

As if steeped in the very soil, the doves in Marrakesh are a dusky red; and so in flight they are arrows flashing across a dense, blue sky. Of course the earth in Africa is red: going to Morocco in February this year we were prepared for that. But it's one thing anticipating such a change in colour from the peaty-black of Irish soil, quite another actually living (in) it. The effect of this immersion in clay - from the walls of our rammed-earth riad and ceramic plates, to the unpaved roads we walked on - was like inhabiting a gigantic, radiant,



An insight into the typical structure of a riad where bricks are crisscrossed for strength

clay vessel.



Drawing by Christian Buchner of the interior of our riad using

It all started in mid-January, when winter was too much with us, that we decided, a group of six artists – working across disciplines of photography, drawing, painting, ceramics - to plan a residency somewhere warmer and more colourful both for recreation and creation. The beauty and location of the riad we stayed in, Paradis Berbere (in the Ourika

valley, 24 kms outside Marrakesh), was pivotal to how inspirational the experience was. Staying in this countryside was like stepping back in time, if you can imagine a place where meetings are determined by a donkey's pace – a common mode of transport – shepherds watch their flocks in the olive groves, and cock's crow and the call to prayer are natural alarm clocks. Traditional, adobe houses abound here, and the same red clay and straw is used for the walls of animal pens and to enclose fields.

Another revelation was how differently the African soil behaves. In Ireland, the earth is separate from human habitation and business in that for the most part the soil stays put - in the garden, on a field, in the fireplace as peat. However in rural Marrakesh, the soil is irrepressible,



Outer walls of the city are made of clay with puncture holes for drainage

asserting itself everywhere, and is extensively integrated into daily life. As dust it enters buildings under doors, through ventilators it defeats windows, depositing a fine layer on every surface. The 200 year-old riad we stayed in was a living entity with thick walls of locally sourced clay strengthened with straw. The organic, tactile shapes of the bathtubs and washbasins were also due to clay's malleability. Our night lamps were terracotta as was the crockery. Besides living and washing in clay, we were therefore also eating, drinking and walking on it. The best defence it seems is incorporation, as clay is used extensively: for instance, every two years, new layers of clay are added to the walls which naturally decay, and in between fields where water canals had to be fashioned, it was used to make new conduits.



Clay walls demarcating fields and roads stretch like camel humps across the countryside

Yet this omnipresence of clay does not reflect a rural-urban divide, for in Marrakesh the imposing city walls are clay, the rubbish bins along the main



Drawing by Helen Doherty of a view from the riad

streets are oval, terracotta vessels and a viable pottery business still exists both within the city souks and nearby villages. Morocco owes its thriving ceramic businesses to a number of factors, namely its reputation as a pottery-producing centre, the availability of suitable clay and a skilled population. Given the global trend for mass-produced, disposable products, the longevity of this ancient tradition in Morocco is surprising, especially since many African countries, such as Kenya,¹ use plastic vessels instead.

Compared to my home country South Africa, where ceramics are a niche market, in Morocco they are still embedded in daily life: people use unglazed tajines and braziers to cook, glazed ware to eat off, ceramic tiles for decoration. Yet the ceramics we saw in the souks and roadside markets, although skilfully made and beautifully painted, were disappointingly formulaic. A handful of pieces were painted with simplistic, realistic scenes of camels and palm trees, but the majority were decorated in symmetrical, abstract or geometrical patterns.

Limited scope for originality is apparently a side effect of making for local and tourist markets.

But exceptions do exist, as do master potters. In a remote shop in a village near Asni, the diversity in form and finish of the ceramics was remarkable. The blue of this candleholder, for example, has an intensity of colour (partly due to the pigment and a white slip over a red body), which we saw nowhere else. The lively painting style and signature on the base indicate that this artist is recognised for his talent and creates one-off rather than mass-produced pieces. According to the assistant who sold the piece, the potter is an elderly, Berber man who has been making for many years and whose work is well-known, hence the signature.



Candleholder made by a Berber artist

The experience of being in rural Marrakesh - walking in the countryside,



Drawing by Christian Buchner of Helen drawing in the countryside

exploring nearby villages and living in an adobe house - was something we recorded and reflected on through drawing and photography. Looking over our records, I found the drawings to be stronger mnemonics than the photographs. Possibly because drawing exacts a physical engagement, a waiting with and weighing up of the subject, impression of which is then recorded by gaze and gestures, the memory fixed in the body is anchored more

firmly in time and space. Time is also of essence. On average, it takes 100th of a

second to take a photograph, whereas a drawing can take from one minute to several hours to complete.

In rural Marrakesh people live close to the earth – either by default (it enters houses as dust), or consciously (roof-tiles, braziers, sugar bowls are clay), and since it also became incorporated into our daily experiences, using clay as a pigment in our drawings seemed natural. Furthermore, it was only by drawing, a process that I first noticed a consistent pattern in Moroccan art forms. Probably inspired by stark contrasts between light and shadow, the landscape and indigenous vegetation - palm fronds and cacti – this style also reflects the Berbers'ⁱⁱ animistic, polytheistic outlook and the Muslim preference for non-representational art.ⁱⁱⁱ The dance of these patterns – the straight line and curve or pointed sword and arabesque - is evident in the

architecture, ceramics and ironwork of Marrakesh. Ceramic decoration is based on the interaction of triangles, squares, ovals or 3-part leaf structures, all forms of which are interlaced. Within each form are filler patterns - of spirals, dots, zigzags and herringbone hatchings. This 'apparent disorder' Alain Caiger Smith reflects, 'is extrapolated from a coherent scheme rooted in nature: incised herringbone patterns suggest the veins of a leaf, blobs and spirals are stems and fruit.'^{iv} The doors and gates of many buildings are of patterned ironwork, painted in subtle colour combinations. The strength of this tradition was evident in the fact that even the humblest, roadside teashop or motorbike mechanic's had such ornamental gates.



Drawing by Helen Doherty of the terrace of the riad with predominant arabesque patterns



A metal door we encountered on a walk in the countryside

Their monotony aside, the predominance of these geometric patterns was a refreshing break from literal image making in the humanist tradition (the most extreme example being the selfie). This impression and the entire experience of being 'earthed' in rural Marrakesh,^v reminded me how human life is simply one pattern of many million patterns of energy, which we need to adapt to and fit in with.

ⁱ Plastic containers have replaced traditional ceramic vessels in Litae, Kenya Noreen Ramsay observed in her article, 'Clay in Africa' in *Ceramics Ireland*, issue 34, 2014, p6. .

ⁱⁱ The Berbers comprise the largest majority living in Marrakesh.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traditional_Berber_religion

ⁱⁱⁱ As Caiger-Smith observes, 'The Moslem faith and religion did not forbid all kinds of imagery. Images tending to idolatry were forbidden, imagery in general is not prohibited in the Koran'. Caiger-Smith, Alan, *Tin-Glaze Pottery in Europe and the Islamic World: The Tradition of 1000 Years in Maiolica, Faience and Delftware*, Faber and Faber, 1973, p. 27.

^{iv} Caiger-Smith, Alan, *Tin-Glaze Pottery in Europe and the Islamic World: The Tradition of 1000 Years in Maiolica, Faience and Delftware*, Faber and Faber, 1973, p.25

ˆSaturated in colour is how one feels being in Marrakesh. Soaked between blue and red, with flashes of the primary colours - yellow of the rape flowers is also the colour of the mountains of grain sold for feed at weekend markets and the canvas bags for transporting it.