

Opinion

TURNING POINTS

The Year 2019, as Seen by Five Artists

Dec. 3, 2019



“Fire (United States of the Americas)2” (2018-19) by Teresita Fernández. Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong and Seoul

Teresita Fernández

“Fire (United States of the Americas)2,” (2019)

Earlier this year, I made a large-scale work titled “Fire (United States of the Americas)2.” Solid charcoal elements arranged in the shape of the continental United States emerge from a wall of gestural, smoky, hand-drawn marks depicting a country burning, falling, slipping. The piece reinserts the shape of Mexico onto the map, newly configured and reimagined as so immense that its redemptive, ghostlike presence starts to dissolve into the cosmos, looming large over the United States.

The charred image prompts viewers to contemplate and question the social history of the United States of America. Only here are we in the habit of using the term “America” in its singular form. Throughout the rest of the Western Hemisphere, the term is customarily used in its plural form: “the Americas.”

Since the 19th century, when the United States invaded Mexico and devised a treaty that claimed more than half of Mexico’s territory, the United States has consistently backed coups throughout Latin America. It has militarized right-wing groups; intervened in elections, civil wars and revolutions; and ignited wars, massacres and gang violence that have left deep scars, forcing the impoverished and imperiled to move north seeking asylum. In the 1930s, President Herbert Hoover started a mass deportation program that expelled 1.8 million Mexicans from the United States, 60 percent of whom were legal citizens. Such stories of American history are largely unknown to a great many United States citizens.

This exceptionalist amnesia insidiously shapes and enables the hateful anti-immigrant and anti-Latinx sentiment in this country, extending from the El Paso massacre in August to the ongoing hunting, caging and separation of migrant families. I urge everyone who wants to understand how we got here to watch the powerful 2012 documentary “Harvest of Empire” (based on Juan González’s book of the same name), so that we can collectively remember the direct correlation between the United States’ interventions in Latin America and the injustices in our immigration system today. They are here because we were there.

Teresita Fernández is a visual artist and MacArthur fellow whose work rethinks the landscape’s connection to colonialism, history, violence and power. Her midcareer retrospective “Teresita Fernández: Elemental” is on view at the Pérez Art Museum Miami until Feb. 9.