

The best word I can use to describe the soil of Tanzania is magical. The iron-rich red soil was unlike anything I had ever seen growing up in Northern Michigan, and it still has a power over me that I cannot seem to describe with words. Naturally occurring with the perfect percentage of clay, the soil is mixed with water and spread thick over a network of woven branches by the local Maasai women to build the walls of their homes. In my brief but unforgettable three weeks in rural Tanzania, we used the smooth red soil in the same ways as the Maasai, mixing it with cow manure and water to make an adobe mixture, but with a slightly different application. We were working with local women to build fuel-efficient wood-burning cookstoves, designed with exhaust systems to remove smoke from the homes (and eyes and lungs) of the women. Communicating with the women was difficult, me speaking only English and them only speaking kimaasai and Swahili, but the one thing that was always clear was how excited the women were to have homes free of smoke. I still cannot help but associate red soil with my Maasai friends and the experiences we shared.

I started IP this past fall not expecting to be influenced by my trip to Tanzania. My work is geometric, exploratory, and formalist. I tend to avoid color, making primarily ceramic objects and letting them be black or white when finished. The porcelain objects I was making in my first semester were interesting to me, but not particularly satisfying. I had grown old with the whiteness and predictability of the clay I was using and in my second semester started to experiment with terra cotta, an iron-rich red clay body with a distinct orange glow when fired. The finished pieces sit in a bed of white sand, which highlights the distinct terra cotta color and texture and is also a subtle nod to the whiteness of my previous work. In the studio we use “red iron oxide,” “ball clay,” and “red art,” while in Tanzania we were just using “the dirt.” In reality though, it is the same earth.

Captions for Photos

Image 1: Taken while on safari in the Serengeti National Park. This massive heard of zebras was running around, kicking up clouds of red dust from the soil.

Image 2: First Semester IP work in progress.

Image 3: Second Semester IP work in progress, this time with terra cotta.

Image 4: Finished IP work. Slip-cast terra cotta form with terra sigillata surface treatment.

Image 5: Installation of finished terra cotta forms.









