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A Continuous Line: The Journey and Artistic Practice of Porfirio Gutiérrez

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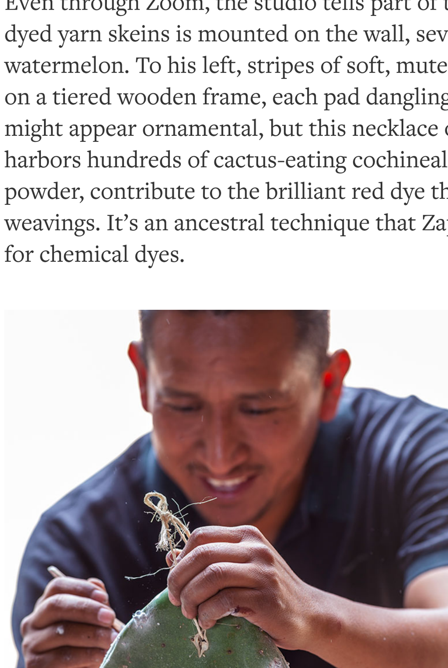
For a time, there was silence.

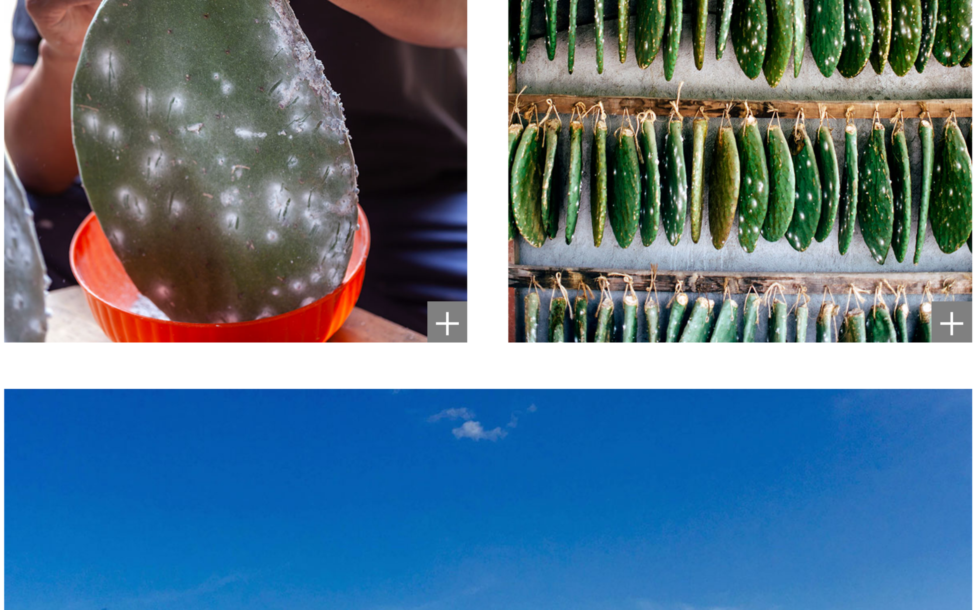
Zapotec weaver and textile artist Porfirio Gutiérrez left his ancestral village in Oaxaca, southern Mexico, when he was eighteen. "It was clear that I was running away," he says. "I always thought that something better was elsewhere." After settling in California, he did not return home to Teotitlán del Valle for almost ten years. In the United States, he had little contact with his parents, his family, and his Indigenous roots.

"I use the word 'silence' because I was completely detached from what I came from," he explains. "There are over 200,000 Zapotecs living in California. But I was not part of that community at all."

Now, fifteen years after discovering his calling as both an artist and cultural ambassador, Gutiérrez's new studio in Ventura, California, will provide a space for that very diasporic Zapotec community—especially the next generation of Oaxacan youth—to engage with inherited knowledge of weaving, dyeing, and stewardship of the natural world.

Even through Zoom, the studio tells part of that story. Over his right shoulder, an ombré array of dyed yarn skeins is mounted on the wall, seven in all, ranging from deep burgundy to ripe watermelon. To his left, stripes of soft, muted green: prickly pear cactus leaves, hanging in rows on a tiered wooden frame, each pad dangling from its own nail by a slender string. The structure might appear ornamental, but this necklace of cacti serves as a veritable color farm: every leaf harbors hundreds of cactus-eating cochineal insects which, when matured and ground to a fine powder, contribute to the brilliant red dye that graces many of Gutiérrez's tapestries and weavings. It's an ancestral technique that Zapotec weavers have largely forgotten, or forsaken, for chemical dyes.





For centuries, Zapotec communities in the foothills of southern Mexico have produced their renowned flat-weave garments and textiles, originally spun from plant fibers and dyed with pigments distilled from plants and insects. "Ever since I can remember, I helped out with some aspect of the weaving," Gutiérrez says. As a child, he could often be found winding bobbins and coiling yarn into skeins, and he accompanied his mother into the foothills on journeys to collect native plants for traditional remedies.

Between the ages of nine and twelve, before starting on the loom, he was a shepherd, where he stumbled upon the vibrant properties of local flora and fauna. He found what left a stain. "I discovered cochineal by pinching them on the cactus, out in the wild," he tells me. "I started to color my slingshot, my hat. I started to put text on my shirt—which my mom wasn't too happy about."

Gutiérrez describes himself as a creative child, sensitive and sentimental. "I loved the sound of rain, the landscape in the wet season." He pursued beauty, often gathering bouquets of flowers, gravitating even then to the manipulation of color and shape and pattern. But in the village, the principles and techniques from which Gutiérrez would eventually build his artistic practice were not considered art, at least not first and foremost.

Gutiérrez's father often traveled for several days at a time to sell or trade his woven blankets in the mountains to support his family. "It is a beautiful tradition and way of life," Gutiérrez says. "But it is work."

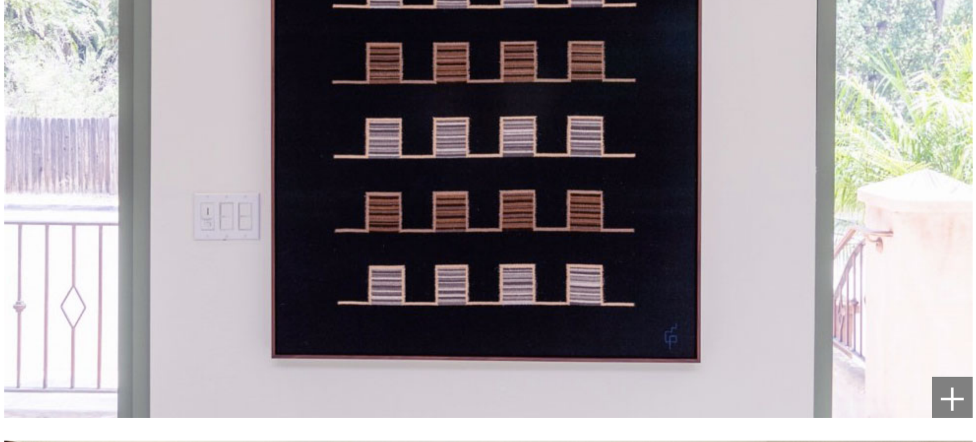
For Gutiérrez, it was the time of silence in the United States that caused him to see that work in a different light, as both his cultural inheritance and his peoples' artistry. In California, he took work in restaurants, in a grocery store, and in construction as an employee and eventual manager of a concrete plant. He immersed himself in American culture, but over time, he began to reflect on its stark incongruities with the world he had left behind.

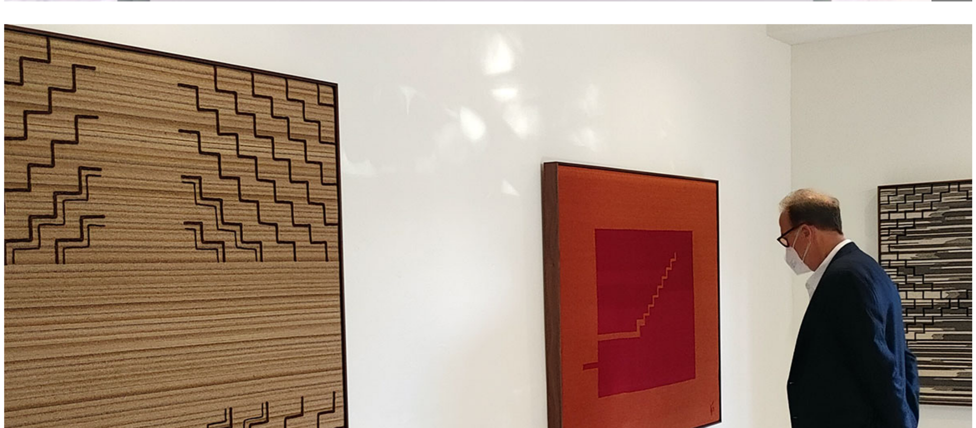
At the concrete plant, "every week, I watched tons and tons of material going into the land," he says. He wondered, "How much of that is just pure waste? How much of that is harming nature?"

Gutiérrez returned to his village with a renewed commitment to reviving the ancestral knowledge that he saw waning even in Oaxaca, a hub of Indigenous art. He shuttled back and forth between California, where he had started a family, and Teotitlán del Valle, where he began to develop his artistic vision and cultivate a team of family and community members to support his weaving and dyeing practice.

Today, Gutiérrez associates his transnational, artistic journey with a particular style of drawing in which the artist brings pen to paper and maintains the flow of the line until the image is complete, never breaking contact. His story is an ongoing pilgrimage both *from* and *toward* the land, knowledge, and traditions of his ancestors. Recalling his father's travels into the mountains to display their textiles, he says, "That notion of taking your work to other places, or trading and bringing economic opportunity for your family—that's what I do, in different ways. Exhibiting, showing my work around the world."

He also sees in his artistic nature the same compass that pointed his mother toward healing. "My mother says that the greater being blesses someone's hand with their specific journey or calling. In the Western world, we might think of it as a passion. But to us, it is a blessing."





Even the time of silence was not an absence or a rupture but a hush, during which new images and sounds and syntax spoke to him. His time in construction sparked his fascination with architecture and the building arts, a preoccupation that has made its way into an evolving series of textile wall hangings titled *Continuous Line*. The series employs simple, modern shapes and lines to evoke the peace Gutiérrez has found in the spiritual connection between past and present, here and there, tradition and modernism, nature and architecture, color and flesh.

"It's about the history, the memories, the values," he says. "And the labor, and the talent. All of that existed within me since the day I started to resume my art form."

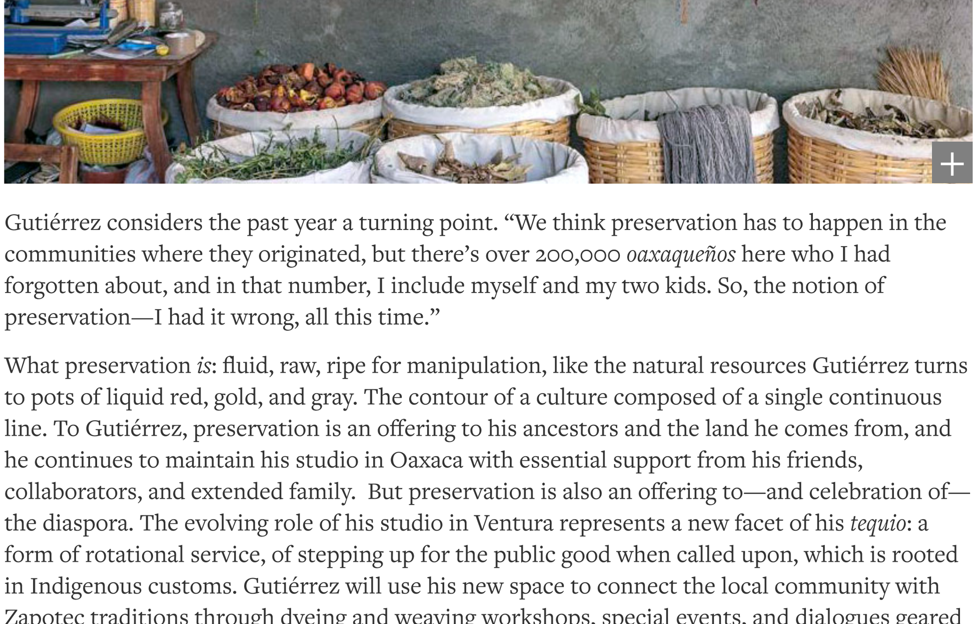
The hues Gutiérrez achieves through natural dyes illustrate these linkages. "I look at a building that is gray, and I think about where I get that color," Gutiérrez says. One of his grays can be achieved by spinning white and black wool together, but the gray of a building—a charcoal—would come from *sapote negro*, a sweet, pulpy black fruit.

This continuous line between Gutiérrez and the land informs the deliberate, embodied, empathetic way he physically engages with his materials. When boring a hole through the end of each cactus leaf, for instance, he's sure to pierce the flesh with wood to avoid poisoning the plant. "If you do it with a piece of metal, then it infects. It'll start rotting. If I get poked with a piece of metal, chances are I'll get infected too." After making the hole, Gutiérrez waits for it to heal before inserting the thread. "This reminds me that I'm no different than a plant," he says. "You have a communion with the process and the material."

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Gutiérrez's practice—his studio, his materials, and his team—was based in Oaxaca, despite living and raising his children in California for the past twenty-four years. "When I'm in the village," Gutiérrez said, "I'm literally standing and stamping on the same shoe-steps of my ancestors. It is in the same exact land. So that evokes tremendous energy."

Over the years, the connection between Oaxaca and his adopted home in Ventura, territory claimed by Mexico before the Mexican American War, has become more visible and visceral. "I am in the land of the ancestors, the Chumash people. Especially when I'm collecting here in California, harvesting native plants, I feel a reverence to our brothers and sisters as Native people." The landscape and climate of the Southwest share characteristics with southern Mexico. Certain plants make their homes in both regions. "We are in the same land," he says. "If you refer to me as Indigenous to the Americas, then you're saying I'm Indigenous to *this* land."

After the pandemic hit, Gutiérrez began to revise the parameters of his practice. "There was the notion that it only lives in Oaxaca, that it has to be done in Oaxaca," he admits. "But *this* is where I live. Here is where my kids are growing up—I can't change that." He has shared the fabric of Zapotec existence with his sons since their infancy, but he acknowledges that before centering his practice in the United States, "it was never tangible to them." He asked himself, "All this work that I've been doing and the blessing the greater being put in my hands—who does it belong to? Who is it for?"



Gutiérrez considers the past year a turning point. "We think preservation has to happen in the communities where they originated, but there's over 200,000 *oaxaqueños* here who I had forgotten about, and in that number, I include myself and my two kids. So, the notion of preservation—I had it wrong, all this time."

What preservation *is*: fluid, raw, ripe for manipulation, like the natural resources Gutiérrez turns to pots of liquid red, gold, and gray. The contour of a culture composed of a single continuous line. To Gutiérrez, preservation is an offering to his ancestors and the land he comes from, and he continues to maintain his studio in Oaxaca with essential support from his friends, collaborators, and extended family. But preservation is also an offering to—and celebration of—the diaspora. The evolving role of his studio in Ventura represents a new facet of his *tequio*: a form of rotational service, of stepping up for the public good when called upon, which is rooted in Indigenous customs. Gutiérrez will use his new space to connect the local community with Zapotec traditions through dyeing and weaving workshops, special events, and dialogues geared toward engaging the younger generation.

Gutiérrez has always told his children that he does not expect them to weave, but he is certain that "the fabric of ancestral knowledge and wisdom will continue to be woven through them in its own way." His nineteen-year-old is a writer, his nine-year-old, a budding artist. "The textiles could truly become text," he suggests. "Maybe painting, digital art forms."

Gutiérrez himself has always taken a contemporary, convention-bending approach to creating, and he continues to explore new media. He's currently working on a piece for the Smithsonian Arts + Industries Building with fabric that is woven first and dyed second, rather than coloring the yarn itself. The design will be applied in felt after the dyeing process is complete. He also continues the experimentation begun in his *Continuous Line* series.

"I'm really drawn to embroidery work and how it intersects with tapestry weaving," he says, noting that in traditional Zapotec textiles, these techniques remain separate. "I'm interested in bringing these ancient techniques into a contemporary art vocabulary."

In Ventura, he has begun in earnest to translate his methods from the foothills to his new landscape, figuring out how to harvest in California, where land is privately owned. He speaks with curiosity and receptivity of the potential outcomes in his new pieces. "Each color is an imprint of a season," he explains. "The color is dictated by the rain, the pH of the soil. You just need to make adjustments."

Gutiérrez's philosophy and practice stretch across a cultural canvas as expansive and malleable as the traditional materials and processes he utilizes. Like a stain, Gutiérrez's work proves that tradition spreads in every direction, seeping out and tunneling in. "This is nothing I started myself," he says. "This is the continuous line."

Lena Crown is a writer and intern at the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. She received her bachelor's degree in Latin American studies and Spanish, and she is currently pursuing an MFA in creative nonfiction at George Mason University.

You can find Porfirio Gutiérrez's textile works for sale in the Smithsonian Folklife Festival Marketplace.

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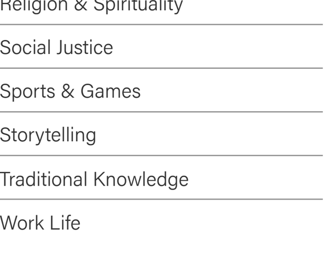

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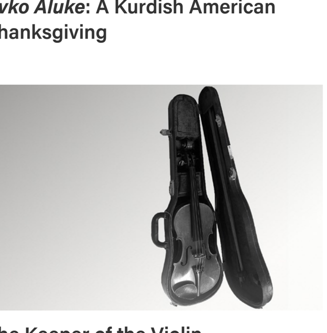

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