

HYPERALLERGIC

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Our Political Furor Rendered in Ceramic and Fire

Here's a story: Once upon a time there was a nation. Then it caught on fire. The end.

By, Seph Rodney
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Teresita Fernández “Fire (America) 5” (2017), glazed ceramic, 96 x 192 x 1.25 inches (photo by EPW Studio/Maris Hutchinson; all images courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong)

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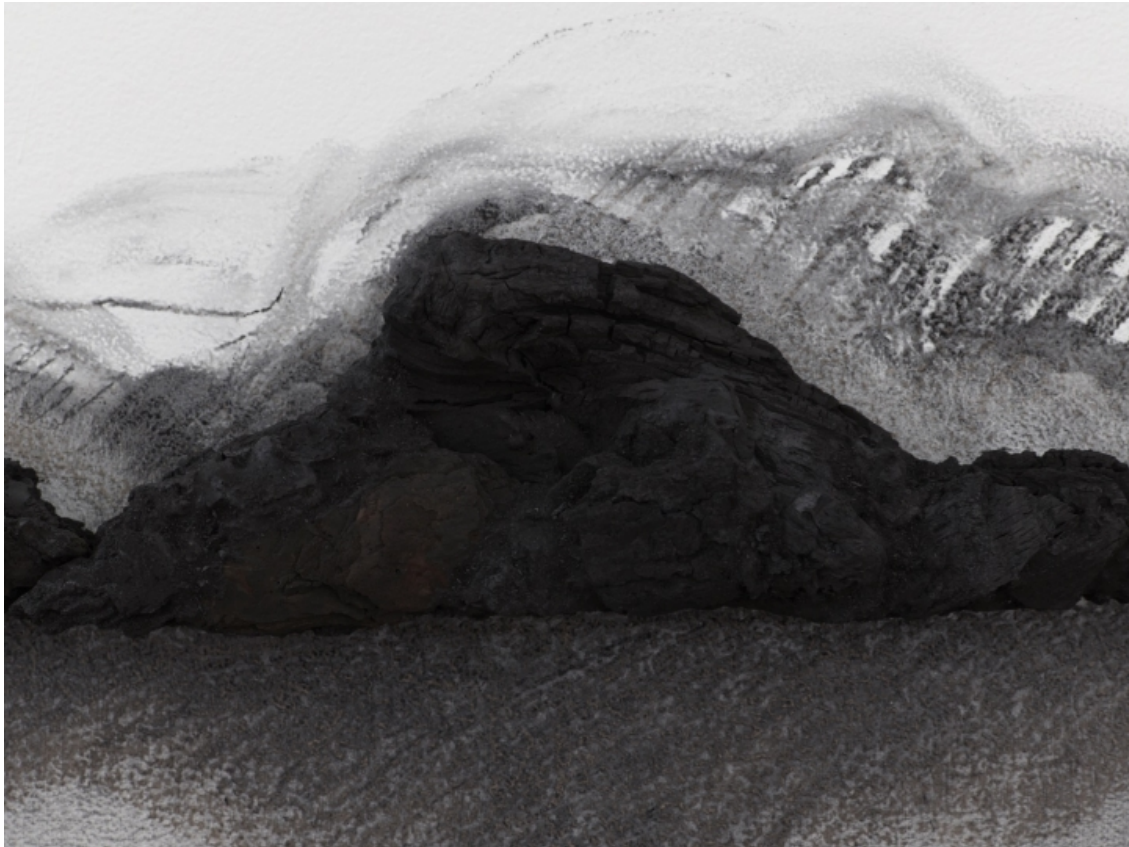
I think of the remnants of conflagrations when I see *Fire (America)*, Teresita Fernández's exhibition at Lehmann Maupin Downtown. Its central piece, "Fire (America) 5" (2016), is an image of roiling flames reproduced on glazed ceramic — a material that is itself birthed in fire. That's the mesmerizing part. But what fires often leave behind, and what is left behind here, is a shoulder-level horizon line of charred wood encircling the gallery. These remnants are a poignant coda to the story above *and* the portent that attempts to wave us off from it.

Given enough oxygen, a fire that feeds on hydrocarbons — the main source of the world's electric energy and heat — will leave behind only carbon dioxide and water. The charred wood and ash here represent *incomplete* combustion. The cinders are a fitting metaphor for the nation's ravenous political appetites and insatiable angers that want to consume truthful rhetoric, intellectual discourse, philosophical consistency, ethical fidelity, and whoever the opposition may be. What's left behind when these are swallowed up by righteous indignation is not mere gas and steam, but ashy debris pocking a landscape as bleak as it is barren.



Teresita Fernández “Charred Landscape (America)” (2017), installation view (photo by Elisabeth Bernstein)

This exhibition is a work of prophecy. It is also a work of artistic ambition: to use drawing as a tool to extract the metaphorical potential of a landscape by giving the one Fernández has formed here the added dimensionality of shadows, along with the rough topography formed by some charred forms fixed to the walls. The installation evokes a clearer understanding of what I recognize as a landscape — that is, a site that is distant until I get close enough to recognize the objects in it. At that point, they become my surroundings and it’s too late to escape.



Teresita Fernández “Charred Landscape (America) (2017), detail
(photo by Elisabeth Bernstein)

Heat, passion, desire, damnation, consumption, destruction, and a tree, a natural, living creature choked of its life to shrivel into ash — all culminate in fire. Another story this work evokes, from essayist Robert Fulghum, tells of a fireman speaking to a tenant whose apartment fire started in the tenant’s bed. The fireman asks the man what caused the bed to catch fire, and he answers: “I don’t know; it was on fire when I lay down on it.”

Fire (America) continues at Lehmann Maupin Downtown (201 Chrystie Street, Lower East Side) through May 20.