

Book of Earth

An Interview With Heidi Gustafson

Lydia Pyne

Ochre has been with humankind since our beginning.

PART IRON, PART OXYGEN, PART CLAY AND SOIL, OCHRE IS an earth pigment. It is both color and material. Crush it up, add liquid, and the pigment becomes a fluid color material—paint. For some 500,000 years, ochres and peoples have coevolved. But ochre, like the earth itself, is much, much more than simply how people have chosen to use it, be that for art or technology or any space in between.

Heidi Gustafson knows ochre. Her work with ochres has been featured in *American Craft*, where she was called the “ochre whisperer”, and *The New York Times*, in which she was described as “the woman archiving the world’s ochre.”¹ In her new book, *Book of Earth: A Guide To Ochre, Pigment, and Raw Color*, Gustafson takes readers through ochre as she knows it.² *Book of Earth* is part philosophy, part color theory, and part art and craft; it features several of her own stunning ochre art works. “I imagine ochre (iron earth, iron oxides) as a shared creative portal between the cosmos, Earth’s heart, and my tiny life,” she writes.

Book of Earth is comprised of eight sections in addition to a preface and introduction. It is organized around each color of ochre—red, yellow, green, blue, black, and white—and opens with a discussion of biogenic ochre and the role that origins play in the ochre and earth pigment worlds. “Ochre and earth pigment are situated at the nexus of huge elemental cycles,” Gustafson writes, “a gazillion years of outer space galaxy creation, a few billion years of geological and biological growth on (and of) Earth, and several hundred thousand recent years

¹“The Ochre Whisperer,” American Craft Council, accessed November 4, 2022, www.craftcouncil.org/magazine/article/ochre-whisperer; Alex Ronan, “The Woman Archiving the World’s Ochres,” *The New York Times*, October 24, 2019, sec. T Magazine, www.nytimes.com/2019/10/24/t-magazine/ocher-heidi-gustafson.html; “Early Futures,” March 13, 2016, earlyfutures.com.

² Harry N. Abrams, 2023, 224 pages hardcover.



Ochres in a stream. Photo courtesy Heidi Gustafson.

of human evolution.” This organization explores the plethora of ways that different ochre earths synchronously hold color and place.

I met Gustafson through my own research and writing about ochre. We spent a day on Whidbey Island, Washington, where she introduced me to the island’s ochres and ochrescape. She also shared her work with her Ochre Sanctuary, a collection of over 600 earth pigments. How I think and write about ochre and earth has been shaped by Gustafson’s mentorship—she has encouraged me to think more deeply and more purposefully about ochre and its existence.



Yellow ochres. Photo courtesy Heidi Gustafson.

I am excited to share our conversation about her work, *Book of Earth*. This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

Lydia Pyne (LP): In the introduction to *Book of Earth*, you write about the impetus for the project and how your ochre journey has unfolded over the last 10 years. Tell me about how you became interested in writing about ochres, pigments, and colors.

Heidi Gustafson (HG): I feel that *Book of Earth* is a project that came out of an earlier idea I had for a book where rocks spoke for themselves. I had originally wanted a book with ochre on every page—sort of almost like color swatches—but with an energetic communication quality. So *Book of Earth* has essays, photographs, and ochre artworks. I see *Book of Earth* as a book that translates the voices of ochre, the voices of rocks.

LP: *Book of Earth* lets ochre do the talking.

HG: Exactly.

LP: I think one of the incredible strengths of *Book of Earth* is how you so seamlessly blend together art, history, anthropology, poetry, and a plethora of other disciplines. In the book's introduction, you talk about feeling a responsibility to move between "lenses, scales, places, and kinds of knowledge, often without much forewarning." For you, as an author, that's a lot of different ways of thinking about ochre to hold at the same time.

HG: Yes, it can be challenging! I want to show people, to show readers, a way into ochre—to show what ochre is up to. I don't want people to assume that only archeologists are interested in ochre, or only artists are interested in ochre, or one specific group of people who have historically studied or used ochre. There are so many degrees of ochre's existence. *Book of Earth* is way to think about the full spectrum of ochre.

LP: Speaking of spectrums, this feels like a good point to talk about the book's organization, which reads like a color spectrum. The book begins with biogenic ochres—ochres that are microbial, ochres that are living—and then moves on to red ochre, yellow ochre, green earth, blue ochre, black ochre, and finishes with white earth.

HG: I followed ochre's lead, starting by looking across deep time. Microbial ochre is the origin of a lot of other ochres, so I wanted to start where the ochre starts. I feel like red ochre is a child of the

microbial ochre, so that comes next, and then I follow with other ochres. As you get to black ochre and even white ochre, you're just getting a lot closer to human industry.

LP: I love how each ochre section has an essay and discussion about each type of earth. Guiding readers through ochre this way has an organic and natural narrative flow to it.

HG: Yes, exactly. And it also follows how long certain ochres have been around. For example, you don't see a lot of vivianite, the blue ochre, in a deep time context. There isn't any 3-billion-year-old vivianite that we know about, unlike red ochre or yellow ochre.

LP: I'll be honest: Learning about "blue ochre" has fundamentally changed how I think about ochre and how color and material combine to form earth.

HG: Vivianite is a really special ochre.

LP: I know better than to ask you about a "favorite" ochre. How could you possibly pick one? But I'm curious if there's an ochre that has resonated with you throughout this project, or one that really piques your curiosity?

HG: As an ochre person, I feel like I haven't heard enough stories about yellow ochres—they seem to be overshadowed by the red ochre. It's as if yellow ochre is only talked about when and how it can be changed into red ochre.

LP: Right. Heating yellow ochre transforms it into red ochre.

HG: In *Book of Earth*, I write about the iron part of goethite and the shadow part of the Iron Age in our industrial culture. I'm fascinated by a lot of these yellow ochres that were once microbial ochres that became really hard bog irons, or like goethite where you can still see biogenic ochre sheaths.

LP: In *Book of Earth*, you describe bog iron (in the yellow ochre spectrum) as biogenic ochre's "eldest child, usually the first to form solid mineral chunks out of sludge."

HG: It feels like yellow ochre holds so many important stories. There's so much important knowledge. There are so many contemporary secrets about our culture hidden in that material.

LP: There's such a visual element to ochre. Some of the trays in your



Bearded vulture in biogenic ochre.

Photo courtesy Klaus Robin/Foundation for the Bearded Vulture.

curated ochre pieces really make me think of the historical *Wunderkammer* or cabinets of curiosities. I am curious if you could tell me a bit about how you've conceptualized the display of the ochre with images you've included?

HG: I actually was inspired by a cabinet of curiosities! In particular, a specific 18th century Dutch cabinet in Rijksmuseum's furniture collection. It is a big apothecary chest, a medicine chest, and it has all these hidden trays. The mineral medicine was hidden away; each drawer had its own set of shapes that were built around the materials that were in that tray.

LP: The interplay between what's visible and what's not—it's stunning.

HG: I wanted to have an honest nod to the European-American cultures that I'm coming from, referencing both pharmaceutical elements of ochre as well as the display of the materials. My very good friend Henry Ancheta (who is ochre and pigment expert Melonie Ancheta's husband) built those trays in collaboration with me from old IKEA bed slats.

LP (laughing): That's a great detail: To take something from IKEA and make it into something beautiful.

HG: So it's almost also like doubling this kind of joke on a European cultural context. He was like, oh yeah, I'm gonna make these beautiful trays out of like old badly made Swedish furniture.

LP: *Book of Earth* is beautiful, complex, and incredibly timely, here in the Anthropocene. What would you want readers to come away thinking more deeply about?

HG: I'm very interested in earth empathy. Earth empathy lets you relate to microbial ochre as the living lineage of ancestors that created other beings out of which we've come. You realize that gods are right in front of your face. That you're in a series of origin stories still alive right now. Ochres point us back to teachings about how to connect to ancestral memory, cultural memory. Ochres have deep meanings to me in their ability to both physically remediate landscapes, and also to spiritually remediate our relationship with the earth. ♪