

Monocle November 2009

In Her Element – New York

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Preface

Artist Teresita Fernández, who was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 2005, makes pieces that reflect the landscape as she sees it. Monocle visits her as she prepares to install her new show in New York.

"I'm originally from Miami but moved to New York 12 years ago. Living here in Brooklyn gives me privacy. I live next door to my studio. I love this neighbourhood, Boreum Hill. I like that I can walk out of my studio and turn right and there are all these gritty industrial warehouses along the Gowanus Canal, and if I turn left I can get good food and great espresso. I feel I can move between different areas of life very easily.

I've spent most of the last month going back and forth to Japan installing my commissioned work "Blind Blue Landscape" at the Benesse Art Site in Naoshima. I thrive on a hectic travel schedule. It keeps me organized. Soon, I'll install my show at Lehmann Maupin, and a museum show at The Blanton in Texas.

I like to think that I'm very hands-on in the sense that I'm obsessed with detail and how things get made I've had three people in here doing nothing but polishing and shaving chunks of graphite for the last five months. When I'm not traveling or in production meetings, I'm working here in the studio. I'm a night owl, when no one else is here. I need to be alone in order to think about why I'm making work and what's going to happen next. Right now, my whole life is covered in graphite. My new show at Lehmann Maupin will be made completely out of graphite, from the large-scale sculpture to a kind of panoramic wall installation to small drawings that are simultaneously relief sculpture, painting and traditional drawing. Graphite is relentlessly messy to work with, and everything here in my studio has acquired a gorgeous deep-grey metallic sheen. Natural raw graphite has an unreal, luminous quality. Its luster and its connection to diamonds, which have the same chemical composition, seduced me.

I traced the origins of graphite to Borrowdale in the Lake District, England, where it was first discovered and mined in the 1500s. I liked the idea that the whole of Borrowdale was essentially one big drawing, solid graphite underfoot. This is what prompted me to want to make these big, solid, three-dimensional smudges. To assemble one of the graphite pieces becomes essentially to engage in the act of drawing. I think of us as viewers and makers, as being terribly volatile, always infusing the act of looking with these serendipitous optical and psychological frenzies, so that the work is always different and always informed by the disposition of a complicit viewer.

The "Nocturnal" drawings in my upcoming show are meant to disappear. They can be initially mistaken to disappear. They can be initially mistaken for dark, minimalist

paintings. As you get closer and the surface of the polished graphite catches the light and details - the cliffs and tidal pools and night skies - are revealed. I wanted it to feel like your eyes were adjusting to the darkness, where the longer you wait the more you see. All this emphasizes this underlying theme of dimming something in order to see more; this connection between revealing and concealing. I'm fascinated by this idea that to be dazzled and blinded are, optically, the same exact thing.

I was amazed and thrilled to get the Naoshima commission. I oversaw the installation. I had an amazing crew that had just finished installing the recent Monet acquisition. There were 13 people working for a week attaching almost 30,000 tiny, mirrored glass cubes to a curved wall of the Tadao Ando space with a highly, choreographed, precise system. Each morning the workers would meet and the boss would give them a pep talk about how they should take pride in their work. Then everyone would do stretching exercises? When you go to Naoshima the landscape is so powerful and I wanted to create a piece that reflected everything that was happening atmospherically in the space around it, so each mirror becomes a miniature portrait of the changing landscape.

Working with landscape as a reference is the ultimate grandiose gesture; I'm intrigued by the pretentious, formal, and historical baggage it comes loaded with. I often spend weekend in my cabin upstate, which is near the Franklin Mineral Mine and the area where Robert Smithson (a specialist in large earthwork sculptures) conceived so much of his work. This is where I first became fascinated with the idea of mining in relation to a deliberately romanticized landscape.

After the shows in New York and Texas I'm going to Singapore for a month to develop a new body of work. I feel much more excited about what's coming than what I've already accomplished. I think that's the place you want to be as an artist because you get to a point where people expect something of you based on the work you have already created. The crucial thing is, you are looking forward or are you looking at what you've already done? I'm still being constantly surprised by my work and to me that's crucial."