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ART

Beauty and Disunity in Two Visions of the United States

The work of Teresita Fernandez and Nari Ward presents two contradictory views of the United States — one of the most hopeful, and one of the least.



Seph Rodney 4 days ago





Teresita Fernández, “Fire (United States of the Americas)” (2017) charcoal, 57 parts, 158 x 175.75 x 1.25 inches (approximately) 401.3 x 446.4 x 3.2 cm (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

A nation is a strange, abstracted construction: an aggregate of people, most of whom will never meet each other, who are nevertheless understood to be fellow citizens — that is, collaborators in some shared political project. *American Landscape*, on view at [Lehmann Maupin](#) gallery until May 5, presents two contradictory visions of the United States — one of the most hopeful, and one of the least — in the work of [Teresita Fernandez](#) and [Nari Ward](#).



Nari Ward, “Last words of John Brown” (2017) (detail view)
shoelaces, 48 x 184 x 4 inches, 121.9 x 467.4 x 10.2 cm (photo
by the author for Hyperallergic)

Fernandez presents “Fire (United States of the Americas)” (2017), which uses wood burned into charcoal to reify a map of each of the continental American states. The states are haloed by a streaks of dark ash, and spaced so that the whole seems to be breaking up. One can read the news or peruse any of the popular social media platforms to get the same indication: that our discrete municipalities are becoming balkanized, and more loudly so, as we debate law, policing, LGBTQ rights and recognition, teacher pay, immigration, military intervention, and taxation policy. Unlike a generation ago, these turbulences cannot be abated by rhetoric or a patriotic ideology, which so often is racialized and

blinkered. I think of Sylvia Plath’s poem “[Elm](#),” in which the speaker almost seems a surrogate for the the nation itself: “Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs. / A wind of such violence / Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.”

Yet in another room, Nari Ward puts forward the narrative that the mosaic of difference — given enough distance — can combine into a compelling and lovely portrait. Up close and from the side, “Last words of John Brown” (2017) is simply shoelaces of varied colors strung through holes in the wall, so that they fall at varied lengths. From farther away, one sees that the laces form language — a complete sentence, a complete thought: “This is a beautiful country.” True. It is, in places. I know because I have seen them: driving down Pacific Coast Highway from Long Beach to Dana Point on a Saturday afternoon, on which the grandeur of collective endeavors such as coastline-hugging highways seem both necessary and miraculous. These structures make this country navigable and connected, and crucially, they are shared utilities made by people I will never see or know.



American Landscape Installation view, Lehmann Maupin, New York, courtesy the artists and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong (photo by Matthew Herrmann)

How to reconcile these visions? How else, but to decide to live *in* them? I decided long ago that I would live in a city of raucous difference, though it is sometimes grating and exasperating. One can decide not to hate disparities in ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, and religious affiliation (or lack thereof). Love may be out of reach, but one can choose something other than spite, and thrive. Then, perhaps, this strange idea of the nation-state can live on.

[American Landscape](#) continues at [Lehmann Maupin](#) gallery (536 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through May 5.

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