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Revering the Earth, Colombian Artist Delcy Morelos Brings It to Chelsea

*To make sense of her country's history of violence, the artist evokes beauty in the land.
At Dia, you can smell, enter and touch.*

by Tess Thackara (October 5, 2023)



Delcy Morelos at her exhibition "El abrazo," or "The Embrace," at Dia Chelsea. Visitors can walk inside and (gently) touch the installation, made of Hudson Valley soil mixed with other materials. Credit: Victor Llorente for The New York Times

When the Colombian artist Delcy Morelos created a giant maze of earth at the Venice Biennale in 2022, she watched some visitors respond to the structure in a way that troubled her.

"People would kick the work," she remarked, sitting in the galleries of Dia Art Foundation in Chelsea, on a stack of hay destined for her next colossal installation made of soil. "They wanted to know how it was built. People are so used to behaving this way when it comes to the earth."

In New York to open her first U.S. solo show, at Dia on Thursday, Morelos described herself as something of an ambassador for Mother Earth, a self-professed healer and sorceress charged with delivering a message about her force, intelligence and beauty. "Industrialized cultures have forgotten her," she lamented. Here, she has raised one of her installations off the ground, partly to protect it from irreverent feet. "The kicking will have to become more aggressive" to reach it, she said. "When you hurt the earth, you hurt yourself. We are not separate."



The structure appears to hover slightly off the ground. Alexis Lowry, a Dia curator, said Morelos was committed to “engaging people with the earth as this intimate material.” Credit: Victor Llorente for The New York Times

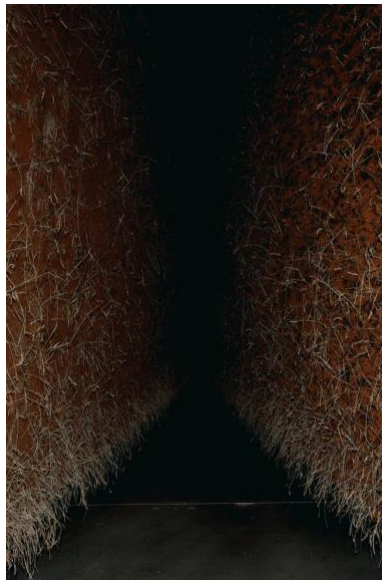
Morelos, 55, comes from a small town called Tierralta, in northern Colombia, where she grew up with her grandmother in a mud house that they moistened daily with their hands to prevent it from becoming too dry and dusty. Her grandmother, who is descended from the Indigenous Emberá people, grew almost everything they ate. Morelos made her own dolls from glass bottles and fabrics, and toy animals from seeds and twigs. At the same time, she lived with the permanent threat of violence from guerrilla and paramilitary groups, who fought over coca-rich territory and assassinated Indigenous leaders seeking to protect the river. As she learned to paint and make ceramics in school, and eventually attended art school in Cartagena, Morelos began to find a visual language to examine these experiences of the world.

When we met, Morelos was dressed in an indigo shift dress that she made, as she has most of her clothes since childhood. She is small, with the warm, gentle manner of a wise auntie — a quality that belies the ambition and seriousness of her work. For some three decades, Morelos has tried to make sense of human violence and abuse of the land in her paintings, sculptures and installations. For years, she made works splashed in blood-red hues, and sought out Indigenous teachers and communities of women ceramists to learn from. Over the past 10 years, she has focused primarily on soil and clay, making objects and installations that manifest her reverence for the earth — but largely out of view of the Western art world. (That is changing in the United States, where the Marian Goodman Gallery announced it would represent the artist.)

“What I was struck by was that I didn’t know her — she’s been around for quite some time,” said Cecilia Alemani, curator of the 2022 Venice Biennale, describing her response when one or two of her advisers in Latin America recommended Morelos for the exhibition. “There is an interesting evolution in her work. The sense of scale and monumentality. It’s incredibly interesting that she’s showing at Dia, the temple of Western Minimalism, and she’s sort of throwing it upside down.”



Victor Llorente for The New York Times



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In the galleries at Dia Chelsea, a few subway stops from Walter De Maria’s famous interior land sculpture, “The New York Earth Room,” Morelos has created a synesthetic encounter with the earth, in the form of two vast installations composed primarily of soil that she’s scented with spices like cinnamon, clove and copaiba — a tree resin used in Indigenous Amazonian cultures to cure infections and diseases. One of these installations cannot only be smelled, but also entered and touched. “El abrazo,” or “The Embrace,” is a kind of living temple — a hulking geometric mass made of top soil from the Hudson Valley mixed with clay and ground coconut husks that visitors can circumnavigate, and walk inside via a cleaved opening. “La Montana,” she called it in passing. The mountainous structure appears to hover just off the ground. Morelos is inviting people to caress it, gently, with their hands.

It is this sense of intimacy with, and care for, the environment that the Dia curator Alexis Lowry and curatorial assistant Zuna Maza see as perhaps the most poignant aspect of Morelos's work. "We live in a time of ecological crisis," Lowry said, "and I don't think we should be asking artists to solve our problems for us but I do think the best work can help us to think about them differently. Delcy's commitment to engaging people with the earth as this intimate material has profound possibilities."



The other installation in the show, "Cielo terrenal" ("Earthly Heaven"). Morelos spoke of it as a place where life is gestating, but also a place of mourning. Credit: Victor Llorente for The New York Times

Morelos's other installation at Dia, "Cielo terrenal," or "Earthly Heaven," is quieter, and subtler — a space of "fertile darkness," as Morelos envisions it. Visitors will find a barely lit, subterranean-like space in which the floors and walls have been partially painted in a thin layer of earth, up to the watermark level left by Hurricane Sandy when it flooded the galleries in 2012. On top of this layer, Morelos has placed tidy stacks of small ceramic forms evoking root vegetables, seeds and animal droppings, and earth-covered industrial refuse salvaged from past installations at Dia Beacon. Morelos, through a translator, spoke about this room as a "uterus where life is gestating," but also as a space of mourning. In person, its precise rows of soil-encrusted rebar, piping and wood suggest bodies laid out to decompose in a mass grave.

"I've been thinking a lot about this because of Colombia's history of violence," she said. "There are a lot of missing people. In any land where there's cultivation, bodies could be there. It's a difficult subject, but there is beauty in it."

Rodrigo Moura, chief curator of El Museo del Barrio, who put Morelos's work in the 2013 Salón Nacional de Artistas in Medellin, Colombia, and has followed her since, remarked on her ability to take on such urgent matters. "In a quite prescient way, her work has anticipated a lot of the discussions we're having about land rights," he said in an interview.

Bernardo Mosqueira, chief curator of the Institute for Studies on Latin American Art — which has just started a partnership with Dia — noted the importance of creating new narratives about Latin American art that are "closer to the bodies and lived experiences of people of Latin America."



The precise rows suggest bodies laid out to decompose in a mass grave. "I've been thinking a lot about this because of Colombia's history of violence," Morelos said. "There are a lot of missing people." Credit: Victor Llorente for The New York Times

Morelos's work "can be read through the legacies of Minimalism," he said, "but it needs to be read also from the perspective of someone who is in direct collaboration with Indigenous cultures." He urged the dismantling of categories imposed on art by colonial-thinking institutions, and more broadly by the structure of Western thought, in order to find other ways of thinking and feeling.

When it comes to the earth, Morelos said, the language of geometry offers a vocabulary to better understand something that is complex, powerful and unruly. "Land manifests itself in many ways," she said, her eyes closed to focus her thoughts. "As a living element, she continued, the earth can be chaotic and inscrutable. Morelos has her audience in mind, and if their communion with the earth is about touching it, and breathing in its aroma, it's also about seeing it with renewed vision. "I want to show the land out of context and in a sacred way," she continued, "so I call it to order."

"She allows me to do that," she added.