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ANCESTRAL SEDIMENTS

The Archival Forces of Layers and Shadow

Eleanor Díaz Ritson

2023

Dear Reader,

This exegesis consists of a series of letters written between *Weaver* and *Painter*. They're not fictional characters but two distinct (though interconnected) facets of my creative process. Their individuated roles are a method through which I question, reflect and challenge myself to think and make with honesty and depth. Their ideas, their perspectives and insights are all aspects of my own.

Painter is the maker. She experiences the practice of painting and considers the threads of connection between her own life, her history, and her artistic expression. *Weaver* takes these threads and interlaces them with an extended set of knowledge, research and ponderings. She also has her own insights, although her reflections embody a process of weaving together *Painter's* ideas whilst casting new lines of enquiry; she hauls in her woven nets from different waters and offers them to *Painter*.

This work, this research is bound to the material reality of being (be it human or rock), so to speak of it through conversational language is an approach I find doesn't leave me restrained by cerebral knots of my own creation. The ideas shared between *Weaver* and *Painter* are often difficult to pin down, and I've found the formal language of academia can too easily obfuscate my truthful conveyance of meaning, as well as being an inadequate method of analysis for the transient and ever-changing themes I research in my work. Letter writing, therefore, fulfils a purpose amongst my painting practice and is a creative practice in its own respect. It has permitted *Weaver* and *Painter* to provide a framework through which I examine the intrinsic relationship between the *human* and the *geologic*. Likening geologic processes to ancestral lineage and accepting the transcendent belonging allowed by such a recognition has formed the basis of my research into the archival capabilities of rock and earth. In the way that shifting sediments from disparate sources gather, then compact and combine to form rock, pressed ever-deeper beneath new layers of sediment, so it is with the communicative layering of *Weaver* and *Painter*. Through them, I think about how I encounter the world and how I perceive, respond and connect to that world.

Weaver and Painter's correspondence begins with an archived lineage of rock and earth, then moves to the sediment of Painter's being. It's followed by discussions of transcendent belonging, sensorial sight and the archival forces of layers and shadow. Weaver describes how rock and earth remember before their conversation arrives at Painter's final stepping stone.

I invite you, *Reader*, to witness this communion between *Weaver* and *Painter*; to enter into their domain; to taste and to test their exploration through your own experience.

Bienvenido, welcome in.

Eleanor



Mid. Preclassical clay figurines (c. 1,000-300 B.C.E.), excavated from the site of pre-Columbian Tlatilco (near present-day Mexico City). National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City, Mexico. IMAGE: ELEANOR DIAZ RITSON, 2023.

*the way it holds you, gives you
not a way forward but a doorway in, staunches
your need to leave, becomes faithful by going nowhere,
something that wants you to stay here and look back¹*

– David Whyte, 2016

¹ David Whyte, "Stone (Thobar Phádraig)," *The Sea in You: Twenty Poems of Required and Unrequited Love* (Many Rivers Press, 2016).

I. CLAYSTONE BODIES

An Archived Lineage of Rock and Earth

*Clay comes from the ground
Where waters once flowed
living matter is broken apart and pulverised into fine particles
Layer on layer, ancestral sediments become archived in the strata*

Painter,

Since our ancestors carved stone tools and painted cave walls, we've been entangled with rock-material. The spaces provided by rock have sheltered our primordial families, sited our rituals and entombed our remains. Your term *ancestral sediments*, acknowledged in the title, prompts me to consider that ancestry not only recognises human lineage from which all of us are descended, but also an ancestral lineage of sediment within rock and earth. *Ancestral sediments* forge an inherent bond between the human and the geologic.

The earthly processes of deep-time arrange its sediments into decipherable layers dating all the way back through those inconceivable four billion years which preempted our species to a primaeval earth, violently elemental and entirely void of life.² It's a span of time that witnessed the creation of rock, from igneous (such as granite, basalt and gneiss, formed by molten outpours from within the earth's crust) to sedimentary (such as limestone, sandstones and mudstones, formed beneath ancient oceans by the compacted particles of calcareous silt and grit).³ In comparative geological terms, the profusion of limestone deposits ranging the length of Aotearoa from East Northland to Southland are only about thirty million years young.⁴ Still, you and I are bound to these layers as we live and move amid the archived lineage of rock

² Thomas Halliday, *Otherlands: A World in the Making* (United Kingdom: Penguin Books Ltd, 2022) p. xiv.

³ GNS Science, Te Pū Ao, "Statigraphy," revised 2023.

<https://www.gns.cri.nz/our-science/land-and-marine-geoscience/te-riu-a-maui-our-continent/geology-of-new-zealand/stratigraphy/>.

⁴ Bruce W. Hayward, "Geological Terms and Concepts," *Mountains, Volcanoes, Coasts and Caves: Origins of Aotearoa New Zealand's Natural Wonders* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2022) pp. 357-8.



Cuerpo-Cueva II (Cave-Body II), 2022.
Water-mixable oil on canvas, 607 x 835 mm.

and earth. As I've described, rocks such as limestone and sandstone are composed of their *ancestral sediments*, and while human lineage is distinctly realised, the same can also be said of us. My body, born of my mother and father, is the living incarnation of their parents, grandparents and so on. The cells of our bodies are sediment-like, carried and laid, shuffled and reformed. The minerals of rock and earth are the descendants of our modern selves, retained through an archival transmission of *ancestral lineage*.

In my daily life, I often seem to forget that I too am of the earth; an archival body of growth and exchange like to geologic processes such as fossilisation and petrification. These processes in particular manifest the contribution of once-lively-matter to the lineage of rock and earth in their return to it as another layer of *ancestral sediment* in some future archival body. The ever shifting endurance of rock-time is a contradiction to human-time, "for to acknowledge that the hard rock of a mountain is vulnerable to the attrition of time is for necessity to reflect on the

appalling transience of the human body.⁵ I can't deny, it's a confronting truth for my naive-self to observe.

I'm reminded of an image I once saw of a grub-shaped bug fossil. Appearing as little more than an umbral outline and only nineteen millimetres in length, it's a mudrock trace, a two and a half million year old burial in what was once boggy silt at the bottom of a freshwater pond. The layers of compacted sediment that encompass the little critter have preserved its form in the state we see today.⁶ It's a compelling image which, despite its apparent simplicity, summons up the transformative capabilities of earth's deep-time processes. Even this tiny shadow retains a measure of time "that humbles the human instant: millennia, epochs and aeons, instead of minutes, months and years."⁷ While the original specimen now resides somewhere in Otago University's Geology Department collection, the photo-documentation independently re-archives the fossil. No longer a thin slab of brittle paper-shale (an object of the earth), but a grainy grayscale image (a magnified remnant on my computer screen). The photograph wasn't taken with artistic intention, nevertheless it demands that I encounter those *archival forces* borne by such earth material. Something for you to consider as well, I think.

*Clay comes from the ground
At the rain-soaked surface it's so fresh and malleable
it presses between my toes
It breathes with the air, not yet stone*

⁵ Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: Adventures in Reaching the Summit* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004) p. 43.

⁶ Anthony C. Harris, "An Eocene larval insect fossil (Diptera: Bibionidae) from North Otago, New Zealand," *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1983, pp. 93-105.

⁷ Robert Macfarlane, *Underland: A Deep Time Journey*, (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 2019) p. 15.

To close my letter I have a single question to ask you, *Painter*.
What is the sediment of your being?

From *Weaver*



Pre-Pleistocene fossilised march fly larva (*Dilophus Campbellei*).
IMAGE: COURTESY OF ANTHONY HARRIS, 1983.

The Sediment of My Being

Weaver,

My ancestry is both Pākehā and Mexican.

Jessie Ritson and Ellen Palmer were my Pākehā great grandmothers, from Ahuriri, Te Matau-a-Māui and Waituna West, Manawatū, Aotearoa.

Eustolia Ramirez and Florinda Martinez were my Mexican bisabuelas (descended from Mixteca Baja (Ñuu I'ni) and Mixteca Costa (Ñuu Andivi)), from Tulcingo del Valle, Puebla and Acapulco, Guerrero, Mexico.

My names were given by my mother and father.

Helen Ritson was born in Upper Hutt, Aotearoa, where she grew up in the care of her parents and three older siblings in Pinehaven, a verdant valley where the mist never seemed to lift. Placido Diaz Rodríguez was born the seventh of fourteen children in Distrito Federal, Mexico. He was the first of his siblings to be born in Mexico City since his family's relocation from their ancestral home in Tulcingo del Valle. In the years following his birth his family settled in the sprawling Ciudad Nezahualcōyotl, Mexico City, Mexico.

I was born in that same house.

My older brother and I spent our first years in Ayapango, Mexico. It's an agricultural steppelike landscape, dominated by the colours and textures of ashy volcanic soil, parched grasses and slash-and-burn smoke. Although my parents had planned to stay in Ayapango for the foreseeable future, a combination of financial strain, societal corruption and the prospect of a meagre public education forced them to envision a new life for us in Aotearoa. Aside from this, provincial Mexico was a difficult home for a *guera*⁸ mother and her young, fair-skinned children. So we emigrated to Kaipara Flats, Tāmaki Makaurau, Aotearoa. It's a humid place, seemingly made entirely of clay. The land is boggy cattle-stomped farmland, severed by offshoot streams from the Hōteu River and cradled by pine swathed hills.

This year my father and I travelled back to Mexico for the first time.

⁸ Translated from Mexican-Spanish slang, *guera* translates roughly as *white girl*.



My abulia (grandma), Ofelia Laurencia Rodríguez Ramirez, Tulcingo del Valle, Puebla, Mexico.
IMAGE: COURTESY OF PLACIDO DIAZ RODRIGUEZ, 1993.



The volcano, Popocatepetl, as seen from my family home in Ayapango, Ayapango, Mexico, Mexico.
IMAGE: ELEANOR DIAZ RITSON, 2023.

You and I were born into a materialistic age, founded by industrialisation and the spoils of empire, where being human entails that we witness monumental global change and participate in deep-time alterations. I sometimes feel as though my gullible primate-brain heedlessly disregards *the ancient* and is instead seduced by a shiny worship of *the new*. It's a 'flat perspective'⁹ to which I've become accustomed, a mainstream prejudice that fails to observe the immensity of rock-time or the impermanence of all things that materials of sediment, like the unassuming mudrock called claystone, preserve as shadows and traces. The vastness of rock-time equally enthralls and alarms me, whose steamrolling compression of our human sense of time crushes it into something paper-shale thin. The archival protection of claystone counters such a dislocated and short-sighted sense of time. To me, rock-time, with specific regard to claystone, acts as a prompt. My paintings *see through claystone eyes*, likening my body to one of rock and my senses to the contractions and releases of geologic movement.

As is becoming apparent, I feel it necessary to contemplate the connection observed in your letter, between *rock* and *human* as materials of the *earth*. Their relationship is not only a confronting one, but one which also seems entirely obvious: *rock* and *human* are at once dichotomous and inextricable.

*The smell of earth was like a secret language
That dead men speak and we have long forgotten.*¹⁰

This passage from James K. Baxter's poem recalls to me that intuitive sense of affinity, like a chance rendezvous with someone half-remembered. It's *a transcendent kind of belonging*. He reminds us that, although we've long since abandoned the archaic language of rock and earth, something that resembles kinship lingers in our bodies.

I often think about this kind of kinship and it's a fundamental awareness in the way I make paintings. It's a reflective practice of simultaneously glancing into my ancestral past and imagining future traces. I draw the tones and textures of mouldering matter and weathered rock-faces into body surfaces. Creases become caves and skin is shale or bark. I move fluidly with thin layers of water-mixable oil paint, laid down, blended, and removed, imbuing both figure and environment with a sense of quivering turbulence and an ancient, sometimes eerie, stillness. Melded body

⁹ Stephen Graham, *Vertical: The City from Satellites to Bunkers*, Verso Books, 2016.

¹⁰ James K. Baxter, "The Cave." In Charles Brasch, *Landfall*, vol. 2, no. 1, March 1948, p. 27.

and earth recognise those connecting *bonds*, as you put it, *between the human and the geologic*, rendering the gaps between aeons and instants arbitrary.

You asked me, *what is the sediment of my being?* While I could describe my conglomerate Pākehā and Mexican ancestry as a sedimentary convergence, in many ways it feels more like a forceful collision not dissimilar to some kind of explosive geologic event. The strata of my being have warped and folded in an embodiment of cultural dissonance, the fragments of which have assembled and remain in my body. I've inherited the guilt of being Pākehā in Aotearoa, as well as resentment and despair for the persecution of my indigenous Mixtec ancestors. My sediments are coloured by the discomfort, the fear, the longing, the ecstasy of living in this claystone body of mine. Ages elapse and environments change, yet past fractures are archived.



A collision of warped and folded rock, Opito Bay, Coromandel, Aotearoa.
IMAGE: COURTESY OF NICHOLAS BURRY, 2021.

I've always felt Mexican, but after so many years of distance, the language, the lifestyle, the air itself, made me feel like an outsider. My recent trip to Mexico, back home so to speak, also shattered a lot of the romanticised preconceptions I previously held about my birthplace. Remarking on Mexico's *ancientness* seems needless, and it's a romantic idea in and of itself, still, I was intensely struck by the commonplace happenings which felt unchanged since ancient times. I don't mean the particulars which, like all places, have shifted to assimilate the demands of capitalism and the paraphernalia of modernity, I think instead of abuelitas (grannies) with long silver braids and brittle fingers, chattering over their comales (griddles); whistling hustlers in the tianguis (street market), competing with and bragging to each other; the wafting smells of tortilla maize, tobacco and dog faeces. There was an overwhelming sense of human-time which I had never encountered. In the same way that the geologic pressures of deep-time disarray the order of land-strata, our human existence within rock-time is jumbled, so that what's oldest needn't always reside deepest.¹¹ Pre-columbian ruins rise from the ground in the middle of Mexico City's colonial religious and political centre. The streets are an utter chaos of crumbling and jankily repaired concrete, rent by shifting soils and overgrown trees. The material anarchy in every direction seemed to manifest preservation in the face of temporal fragility. Mexico City has been carved up, torn down, reappropriated, buried and uncovered. Time and time again, human and geologic impressions have been archived within its stoney infrastructure. I thought it was beautiful; dry, smoggy and, in comparison to Aotearoa, oppressively grey.

This letter doesn't hold any answers, rather it's an attempt to confront the past with imagination and an ancient sense of being.

From *Painter*

¹¹ Penelope Lively, *The Presence of the Past: an introduction to landscape history*, (Glasgow: William Collins Son & Co Ltd, 1976) p. 14.



Avenue of the Dead and Pyramid of the Sun at the ancient pre-Aztec site of Teotihuacán, San Juan Teotihuacán, Mexico, Mexico.
IMAGE: ELEANOR DIAZ RITSON, 2023.



*Exposed ruins of the Main Temple at the ancient Mexica site of Tenochtitlan,
Historic Centre, Mexico City, Mexico.*
IMAGE: ELEANOR DIAZ RITSON, 2023.



Overgrown trees and scattered litter on the streets of Roma, Cuauhtémoc, Mexico City, Mexico.
IMAGE: ELEANOR DIAZ RITSON, 2023.



Dogs guard the courtyard at my family home, Nezahualc6yotl, Mexico City, Mexico.
IMAGE: ELEANOR DIAZ RITSON, 2023.

A Transcendent Kind of Belonging

Painter,

I've been pondering the manifested preservation and endurance you encountered in the *material anarchy* of Mexico City. I've added the word *endurance* to your observation, as it recalls a sort of path treading that we, as humans, are ever subject to. We seem to perceive ourselves as micro-eternities, each of us with our own feeling of soleness, yet we're composite, ever-changing entities, acutely aware of our earthly brevity in comparison to other timescales. Endurance is our human burden *in the face of temporal fragility*.

I won't digress too much here, but this notion of our bodily composition as conglomerate beings, seems to me, correlated with the sorites paradox.¹² It considers a heap of sand which, when reduced by single-grain-decrements until there's no heap at all, asks precisely when does the heap cease to be?¹³ It's an independently curious conundrum that I bring to you in conjunction with the Buddhist concepts of *Ātman* and *Anatta*, which refer to *self* and *non-self*.¹⁴ The *self*, mine and yours, are their own composite heaps too, exactly like those grains of sand. *Anatta* or *non-self* teaches that the layers of *heaping* extend beyond *self*, our bodies of earth are themselves grains in a larger, all-encompassing *heap*. A Sanskrit word, *skandha*, meaning to "heap, group... or aggregate",¹⁵ defines *heaping* as the summation of both our mental and physical existence. It can be deduced then, that everything perceived, including ourselves, physically and perhaps even metaphysically, is an *aggregate heap*.

"All individuals are subject to constant change, as the elements of consciousness are never the same, and man may be compared to a river, which retains an identity, though the drops of water that make it up are different from one moment to the next."¹⁶

¹² The sorites paradox is ascribed to the Greek philosopher, Eubulides of Miletus (fl. 4c B.C.E.).

¹³ Myles Burnyeat, "15. Gods and heaps." In Schofield, M.; Nussbaum, M. C. (eds.). *Language and Logos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) pp. 315.

¹⁴ Thomas W. Rhys Davids; William Stede, *Pali-English Dictionary* (London: Motilal Banarsidass, 1921) p. 22.

¹⁵ Dalai Lama, *The Opening of the Wisdom-Eye: And the History of the Advancement of Buddhadharma in Tibet* (Theosophical Publishing House, 1966) pp. 37-38.

¹⁶ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "skandha." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, May 20, 2011. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/skandha>.

This intersection of philosophical paradox and religious doctrine are threads of interpretation that weave together the material language of our human bodies and our human-selves with those of *rock* and *earth*. Although neither you nor I are religious by any conventional definition, they nevertheless represent *a transcendent kind of belonging*.

When you speak of the *fundamental awareness* of *rock-time* in your painting process, I think of the almost instinctive human compulsion to inscribe any durable surface, be it clay cuneiform tablets, runestone boulders or latrinalia on bathroom walls. Even the students who attended the Former College of San Ildefonso carved their names into José Clemente Orozco's fresco paintings. It's a proclamation, a self-declaration that *someone* was *here*. In a way, those fresco cycles at the Former College are like that photograph of a larva-fossil *traced in mudrock*. Instead of preserving a living creature or an ancient relic, Orozco's paintings have archived the memories of a nation. They witness the brutal evolution of a culture transformed by conquest¹⁷, independence¹⁸ and revolution¹⁹ through Orozco's artistic vision. At a glance, some of his images could be characterised as *romanticised* retellings of Mexican history, however I'm inclined to interpret his figures as intentionally forbearing, a quiet lament for the everpresent grief and powerlessness of a vulnerable and underprivileged population. Present day descendents of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, yourself included, have inherited the onerous task of reconciling such a history. It requires an unearthing of sorts, a paring back of layers in the search for something embedded and, perhaps, unknown. As I understand it, your trip to Mexico was less a steady uncovering of layers than a fierce exposure which laid bare the *warped and folded* strata of your ancestral sediments. So rather than recite to you a brief and likely flawed history of Mexican muralism, I proffer two fresco paintings by José Clemente Orozco, as seen at the Former College, for your insight and consideration.

¹⁷ Spain's Conquest of Mexico (1519-21).

¹⁸ Mexican War of Independence (1810-21).

¹⁹ Mexican Revolution (1910-20).

Following the revolution, the new government under Álvaro Obregón²⁰ was confronted with the immense challenge of stabilising Mexico after a decade of domestic hostility. For this very reason, Orozco's first murals were commissioned. Though his paintings were created "amidst the climate of revolutionary optimism and nationalist fervour," they seldom reflected either.²¹ His work tended to lend prominence to commonplace tragedies often overlooked by the gallant values of an idealised revolution. Indeed, Orozco's seeming lack of faith in these values pervade his historic depictions of Spain's spiritual conquest over indigenous Mexico.

²⁰ Álvaro Obregón was a reformist figure in the Mexican Revolution and former President of Mexico (1920–4).

²¹ Desmond Rochfort, *Mexican Muralists: Orozco Rivera Siqueiros* (Laurence King Publishing, 1993) p. 36.



I stand before José Clemente Orozco's fresco, *La Trinchera/The Trench* (1924-26),
Former College of San Ildefonso, Centro Historico, Mexico City, Mexico.
IMAGE: COURTESY OF PLACIDO DIAZ RODRIGUEZ, 2023.

ONE. As a member of a largely Catholic nation, Orozco clearly grieves for the past in his unwavering confrontation of it. *Franciscanos* is a claustrophobic scene, both huge in proportion and allegorical weight. Only one of many frescoes that span the walls and ceiling of an enclosed stone stairwell, *Franciscanos* is architecturally cramped and pictorially sparse. This sparsity, however, is deceptive. The friar's smothering embrace chokes an emaciated indigenous man, and flips conflictingly to and fro both in meaning and intention. The embrace is enforced, yet tender. The friar's bestowed kiss of peace, in a symbol of greeting between "all God's people,"²² is equally reminiscent of the kiss of Judas in his betrayal of "the Son of man".²³ Orozco fed from a retrospective bourgeois notion of his contemporaries that the colonisation of Mexico was a necessary evil in achieving the freedoms allowed by civilisation, while also displaying Spanish imperial rule and the spiritual conquest as an oppressive extinguishment of indigenous peoples and their culture.²⁴ As I see it, in Orozco's representation of indigenous subjugation in the name of Christian salvation and redemption, God's light provides for deep shadows to be cast.

²² Also known as a holy kiss. In 1 Thessalonians 5:26 (NIV).

²³ Luke 22:48 (NIV).

²⁴ Desmond Rochfort, *Mexican Muralists: Orozco Rivera Siqueiros* (Laurence King Publishing, 1993) p. 46.



José Clemente Orozco's fresco, *Franciscanos/Franciscans* (1923-4),
Former College of San Ildefonso, Centro Historico, Mexico City, Mexico.
IMAGE: ELEANOR DIAZ RITSON, 2023.



José Clemente Orozco's fresco *La Familia/The Family* (1926),
Former College of San Ildefonso, Centro Historico, Mexico City, Mexico.
IMAGE: ELEANOR DIAZ RITSON, 2023.

TWO. *La Familia* is weary. As viewers, we witness grief and loss as experienced by Orozco's rural paisanos (countrymen or compatriots) in the wake of agrarian revolt and as a direct result of the recent revolution. While *La Familia* initially appears to present a straightforward narrative, like *Franciscanos* it's also laden with allegory and symbolic meaning. The cluster of figures in the foreground could be viewed as a single family, although I interpret them as three sets of representative familial relationships, recounting various roles of interdependence and support; a mother mourns for her soldier son who died for his family's freedom; a young mother cradles her infant, a child of Mexico reborn; a husband and wife, united in anguish, are the source of one another's *endurance*.

The first of Orozco's pairings includes the most allegorically comprehensive character. The soldier becomes every fallen man who leaves behind a mourning mother, yet to me, it's this softly portrayed woman who is especially significant. She is the Virgin Mary who caresses the lifeless body of her adult son. She is the eternal mother, Tonāntzín,²⁵ made mortal in an indigenous body. She is both a literal and spiritual embodiment of sacrificial motherhood.

In the young Madonna-like mother and child, shrouded by a rebozo de luto (an unadorned, black shawl worn by women in mourning), Orozco has symbolised the fragility of human life. Their vulnerability, however, realises the continuation of human life; a reminder that in the midst of death, there is birth.

The final pair face away, weeping I imagine, as they watch the building behind them burn. The man, dressed recognisably as an agricultural labourer, and his wife, also veiled by a rebozo de luto, embody the paisanos, the people of the revolution.

The stone building is a strange proto-brutalist combination of imperial architecture, at once resembling an industrial factory, a colonial hacienda,²⁶ a fortified church, and even a stylized mesoamerican temple. I think it likely that Orozco invented this curious structure to encompass the widespread setting of scenes like this, harking back to the civil wars of pre-Columbian times. It reminds me of a passage from your previous letter: *Mexico... has been carved up, torn down, reappropriated, buried and uncovered. Time and time again, human and geologic impressions have been archived within its stoney infrastructure.*

²⁵ Tonāntzín is the Aztec Mother Goddess of Sustenance. Orozco's depiction resembles a stone carving of the Goddess currently housed at the Nation Museum of the Interventions, Churubusco, Mexico City, Mexico.

²⁶ An hacienda is an economic system of large land holdings such as plantations, mines or factories.

While the figures in *La Familia* are perhaps not a literal family, they are a metaphorical family, another *transcendent kind of belonging* through circumstance and experience. They, like you and I, were shaped by the endurance of colonisation and the unchangeable reality of conflict. They, like you and I, and everything perceived, are individual grains of sand in this familial *aggregate heap*.

Of Orozco's entire body of painted work, these frescoes are, in my opinion, among the most affecting, and I choose to share them with you here for two main reasons. Firstly, the archiving of cultural history through painted narrative onto an architectural, almost rock-like surface weaves together the method of your research, as a painter, with the *bonds between the human and the geologic*. Secondly, these frescoes demonstrate how another painter, faced with the same onerous task of reconciling the past, has pared back the layers of his own ancestral sediments. In his nuanced way, Orozco's work archives his ancestral sediments as well as those of the nation he was charged to represent. You, too, recognise the significance of a task such as this, albeit separated by incentive, time and situation, not to mention medium and scale. You instead ask the viewer of your work to recontextualise themselves as a counter to the *materialistic and short-sighted* perspective we too readily employ. You ask us to see through our *claystone eyes*, to recognise the *endurance* of our temporal bodies.

Again, I close my letter with a question for you, *Painter*.

From your position within the claystone archives, what do you witness in the *warped and folded strata* of your *ancestral sediments*?

From *Weaver*

II. SHADOW TRACES

The Archival Forces of Layers and Shadow

Weaver,

Through our correspondence, we're coming to realise that my work is about the *archival force of layers*. The word *layer* is illusive in its simplicity: a "thickness of material, typically one of several, covering a surface or body."²⁷ It's a definition whose meaning is bedded in the earth. The obsolete word *lair*, argued to be a potential origin of *layer*,²⁸ is still in use to mean clay, mire and soil.²⁹ So if *layering* is defined as the placing of one material atop another, then it's not only implied that *layering* is a physical action, but an action that abides by the corporeal laws that we, as bipedal primates, encounter in a horizontal world, always pulled gravitationally groundwards. A *layer* also implies an endpoint. For instance, the stratum within rock are clearly distinguishable, each archiving the period in which they were laid. In the way that light can't exist without dark, *layers* are defined by their distinction from one another. From a geological stance this makes perfect sense, however within the context of our *layering* here, in this dialogue between you and I, such separateness seems contradictory. When laid onto canvas, paint assumes depth through *layers*, a surface in the making, yet our *layers* extend beyond physical *layering*, be it of actual sediment or paint, to a *layering* of ancestry, experience and even intention. To me, the verb *layering* enacts an emergence of possibilities which aren't contained by individual layers. They meld into one another with no clear partition, like the boundary between light and shadow, there's an indefinable penumbral shade, an area neither of light nor shadow. Or like the elusive moment when accumulated grains of sand become a heap, when does one layer become another? Such a paradoxical state transcends ordinary reasoning.

²⁷ Eds. Angus Stevenson, Maurice Waite, *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2011) 12th edition, p. 808.

²⁸ Douglas Harper, "Etymology of lair," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, revised 2023, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/lair>.

²⁹ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "lair, n.2", July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1149872012>.

With this prelude now in place, I answer your question:

From your position within the claystone archives, what do you witness in the warped and folded strata of your ancestral sediments?

My position within the *claystone archives* is amongst the *layers*. Unsurprisingly then, my paintings are representative of this position. They archive the layers I encounter during their creation in a material process of growth and exchange. I witness *earth layers*, *sensorial layers* and, at times, *enigmatic layers*. They are my *ancestral sediments*.

When I speak to you of the *archival force of layers* I refer to a literal vitality, a kind of life-force that evolves within each new layer deposited. As I noted in my prior letter, the *bonds between the human and the geologic* emerge from fluidly applied paint layers that visually meld *body* and *earth* material. Both *body* and *earth* in this instance are possessors of *archival force*, as well as referential of it in their imagery. I archive my *ancestral sediments* as a means of approaching the *onerous task of reconciling the past* with two basal layers of intention.

The first is to interrupt the sensation of *outsiderness* I previously expressed (as *Pākehā* in Aotearoa and as an expatriate in Mexico). I feel that, no matter the nuance of one's *outsiderness*, the *archaic language of rock and earth* envelopes all as kin, you and I included, in its unifying embrace.

Overlying this initial layer is my sensorial prompt of *seeing through claystone eyes*. An exploration of claystone-body becomes one of transitory traces, cast by shadow in light. A redirection of vision awakens *sensorial sight*, rather than eye-sight, an opposition to that *materialistic and short-sighted perspective we too readily employ*. It allows for deeper layers to become newly perceptible at distance and with time. Textural layers (of paint) seem to morph, they pull in and out.

“Our eyes do not produce a static image, like a photograph. Rather, our eyes are tools of our brains, taking note of the world. We are fully embodied—our bodies are not afterthoughts to our brains, or unnecessary to their interpretation of the world. Those eyes, in those skulls, on those necks, atop the torsos and legs and feet that move—it is all part of perception.”³⁰

³⁰ Heather Heying, Bret Weinstein, *A Hunter-Gatherer's Guide to the 21st Century: Evolution and the Challenges of Modern Life* (Penguin Publishing Group, 2021) p. 195.

It's worth mentioning here that the recurring figure in almost every painting in this body of work is based on myself, though I'm tentative to categorise them as self-portraits, mostly because I initially used my image as reference out of practical necessity. Since then, though, I've come to appreciate that my semblance, portrayed earth material-like, has granted me an intimate confrontation with my own *ancestral sediments*. It's an encounter I hadn't predetermined or anticipated. While the figures in my paintings are, more or less, accurately representative of my true likeness, this isn't, nor has it ever been, my objective. In this, it varies from much modern self-portraiture which tends to "conceal or suppress the [artist's] face and head,"³¹ and while I personally resonate with the desire to counteract the precision of photographic imaging, my compositions often rely on facial expression, as well as body and gesture, as communicative channels. Therefore, I prefer to describe my paintings as somewhat akin to land-portraits or body-scapes which also exist *amongst the layers*.



The Smell Of Earth Was Like A Secret Language (Long Forgotten), detail, 2023.
Water-mixable oil on canvas, 900 x 1200 mm.

³¹ James Hall, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2015) p. 231.

My images begin as small graphite drawings that block a basic composition, usually from memory or loosely based on personal photographs. I then free-hand the image with charcoal onto primed canvas, forming guidelines to which I (mostly) adhere when paint is added. My reliance on photo-references goes no further than assuring a level of accuracy with my representation of figure. I often start with the figure, applying relatively thick paint, then using water and a coarse brush, I pull and scrape the pigment away to reveal light from beneath. This is an unconventional, almost sculptural approach to three-dimensional form, more like woodcutting than traditional oil painting, except in my case a brush acts as a chisel. It's a method I've developed over time, an appraisal of the textural and grainy aesthetics of printmaking (such as Barry Cleavin's etchings,³² Joan Taylor's lithographs³³ and Stanley Palmer's bamboo cuts³⁴).

I willingly permit layers of sediment, light and shadow to take on a life of their own. There are no exacting narratives, rather some sort of intuitive force that elucidates or obscures the path ahead. It's an experiential process, a research practice of sight and discovery, through which I follow the material as it directs me. As a painter, I'm involved in the physical action of *layering* paint, water and oil onto canvas, yet the tonal shifts, the ripples and folds of skin and rock textures are unplanned and unrepeatable. The paintings form themselves, often emerging with a gnawing sense of melancholy, rooted, I believe, in that *human burden of endurance*; a condition also of *rock* and *earth*. To speak plainly, it's a search for amelioration from the tumult of fear and anguish. A necessary part of enduring the tumult is confronting and accepting it. Without acknowledgement of the shadows, the light becomes obsolete.

You'll have noticed that I frequently refer to *shade* or *shadow* in my letters. They form a conceptual layer that permeates the surrounding strata as well as manifesting representationally in my paintings. Although *shade* and *shadow* are interconnected and colloquially interchangeable, their meanings vary subtly from one another. *Shade* is "comparative darkness caused by absence of complete illumination"³⁵ whereas *shadow* is "a tract of partial darkness, esp. that caused by interception of light."³⁶ *Shade*

³² Barry Cleavin, *Factorial Landscapes I & II*, 1984. Etching, 165 x 505 mm two plates.

³³ Joan Taylor, *Overlooking The Waitemata*, 1980. Lithograph, 250 x 305 mm.

³⁴ Stanley Palmer, *Creek, Punga and Cloud-Karamatura*, 1970. Bamboo engraving and lithograph, 570 x 425 mm.

³⁵ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "shade, n., sense 1.1.a", April 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1965652710>.

³⁶ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "shadow, n.", April 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2256288728>.



With my body, I exemplify the coexistence of shade and shadow,
Whatipū Beach, Waitakere Ranges, Tāmaki Makaurau, Aotearoa.
IMAGE: COURTESY OF TRANTHAM GORDON, 2023.

and *shadow* are bound together, as they are in my work, both in meaning and darkened appearance. However, their differences are, for the most part, perceived vagaries of definition. A *cast shadow* describes the typical *shadow*: a misshapen silhouette which occludes a surface.³⁷ In the photograph my *cast shadow* materialises, black, on the sand. Whereas an *attached shadow* is an element of visual perception that we simply take for granted. It forms “when a surface obstructs the light falling on itself.”³⁸ Seen in the same image, *attached shadows* appear in the shaded contours of my body. Both types of *shadow* are the transient traces of interrupted space in which *shade* resides. Even Pliny the Elder ascribed the origin of drawing to Kora of Sicyon,³⁹ who outlined the *cast shadow* of her lover’s likeness to preserve a vestige of his image. Intriguingly, Pliny goes on to explain how Kora’s father, Butades of Sicyon, “pressed clay on [the drawing]... and made a relief, which he hardened by exposure to fire.”⁴⁰ Despite the inaccuracy of Pliny’s attributed invention of drawing, a practice which we now know has existed in some form or other for tens of thousands of years, his story remains a straightforward example of layering *shadow* and *earth* to forge an enduring impression.

My own paintings revel in shadows, though my intention is to infer an imagined sense of atmospheric locale, instead of recreating truthful three-dimensionality. In my opinion, the corporal laws of physics that fasten us to the ground needn’t be faithfully obeyed in painted shadows. Such “transgressions of standard physics – impossible shadows, impossible colors, impossible reflections or contours – often pass unnoticed”⁴¹ and act as leading prompts. Painted depictions of shadow become, like *claystone layers*, bearers of *archival force*.

This being said, an indigenous Mexican understanding of *shadow* is another interpretation from which I draw in my work. It’s a non-physical evocation of *shadow layers*, orally imparted to me through familial experience. While the Spanish translation for both shade and shadow are contained within the same word (*sombra*), it carries a host of cultural meanings beyond a description of visible comparative darkness. My father explained to me that “*sombra* is difficult to describe. It’s

³⁷ Leonardo da Vinci, *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, Ed. Jean Paul Richter, vol. 1 (Dover Publications, 1970).

³⁸ D. C. Knill, P. Mamassian, D. Kersten, *Geometry of shadows*, (J. Opt. Soc. Am. A., 14, 1997) pp. 3216-3232.

³⁹ Kora of Sicyon (fl. c. 650 B.C.E.) was the daughter of Butades of Sicyon (fl. c. 600 B.C.E.).

⁴⁰ Pliny the Elder, “Book XXXV” In *PLINY, Natural History, Volume IX: Books 33-35*, trans. H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library 394. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952) p. 373.

⁴¹ Roberto Casati, Patrick Cavanagh, *The Visual World of Shadows* (The MIT Press, 2019).

something like an energy inside you.”⁴² This meaning of *sombra*, or *shadow*, is the harmonious inner essence like to one's soul. However, *La Sombra*, translated as *The Shadow*, is a similar term that encompasses an entirely different kind of energy. *La Sombra* is a disruptive and harmful external energy, sometimes supernatural in origin, that can take hold as a result of a physically or emotionally shocking incident, often referred to as *susto* or *espanto* (meaning *fright* or *terror*). As told by my father, “when there’s a traumatic *espanto* in your life, like a car accident or assault or the death of a loved one, you can be caught by *susto* and your *sombra* is ruptured. It can even leave your body which is very dangerous.”⁴³ In such cases, *La Sombra* can take advantage of the rupture, lodging itself in the place from which one's *sombra* fled.⁴⁴ This collapse of harmonious energy ultimately presents with tangible symptoms of illness; body pain, fatigue, disorientation, fever, and in some cases, death.⁴⁵

I fully recognise that this is more than a little confusing, and I've even heard the terms *susto*, *espanto*, *La Sombra* and *mal aire* (*bad air*), used somewhat interchangeably. For the pre-Columbian Nahua, Mexica and Aztec, the human body was a “pervasive type of sacred space,”⁴⁶ believed to accommodate three balanced energies, all of which form a person's *sombra*. The Nahuatl words for these are *tonalli*, *teyolia*, and *ihiyotl*,⁴⁷ and I'm in no doubt that the indigenous dialects of my Mixtec ancestors also had distinct words for this abundance of knowledge. Regretfully, though, it has long since lapsed from my family's modern parlance.

Shadow layers cast traces which I can't help but perceive as possessors of *archival force*. Seen *through claystone eyes*, my archival body retains the fractures and shadows throughout its *warped and folded strata*. Embedded *amongst the layers*, transient shadow becomes like a fossilised memory within the primordial sediments of *rock and earth*.

From Painter

⁴² Plácido Díaz Rodríguez in discussion with the author, Wellington, September 2023.

⁴³ Díaz Rodríguez, 2023.

⁴⁴ Miriam Castaldo, “Susto o espanto: en torno a la complejidad del Fenómeno.” In *Dimensión Antropológica*, vol. 32, September–December, 2004, pp. 29–67. In Spanish.

⁴⁵ Biblioteca Digital de la Medicina Tradicional Mexicana, “La Medicina Tradicional de los Pueblos Indígenas de México: Nahua, Susto o Espanto”, 2006, <http://www.medicinatradicionalmexicana.unam.mx/mtpim/termino.php?v=m&l=2&t=nahua&da=susto>.

⁴⁶ David Carrasco, Scott Session, *Daily Life of the Aztecs: People of the Sun and Earth* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1998).

⁴⁷ Alfredo López Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas*, Volume 1 (University of Utah Press, 1988).



Shadow Traces Swirl And Remember, 2023.
Water-mixable oil on linen, 253 x 253 mm.



The South Coast at night, Te Whanganui-a-tara, Aotearoa.
IMAGE: COURTESY OF ROSIE STACK, 2022.

Rock and Earth Remember

I went towards light, it felt scorching to me,
I went towards shade, it shrouded me in swirling dust.
A slobbered hand was laid across my honeyed mouth,
What was fairest in my nature was turned to dirt.⁴⁸

— Enheduanna, ca. 2,300 B.C.E.

Painter,

It seems fitting to respond, first and foremost, with my interpretation of the *archival forces of layers and shadow*. I'll begin with your *redirection of vision which awakens sensorial sight, rather than eye-sight*. To me, *seeing through claystone eyes* implies something beyond a metaphorical prompt. It's a literal alteration of vision, a sensorial lithification of sorts, which when articulated as such, is a seemingly absurd concept. How can a sense be rock-like? I have no answer, but I wonder if it's any more absurd than the notion that rocks retain memories. For my part, I think not. After all, you and I don't merely perceive through clear-eyed vision, we're "mineral beings too — our teeth are reefs, our bones are stones — and there is a geology of the body as well as of the land... Ice breathes. Rock has tides. Mountains ebb and flow. Stone pulses."⁴⁹ This, to me, is what *seeing through claystone eyes* elucidates: vision, not of actual sight, but of unsight. It's a kind of vision that avails *sensorial sight*, in which light and shadow become sensory transmitters of *archival force*. Enheduanna's⁵⁰ *scorching light* and *swirling shade*, inscribed on cuneiform tablets, are lasting impressions of *sensorial sight*, a union between the hand-wielded stylus and material of *earth*, an instance where human recollections are also *claystone memories*.

In the way that your term *ancestral sediments* prompted me to consider a lineage of sediment, the *inherent bond between the human and the geologic* also pervades a lithic kind of memory. While we generally "attribute to stone a great power to hold time

⁴⁸ Enheduanna, "The Banishment from Ur" (70-73). In *The Exaltation of Inanna*, translated from Sumerian to English by Benjamin R. Foster, *The Age of Agade: Inventing Empire in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016) p. 333.

⁴⁹ Robert Macfarlane, *Underland: A Deep Time Journey* (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 2019) pp. 16-37.

⁵⁰ Enheduanna was an Akkadian high priestess, poet and the world's first author known by name. See: W. W. Hallo, J. J. A. Van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1968).

back, to refuse its claims,⁵¹ I unavoidably find myself reevaluating its *endurance*. I don't mean to suggest that *rock* and *earth* aren't enduring, but what are the qualities of that *endurance*? If *endurance* is defined by "the power of holding out" or "the capacity of withstanding strain,"⁵² it's implied that *endurance* is itself a condition of archival, be it material or remembered. In my last letter to you, I claimed *endurance* as *our human burden in the face of temporal fragility*, yet as you expounded, *rock* and *earth* are just as susceptible to the imprint of ages, "*terra firma* becomes *terra mobilis*."⁵³ Sediments lay down memories, albet them geologic ones, recording the traces of "past stress states... (expressed by such control parameters as stress, strain, dilatancy and so on). The mechanical circumstances of rocks depend not only on their current stress state."⁵⁴ In effect, the layers of sediment that make up the earth are a succession of heaped lithic-memories, underlaying one another from the surface down. It calls to mind a rare Anglo-Saxon burial (excavated in Oulton) which revealed an interchange of memory between the human and the geologic, a reciprocal *archival force*: where shadowy traces in the ground are illustrative of how *rock* and *earth* can remember us.

Embedded within the sandy soil, once-human material has entirely disappeared over the two thousand years spent below ground, leaving only a delicately preserved impression, "shadows in the sand."⁵⁵ These stained soil *shadow-memories* are *ancestral sediments* in the truest sense. They're *memories* made of *earth*, which soberingly foreshadow our own future archival, exactly like that *umbral outline* of a *grub-shaped bug fossil*. *Transient shadow becomes like a fossilised memory within primordial sediments*. We, like *rock* and *earth*, are *layers*. *Layers* preserve *shadows*, and *shadows* are *memories*. We cannot escape the ultimate material reality of our human bodies and, in your words, are all enveloped as kin in the *unifying embrace* of *rock* and *earth*. *Outsiderness* becomes obsolete.

⁵¹ Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: Adventures in Reaching the Summit* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004) p. 43.

⁵² Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "endurance, n., sense 1.c", July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1008243307>.

⁵³ Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: Adventures in Reaching the Summit*, p. 43.

⁵⁴ X. F. Yu, S. G. Ge, J. Yu, Y. J. Shang, "Rock memory and intelligent computing of the excavation process in rock," *International Journal of Rock Mechanics and Mining Sciences*, vol. 37, no. 3, April 2000, pp. 549-551.

⁵⁵ Andrew Peachy interview by BBC News, Oulton burial site: Sutton Hoo-era Anglo-Saxon cemetery discovered, 16 September 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-suffolk-54177762>.



Excavated Anglo-Saxon burials (c. 6-7 C.E.), Oulton, Suffolk, England.
IMAGE: COURTESY OF SUFFOLK COUNTY COUNCIL, 2020.

Shadows are memories transient and shifting

They are scars leaving traces

Marks cannot be unmade

Rock and earth remember

From *Weaver*

Stepping Stone

Weaver,

While I can acknowledge the necessity to wind up, true finality is, I think, unattainable. Impermanence and incompleteness are actualities of which our conversation here is no exception. Settling at an endpoint feels uneasy when work is in the midst of transition, as mine is, so to claim conclusion would be a pretence. My practice is ongoing and this is but a *stepping stone*, a place where my feet happen to have momentarily landed.

This body of work, these letters and paintings, are my way of facing up to the inescapable *fragility* of our human bodies in a surrender to that *unifying embrace of rock and earth*. So I look to *rock and earth*, to *ancestral sediments* laid down, to the continuation of such lineage, encountering them as *kin* to my *claystone body* and forming my own *lithic-like memories*. To me, this is *seeing through claystone eyes*. When I paint, I feel as though my hands, my body, see in a way that my eyes cannot. There's even an occasional argumentative dissonance between my eyes, desirous to lead, and my body, which physically marks the canvas. In my experience, *sensorial sight*, felt sight, breaks forth from my body with a kind of transference of vital energy. The work then becomes animated to me, almost as if it breathes for itself.

As you know, an incentive for my return to Mexico was to inspire and replenish that part of myself that was starved of access to my birthplace, though in truth it had the opposite effect. I'd go so far as to say that the experience caused harm to the balance of my *sombra*. I can't speak absolutely to this perception as I wasn't raised in an indigenous or even a semi-indigenous environment, although in my father's telling (*sombra* is "something like an energy inside you" that can be "ruptured" by stress or trauma), I believe the emotional turbulence of returning to Mexico caused my inner shadow, my *sombra*, to become disrupted. It destabilised my sense of sight; of imagery; of identity. The overwhelming *outsiderness* I experienced both during and after travelling disoriented me within my own practice of painting. While this confusion didn't cloud my actual eyes (I could still see and paint), my *sensorial sight*, my body sight, was somehow blinded. For a time many paintings failed to animate in

the way I described, almost as if my smothered senses were unable to offer that transference of vital energy. The work I made with my eyes alone were distressing to me, seemingly hyper-intense with observation yet lacking connection to body sight, felt sight.

Writing with you, *Weaver*, has been essential in re-engaging with my *claystone* eyes, my *sensorial sight*, to see and live and paint in spite of the inadequate and shallow demands of a pedestrian Pākehā lifestyle, a perspective that you and I feel overlooks the *bonds between the human and the geologic*. It's a deficit, another *outsiderness* of sorts, for which I grieve and is alleviated, however briefly, when I paint. In voicing the connections between *rock* and *earth*, *sediment* and *shadow layers*, the *transcendent belonging*, my *sombra* began slowly to reintegrate, as did my relationship to painting. Not only have I found this process to be profoundly grounding, but undoubtedly vital in contextualising myself, as *Painter*, in relation to the ever present, ever changing earth I inhabit.

You and I are sensorially perceptive *claystone bodies*.

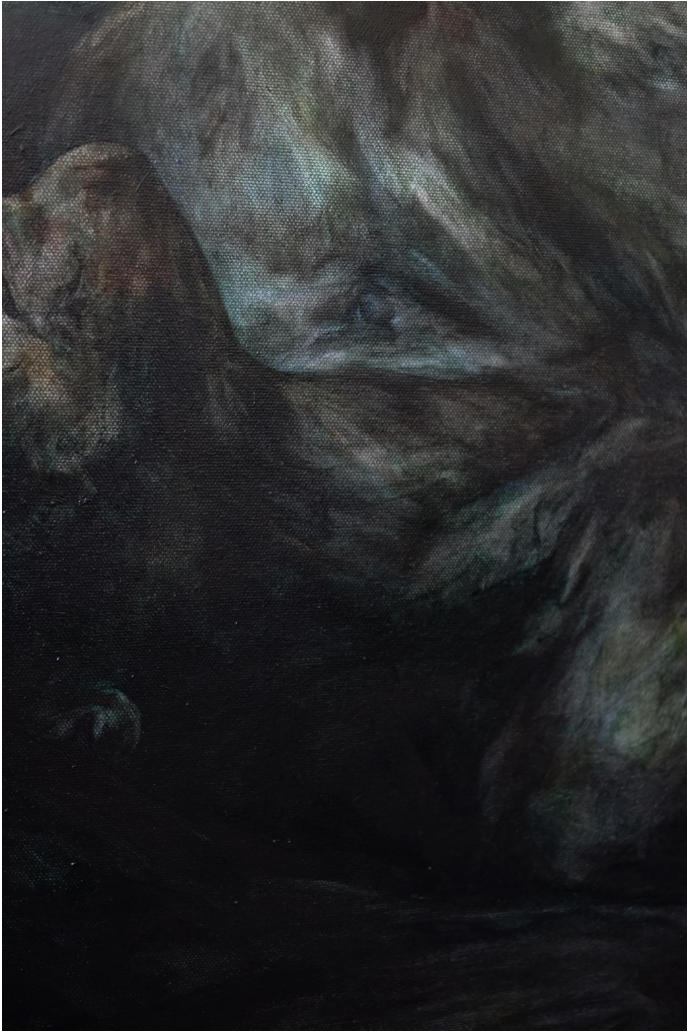
We are *layers*, we are *shadows*.

We are *ancestral sediments*.

We carry *archival force*.

Hasta luego, until we speak again.

From *Painter*



Ancestral Sediments, detail, 2023.
Water-mixable oil on canvas, 1200 x 1500 mm.

To:

Helen Díaz

Placido Díaz Rodríguez

Virginia Auton

Rosie Stack

Alexander Boulton

Hemi Macgregor

Stuart Foster

Julieanna Preston

Thank you for your insight, inspiration and steadfast support.

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