

Written by Tracy Thieriot for The Last Straw, March 2008

*“... a red clay road with red clay wings and a red clay halo for my head.”
- Sung by Gillian Welch*

The land in Northern New Mexico is full of red clay. It seems everywhere I looked there were red clay roads, red clay houses, red clay deserts, and rivers running red with clay. In the winter inches of red clay coated the soles of my shoes and at the hot springs attendants provided red clay for your mud bath. I fell in love with dirt while living there and have been playing with it ever since.

I lived in a small northern New Mexican village for about five years. A village of 150 people, most of whom were related to each other or belonged to one of the main families that lived there. I moved there to work with a good friend, Felipe Ortega, who was a key figure in this village and a member of an Apache/Hispanic family who had always lived in this area, as it was their traditional Jicarilla Apache homeland. Felipe is a renowned micaceous clay potter who is credited with reviving the Jicarilla Apache pottery tradition.

While living there I learned, and fell in love with, native soils and their transformation into utilitarian and sacred vessels. I spent over a year learning the rituals and work involved with excavating the raw soils and turning them into pottery clay. One day while mixing a large vat of clay I looked up at the houses, as I had done a thousand times, and realized they were made out of the same clay in my hands. It was like I was seeing them for the first time. For the rest of the day everything I looked at appeared to be made out of this clay. The dirt driveway was covered with remnants from screening clay, beautiful mica schist that glittered in the sun. The adobe houses were built from local soils and painted with micaceous clays. The built in banco furniture, the horno bread ovens, the fire pit, and the sweat lodge were all adobe. And of course the pots we used to cook our meals were made from the same clay.

I began to ask about the houses and with Felipe's guidance, I began to care for them. I learned that plastering was traditionally done by women and spent time with Felipe's mother, Tina Ortega, who had taught Felipe and his brothers, how to plaster. At this point in time I didn't think about what I was doing, what it was called or how it fit into anything beyond the life of the village.

A resident from the Lama Foundation came to one of our sweat lodges. As we were talking he made the comment that I was a “natural builder” and should come teach at Build Here Now, an annual gathering of natural builders outside of Taos. I had never heard the term “Natural Builder” and as he explained it to me I was amazed to hear that these traditional forms were influencing new methods of building. I went to Build Here Now for the next three years and loved every gathering. It was exuberating to be in a place where so many interesting people were gathered together to share their knowledge and ideas about creating and living in better environments. It was at these colloquia that I met and learned from the people who would shape my life for the unforeseeable future.

By the end of 2001, shortly after Build Here Now, we held a ‘work party’ in the village. And with 50 people, ages 3 1/2 to 82, and 100 hands we held a sweat, we feasted, we played and we re-plastered two full houses that were in dire need of a new protective coat.

Before leaving New Mexico and relocating to Northern California I had the privilege of consulting for and working on an historic restoration of the only adobe round barn in the U.S., at Ojo Caliente hot springs. This magical building, with a 45' cedar shake roof, was the valley's original dairy barn. We sponge alized 1600 ft² of interior wall surface with a local micacious soil used traditionally for painting the houses, called Tierra Amarilla. We also installed a 3,000 ft² round adobe floor with a bronze micacious clay finish. To date I think this is the largest modern adobe floor installation.

I've been working as a natural builder in one way or another ever since. I have worked with adobe and the restoration of adobe structures, installed earthen floors, taught workshops, and presented at colloquia, but primarily I am a plasterer.

Working as a plasterer in California is extremely different from New Mexico. In the Southwest earthen, vernacular and natural building is everywhere, supported by the culture, history and local landscape. In California stick frame building is the dominant form, even in the young evolution of 'green' building. California is, however, a mecca of Straw Building, and we regularly boast about our superior building bales.

For the last three years I have run a company called Tactile Interiors. We focus on interior and exterior earthen and lime plasters and paint, including consultation, design and installation of thick walled plasters, ails, clay paints, tadalakt and more. In addition to this I am also the owner of Ochres and Oxides, a wholesale supplier of pigments and other ingredients for earth and clay plastering.

In the past three years Tactile Interiors has worked on over 24 plaster projects and taught or presented on the topic of earthen plasters at 12 workshops or conferences. Projects have included plaster design, installation and artwork in new frame construction, conventional renovations, new straw bale construction, and renovation of existing straw bale buildings. Projects have taken place in single-family residencies, multiple family residencies, wineries, a day spa, and a multi use space for the Episcopalian church. All of the projects have included client driven design collaboration and we have been blessed with incredibly loving clients.

The main materials used are clay plasters and paints, site soil derived plasters and paints and Natural Hydraulic lime plasters. All clay and earthen paints and plasters have been created and tested in the studio. I work with a range of about 18 fantastic people, depending on availability, and my main collaborators have included Mary Golden, Janine Bjornson and Bob Theis. We are fortunate in California to have incredible information and organizational resources. I have been involved with CASBA; the California Straw Building Association and New College's Eco Dwelling program.

Some days the Northern New Mexican lifestyle seems very far away and vastly different than this one in Northern California. I look around the oak savannah of Mendocino County, with the Pacific Ocean a short distant away, as the crow flies. The difference is in the dirt, the land, and the culture. But I always know it's that layer of clay pulsing under my feet that connects them.

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