

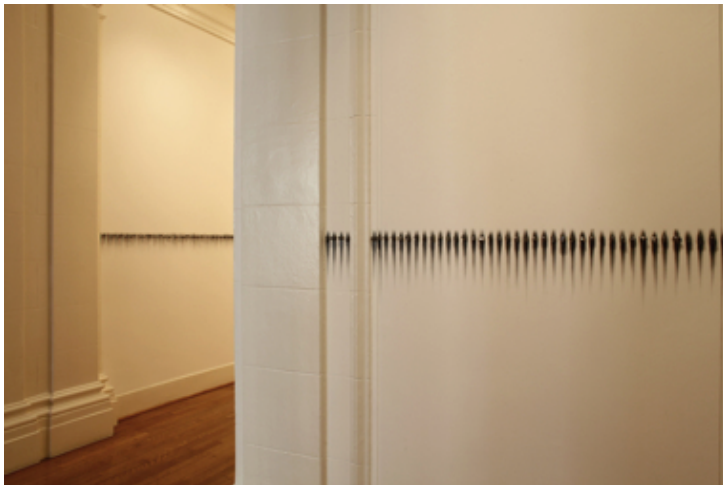


In Case You Missed It: Teresita Fernández

TERESITA FERNANDEZ
SEP 24 – OCT 22
ANTHONY MEIER FINE ARTS

BY Lea Feinstein

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light. To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight, and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings, and is travelled by dark feet and dark wings.¹
—Wendell Berry, "To Know the Dark"



Sfumato (Horizon). 2010; site-specific installation, solid graphite and drawing, dimension variable. Courtesy of Artist and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco.

These days—when wars, the failing economy, and nerve-racking elections fill the news—I am drawn to dark work. Mining the physical properties of graphite, Teresita Fernández goes “dark” in her current exhibition at Anthony Meier Fine Arts, creating sculptural wall pieces from a substance traditionally used as a drawing material. And she makes it bloom and sing.

Awarded a MacArthur genius grant in 2005 and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2003, she is best known for huge, immersive installations that explore our perceptions of light, landscape, and reflectivity, and require the viewer to move through her enhanced spaces—a cinematic experience of linked visual moments. Her works for this exhibition—abstracted black landscapes on panel and two wall-size installations—are modest in scope and scaled for a domestic interior.

In *Sfumato (Horizon)* (2010), Fernández takes the measure of the gallery’s physical space and runs a precise line of graphite nuggets at shoulder height around the perimeter of a long corridor. Attached by magnets to the wall, each chunk—raw, faceted, reflecting black light—casts its own graphite “shadow,” a powdered smudge on the wall itself. The graphite chunks are beautiful in a rough way, each one different. The continuous line reads as a “waistband” meticulously stitched or a rosary of beads visually “fingered” one by one by one. Fernández speaks of the ambulatory viewer as a main ingredient in her work, and this piece depends on that walk for its full experience, like marking the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday.² The somber rhythm and smoky darkness of the pieces call to mind the soot-stained walls of Ann Hamilton’s devotional installation *Accountings* (1992), at the Henry Art Gallery, in Seattle. Mineral nuggets on the walls of this historic San Francisco house also resonate with the local history of mines and gold seekers.

The *Nocturnal* panels are interspersed along this line and also installed in the adjoining gallery. Powdered graphite has been applied in matte and lustrous layers and in melted drips, chunks, and corrugated lines. This is no minor technical feat as graphite, like its carbon sister the diamond, has an extremely high melting point. But it is the softest of the carbons as well, and in landscape reliefs, like *Nocturnal (Stacked Bands 1)* (2010), each “gesture” and scratch leaves a trace. The polished bands in low relief at the lower edge of the panel are burnished and reflective, eerie metaphors for the night sea. In



Nocturnal (Stacked Bands 1), 2010; solid graphite and pencil on wood panel, 6 x 8 x 2 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco

Nocturnal (Rise and Fall) (2010) and *Nocturnal (Starfield 5)* (2010), polished graphite droplets and their auras stand out dimly but convincingly, like stars in the light-absorptive sky. They recall the labor-intensive pointillist drawings of Vija Celmins’ night skies, also graphite marvels, where the starry whites are left white and the dark around them is rendered like smoke.

In the living room gallery, *Double Dissolve* (2010), the only non-graphite work in the show, is installed facing a bank of windows. Comprising dozens of mirrored Lucite cubes affixed meticulously to the wall, it scatters radiance from a dense center outward, controlling the space of the entire wall with very little material.

Like her avowed inspiration, Robert Smithson, Fernández tackles nature on a grand scale. Waterfalls, dunes, bamboo groves, fire, and a city skyline have been interpreted in highly refined industrial materials (polished steel, Lucite, acrylic tubing, silk threads from industrial looms). But where Smithson’s works, like *Gravel Mirrors with Cracks and Dust* (1968), were raw, fierce, and unruly, Fernández’s works are elegant and precise. It is metaphorical nature, created with extraordinary formal restraint, aesthetically cool and tamed by an architectural setting.

The intimacy of the Meier show is a rare treat. The tactility and familiarity of the graphite is extremely seductive, and walking the meditative installation is a delight. But perhaps the singular achievement here is how much *light* the artist is able to wring from the darkness.

Teresita Fernández was on view at [Anthony Meier Fine Arts](#), in San Francisco, through October 22, 2010.

1. Wendell Berry, "To Know the Dark" from *Farming: A Handbook* (Harcourt Brace, 1970)

2. Anne Stringfield. "Teresita Fernández Interview." *Teresita Fernández: Blind Landscape*. USF Contemporary Art Museum and JRP-Ringier, 2009.

Teresita Fernández: I’m interested in making works that generate a singular, intimate experience. So I do need someone to set a piece into motion and complete the circuit of meaning in the work. I am interested in this simultaneous presence of viewer as both spectator and performer, wholeheartedly complicit and willing. What I’m after is a lingering ephemeral engagement, slow, quiet, and with enough depth, kinesthetically, to be recalled by the viewers after the work is no longer in front of them. I think the best works of art somehow haunt you a little bit; I’ve always liked the etymological thread between spectator, spectrum, and specter.