



STATE OF CERAMICS | September 24, 2021

Désirée Coral

Ceramics in Relationship to Color as Traveler:  
how color crosses geographic, geologic, and cultural boundaries

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#### IN ATTENDANCE:

Avery Avalos, Alexis C. Brunkow, Jo Anne Butler, CJ, Danielle Callahan, Sarah Christie, Connie, Cyrielle, Brooke Cassady, Désirée Coral, Nicole D’Aurizio, Sabiha Dohadwala, Magdolene Dykstra, Cathy Fairbanks, Wendy Gers, Ariel Gout, Phyllis Green, Iso Marcus, Alyson Iwamoto, Jenn Law, Cathy Lu, Montessa Maack, Natasha Mayo, Holly Macdonald, Rachel Mangold, Samuel Maslow, Conall Mathis, Liz Menard, Molly Morningglory, Adrian Muller, Agata Nowak, Evgenia Ozerova, Kate Roberts, Katherine Ross, Megan Rowden, Sara, Kory Salajka, Charlotte Seifert, Nicole Seisler, Anie Toole, Larisa Usich, VEGA, Marina Weiner, Alayna Wiley, Addison Woolsey, Ariel Zimman

#### QUESTIONS POSED BY THE ARTIST

- What is our relationship to the earth? What are our responsibilities as citizens?
- How do we use globally-sourced materials (in the studio as well as our daily lives) now that we are conscious, in global terms, of the precarity of the earth?
- What does local mean when there is only one planet?
- What does hyper-local mean in terms of exchange with other hyper-localities?

#### SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION (WRITTEN BY A-B PROJECTS ASSISTANT MARINA WEINER)

##### Introduction

Désirée Coral was born in Ecuador and spent her early years there; in adulthood, she has lived in Italy, Spain, Scotland, and the United States. Living in many different parts of the world has inspired her interest in the cultural meanings and geographic origins of materials. In Coral’s introductory lecture, she explained that one material can have multiple meanings depending on a cultural lens; for example, gold was used and understood differently in ancient Andean society than in a Spanish settler-colonial context.

Importantly, materials carry a definition of locality that differs from the one prescribed by human society. The regions defined by archaeology, geography, and politics are often fractured and arbitrary, but materials don’t have the same boundaries. The presence of a material, craft practice, or aesthetic preference may spread across two or more regions that are believed to be completely distinct, complicating our ideas about history, place, and culture.

Central to the conversation was a question about ethical engagement with materials and place. Coral shared that in the Ecuadorian constitution, nature is understood as an “entity of right” and is granted a degree of autonomy and protection. The artist asked us to consider our relationship to the natural world, and to examine how we might best care for materials and resources as makers in this current moment of climate emergency.

### **Local/Global**

The group discussed the contemporary meaning of terms such as local, hyper-local, and global. In linguistics, the word “local” indicates the proximity of a descriptor to a subject within a sentence, which indicates spatial and conceptual distance between words. It is suggested that the word “local” also contains the idea of connecting with other individuals, which can happen with or without physical proximity. Events such as this discussion can be considered examples of “hyper-locality” in which participants exchange ideas within a highly specific set of interests without the need to be in the same location. There is a tradeoff, however; use of the Internet and electronic devices relies heavily on a global infrastructure and contains a very high energy cost.

The idea of the local expands when we consider the planet as a global neighborhood. Each specific location can be situated within the sites directly proximal to it, therefore connecting it to the entire world. If we think of the earth as one locality, maybe we can treat people who live on the other side of the world with the same respect that we offer to those who are right next to us. It seems that the presence of boundaries allows us to determine locality, but when we disregard or look beyond boundaries, we are able to consider our presence and connectedness within the entire universe. This also relates to colonial notions of ownership: in occidental thinking, we inhabit a sense of hierarchy that allows us to believe that we own the earth. In actuality, biological science as well as indigenous ecological frameworks remind us that our very bodies are part of the earth; “local” can therefore be understood as an extension of one’s own corporeality.

Coral shares her experience with the Jama Coaque people in Ecuador, whose understanding of their native forest contains a deep intergenerational somatic knowledge that they are part of something bigger, and that every material and being in the forest has an energy that acts in collaboration with everything else. This understanding of unity and wholeness goes beyond terms like “interconnectedness” and “animism” and is impossible to grasp in occidental thinking.

### **Time**

The group also discussed the temporal definition of locality. A place’s history can influence what we make— how can the memory of the landscape be brought into the work? There are varying paths, including working with materials and clays found immediately around us. Landscapes change over time, and the materials that we think of as being essential to a region (such as gold in California) are in fact the relatively recent results of geological forces such as glaciers and sedimentary accretions. A geologist may have a very different definition of the word “local” than an artist. The landscapes that we inhabit today have also been dramatically

impacted by human behavior (i.e. soil from one region has been brought into another region as fill dirt, muddying our understanding of the local).

Additionally, this brings to mind the capability of clay (fired and unfired) to record histories. While clay as a raw material may take thousands of years to form, once it is fired, it is immediately timestamped and traceable through carbon-dating to the moment of its firing. Thus the material history of clay is rewritten in a matter of hours, and the vitrified object can act as a material record of the time in which it was formed and fired. This points to a quantum understanding of time in which we are not just participants in history, but co-creators.

### **Material Practices**

How do we make work in the context of ecological crisis, knowing that our practices necessitate the use of extracted and commodified materials? When we look at the proliferation of cobalt and porcelain as objects of desire through global trade, we understand that access to materials had a profound impact on the development of aesthetics. A desire to replicate the look of porcelain from China using clay and technology available in Italy resulted the production of Majolica, a fundamentally local craft influenced by the aesthetics of a rapidly globalizing world. Indeed, the rise of capitalism has pushed us toward materials and practices that are more economically than ecologically viable, resulting in the violent extraction of materials and enormous environmental costs to ship them around the world. On the other hand, many of the materials used in the cottage industry of ceramics (cobalt, lithium) are mined at a much larger scale to power electronic devices, cars, and military operations, depleting the earth's resources and driving up economic costs at a much faster rate than any ceramicist. Even if we don't use lithium in our glazes in protest of its unethical origin, we are still using it in our laptops to hold this very discussion.

Although this realization can lead to a mentality of paralyzing scarcity, we can also feel a sense of relief that we live in a moment where we are encouraged to choose a more compatible and sympathetic relationship to the materials that are underneath us. Many artists whose work includes ceramics operate without using a kiln. Can we expand our understanding of ceramics to take on "peri-ceramics", which understands the craft to be primarily one of managing water loss and dehydration? This is the analog scale at which ceramics exists materially – with this understanding, paper mache, air dry clay, and mud (and more) can all be considered ceramic practices.

Creative and ethical thinking about ceramic materials also brings up the notion of working with locally-sourced materials. This clearly has a moral high-ground when it comes to ecology: digging naturally-renewable clay directly from the earth is much less impactful on the environment than purchasing a clay body whose ingredients have been extracted and shipped from across the globe, requiring great labor, fuel, and carbon. However, if we consider the concept of nature as an "entity of right", is it really morally neutral to dig up and use materials from the earth, even at a very small scale? Most of us live and practice on stolen land; our relationship to that land has been fractured through generations of trauma, genocide, and exploitation, and we are deeply removed from indigenous frameworks of ecological maintenance of resource management.

The group discussed the concept of asking for the land's consent before using it: asking for permission from the river before swimming, the forest before hiking, the mountain before digging. This raises other issues - first and foremost, how do we determine consent in these instances? It is discussed that the purpose of this practice of asking permission might be the opportunity for reflection. Rather than waiting for some kind of sign or response, pausing before jumping into the river, for example, allows one time to consider whether there are fish spawning in that region. It is an invitation to be present that allows us to thoughtfully consider our moment-to-moment impact within the hyper-locality of our ecological community.