

Vernacular Materials | Desertscape

Clay

In Communion with Earth
A contribution by Paola Sakr



Clay kiln, Al Fakher Pottery Works, Al Dhaid, Sharjah, UAE.

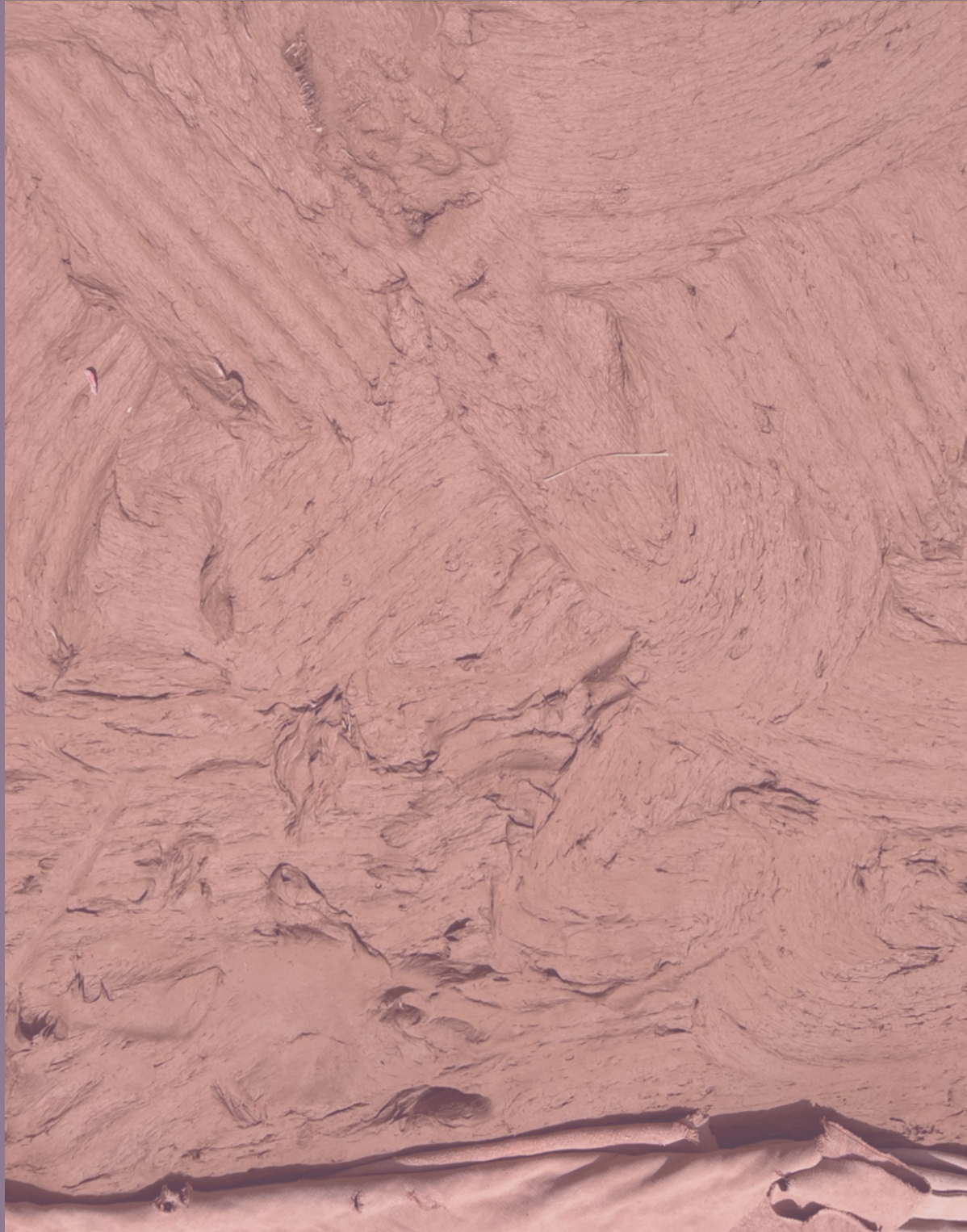
To work with clay is to tap into pure Earth consciousness. Clay is a gift from our ever-giving mother to our fertile hands, and everything we create with it should be made in reverence to her. Creating with this raw element nurtures a personal and intimate relationship with the Earth; a connection that reemerges every time you are captivated by the crackling sound of leaves in the wind, the shimmers of light on the river, the sensation of soil under your bare feet or the smell of the first rain. There is this very primal and sacred aspect to pottery, an invitation to play with all four elements: from the earth and the water that sustains, to the air that dries and the fire that eternalizes.

There is a call for balance in everything to do with this practice, it is a dance between the elements and a synergy between learned and intuitive movements. A lot of one element, or the introduction of it too soon or too late in the process, will lead the piece to damage itself. It is a delicate play between pushing and pulling, controlling and letting go. It would be foolish to think that you are the one in control while making pottery, when in fact you are a mere vessel of creation working with a material that has a memory and a life of its own- a material that is unforgiving, that demands patience and the utmost respect from the moment it is



Ceramic Still, from the Science and Technology Gallery, at Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization.

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harvested to the moment it is being shaped against your skin and fired in the kiln. Clay will remind you of its presence when you have forgotten and trespassed its boundaries. Just like nature takes its time, you can't rush the creation of a piece, for clay shows you that you need to be meticulous and gentle; that you need to handle everything with care and patience, and especially that you need to trust the process and not grow attached to the outcome.

To work with clay is to be a collaborator. One should always remember to leave room for surprises because clay will always have the final word. You can't force it to behave a certain way, but instead, learn to listen to what it is asking of you and work with that. Clay teaches you how it wants to be treated, and when you are respectful of its needs and boundaries, it is the most giving of elements. It is not only a substance of endless creation but if you allow it, it will be your greatest teacher. It will help you harvest mindfulness, patience, curiosity, respect, detachment and playfulness amongst other valuable virtues.

To work with clay is to ground yourself to the very core of the earth, where all wisdom resides. To work with clay is to let it consume you and blend your energy; for this material doesn't allow only partial contact, it demands you be fully immersed with all your senses. It proudly leaves stains on your clothes and becomes your new skin. It makes you embody it before you can begin to think of shaping your own vision. Clay teaches you to be reborn over and over again, from the ground to the shape of a vessel and back to a formless state.



Clay is eternal, clay is transformative. Before it feels the burn of fire, it can go through every state in a loop; and when it hasn't allowed your vision to be realized, you can gracefully offer it back to the earth, from where it came. To work with clay is to surrender to a mindful meditation. It vibrates between the palms of your hands at higher frequencies than any other material, for it holds all the knowledge of Gaia. To work with clay is to be in sacred communion with the Earth, but most importantly, to work with clay is to allow it to transform you while being led to think that you are transforming it.

Al Madam Village, Al Madam, Sharjah, UAE.
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