

## BROOKLYN RAIL

### *Delcy Morelos with Gaby Collins-Fernández*

by Gaby Collins-Fernandez (March 6, 2024)



Portrait of Delcy Morelos, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

Delcy Morelos was born in Tierralta, Colombia, in 1967. Her practice includes painting, installation, and sculpture. In the last decade, the artist has focused on producing large format installations in situ using earth, clay, natural fibers, and other organic materials. Recently, she has had individual presentations of her work at Galeria Santa Fé in Bogotá in 2019, Southern Alberta art gallery in Lethbridge, Alberta in 2019, and the Museo Moderno in Buenos Aires. She lives in Bogotá. The following conversation took place on the New Social Environment on Friday, February 2, 2024 on the occasion of Morelos's exhibition at Dia Chelsea, *El abrazo*. It was recorded in Spanish, translated into English, and edited for clarity and concision.



Delcy Morelos, *Cielo terrenal* (Earthly Heaven, detail), 2023. Soil from Goshen, New York; cinnamon; clove; and acrylic binder on floor, wall, felt, metal, and wood, and fired ceramics. Dia Chelsea, New York, 2023. Courtesy of the artist, Dia Chelsea, New York and Marian Goodman Gallery © Delcy Morelos. Photo: Don Stahl.

**Gaby Collins-Fernández (Rail):** Delcy, you have spoken before about how your work is intended to be experienced emotionally and through the body. I think it would be a meaningful introduction to your work to hear you talk about your exhibition *El abrazo* in terms of the materials and the experience you intended.

**Delcy Morelos:** *Cielo terrenal* (Earthly Heaven) and *El abrazo* (The Embrace) (both 2023) are artworks that show the soil in two very different ways. Soil, earth, is an element that can be seen in so many ways. For Indigenous communities, it is a goddess, it's the mother. It's what feeds us, and what we are made of. This is something we have lost awareness of as Western people who live in cities. As an artist who grew up with a close relationship to earth, I feel like an interpreter, someone who is presenting the soil in a sacred place, since exhibition spaces are considered sacred spaces at this time in our culture. This allows for the soil to be made sacred too; it allows me to expose its sacred dimension, which we have forgotten.

The first piece a visitor encounters at Dia is *Cielo terrenal*, which is about earth as the space that we go back to when we die. The soil transforms us into food. I think death feeds life, and life feeds death. When we die and our bodies return to the earth, they become nutrients for plants, animals, insects. This allows our lives to continue, on a material and physical level, through the nourishment of these animals. Death does not exist for me as an end, but rather as a transformation. The scale of *El abrazo* is enormous so that you can feel embraced and contained by earth. We spend all of our time living and moving on top of earth and not within it, so we don't keep in mind how surrounded and dependent we are on it as nourishment. Everything feeds from the earth, the plants, the animals that eat plants, humans who eat plants and animals. But because it is not direct, we don't see that it is actually the earth that is feeding us. I think it's important to be conscious of this magnificence, that the earth provides for us and comforts us. All of the mass, size, and material of *El abrazo* is there to hug the spectator.

**Rail:** As we prepared for this conversation, we were discussing language, and the differences in talking in English and Spanish. English is more rational, logical, you can speak it with your mouth half closed. In Spanish, the materiality of the language shifts, and this literally opens the body, makes it more vulnerable, because Spanish has so many rounded, open vowels. The meaning of the words can't help but be affected by how speaking literally shapes our mouths. I was thinking about this at your show, because my first impression of both works was one of surprising sensorial openings and closures, which is structured by a very clear structure and geometric organization.

I got to the show at around 2:00 p.m., when it was still light enough outside that all of the interior lights were off in the room that holds *Cielo terrenal*. There is a skylight, but its dim light diminishes toward the back. I couldn't really see anything as I walked in, so my first impression was of dark piles and the smell of the spices that you used to perfume the soil of *El abrazo*, which drifted faintly between the two rooms. *Cielo terrenal* is a very low, horizontal artwork. As I waited for my vision to adjust I felt both sightless and opened up, sensorially, to my breathing and the scent and humidity of the air. The visual elements of the work make you wait for them. I was trying to penetrate the visual, and instead I felt penetrated by the space and the art. I felt like this work was preparing me and activating my senses for *El abrazo*. Walking into that room, the air became heavier and more scented. The soil mass is monumental, overwhelming, and the hay which adorns the soil feels like dry fingers that touch your hands back. Then there is the triangular opening in the earth toward the back of the room. The further I went in, the more the earth muffled all the exterior sounds. Near the triangle's point, it is almost silent, so I felt almost totally enclosed by the soil, and muffled in my hearing. It was very exciting to experience how you use visuality in order to literally open the body physically and sensorially. At the same time the work is a concrete metaphor, which, because of this opening, can be received by the body at the same time as the mind. How do you think about geometry, shape, or other formal elements as a way to create this kind of transformation?



Delcy Morelos, *Cielo terrenal* (Earthly Heaven, detail), 2023. Soil from Goshen, New York; cinnamon; clove; and acrylic binder on floor, wall, felt, metal, and wood, and fired ceramics. Dia Chelsea, New York, 2023. Courtesy of the artist, Dia Chelsea, New York and Marian Goodman Gallery © Delcy Morelos. Photo: Don Stahl.

**Morelos:** Along with geometry and shape, I'm also using light, darkness, and the sense of smell as important elements. We give little importance to the olfactory sense, but it has been essential to human development and survival. Smells activate the part of the brain that triggers memories. What I want is to activate memories for the viewer when they were in nature and it felt really good, and even if they didn't know why, they felt at peace, happy. Usually, we spend more time like this as children, and I'm interested in this phenomenon. As adults, we dedicate our lives to work, to survival in the cities. But when we were children, our parents would take us out to the countryside, to enjoy the land. I'm also interested in activating the tranquility that I associate with these experiences. When there is a lot of light, the sense of sight gets activated: what I want is to deactivate sight a bit in order for the olfactory sense to emerge. There is very little light in *Cielo terrenal*, and as your eyes get used to the darkness, the figures placed in the darkness begin to emerge, as if from the void. I wanted it to seem like a dream, and in the dream state, to a feeling of peace. What I want to do with these very large works is to create calm and enjoyment for a viewer, experiences that normally are not activated in exhibitions, or in their daily life.

**Rail:** In the United States, Minimalism is usually thought of as quite rational and conceptual. But you describe your work as entering into a dream, in sensorial terms that feel intuitive and embodied. It brings to mind the utopian politics of many Latin American modernist traditions, including Concrete and Neo-Concrete art, which used geometry and materiality to configure hopeful and utopian social programs. I wanted to ask you about both the beautiful utopian possibility and the dreamlike surrealism of your work, and how it speaks to politics and art history.

**Morelos:** A lot of people might think that I come from North American Minimalism. And yes, I come from Minimalism, and I am very abstract, but I come from the South, which is a different story, and where everything is a bit surreal. I come from the Caribbean, along the Northern coast of Colombia, where there is a lot of color and joy. I have always felt sort of like an anomaly as a Caribbean artist, because my work is different from a lot of the work that gets made in this part of the world. But I also feel strange within Minimalism as established in North America, because I am a woman, I'm Caribbean, I speak Spanish, and all of this changes how I perceive and understand things. I don't speak or read English very well. The majority of the texts written about Minimalism are in English, so I have not been able to read them. But I can read and feel the art itself. I go to an exhibition and I experience it. I have learned about art by experiencing it, not starting in the brain but through my body, my sensibility, using my heart and my soul. I think that in the South, in Latin America, there is more fluency in this language of emotions, the senses, the body. When someone comes to see one of my works, I want them to feel it with their body.

**Rail:** You have been working with soil for eleven years now. Where did that interest come from, and how did it develop over time?

**Morelos:** I started to work with soil because I noticed that what makes blood red is iron, and what makes the earth red is the iron that the Earth has. We are given this color by the cycle of nourishment that I was talking about earlier: the cow feeds on grass, and that grass, and the spinach we eat, is fed by iron in the soil. This profound relationship—that we are earth, that she is the mother—is obvious for someone who lives in the jungle, or in the Andean mountains, or the Russian steppes, or rural areas anywhere. I think there is a deep lack of understanding among people who live in cities about that connection. I felt it was of the highest importance to talk about this. I'm also learning the connection myself, as I work with the soil.

My work used to deal with themes of violence, racism. I noticed that gendered and political violence comes from the same place as our violence toward our Earth. The fact that we can't see how this violence is related comes from ignorance. When I hurt someone else, I'm hurting myself. When a man hurts a woman, he's hurting himself. When someone hurts the Earth, they are also hurt. I get very emotional about this; Earth is fantastic.

**Rail:** These are such powerful ideas! Could you describe the process of these pieces, perhaps starting with the works in *El abrazo*? How did your relationship with Dia come about, and what were you thinking about in some of the large installations leading up to the show?

**Morelos:** Dia first came to my studio five or six years ago. Having them come to see my work was amazing—they not only show but have supported big projects by many of the artists in the books I mentioned earlier, who had really moved me. So for me to be at Dia is like being a part of art history, literally and physically. They came to my studio, and they listened to what I had to say: a lot of things that they might not normally hear about art, the jungle, about my teacher Isaías Román, who is Huitoto, an Indigenous group of the Colombian Amazon. And they were interested in all of this, they paid attention. That was really surprising for me, because my previous experiences had been that what I had to say was not important. The support from Dia has been a turning point in my life and my work. Of course, the two are interconnected—what I am interested in is learning through art, and learning how to live through my art. We are one.

I used to talk about all of this to curators in Colombia, and they didn't understand me or what I was saying, or pay me much attention. Because I'm from a small town near the Caribbean and not from the capital, Bogotá; because I'm a woman; it all adds up. Making my work requires a lot of effort and resources because of the scale. I didn't choose the scale, exactly, it was more like the work needed to be that size *because* no one was listening; they have to be so big in order for these ideas to be heard and seen. In order to make this work without institutional support I had to find other ways of doing it on my own, including borrowing money from friends, asking for help. It was difficult! But Latin American women are used to doing a lot with a little, making miracles—in Colombia, a woman might support her whole family and do a million things on the minimum wage. I come from that lineage. When I got to Dia, they told me, "you can do whatever you want, however you want to do it," without restrictions, or even saying that they wanted me to create a certain kind of piece. I was given total freedom. I couldn't believe this was possible! This institution is amazing, really, and I am so appreciative to be able to work with them.

It was a very long process to make this exhibition. I kept increasing the size, learning about the soil, figuring out the armature and construction for the works, talking with engineers. One of the difficulties has been working against gravity. The laws of gravity are almost like the patriarchy, which wants to keep women down. I want to work against the forces bringing things down in order to elevate the soil, the feminine. I was working with a female engineer to make the infrastructure of *El Abrazo*, which is like a textile of different forces. The interior is almost more amazing than the exterior; it's a net of wood, hay, and earth, all to be able to elevate the enormous mass of soil so it embraces the audience.

When they invited me to make a piece for a space in Gothenburg, the floor was extremely uneven, so I couldn't build directly on the ground. I had to elevate the soil in order to create distance from the floor. People came and looked at it and thought it was a reference to Walter De Maria, but that wasn't it, it was a way of problem solving. For me, just as there's no such thing as a blank canvas, there's no such thing as a neutral space. Space has a lot of features, and what I do is respond.

When I made *Moradas* (2019), in Santa Fé, Bogotá, it was in an underground space that was below an open-air market. I wanted to emphasize the subterranean element of the space. I think humans are very alienated from how we move up and down in relation to the earth, and that's something I want to make us more aware of. For example, the galleries of my exhibition at the Museo Moderno in Buenos Aires, Argentina, were in the second sub-basement, ten meters underground. When you go down stairs or an elevator, you don't understand that you are actually going into the depths of the earth. These spaces are sacred in many cultures; our ancestors would go into caves to make offerings to Mother Earth. I can also use these underground spaces given to me by Mother Earth, making my work in these sacred spaces and presenting them as a kind of offering. The third artwork I made in an underground space was at Marian Goodman's gallery in Paris, and it's called *El oscuro de abajo* (2023). It also seeks to make being underground palpable, a sensation of being in the womb of the Earth, that dark, warm, humid space where seeds germinate and which is the origin of everything.



Delcy Morelos, *Cielo terrenal* (Earthly Heaven, detail), 2023. Soil from Goshen, New York; cinnamon; clove; and acrylic binder on floor, wall, felt, metal, and wood, and fired ceramics. Dia Chelsea, New York, 2023. Courtesy of the artist, Dia Chelsea, New York and Marian Goodman Gallery © Delcy Morelos. Photo: Don Stahl.

**Rail:** You mentioned earlier that you want your audience to remember their happy experiences with Earth. As I listen to you talk about your work, another kind of memory emerges, which is Earth's memory of itself. It's almost as though you enter into these industrial structures and remind us that we made them, and that these very spaces still contain a charged history of soil and earth which we can access when you reintroduce the soil into this place from which it was taken. It's a much less individualist way of thinking about memory than our (very individualist) cultures usually encourage, and it's so interesting to treat memory as inheriting materiality itself.

I know that when sourcing the soil you use, the specific location is important. Soil has all of the universal meanings that we have been talking about, but it also carries local histories and contexts, which it is clear you are also thinking about. In *El abrazo* and *Cielo terrenal*, the soil came from the Hudson River Valley, near Dia Beacon, and also from the Amazon jungle in Colombia. But there was also the issue that you can't bring raw earth into the United States from another country, and your solution to this was to cook the soil, by firing it into ceramics. In Spanish, the word for cooking is the same as the word for firing clay, *cocer*. There's a real irony to this, which is that the cooked earth of Latin America can be found in so many Spanish and European still-life paintings as ceramic vessels brought from the colonies. In these paintings, such as those made by Zurbarán, ceramics from the Americas are evidence of the violence and exploitative extraction occurring there; they function symbolically to demonstrate the power of empire. So I thought it was interesting that you still had to cook this earth in order to bring it here, but now because of customs issues. You also made the ceramics in a very specific way, with Indigenous communities in the Amazon. Can you tell us more about the process of making the clay, and your interest in the specific contexts and geographies of the earth you are using?

**Morelos:** Where the soil comes from is so important. It's like wine, which has a designation of origin. The slope of one mountain is different from another, so you have to specify on the bottle in which geographical area the grapes were grown. It's as important with soil, which forms how humans live. The place where we were born, what kind of climate we grew up in, the quality of the air we breathed, what the water was like to drink—all of these constitute each human being. So bringing soil from the Amazon was to bring a part of this magical place where nature is understood by the communities living within it. In order to survive in those areas, it's very, very difficult. At any moment, you might be at the edge of death. There are innumerable dangers, and in order to survive you have to be in total awareness and communication with your surroundings. It's almost a meditative state of presence, you cannot be thinking about anything else, because there are dangers everywhere. The way of elaborating the ceramic is a technique from another time, which is being maintained there by people and by nature itself. The ceramics are made on an open flame, and the black color of the clay comes from the vegetation of the Amazon. Every other place I have done ceramics, the black color comes from chemicals. But there, there are so many plants and animals and insects in every square foot, it's hard to describe. So the plants that make the clay black, are just there, and have been for a very long time. Through the ceramics, I bring that knowledge into my work in a subtle way. The soil from Beacon has a different temperature. It comes from a region where there are seasons, and that remains in its memory when you touch it. The soil in Colombia is warmer, the Beacon soil is very cold. The way that I communicate with soil is through touch, texture, temperature. At first, my hands didn't understand how to work with colder soil.

**Rail:** Although it may not be immediately apparent, there is a lot of continuity in your practice. You make a lot of drawings, which are very interesting to see alongside the larger installations because there is a graphic sensibility in your work on paper which seems to be present in how you organize and place things in the rest of your work. You also made paintings for a long time before making sculptures, which also focused on how you worked with pigment and matter on the surface. We might look to the soil layer on the floor and walls of *Cielo terrenal*, which you have mixed with a binder and literally painted in a flat layer. Even the way you talk about the internal engineering of *El abrazo*, and its external matter, reminds me of the relationship between the structure of painting, making a rectangular form which is an excuse for a surface which can hold whatever image or metaphor you want it to. Your work often includes line both as an almost architectural structure and as a material surface which carries metaphorical and symbolic meaning, a contrast which is very clear in your drawings. Does this kind of structural abstraction affect your thought process and goals?



Delcy Morelos, *El abrazo* (The Embrace), 2023. Recycled garden soil, clay from Dia Beacon, coir, hay, cinnamon, clove, copaiba oil, Eco Tackifier, and fragrance. Dia Chelsea, New York, 2023.  
 Courtesy the artist, Dia Chelsea, New York and Marian Goodman Gallery © Delcy Morelos. Photo: Don Stahl.

**Morelos:** Actually, as I was looking at this drawing, *Untitled* (2018), I was thinking that this is exactly how it looks on the inside of *El abrazo*. That's how it's knit together. And yes, I'm always still painting, even as someone working with installation and sculpture. I painted for a very long time; it's a particular feature of who I am as an artist which I have continued to cultivate. I make my sculptures and installations from the point of view of a painter. I'm currently in St. Louis, Missouri, working on a project with the Pulitzer foundation. I'm working with these iron screens and I feel like I am working in the void, painting these screens in the void. The difference between being a painter and a sculptor for me is this difference in support. When I work on paper or canvas, I am working on a physical support; when I am making sculpture, that support is space, and more specifically, the site where I am making the project.

Each space where I make a work has specific characteristics. It has its dimensions and walls. There is a particular sense of light, temperature. Whether the space is underground or not, whether it is at a high altitude. The material and texture of the floors, walls, ceilings. These are the conditions of my sculptures; I never start from a blank space. When I work site-specifically, my dialogue with the space is my favorite part of the process.

**Rail:** You are also in conversation with magic and alchemy. How do magic, shamanism, and structures that are seen as less rational influence your work?

**Morelos:** All artists are magicians and witches. For me, making art is magic. Even if we don't know it consciously, we are casting spells. I consider myself a cauldron witch! I'm always mixing things that people don't usually put together, whether it's using techniques in ways that are not traditional, or conceptually mixing ideas, or literally putting materials together. I like mixing different art modalities in this manner, painting, making sculpture, weaving. As I mix the binder with soil, grass, the cinnamon, cocoa, coffee, I could be a witch in the Middle Ages. I think women tend to be closer to an encounter with magic because of the social roles women have been expected to take on as caregivers—although that's changing now a little. Historically, most of the time women have been in the kitchen, working with sometimes very little and transforming them into miracles. This has strongly influenced my work as an artist, as a woman, as a witch, as a magician.



Delcy Morelos, *El abrazo* (The Embrace), 2023. Recycled garden soil, clay from Dia Beacon, coir, hay, cinnamon, clove, copaiba oil, Eco Tackifier, and fragrance. Dia Chelsea, New York, 2023.  
 Courtesy the artist, Dia Chelsea, New York and Marian Goodman Gallery © Delcy Morelos. Photo: Don Stahl.

**Rail:** Walking into the show, it could be confused with a bakery. In the literature about the exhibition you talk a lot about the importance of the humidity of the earth, but when I arrived at the show, much of that humidity had evaporated. It was drier, but that original, humid mixture remained in its fragrance. I was thinking about your interest in alchemy, and the slippage between *abrazar*, to embrace, and *abrasar*, to burn, which in Spanish sound the same. One could say that homophones are a kind of verbal alchemy. In this show, we move from the richer earth of *El abrazo* to the dark, dry soil and objects of *Cielo terrenal*, which look like they could have been burned. We also know that wildfires, in charring elements of a forest, also feed the soil and make it more nutrient-dense. Were you thinking about fires and burning in these works?

**Morelos:** Yes, it does have to do with these pieces! Isaías Román, who was my teacher of Amazonian magic, would talk to me about how they cultivate the land there. There is a small space that was dense with trees called a *chagra*, which is a plot of land where they grow crops. In order to cultivate the land, they would cut some of the trees to burn them. I was there for one of the fires; it was very dangerous because the flames might rise to twenty meters. The fire was tended by a woman and daughter, and they called the mother *mama chacha*. She was like a sorcerer, I saw her praying to the fire and the wind so it would burn in a contained circle and not burn out of control into the rainforest, as well as to protect us. She would sing and dance, and it was as though the fire listened to her. Everything was burned and black, and like I was talking about before, a part of how life and death sustain one another. These burnt trees would enrich the soil enough to feed people and animals from the crops planted on the *chagra*. This was one of the reasons it was so important for the soil to be black. The fact that I was able to be present for one of these fires was so magical, but for them it is a very quotidian and necessary part of subsistence and survival. For me, these forces seem uncontrollable, but they know how to control them so they don't harm the biodiversity of the forest. This kind of cultivation has been happening for hundreds of years. They bring the seeds between plots of land, and as the plants grow, they are not only for humans but also for animals as they pass through.

**Rail:** It's relevant to bring up the question of control—there is so much formal control in your work. You arranged each individual piece of hay that comes from the soil of *El abrazo*. In *Cielo terrenal* everything is organized into very specific piles, as though they are in a warehouse that's being kept for the future that might await us if we prepare correctly. Your sense of composition, arrangement, and shape is so definite.



**Morelos:** The way things are organized in *Cielo terrenal* is related to *Moradas*, the artwork I made at Galería Santa Fe a few years prior. As I mentioned earlier, the exhibition space was below a market. If you've ever gone to a Latin American market, you know that all the products are organized very preciously, they make marvelous towers, everything is very beautiful. I began to pile the work in this manner to reference the markets. In these places, you can also find things which are very different from one another.

In *El abrazo*, the organization is inspired by the aleatory arrangements you encounter in landscapes. But we are used to living in geometric spaces. I wanted it to feel as though a viewer were entering this kind of a home, so they might relate the geometry to the architecture of a living space. Ultimately I wanted to make a kind of intermediary space between the two, so you might transit between the landscape and domestic space—to reinforce the idea that the earth is our home on a sensory, embodied level.



Delcy Morelos, *El abrazo (The Embrace)*, 2023. Recycled garden soil, clay from Dia Beacon, coir, hay, cinnamon, clove, copaiba oil, Eco Tackifier, and fragrance. Dia Chelsea, New York, 2023.  
Courtesy the artist, Dia Chelsea, New York and Marian Goodman Gallery © Delcy Morelos. Photo: Don Stahl.

**Rail:** One last impression I'll share was of memento mori or still-life painting being inverted. Rather than take death as something final to be contemplated, you present the idea of a life force which changes in form, maybe, but does not end. It brings up questions about the ecological disaster we are living through. This is a moment of profound crisis on Earth, which is also hastening changes in our environment. How are you thinking about this moment? It seems to me like your work sees its power not to make changes in relationship to this crisis, but rather in helping us understand that we actually live on and in this Earth in a deeper way.

**Morelos:** Yes, that's right. I would add that the power of art is to present this relationship to the Earth in a more loving way. That Earth is hugging you, and in that moment of embrace, you will feel as though you are part of the Earth and will take better care of her. The importance of understanding this profound relationship we all have with the Earth, and with soil, is that there is no separation between interior and exterior. That soil is me, I am it. It's not only a call to take care of the Earth as something distinct, but to take actual care of ourselves, as part of this cycle.