

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-smearing 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, Pachamama, 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

