

Fields of the Future: Unraveling the Loom
A Podcast by Bard Graduate Center
S2E5: Porfirio Gutiérrez—Color as a Form of Storytelling

Introduction: This is Fields of the Future, an interview series by Bard Graduate Center. This season highlights the work of scholars, artists, and educators working with Indigenous textiles and textile history of the Southwestern United States and Mexico. Jessie Mordine Young speaks with Porfirio Gutiérrez about his textile art and its connection to spaces, specifically to his homeland of Teotitlán del Valle. They also talk about his relationship with natural dye and color and how his practice is deeply rooted in ancestral knowledge.

Jessie Mordine Young: Hi. My name is Jessie Mordine Young, a recent graduate from the Bard Graduate Center. I am a Brooklyn-based textile scholar, educator, and weaver. I'm calling in from the traditional homelands of the Lenape, Merrick, Canarsie, Matinecock, and Rockaway nations. I'm thrilled to be speaking to Porfirio Gutiérrez, who is a Zapotec textile artist and natural dyer based in Ventura, California. He was born and raised in the Zapotec textile community of Teotitlán del Valle in Oaxaca, Mexico, which has an incredibly rich textile tradition. His art practice is rooted in his ancestors' knowledge and deep respect for nature, and his work is inspired by his experience on both sides of the imposed border. He is also an esteemed lecturer and has shared his art practice and ancestors' story at many institutions and cultural organizations around the world. Hi, Porfirio. Thank you for joining us today.

Porfirio Gutiérrez: Hello, hello. Thank you so much, Jessica, for the invitation. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share with your audience.

JMY: We're lucky to have you. To start off, can you please share your art practice with me and talk a little bit about the mission of your studio?

PG: If you don't mind, if I just share a little bit about where I come from. So I come from a family of musicians. I come from also a family of practitioners and teachers of the ceremonial feather dance. And because, I was uh, born within this family and within this community, I also received the inherence of the art of weaving. The mission of my studio and my art practice has always been to preserve the memories and the, uh, traditional knowledge of the ancestors, to uplift, and for the world to hear the voice of the Indigenous people and to honor them through the work.

JMY: And in terms of how you've seen your family and your ancestors' histories transcend into your own practice over the years, can you talk a little bit more about how that exists today?

PG: I think the most visual, the most evident way how this world view, the ancestral world view, and the cultural value that I talk about so much is seen in my work, it is because it carries these practices, the ancestral knowledge, specifically, the natural dye. And, beyond that, it carries these traditional knowledge of the spiritual aspect and the relationship that I have with nature

and this world view of Mother Earth, which is something that I have learned, from my parents and that has been passed down from our civilization. And as one of the youngest people of the Zapotec civilization as a practitioner of this art form, it is my wish that the people could see this value within my art practice.

JMY: I feel very fortunate to have been able to visit your homelands and your home town in the Valle de Teotitlán. And it was both really inspiring and informative. I learned so much about the history of color and the importance of preserving color. I'd love to hear more (about) how you incorporate color into your art and what that process is a little bit like, in terms of maintaining a relationship with color on a daily basis.

PG: For referencing with color it has obviously been, um, such of an important aspect in humanity's life. For some cultures or for more the western world view of color, we have so much reference or symbolism of wealth and power. When we think about the cultural context, especially in Mexico, we start looking at the spiritual connection with color. But for me, it is not only about the color, but instead, where the color comes from. And all the colors that you see on my weavings come from a living source. These are the, uh, understandings that I've learned since really young. And, that communicates, not only the aesthetic, and the colors of my pieces, but also, uh, the spiritual, understanding through that.

JMY: That's really beautiful. As someone who also has an intimate relationship with color, in that I have my own natural dye practice, I do understand the importance to experience the dye process. But someone like you, who educates others on the importance of color within your community, within your ancestry, how do you teach others to appreciate color?

PG: Wow. That is a great question. I don't know if I've ever put in effort to appreciate color. I don't know if that's really, um, my effort. I think my effort has been for people to understand where the colors come from. And how that relates to the biodiversity, and, how within that, what is visually seen as color, what is the relation to the spiritual aspect and the cultural value. And of course, what I'm talking about natural dyes here.

JMY: Can you speak about the permeability of the border, and how that has influenced the exchange of color? And also how that influences your experience with color, as you've now had life on both sides of the California-Mexico border.

PG: I think, when it comes to color for me, it only comes to mind the, uh, issues that we've had with defining people of color. And as a person of color, and also immigrant in a different country, that really comes to mind. And I've never really focused on color, so that's probably why I'm not able to answer your question about color. Because I think color for me it is extremely sensitive. My approach, like I mentioned it, it only comes through, instead of just the color itself, and of course the colors in important place, plays an important role in my work, it's more of a meditative when it comes to aesthetic of the color. But instead it is more driven by who and what makes the color, how the color came to be.

But when it comes to, Indigenous of the Americas or Native American, there's obviously this notion of, "I am in a different country," and in some it is true to that. Yes, and I'm in a different country. But we often forget that I am in the same land. And in the reference towards me as an Indigenous or Native American, then I'm not an immigrant in some ways. so, it is within the context of the land as a whole. When I think about my latest work, a body of work that I just produced in an exhibition right now here in California, it's called Continuous Line. When I think about the plants, that I use in my dyes that are Indigenous to the Americas, and specifically to Oaxaca, let's say, that they grow wildly here in this part of the Americas where I'm at. and, when I think about the knowledge, how it runs through the people. and no matter where the people goes, it stays alive. And this is where this quote that I said, that our head is our house. So, really border, it becomes depleted at that point. When I'm speaking on these contexts, I'm never thinking about this, that I'm in a different country. Instead, I am on the land of the Chumash people who are our brothers and sisters. And, in my work it is more of a relationship and homage to the land itself, and, not paying so much attention to the limitation as an immigrant, or with a border. Instead, this continuous line travels through the people and their value, and their knowledge, and truly, being in a different country or being on the other side of the border, it's not relevant. At that point, I think.

JMY: I think what you're saying is so true, specifically as an art historian who has been learning so much about textiles in the Indigenous Southwest, and in Mexico for the past year and a half. We always refer to the border as permeable, because the border is evidence to colonization. And so much of the history of color is a result of colonization, in that the exchange of it became a part of this narrative of taking and moving and, so on, I think what you're saying is so well worded because it's so true. I loved what you were saying about the continuous line, because, as you said, from someone who's from the land, the border doesn't exist, it is an exchange that happens throughout the land because of no need for one, no need for a border.

PG: And that has nothing to do with Indigenous people.

JMY: Yes. In terms of that exhibition of work, did you weave everything, and specifically, was (were) there colors that stood out in that work? You said that they were from the local area in LA. Can you talk more about the color palette that you were using?

PG: The color palette, and so much of, when you, um, explore the shades that earth provides, it has such a specific vocabulary. And I'm extremely drawn to those vocabularies. In fact, my art practice, revitalizing and resuming my art practice, I came to really understand a specific body of language that Mother Earth provides, and how the purest of it, with no additives, with no processed chemical. because if we speak of natural dye there's also a lot of chemicals that could be added as additives, to make the color react. In my practice, it's the purest. So, creating colors, it's only by creating chemical reactions with nature. so, to me, overall, it is very meditative and this body of work, continuous line, has some of these colors that, the color itself, it is something that inspires you to meditate. The soothing of the colors, but also, the very minimal designs you see on these pieces. You obviously see the origin of these designs but you also see urban influence and modernism in the work. So, the colors become as important as the

design, or maybe more important as the design, and I say important because, hopefully, it draws the people to meditate in the soothingness and the vocabulary of Mother Earth can now be tangible through these pieces.

JMY: I'm actually looking at one of the works from this series and it's just absolutely stunning. I'm looking at the one with the orange band. And with the red and then almost like a ziggurat, zigzag type shape. And it's, it's so beautiful. but I particularly love the gray one with all of the striations. The contrast of that really charcoal gray with that ...natural creamy color and then that black line is just really, really stunning. It's just so beautiful.

PG: Thank you. I appreciate that. And, these colors, it's exploring this body of work, Continuous Line, it's exploring the ancestral, technique and, the values, but also it is, a conversation, and it is a... interaction with t-the contemporary art practice... as well as these pieces, some of them have embroidery work on them. So, it is also this intersection with other techniques that goes beyond what the community in Teotitlán has been doing for, you know, a couple 100 years now or maybe 100 years. So again, I continue to see the influence of these two worlds.

JMY: What's so interesting is that with contemporary art there's this kind of unspoken word, or maybe it's a spoken word, that simplicity can often define a piece because of it being, part of the language of contemporary art. And I look at your work and it is simple, and it's contemporary, like you're saying, but it's also so complex, because of its meaning, its deep meaning that comes with it, the meaning of the color, the meaning of the pattern. It's all connected to not only yourself, but a larger history, a larger community, to your ancestors. So, I think it's so beautiful that there are these various layers. it's so much more complex than what you initially think when you look at it, So, it's, an incredible body of work.

PG: Thank you.

JMY: And, in addition to your art practice, you're an educator and a community creator. And, so, I wanted to ask you if you could speak a little bit more about that.

PG: When I think of educator, I think of, obviously, you know, because, uh, there is so much, knowledge and wisdom, that nestles within, you know, my culture as, as Zapotec, my art practice, and, so much of it also driven by this, notion of, the ancestors voice could be heard. But also, um, I think of my parents who never had the opportunity to go to school, I'm speaking Western school. So- this Indigenous community that has tremendous knowledge and wisdom, and, and inherited the science, the arts, that they don't have the opportunity, to be able to express all that to the world. And again, I'm, I'm thinking directly to my parents, you know. They could barely speak Spanish.

So, I only communicate with them through my native language, which is Zapotec. So, I think those are some of the things that drives me, uh, and I've been an educator, but also, so much information and this knowledge that I just mentioned, has been spoken by someone else, and he's been told by someone else, and has been shared by, someone else. So, the world never

really hears the concerns and the voice of the Indigenous people. and those are some of the things that has driven me to be able to educate, And, and not just educate because I don't really consider myself an educator, other than teacher one because I teach natural dye ... and weaving I do some workshops when my schedule permits it. But, those are the things, I just think that I also, not only owe it for, -all this responsibility to my ancestors, but also to my kids, or the next generation,of the Zapotec nation.

JMY: Do your kids have any interest in weaving or dyeing?

PG: You know, my kids are definitely involved. Uh, I have a 19 year old who is at college.....a great writer. I have another, Noah, who's nine years old. My oldest son, his name is David, and Noah. and Noah is definitely an artist, and he's definitely someone that I can really see being able to continue my art form. But I never really put the responsibility on my kids that they need to be weavers and dyers.

Because often we expect or we think, at least from my personal experience, that I am a weaver because I was born in this tradition and learning, through my parents. But the minute I had an option, I left. And when you speak of a craft within a cultural tradition, in many ways it becomes a work. And it's only alive through me because I discover my calling. My mother says that, the greater being blesses your hands with a particular mission, and the work that you do. So, it's not just me, that I'm doing the work that I'm doing, it is a blessing that I received from the greater being. And she refers to that because she is a healer herself, and she says that, uh, as a person does not heal but instead it is, the greater being that heals through her, specifically through her hands and the knowledge of, a traditional medicine. So, I parallel that with my art practice or me as an artist. I ran away from my culture when I was 18 years old.

The minute that the world gave me an opportunity, off I went. And only through these many years of silence, I discovered that I had a passion for weaving and that I discovered my calling. And for that reason, I exist as an artist, and the minute that you're gonna give options to traditional craft it would preserve through very few people that truly found their calling. Otherwise, it just becomes a business, it becomes something very empty. And because it could just really be exchanged by monetary all the time. And when I think about my kids, we're making sure that they are carrying these cultural values and, how they're gonna express the cultural value, it is really up to them and hopefully they'll discover the blessing that they will receive or they've already received when they were born through the greater being. And, uh, maybe this tradition could stay alive through the writings of my son, or maybe my younger son will become, I don't know, maybe a weaver like me, or maybe a dyer or a painter, a filmmaker. I don't know, but I think for me it's most important for them to carry the value.

JMY: I think the fact that you're so open to that freedom of expression, taking on different forms and allowing them to explore, that I think is really important. I'm really interested in how you said that you took some time away from it and then you returned to it, and that's because it was meant for you. And I think that it's really wonderful that you found something that you feel so passionate about that you can pursue fully. I woke up this morning and I just had one of

those moments as someone who's a weaver, where we live in this digital age, and people expect content all the time or they expect for you to be fast and keep going.....and weaving is one of the slowest things. It's so labor intensive. And most people don't understand how much time, patience and attention it takes to be a weaver and to be a dyer (laughs), both are very commanding forms of making. And I guess I was thinking a lot about it because we also live in this time of industrialization and fast fashion and when I went to Oaxaca and visited Teotitlan, it seems that there was a very strong community of weavers still practicing their craft. But at the same time, from the stories I heard or the narratives people told me, there's this challenge, because people don't always appreciate the time and energy it takes to make something and they expect it to be something that they can get for less money. They think that they can buy it at a lesser cost, but really, it's important for others to recognize the value behind the handmade and the value behind the knowledge and the skill and the ancestral skillset. So, I'm wondering, how does someone who's not from your hometown, or from the area, and someone who's not a weaver, how do they better understand the efforts it takes to make a beautiful textile? Or how can they support individuals who are weavers in a way that is respectful to their practice and to their craft?

PG: Great question, and definitely those are some of the, uh, really important topics. I think to understand and value handmade, and handmade is one thing, a whole different thing if we're talking about your work closely, or your art practice is deeply embedded to nature. You could look around you and, and start to understand and see, climate change in the environmental crisis we are facing today. I think, value could come from being aware of those things. and start to really value, again, not only handmade, because handmade can still be done with chemicals that are still harming nature, right?That's probably, I think the most obvious that anybody, anywhere in the world then in any background,that you start to see this urgency that we've seen with the environment and the climate change. How would you support somebody that maybe, you know, it works in this manner, so respectful to nature. If the consumers would only take a moment to learn what people do and not what they say they do, then you will be better educated, and you will know at that point, whether it's worth it for you to support them. I say this because this happens all over the world, where the economic opportunity is driven by tourism. So, you get to these places where, it is driven by a market, it is driven by tourism, so, much of it, is honoring those buyers that are looking for something cheap, or maybe the notion of preservation is, is different. But when you take your time to learn what people do, you start to peel those layers, and you start to find authenticity within the mess. And depending, whatever you're looking for, you know, and, and, and I'm speaking, maybe someone that, in our practice that continues the, uh, respect and works in harmony with nature and carries that value. Only if you could take the time to learn what people do and not what they say they do, I think that would help a lot.

JMY: I think that's great advice. I think that's, hard to put into practice for many, but I think you're right, there in terms of what we need to do to value other people's work, and to be,more conscious of how we consume cloth overall, I can't help but see the beautiful red skeins of churro wool behind you, and I also see, some cactus hanging from, the rafts, so, I'm wondering if you could just tell me a little bit about, the display in your studio in Ventura.

PG: The yarn, it is indeed a display to be able to see, traditional knowledge within this, chemistry that relates to Cochineal insect and the Cochineal insect, leaves, you see, are actually Where I am farming. The insects, of course, for the color red, this is cochineal insect. the little bit that it's seen on this screen here, you are able to, see this labor intensive, right? This, slowness.

JMY: Thank you so much for joining us today. I really do hope that at some point in the future I can come see your studio in Ventura and see what you're working on... It's just such a privilege to have you on the second season of The Fields of the Future podcast, and I've really just enjoyed speaking with you about your work.

PG: Well, thank you Jessica, and thank you, um, everybody who makes this, uh, podcast, possible. I appreciate all of you, uh, for having me and, and thank you for, for, the opportunity.