

TICKLED PINK

Authentic Voices Juana and Porfirio Gutierrez

A few well-worn paths trace their way away from the town of Teotitlán, upward from the alluvial plain of Oaxaca's Central Valley and into quiet foothills and rolling sheep pastures. From there, the paths lead upward still to the peaks of the Sierra Madre. Tradition explains this landscape's sense of timelessness with the story that Teotidán was the first Zapotec settlement. Although archeologists put nearby Monte Alban at the beginning of the Zapotec timeline, at around 500 BCE, this has not disturbed Teotitecos' deeply rooted identity as the original Zapotecs.

The Zapotec language is also a cherished link to the past, as is ancient knowledge of wild medicine and dye plants, which sends townspeople upward along those mountain pathways to forage during the lush growing season. Most importantly, however, weaving remains a strong symbol of cultural continuity. In pre-Hispanic times, Zapotecs paid their taxes to the Aztecs in the form of coloured and patterned cotton blankets woven on backstrap looms. Wool became the region's dominant fibre in the mid-16th century, when Bishop Lopez de Zarate brought sheep and upright treadle looms, which turned weaving from a woman's craft to a male-dominated one, with women focused on carding, spinning and dyeing. The tools, materials, and gender roles of Teotidán's current weaving workshops descend from this period.

When Maria Luisa, the five-year-old granddaughter of Juana Gutierrez Contreras, comes for a visit to the family workshop, Juana repeats the names of the dye plants hung from the rafters – passing on

what Juana herself learned as a child. As a youngster, Juana and her 11 siblings would often make a pilgrimage into the hills around the town. Their parents pointed out valuable dye and medicine plants, repeated their names, and shared their uses. This oral tradition extends back far beyond Juana's parents, grandparents and even great-grandparents. Plant knowledge is part of Zapotec heritage – integral to a life unfolding with the seasons, delineated by daily rituals and punctuated by annual festivals and religious observances.

At 15, Juana began to master about 10 plant colours thanks to her family's teachings. Almost 30 years later, however, she has a dye vocabulary of roughly 50 colours; tree moss makes beiges and golden tans, Zapote negro make rich browns, *Maruush* leaves render a lovely olive green and pomegranate skins yield black... These and a few other mainstays are deployed with mordant options and lots of overdyeing to achieve a rich colour vocabulary. Juana's favourite colour is the deep burgundy she coaxes out of vats of cochineal and can also produce soft pinks, vivid pinks, various reds and oranges, and a rainbow of burgundies and purples. 'I relate it to the red blood of Jesus,' she says, 'it's emotional. It's powerful. It's alive'.

Juana and Antonio produce a few kilos of cochineal themselves, mostly so that they can show visitors the full story of cochineal dyeing. There are always several dozen paddle-shaped leaves of nopal hanging in their courtyard, protected from rain and birds. Every three months in warm weather,

mature beetles are brushed by hand into a bowl with a tiny flat stick. Bowls of harvested beetles are tossed into a sieve, which is tapped gently over fresh nopal leaves laid flat on the floor of the courtyard. Tiny young beetles pass through onto their new homes. It only takes a few hours for the beetles to bite into the nopal and begin feeding, and the leaves are hung undisturbed until the next harvest time comes around. The harvested beetles are dried and then ground on a stone metate prior to a dyeing session.

When Juana mordants her yarn with Lengua de Vaca leaves, she can produce pink cochineal shades – which darken to dusty violet in an iron vat, or fully saturated purples when overdyeing with indigo. Mordanting with alum pushes cochineal towards the reds. An iron pot will darken these tones toward burgundy. Lemon juice pushes the colours towards orange. She achieves still other colours by using yarn already dyed with pericón, which when overdyeing with cochineal turns coral, or warm red. A delicious aubergine comes out when these warm reds are immersed in a cauldron of pomegranate skins.

As a teenager, one of Juana's younger siblings, Porfirio, left Teotitlán for the United States. In spite of the fact that English was his third language, he quickly worked his way up to earning a decent living, spending over a decade away from his birthplace. Eventually, he returned. It was a shock. 'I wasn't a tourist. I was home. But the simplicity of it all hit me really hard...the dirt floors, the reed fences, the outhouses. Everything felt harsh.' ▶

Joe Cozza



But with sensibilities tempered by his long absence, he reconnected to an ancestral sense of belonging to the land. 'Our whole culture starts with people living off of this land. My food, my life, my nurturing happened on this land,' he says, still energized by this both-new-and-ancient sense of place. He also re-immersed in the rituals of Zapotec life. Starting with his mother's ritual blessing of the family's food, Porfirio began to ask questions about deeply ingrained everyday habits. 'I turned into 'the headache kid' at home, always asking questions: What is that? Why do you do it that way? My Mom sometimes answered with her stories, and sometimes just said, "These things don't have to be explained!"

One of his lines of inquiry focused on petates, mats handwoven of dried palm leaves. During his childhood, Porfirio paid no attention at all to these humble floor coverings: 'But I see now that when a woman gives birth at home, it happens on a petate. When newlyweds come to the altar to say their vows, they stand on a petate. When someone dies, the casket is placed on a petate during the funeral. In the old days in church, women and children would sit on long petate runners. We're grounded by these simple petates throughout our lives.'

Another reconnection to home and family came as a surprise. 'I discovered a passion for weaving that I didn't even know I had,' he says. Yes, he had woven his own backpack as a child. But no, he had no intention of becoming a weaver. Nevertheless, that remarkable Teotico touchstone of weaving became a way to express his part American, part ▶





Right; Ceremony, Porfirio Gutierrez, handwoven rug, Wool dyed with Cochineal Insects, 177 x 130cm

Zapotec experience. 'I know our way of life and our heritage -- and I see them with a self that comes from here. But I also come from there,' he explains, pointing north. 'I bring my cultural DNA, and my own complex story, and I weave.'

Starting with Juana's naturally dyed yarns, Porfirio's first weaving included the traditional Zapotec zig-zag pattern called *montanitas*. 'Yes, they can look like mountains. But I also saw in them the shape of rivers flowing back and forth across valleys, carrying the water that makes the difference between life and death. The back and forth looked to me like contact between this living world and the next -- between now and history, between who I was and who I am -- or even who I might be one day.' These emotional and spiritual impulses eventually joined with Porfirio's interest in petate mats. He found himself weaving wool tapestries of enlarged petate patterns. In this new body of work, Porfirio wove himself a metaphorical mat upon which to stand during his period of spiritual and cultural re-entry into his homeland. He continues to weave, among other things, interpretations of petates to ground him in his burgeoning identity as a weaver.

His entirely original extension of the heritage craft of Zapotec weaving occurs in a visual language that is at once personal and traditional. Because the great craft forms of Mexico have always appropriated what seemed beautiful from other traditions -- whether they came from Spain, from Pacific trade with Asia, or from neighbouring peoples -- his work sits comfortably on the

contemporary end of millennia-old Zapotec weaving continuum.

Not everyone sees it this way, however. Porfirio is sometimes criticized on both sides of the Mexican-American border for pushing the traditional boundaries. But he is convinced that ancient traditions, as precious and valuable as they are, can't become straight-jackets in which artists are expected to live out their creative lives. 'If a craft community is deeply rooted in the craft technique, the tradition, and daily experience, it will have changes,' Porfirio points out. If an art form is alive, its creators engage with it, and channel it into expressions of what is beautiful and important to them. They 'discuss' issues that weigh on them or lift them up with their motifs and patterns and colours. They reveal themselves, sometimes unconsciously, as artists always have, in symbolism. As the force of culture and tradition passes through the individual creator it is not just expressed, it is used and it is added to, and it is this very tension which keeps a tradition alive and viable. In Porfirio's words, 'My work is authentic because I made it! If you want to talk about authenticity, let's talk. Tell me who you are. Ask me who I am. Let's be authentic together.' *** Keith Recker

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Ricardo Palavecino

