

Delcy Morelos Embraces Heaven and Earth

In *El abrazo*, Morelos balances spectacle and substance, offering visitors plenty to touch and to ponder.



Louis Bury December 12, 2023



Installation view of Delcy Morelos, “Cielo terrenal” (Earthly heaven) (2023) in *El abrazo* at Dia Chelsea (all photos Louis Bury/Hyperallergic)

Delcy Morelos’s *El abrazo*, Spanish for “the embrace,” is hard not to love. Its two soil installations, each occupying a massive room at Dia Chelsea, present a visceral contrast. The shadowy, cavernous first room contains “Cielo terrenal” (Earthly heaven, 2023), in which a glutinous layer of soil has been applied to most of the floor and the lower walls (the latter at a height corresponding to the building’s 2012 Hurricane Sandy flood line). Soil-covered metal,

wood, and ceramic objects have been ordered on the floor's soil layer like mysterious crop formations. None of the abstract and loosely figurative arrangements exceed average knee height, creating the impression that visitors occupy a bird's-eye vantage.

That sense of perspective gets flipped as the visitor enters the second room. A hulking earthen monument (2023) that shares the exhibition's title occupies most of the room. Its craggy soil walls, adorned with stubbly bits of hay, extend almost from floor to ceiling, maybe 20 or 25 feet in height, dwarfing the visitor. The bunker-like structure is suspended about a foot off the floor, as if it were levitating. On one of its four sides, a narrow passageway allows visitors to enter the structure partway, until engulfed by its mass. Similar to "Cielo terrenal," "El abrazo" has an aura of reverential mystery, only in this case the mystery feels up close and personal.



Installation view of Delcy Morelos, "El abrazo" (The embrace) (2023) in *El abrazo* at Dia Chelsea

Morelos has written a brief, poem-like set of "Instructions" encouraging visitors to touch "El abrazo." Both the instructions and the physical object foreground sensory experience. The artist has created a fragrance from cinnamon and clove and infused it into "El abrazo," which fills its room with the scent of a nutty herbal tea. The artwork's soil turns out to be surprisingly brittle for such an imposing, seemingly sturdy structure; when touched, it breaks off like crumbs from a cookie and accumulates on the floor. It will be interesting to see if the size or shape alters appreciably from being handled during the exhibition's nine-month-long run.

As the nod to Hurricane Sandy's floodwaters suggests, *El abrazo*'s conceit contains an ecological parable: that humans ought to be more mindful of how we handle the earth. The installation "El abrazo" even plays with the gendered trope of "mother nature" through its interior passageway's vaginal undertones. Yet the ethical and political points never feel belabored because the work's dramatic scalar and material qualities dominate the experience. At the same time, both installations allow space for contemplation and awe; unlike other immersive or Instagram-friendly art, nothing about *El abrazo* comes off as gimmicky. Morelos handles the balance between spectacle and substance just right, offering visitors plenty to touch and to ponder.



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Delcy Morelos: El abrazo continues at Dia Chelsea (537 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through July 7. The exhibition was curated by Alexis Lowry, curator, with Zuna Maza, curatorial assistant.