
The experience of the Other is the secret of change.

— Octavio Paz *Seeing and Using*

Encounters in Place

The first use of the word *indigenous* dates from 1644 – that is, early in the age of European economic and cultural expansion. Though its meaning – native, born (here) – seems straightforward when used by biologists, paradox and contrast are embedded in the term. Inside our native place or culture, it is simply our world; only when the outsider arrives and observes (and almost inevitably, impacts) does being *of* a particular place begin to be understood – and questioned.

For several hundred years, the practices, material cultures, and habitats of native peoples have been both studied and undermined, or simply swept away, by outsiders with their own cultural frameworks and agendas. And, despite the insistence and frequent cruelty of European dominance, “western” culture has also been profoundly changed in the process. Wondering how this plays out for makers is what animated the theme for this issue. Now that hardly anyone, no matter how isolated, lives beyond the reach of digital connection and global culture, what does it mean to be an indigenous maker, rooted in the cultural and natural history of a particular place? How are these makers adapting, or succumbing, to change? In the 1973 essay quoted above, Paz asserted, perhaps too optimistically, that “heedless of boundaries and systems of government...the pottery seen in the frescoes of Bonampak [has] survived Mayan priests, Aztec warriors, colonial friars, and Mexican presidents. It will also survive American tourists.” But survive untouched by industrial materials, environmental change, the Internet, and the cult of the individual? Not likely, in the twenty-first century.

The road from question to journal is often a surprising one, and this theme was bent in a different direction by the articles actually submitted, most of which were by American makers. How *they* were changed by encounters with indigenous cultures, as well as how indigenous potters are navigating new technologies and opportunities, makes for a different collection of voices than originally envisioned – one whose underlying theme is the aftermath and effect of contact, for both parties. *Indigenous* marks the moment of encounter between home and the wide world. Wondrous or brutal, that encounter is always transformative.

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