

The man preserving endangered colours



(Image credit: Michael Slominski/Alamy)



For Zapotec artist and weaver Porfirio Gutiérrez, colour is a way to connect with his ancestors' way of life, which has sustained civilisations by living in symbiosis with nature.

Back home in the village of Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca, Mexico, Porfirio Gutiérrez is referred to by his indigenous community as "El Maestro". In Ventura, California, where he lives now, and to the contemporary art world that he is courting, he is an artist with a mission. But for Gutiérrez, the job is the same: to conserve, preserve and innovate, when necessary, generations' worth of wisdom and culture associated with the making of one thing that keeps everything interesting – colour.

But not just any colour. These colours are derived from nature, meaning that Gutiérrez's charge is to discover new and old ways of plucking plants and insects straight out of the natural world and transform them into the pigments that give forth the glorious, rich, fullness of natural dyes.

Bins of these dried plants and insects in Gutiérrez's Ventura studio are all colours in waiting. The most unusual of them all is a shimmering silver bead-like insect called cochineal that will spend its next life as a luxurious red dye. These bugs are cultivated year after year in the same way that seeds are saved by farmers, passing environmental wisdom from generation to generation. Gutiérrez cultivates his own cochineal on an impressive wall of prickly pear cactus leaves installed in his studio. The insects grow like parasites on the the leaves, consuming the cactus juice which produces carminic acid in their body cavities. When dried and ground they miraculously transform into a velvety powder and the base for a red colour.

When compared with the synthetic dyes that are used today in essentially all our clothes and textiles, nature's version is almost always inexplicably better. It's the visual equivalent of a peach ripened by the tree, or a tomato baked in sunshine. Some lost part of you recognises that this is how it's supposed to be. Natural dyes are no different.

50 REASONS TO LOVE THE WORLD - 2021

Why do you love the world?



"Because I am indigenous from Oaxaca and I am blessed to be living here now, in the Chumash land, where I continue to follow my journey, led by the plants and where they grow." – Porfirio Gutiérrez, artist and weaver

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Across time and cultures, we've been carpeting cave floors and dipping our jeans in dye, not because they won't otherwise function but because colour makes life's banal objects durable and our memories last longer. And if you are as blessed with knowledge as Gutiérrez is, then that colour also grounds you spiritually and connects you to your ancestors' way of life – a way of life that sustained civilisations by living in symbiosis with nature. A way of life that 500 years of colonisation has systematically erased.



Porfirio Gutiérrez is an artist and weaver from Teotitlán del Valle, Mexico

Gutiérrez doesn't want natural dye to regain its prominence in the globalised textile industry because that could lead to terrorising nature for the ingredients. He wants us to see that it's possible to make a living and make good on the quid pro quo deal with nature: that she provides for us, and in return that we take only what we need from her. He wants us to see into his colours. He wants us to see that each textile he produces, whether it's informed by ancient symbolism or California modernism, carries forward ancient knowledge and sacred wisdom.

Like his roaming nomadic predecessors, Gutiérrez has struggled to keep the tradition alive. He left his village at 18 years old to look for new opportunities in the United States. In what he describes as a silent period, he was not speaking the language or eating the food of his indigenous community. When he returned to the village 10 years later, he describes seeing the faces of his ancestors in his mothers face. This is when he decided that he would dedicate his life to continuing the traditions and passing the values of his ancestors on to future generations.

He wants us to see that each piece he produces, whether it's informed by ancient symbolism or California modernism, carries forward ancient knowledge and wisdom that is sacred.



Porfirio Gutiérrez makes textiles with handmade dyes derived from nature (Credit: Kate Kunath)

The land, the sheep whose wool becomes his yarn, the plants that grow wild in nature, and even the insects – they all play a part in Gutiérrez's colours. Perhaps, we would all benefit from what they have to offer, and perhaps he is right in looking to the art world to show us.

Gutiérrez's work is currently showing at [The Ojai Institute in Ojai, California](#), until 1 October, 2021, and at [Arizona State University](#) through July 2022.

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