ingenuity, appealing both to its materiality and to its conceptual associations. In these works, which come from various countries in Latin America –Argentina, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela– it is possible to find a Latin Americanist stamp that weaves this material together with the forms of symbolism endemic to our region.

As soon as we step into the exhibition, we are greeted by the word "TIERRA" from a photo that is part of the work of the same name by **Carlos Ginzburg** (Argentina, 1946), made up of a set of images that record the action presented in 1971 at the exhibition *Arte de Sistemas* [Art of Systems] at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires, which at the time was installed on the eighth and ninth floors of the highrise complex that now houses the Teatro San Martín. On an empty lot near that structure, a large sign asked viewers: What's inside this plot of land? To find the answer to this question, you had to enter the building and go up to the Museum, where, from up above, you could read in capital letters the word "tierra." Thus, the work took place over two different, distant spaces, outside and inside, and was completed only through the viewer's participation.

Closely akin to this, in its format of a recorded action, we find *Comunicando con tierra*, [Communicating with earth] by **Marta Minujín** (Argentina, 1943), the very title of which provides us with two important keys to interpretation. We understand "communicate" as the act of making a person partake in what s/he has. So it happened that in 1976 the artist began this project by removing 23 kilos of earth from Machu Picchu, with the idea

¹ Lispector, Clarice. *Todas las crónicas* [Complete Chronicles]. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2022, p.150.

of sending that earth to various countries in Latin America, where artists would have to receive it and in turn send portions of their regional soil to the artist, who would bury them at the Peruvian site, an exchange that took place over years. In this way Minujín sets up a communication through a restitutive exchange of earths steeped in the local memory of their origin, which inevitably refers us to reciprocity as a crucial practice in the Andean worldview. *Comunicando con tierra* was first displayed that year at Buenos Aires's CAyC - Centro de Arte y Comunicación, where her film *Autogeografía* [Autogeography] was projected inside a huge ovenbird's nest, with photographs of the artist's collecting of earth and of bags of earth as elements.

Americanism insistently recurs in the works of the exhibition, though in each instance the artists approach it from the peculiarities of their territories of origin.

Captivated by Pre-hispanic symbols, culture and designs, the work of **Candelaria Traverso** (Argentina, 1991) treats earth in its conceptual core, manifested both in her materials and her allegorical representations. The vessels displayed here assume the forms of the ceremonial urns of the Aguada, Belén and Santa María cultures, while adding a new layer of localism by being fashioned out of soil from Catamarca, the area in which these cultures evolved as well as being the province in which the artist lives today. Traverso is interested in the connection between water and ceramics, appealing to the possibility of containing water, especially in the form of the *aríbalo* [the vessel in its Inca variant, usually small-handled and short-necked – trans.]. This is linked to the current reality of the region, in which a natural watershed is usurped by private sectors. The ropes that deform the vessels allude to the ties attached to bundles at the fairs, spaces she passes through and whose language traverses much of her output. This operation reemerges in the series *Cubos* [Cubes], structures with soil and tightly packed clothing, much in the manner of the bundles characteristic of the garment trade. So the artist salvages forms and materials from the past that overlap with her own contemporaneity.

Pre-hispanic Andean culture comes up again in the series *Cultura Trepá-Nación* [*trepá*: climb/ *trepá*: trepan, to drill into bone; *nación*: nation –trans.] by **Fernando 'Coco' Bedoya** (Peru, 1952). The iconography of the *huacos* –vessels handcrafted in ceramic and used in the temples, other sites of worship and *huacas* for sacred purposes– is evoked by the artist, who makes use of modern replicas meant for tourism. He works on them by bunging up the orifices with Coca-Cola lids, thereby ruling out any possible ceremonial use due to this foreign intervention, a metaphorical allusion to imperialism. A double violation, then, of the sacred Pre-hispanic element is taking place through the use of the very language of the consumer industry. On the other hand, in his series of drawings *Tacilla*, earth is made present through the tool that works on it. The artist recovers this agricultural instrument used by the Pre-Columbian peoples of the Inca empire, consisting of a long-handled shovel and a projection that allows one to apply force with one's foot for the plow.

The work *Quincha* (from the quechua *qincha*, meaning fence or paling) by **Juan Sorrentino** (Argentina, 1978) cites a traditional South American building system, which consists of vertical surfaces made with wooden frames on which is woven a reed framework, later filled in with mud and straw. The piece has various layers of meaning to it, and it is the fruit of a (de)constructive process typical of this artist's output. The panels presented here previously formed the sides of a cube on which Sorrentino creates a vibration through the resonance produced by a sound, which makes cracks and leakage. On the other hand, the pinkish color comes from a blend of lime and bulls' blood, the mixture allegedly first painted onto the Casa Rosada [Pink House], the seat of the executive branch of government for the Republic of Argentina. If architectural historiography has come to dispute that bit of lore, what do remain significant as we confront this work are the symbolic relations set up among the National, blood, soil, and what is intrinsically American.

After a period devoted to studying color and to works linked to minimalism, **Alejandro Puente** (Argentina, 1933-2013) embarked on a phase in which his production began to be vested in Pre-hispanic Americanism, under the stimulus of his encounter with Andean textiles in a show in New York City, where he settled in 1968 after receiving a Guggenheim fellowship. His works began to incorporate elements and distinct images from the primordial American worldview through the use of ideograms and materials such as feathers or, as in this instance, through a brushstroke that achieves a texture reminiscent either of feather-work or of Andean weaving. The earth color that dominates the image connects these autochthonous elements to the territory that receives them, and which takes on a special relevance when we are aware of the deep relationship the peoples of the Andes hold with Mother Earth.

In the series *Capiteles* [Capitals] by **Claudia Casarino** (Paraguay, 1974), the theme turns strongly local. The images represent elements, such as baskets or container vessels, associated with household chores, and they serve as metonymic references for the activities of a subsistence economy that devolves to the female population. Furthermore, these silkscreens are made with reddish earth, an especially fertile sort of soil. In this way the artist presents us with a discourse linked to the role women occupy in the culture, particularly in the economy of Paraguay, in which for a long time the female population played an outstanding part that only deepened during the military conflict of the Triple Alliance. If these elements represent "capitals," then we can understand the women who bear them on the upper part of their heads as columns, as supporting components –literal pillars– of Paraguayan society.

In the case of **Juan José Olavarría** (Venezuela, 1969), earth appears bound up with the national symbol par excellence: the Argentine flag. The artist has worked for years with the iconography of flags, exploring their cultural, historical and political meaning in various contexts. In his series *Memoria comparada* [Comparative Memory] he deals with the tensions between memory and forgetting, and works with the similarities between his native Venezuela and other Latin American countries, addressing themes such as violence, corruption, human rights, migrations, among others. These Argentine flags, which bear the markings of their protocol-guided folds, are steeped in the soil of Tucumán, the province which was the setting for Argentina's declaration of independence. In the artist's words, what we have here is an exercise of comparative (un)memory in the context of Argentina today. In this sense, we can intuit a play of signifiers alluding to the reality of the country and to "wrecking" (bringing down, casting to the ground: *echar por tierra* --trans.) the country's symbol.

Ecology and the American continent are central themes in the production of **Nicolás García Uriburu** (Argentina, 1937-2016). In 1962 he made a long voyage through Europe and North America, verifying in the process that Buenos Aires is "the most exemplary South of all the world's souths"². He came to understand that, in the words of Joaquín Torres García, the South is our "true north" and he would follow in the line of the Uruguayan artist by making works with inverted maps and with an ecological bias. These ideas are reflected in the piece *Por donde miro está el sur* [Wherever I look it's south], a ceramic compass unfailingly pointing south, the cardinal point indicated in its four quadrants. For its part, the early work *Pampa y cielo* [Pampa and Sky] is imbued with a scene typical of our country. Nonetheless, far from evoking a bucolic landscape with the characteristic green sprawl of the Pampa, crowned by a bright blue sky, its palette of ochres and browns recalls the color of the earth that underlies the landscape and enables its vegetation to exist.

² Restany, Pierre, *Uriburu. Utopía del Sur* [U.: Utopia of the South], Buenos Aires: Fundación Nicolás García Uriburu, 2001, p.15.

From Rosario, **Juan Pablo Renzi** (Argentina, 1940-1992) bids us to immerse ourselves in his *Nostalgias del Paraná* [Nostalgias of the Paraná], a river whose basin runs across various cities, including that of his birth. If nostalgia presupposes a sadness caused by the recollection of a loss, it is no wonder that here Renzi should invoke this riverside landscape in a painting made in Buenos Aires, to which he moved in 1975 due to the political persecutions of the era. Coinciding with the year that he would initiate a period in which he gave his painting a patent realism, in this depiction, his native turf is shown with an effort to formulate reality through a naturalistic approach but one by no means devoid of emotion.

The works of **Teresa Pereda** (Argentina, 1956) may be the ones here that present earth in its most synthetic expression. The artist comes up with arrangements that offer a representation of Argentina through its multicolored soils. *Geografía de un país* [A Country's Geography] is made up of twelve receptacles of soil from Buenos Aires, Catamarca, Jujuy, La Rioja, Misiones, Neuquén and San Juan, which function like a mapping or spatial markings of our country. Geography may be understood as the science that studies the description of the Earth, but also as a landscape or territory. If the neat layout in Petri slides takes us close to scientific language, the varied palette of colors leads us to a reading of the work as landscape. In *Itinerario de un país* [Itinerary of a Country] Pereda adds a layer of further meaning, establishing an affiliation between the land and those that dwell on it, in a sort of essay on territorial identity.

An analogous operation is that which **Mónica Girón** (Argentina, 1959) devises in her installation *De frente tierras de la Patagonia* [Facing Lands of Patagonia], in which we observe hands or gloves made with 28 types of earth collected from the Atlantic to the Pacific in the Argentinean part of Patagonia, soils brought together with rocks on a metal mesh structure. Born in a quite recently founded Bariloche, the artist developed an emotional relationship with the Patagonian landscape. In her own words³, she describes that relationship as a process of osmosis with the space every person inhabits and this sensation of being one with the landscape, arousing a concern for the well-being of the environment, which is interrelated with one's own. The hand that works the earth and the earth that shapes and defines the hand represent a good synthesis of this interweave.

The encounter with these productions rouses a reflection about the fertility of the earth, not in any agricultural sense, but rather understanding the fertile as that which is linked to artistic creation. This great variety of approaches may lead to the conclusion that, in fact, in a certain way, everything *is* made of earth. An earth that goes with us into exile and the bond with others, that retains a memory of the space one inhabits, and that in its materiality condenses an image of cultural identity. A material as abundant as it is precious.

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³ Mónica Girón, Episode 12 - Mónica Girón» in MARCO Podcast, Spotify, September 2021, Podcast.