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Art review: Fernandez offers a galaxy or two to contemplate

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BY GAILE ROBINSON

grobinson@star-telegram.com

When the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth mounts a Focus show, the artist is usually a young comer. Occasionally the age skews a little older to an artist with more experience, and the difference between an artist giddy with his or her first museum show and one with much more experience and exposure is tacitly obvious. Such is the case with the Modern's newest exhibit of work by Teresita Fernández; it is spectacular.

The Miami-born, New York-based artist has a history in Texas. Even though she is only in her early 40s, she sits on the board of Artpace, a nonprofit visual arts center in San Antonio, and has a permanent installation in North Texas -- her *S tarfield* of mirrored cubes on a black wall is on the Hall of Fame Level of Cowboys Stadium. She is an artist of international stature, having had solo shows in Japan, France and Spain and numerous exhibits across the U.S.

The pieces she brought to the Modern look made for the museum and, in a sense, they were. Fernández took into account the architect, the architecture, the placement of the galleries in the building, their shape and how her work could meld with all of these.

Fernández placed a large triptych in the center gallery, the first thing the visitor sees. Behind the wall, a view never seen by the public, is the outer edge of architect Tadao Ando's lake that surrounds the back of the museum. Fernández considers this work, *Nocturnal (Japan)*, a window on that view and used liquid graphite to create a landscape of water, land and sky that looks as commanding as Ando's architecture. The dark gray panels of mottled earth, rippling water and star-studded sky are her opening act. In each of the flanking galleries is another vision of a night cosmos, executed in a different manner but evoking the same wonder as looking at a night sky.

They prompt the same question, "How?" She is loath to answer.

"I'd rather talk concept," she says. "The idea is I was interested in the history of landscape drawing, which coincides with the history of graphite," she says.

When graphite was discovered in England in the 1500s, it was used to mark sheep. It took awhile before the soft gray mineral (which comes out of the ground sharp-edged like a crystal) and the gleaming surface of hematite were used for drawings. But once it was utilized to make marks on paper and artists found its range of making sharp-edged lines or smudged shadows, it became a popular medium. Fernández stretches it even further, "I wanted to make sculptures as drawings."

To make *Epic* and *Sfumato*, a combination of previously separate works, she employed a team of volunteers who spent a week preparing the walls -- 12,000 tiny red dots were put in place, and then 12,000 fingerprints dusted with a layer of powdered graphite overprinted the red dots. A sponge brush was used to streak the fingerprints, and then a nail was driven into the center of each print. On top of the nail, a small, gleaming chunk of graphite was affixed to the nail head with a magnet.

Only by being in the museum over the course of the week was it apparent how it was made. The effect is that of a star storm, swirling clouds of gray reflective chunks roiling about the ceiling. It is a choreographed graphite ballet; each little piece has been given a role and a shadow that make the lyric piece play across the room, turn corners and rise and fall in graceful swirls.

The most visually dazzling work is *Ink Sky 2*, a piece that hangs from the ceiling of the third gallery. Here, similar reflective gray chunks, this time galena rocks, are suspended from rhodium-plated chains and rain down from a reflective black panel. Standing underneath the piece and looking up can inspire a number of different allusions, from being in the middle of an asteroid storm to that of being encircled by a mineral flower.

Each gallery is distinctive, and yet all three are of a family. It is a brilliant installation.

Gaile Robinson is the Star-Telegram art and design critic, 817-390-7113