

Secrets of the Soil: Richard Orjis and his Empire of Dirt

By Tessa Laird

When I first saw inside Richard Orjis's studio, there was a neat line of photocopied photographs pinned to the wall, of people from all cultures, daubed in mud. I didn't know it then, but this was to be a summation of the contradiction that Orjis embodies – neat organization, cleanliness, order, and its opposite, revelry, liminality, abandon to earth's elements.

There were other contradictions within Orjis's photo archive. Some of the tribal cultures' muddy smearings were ritualistic tradition, reaching an apogee of artistic perfection with the Papua New Guinea mudmen, while the young white people cavorting in the mire were hippies rebelling against their own traditions. Then there were the body beautiful health seekers, whose clay-smear features were a means to an end – perfect skin, pointing to another of Orjis's odd contradictions – his abiding and unapologetic interest in fashion photography. For the artist's commercial work has made regular appearances in *Pavement*, *Oyster*, *Interview*, *Dazed and Confused*, *L'uomo Vogue*, and even in his gallery work (Orjis graduated with a Masters from Elam in 2006 and exhibits at Roger Williams Contemporary), beneath a layer of dirt, are handsome, fashionable, slick young men.¹

Capping off the contrasts in Orjis's photocopied hit parade, were shots of soldiers in camouflage, young men whose white teeth and eyes, grinning through their earthy warpaint, connected them eerily well to the revellers and the tribal dancers. Perhaps Orjis's project was somewhat akin to the humanistic aspirations of the 1950s photographic exhibition *The Family of Man*, or even of Sesame Street's songs "Everybody Eats" and "Everybody Sleeps" (featuring humans and animals engaged in those very activities)? Orjis's photo archive proved that everybody, everywhere, in some way or other, rolls around in the dirt. This is our universal means to interface with Papatuanuku, Pachama, or whatever moniker is used in your parts for mother earth.

Freidensreich Hundertwasser, the Austrian hippie superstar artist who lived and died in Aotearoa and has yet to be fully celebrated in this country, adored mud and shit. In 1975 while still in Vienna he wrote an essay called *Scheisskultur: Die Heilige Scheisse*, or "Shit Culture: Holy Shit", a.k.a. the "Shit Manifesto." In it, he famously stated "the smell of humus is the smell of god."ⁱⁱ

In many creation stories, the first humans are made from clay, and clay is what we return to when we are buried in the bosom of the earth. Rolling and daubing the body in mud, while having the appearance of frivolity, is a symbolic act, a kind of premature death wish; a deeply chthonian revelry. In *The Secret History of Clay*, Edmund de Waal writes "Clay allowed for a return to self, a return to the body, a return to the earth. Kazuo Shiraga of the Gutai group showed this in 1955 in his performance *Wrestling in the Mud*, writhing around in clay until he was so exhausted that the earth had 'won.' When the radical young group of post-war Japanese potters, led by Kazuo Yagi, were choosing a name they called themselves the Sodeisha, after an earthworm wriggling in mud."ⁱⁱⁱ

The bog men, found preserved in muddy graves, were the victims of ritual sacrifice (I have also read that they practiced sodomy and used imported hair products).^{iv} Michael Taussig writes about Irish peat bogs and the slimy Colombian rainforest in *My Cocaine Museum* (a meditation on, among other things, the opposing substances of primeval mud and modernist concrete). He says, "these thoughts began with mud – and the rocks and the hands and the water and the gravel and the hands – of gold mining up the Timbiqui with the heat and the rain and the overcast skies. Language was king. But this mud was my imminence. I mean, it was all around you and then inside you, as when the gods formed us, they say, from mud itself."^v



Orjis's photocopies got me thinking about the time when I was three years old at a singsing in Papua New Guinea, when I saw my first mudmen. I was horrified by the huge, ghoulish masks wobbling precariously on young men's shoulders, their fingernails elongated with reeds. The dancers' black bodies were grey with mud, and I was terrified of their unusual pallor. They were spirits rather than young men, transported out of their daily bodies by the application of earth.

At the end of 2005, Orjis painted a series of young boys' portraits with watered down mud. They were spectral palefaces, longhaired Westie types, possibly chimeras of Orjis's own adolescence. There was something creepy about their hollowed eyes. Had they been victims of foul play? Like a Dennis Cooper novel about young men's sexual violence to other young men, I barely had the stomach to imagine the scenario. In 2006, Orjis made a series of similar mud paintings of young men, only these ones seemed to be from an earlier era altogether, with short hair, in suits and bow ties, with colourful corsages of orchids erupting from every buttonhole and orifice, covering the faces of their human hosts. A cult was definitely in formation.

The cult of the orchid grew, and by the end of 2006 Orjis had conceived *Floros*, god of flowers, a photographic montage featuring a mud-masked male with an orchid in his mouth.^{vi} Seated with his blacklegged jeans open, his hands on his thighs in a posture that's both self-assured and casually provocative, *Floros's* entire chest (should that read, *trunk?*) is wreathed in camellias, orchids, heliobores, pansies, and penile pitcher plants. *Floros* sprouts out of a pitch-black background, perhaps the very loam of the earth itself.^{vii}

So, what does soil mean to artists other than Hundertwasser? Francis Pound says that for Colin McCahon, soil had a deeply nationalistic signification, and that McCahon saw soil as "the site of consecration to the Spirit, in the sight of God; the soil as the site of nativeness – marked here by Maoriness (the 'Kumara Patch'); the soil as the site of roots and rootedness, at once of agriculture and belonging; the soil as potential source of nourishment; the sense of a spiritual dryness in the New Zealand soil, of the soil as the space of an alien 'desert', or 'wilderness', 'a soil lacking the humus of history'; the sense of an unbearable absence, of a waiting for fructification."^{viii} But for Orjis, the soil isn't barren, it's a fertile site for magic to occur, the magic of seeds sprouting, or Orjis's own godlike powers of cutting and pasting with the magic of Photoshop – 21st Century wizardry in the service of a Pagan deity.^{ix}

John Pule utters this koan about soil as a matrix of networks (mycelium, geneologies) and ends with a reminder that soil is not only a metaphor for rootedness, but a reality which must be experienced to be understood: "Inside the soil is a system of influential prophets and custodians whom I poetically sing as *tufuga* (artist). The eyes of this inverted spectrum exploded in my face, changing the colours of my eyes, which were tired of pursuing past exchanges... This may also be true about my hands at times appearing pallid now used to turning pages and reading about the colonial sufferings of small Pacific nations. Soil must exist outside of the mind."^x

In some "small Pacific nations" the highly respected women's art form of *tivaevae* (Cook Islands) and *tifaifai* (Tahiti and Hawaii) consists of bedspreads often featuring stylised floral motifs. The luscious technicolour orchid is a frequent favourite. Orjis was thinking of *tivaevae* when he asked his friend the fashion designer Christine Crabb to help him make a huge bedspread covered in flowers. Only, Orjis's bedspread is an autumnal, Halloween-y, black and ragged *tivaevae*, with copper and emerald satin shapes following the outlines of orchids and irises. Called *Landslide*, there is a cenfigure, like *Floros*, but this time he is not a pretty young man but a pumpkinhead with slits for eyes. These ocular cavities are filled with gold, uniting the lunar/ solar dichotomy; there is no questioning the divine origin of this chthonian deity. In Colombia, certain tribes believe that gold is the menstrual blood of the earth. But it isn't the earth mother that we worship here, despite the feminine format of the *tivaevae*, and the floral strewings, for the deity in *Landslide* sports an enormous phallus, like Michael Illingworth's *Adam*, or indeed, some of the rafter designs in Paki Harrison's *Tane-nui-a-Rangi*, the whareniui of the University of Auckland, believed to be one of the most phallic houses in the country.



Spurting from *Landslide's* lingam is a rain of leaves, a kind of cosmic reminder that sperm is seed and seeds are sperm. Looking at this work, another obvious title springs to mind, *Seedbed*, Vito Acconci's famous masturbating-under-the-floorboards performance. And for some reason, I can't get *Wickerman* out of my head, both the 1973 original, and the recent, much maligned remake, starring Nicholas Cage. I think Orjis's work shares something of the aesthetic of the latter, the dark, weirdness of it, bees 'n' leaves 'n' men-as-sex-slaves.

But *Wickerman* mark 2006 is a paranoid film that exploits mainstream fear and misunderstanding of Pagan ritual, much in the same way as rabid Christian Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto* exploits a misunderstanding of Mayan sacrifice. Orjis doesn't judge or try to instil fear, rather he coyly invites us to re-evaluate our prejudices, investigating the glamour and mystery of these long-lost rights.

"From Saxo Grammaticus, a 12th Century Christian chronicler, comes the information that the god Freyr was served by gender-variant male priests who displayed feminized behaviour and employed bells, which were considered 'unmanly.' They apparently enacted a symbolic sacred marriage in order to 'ensure the divine fruitfulness of the season.' A ritual which took place every nine years, and consisted of the sacrifice of nine males of every species (including humans) to Freyr, who was worshipped as an erect phallus."^{xi}

Among Orjis's recent photographic montages, is a portrait of Death in a black, muddy hoddie, vomiting a faceful of flowers at the viewer, erupting in a floral fanfare that is unnervingly colourful. Perhaps an obvious comparison to draw is with the flower photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, because he photographed yellow calla lilies as well as human phalli, and fetishised both in the extreme. But whereas Mapplethorpe's almost always black-and-white works were self-consciously perfectionist masterpieces, Orjis's conglomerations are, like Peter Madden's *National Geographic* cut-ups, always works in process. Orjis's works are perversely clean, in spite of the dirt, but they're not, like Mapplethorpe, sterile, hoping to freeze perfection in eternity. Orjis's work, like a flower, feels like it's unfolding slowly: elements repeat from picture to picture, and the digital nature of the work allows for its constant revision. As with any good soil enthusiast, recycling takes place to ensure

ⁱ Orjis's recent exhibition featured the band 1995 smeared in mud, and far more fashionable people than usually attend such events. In fact, it felt like New York in the 1980s – like Andy Warhol was going to arrive at any moment.

^j William Burroughs, on the other hand, had an almost pathological dislike of rot and decay, and hated the smell of fermenting orange peel.

His obsession with the preservation rituals of Ancient Egypt (and perhaps, too, the embalming of his own body in heroin) speak of a distaste of natural cycles, and a cold, calculating defeat of death (that is, death as we mortals know it). Georges Bataille had a similar fascination and repugnance for decay, writing that "One day this living world will pollulate in my dead mouth" and talks of a "fetid sticky object without boundaries, which teems with life and yet is the sign of death." (Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p 81) This contradiction might describe *Floros*, or Orjis's series of mud-painted skulls sprouting flowers or mushrooms. Fungi not only feeds off dead matter, but unlike the sun-loving, chlorophyll producing plant kingdom, the fruits of its spores emerge at night; chthonian manifestations of lunar energy.

^k Edmund de Waal, "High Unseriousness: Artists and Clay" in *The Secret History of Clay*, p44

^l Phil Hine, "Bums in Brigantia: Sacred Gender-Variance in Ancient Germanic & Celtic Cultures", http://www.philhine.org.uk/writings/fish_bumsb.html, and "Metrosexual Man Ruled the Iron Age", *The Australian*, August 02, 2006 posted at <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1676760/posts>

^m Michael Taussig, *My Cocaine Museum*, p 312

ⁿ When I was living in Los Angeles, I dreamed I was a buxom blonde living in a caravan. A friend of the family was a hustler who was in trouble and in need of hiding. He looked just like Phil Jackson (the coach of the Lakers). I was wondering whether or not I should give him shelter in my caravan, but as he was explaining his story, I looked into his mouth, and his tongue was a kaleidoscope of pink orchids. It was such a turn-on, I said, "OK, sure, because you're tongue is a big pink orchid, I'll help you."

^o "Black did not mean death or the underworld; it was the colour of fertility, the colour of damp caves and rich soil, or the womb of the Goddess where life begins. White, on the other hand, was the colour of death, of bones – the opposite of the Indo-European system in which both white and yellow are the colours of the shining sky and the sun." Marja Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess*, p xix. Perhaps Orjis's black backgrounds are the alchemical Prima Materia, the primitive, formless base of all matter. Interestingly enough, "Some say that both alchemy and chemistry get their name from the name of Egypt itself, Kamt or Qemt, meaning the colour black, as applied to the [famously fertile] mud of the river Nile." Taussig, Michael, "What Colour is the Sacred?" *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn 2006, p 37

^p Francis Pound, *The Space Between*, p 96

^q Orjis's partner Harry McNaughton, who is the subject of one of Orjis's photomontages, christened Orjis's latest exhibition with the publication of his wild and lovely *Pagan Poetry*, reprinted in these pages.

^r Caroline Vercoe, "The Many Faces of Paradise", *Paradise Now?* p 40

^s Phil Hine, "Bums in Brigantia: Sacred Gender-Variance in Ancient Germanic & Celtic Cultures", op. cit.

Pagan Poetry

their boy is squatting under green scrub and smudging the soil. the brown air is rotting, writhing milkweed slimes through his hand, up and across to his breast, and he is twisting it so hard that it breaks squirting sap staining his muddy thigh white: semen over soft gritty shit. his pink burnt-gold arm is snaking into the shadow.

he will wait, without laughter or longing, for the thick-fingered men whose footprints are bruises. they won't greet him. the men destroyed his name at the drum dance when he thrust himself into Floros. now his name is the number of nights since Floros needed his seed. today he is called six.

but last month was different – the heavy rain bore down and hummed through and washed out the forest. afterwards the bright leaves were a sore emerald-green and wet burrowing insects cackled in the grey cracks of stones. every day they called him one.

now the slow moist nights are quiet: moonlight drips through the gaps in the canopy. wafts of warm mouldy wetness are following their boy's face.

right now he is guarding. he will not move a muscle until the cold clear rising sun cramps his bunched muscles. last night a young man with bright orange hair across his pelvis was bitten by a dancing spider and died. tonight he will be dragged into the rocky spiky forecourt of the altar and Floros will bounce against his hard cock, smooth peachfat breasts jiggling behind the flames. the tense guards will paint the man in mud and burn him and masticate, and his name will be one forever.

our boy might die tonight. he might be savaged then ravaged then scorched, and his name might be one in the woods, but when he moves his eyes he sees nothing harmful, he sees a dead empire of dirt. the stem of his spine hurts – if he had leaves for arms and thorn-fingers his stamen would be dull and bowed. the air has stopped moving; it is rank and foetid: the night is lower.

ancient stone trunks arch above him, graven columns lost in the gloom; an iris watches his chest. the suffocating velvet scent of lost, creeping jasmine threads through his head.

harry mcnaughton

