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GARDENS OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS
Teresita Fernández cultivates spare, evocative landscapes of wisteria and waterfalls

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

Teresita Fernández's art invites reflection. Light glances off the shimmering surfaces of her gardens and pools, places where you might get lost in a daydream. But the shifting vistas of her big, seductive installations are couched in the most minimal visual language, leaving it to the idling visitor to fill in the context. "The viewer is an integral part of the experience, almost like a circuit that completes the work," says Fernández. "What I make doesn't function very well outside of that witnessing."

At the Castello di Rivoli just outside Turin, Italy, through the end of this month, the 33-yearold artist entices visitors to take a walk through her garden. It's one that couldn't be more obviously fabricated from synthetic materials, yet it simulates the pleasures of "true" nature—which, to Fernández's way of thinking, is almost invariably altered by human design anyway.

In the garden, a waterfall made of a plastic carpet, striated with horizontal bands of mottled blues and whites, rolls off the wall and out into the room. A rainbow composed of more than 5,000 acrylic cubes, each back-side silk-screened with a single color, sparkles across the wall. In the next room a large, square pond, constructed from wood and foamboard painted a deep blue-green, dominates the floor. Resting on top of this surface are more acrylic cubes, in green and yellow and clustered in ovoids that cast their reflections onto this illusion of water. Trellises of drooping wisteria, fashioned from a repeating elliptical form laser-cut from plastic and vinyl, hover a couple of inches away from the walls. The back of each trellis is coated with an intense pigment that bounces a colored glow off the white wall. (The installations, Waterfall and Wisteria (Yellow), were originally commissioned by SITE Sante Fe in 2000.)

The work is optically mesmerizing. The stripes of the waterfall are like film stills moving in succession, animating this static object. The rainbow, too, is just individual points of color. It's only one's vision that blends and holds it together, much as happens when looking at an Impressionist painting. The images and how they were put together are disarmingly straightforward, yet they tease the eye and mind in sophisticated ways.

"Part of the attraction of her work is that it's not smoke and mirrors," says Peter Boswell. senior curator of the Miami Art

Museum, where Fernández will show new work in November of next year. "She gets these perceptual effects, but all you have to do is look closely and you understand how it was done. Then you step away and the effect takes over again. Her work is simple to grasp, but the associations it can conjure up are very complex."

Marcella Beccaria, who organized the show at the Castello di Rivoli, says, "Fernández has designed this journey through the garden for the visitor. She's really created a wonderful and peaceful atmosphere in which the visitor is asked to look and listen and enter the work in a private way. It's not imposing any kind of narrative or illustration."

Indeed, while her pond, like the rainbow, evokes Impressionism—Monet's water lilies instantly comes to mind—it is stripped of any specific reference. The floating, ringed forms could just as well be seen as nuclei—on either a cellular or cosmic scale—or tropical islands. Beccaria also notes that the eye tends to wander among the shadows cast by the wisteria sculptures. '1he color that you actually see reflected on the wall is like the memory of color," she explains.

Memory was also a conceptual component of Fernández's installation on the garden-hall window at New York's Museum of Modern Art last year. "We had started construction in the garden as part of our expansion, and you know how people adored the garden," says Paola Antonelli, one of the curators who invited Fernández to contribute a piece to the museum's "Open Ends" cycle of exhibitions. "She created a filter on the window that made the inside more interesting than what was going on outside and mediated the memory and emotional attachment to the garden."

Fernández started by affixing a reflective film to the window's exterior so that light and shapes could be perceived, but not the construction in the garden. Then, for the interior side, she erected a white plastic trellis of repeating ovals that seemed to climb like ivy up and across the window. The glass picked up the soft green painted on the trellis's reverse side. Titled Hothouse, the installation also evoked beads of moisture accumulating on a windowpane, suggesting the museum's role in cultivating artistic growth. "It's taking a geometric form and reproducing it over and over again until the final image is something very organic," says Fernández, who grew up in Miami and now lives with her husband on a quiet street in Brooklyn, a couple of doors down from her warehouse studio.

The discourse between artifice and nature is at the heart of her work and perhaps not coincidentally plays out on her native Floridian terrain, where it takes tremendous effort

to groom and control natural growth. Fernández's parents moved to Miami from Cuba in the 1950s, when they were teenagers, and she says art was not part of the cultural landscape in her youth. She became interested in making sculpture in college, at Florida International University, and went on to get her M.F.A. from Virginia Commonwealth University. "The hardest part about defining yourself as an artist is coming up with an interesting problem, one that begins to shape your own personal vocabulary, as opposed to just making stuff," says Fernández, whose lush, dark features contrast with a certain austerity in her dress and manner.

"For me that happened after graduate school." She declines to give particulars on this or other topics that she fears might pigeonhole her work. Talking with Fernández is a bit like experiencing her art— while hospitable and inviting, she adamantly controls the dialogue.

She does say that, more than contemporary art, her travels abroad—including a 1997 residency in Japan and a 1999 fellowship in Rome—have informed her work. She was particularly influenced by her study of Japanese and 17th-century European formal gardens. "Originally I was interested in the formal garden as a very concrete way to look at how a viewer unravels a space by moving through it." Fernández says. "If you think of Versailles, there are these framed, compressed vistas from the back of the palace. The only way you can actually understand the space is by walking through these designed plans, tracing the geometric forms of the shaped hedges with your body. It is a very sophisticated way of manipulating how you see."

Her installation "Borrowed Landscape"—first shown at ArtPace in San Antonio, after her residency there in 1998— directly used such parterre garden plans. Meticulously drawn in pencil on panels, her labyrinthine designs served as the flooring of five cubes she created out of translucent scrims, colored shades of citron and aqua. Visitors could walk between—but not enter—these intimate rooms. Cut-out oculi and lamps simulating daylight illuminated the veiled spaces. As the position of the strolling viewer shifted, so too did the layering of colors and degree of transparency, offering changing vistas and sight lines. “There’s definitely a kind of eroticism to a lot of the images I use,” says Fernández, and here the mind could wander from harems to literature’s secret-garden courtships. “It’s not a sexual reference so much as a sensual and sensorial one.”

An idea rather than an image is always the starting point of a piece for Fernández. “Once I realize a connection between concepts, then it’s a matter of finding a visual form that fits the idea,” she says. “That image then gets stripped down so there’s just the merest suggestion of it.” She cites as an example the empty swimming pool she build for her first solo show in 1996 at her New York gallery, Deitch Projects: “It was all about the

translucency, all about the lighting, all about how you moved around the edges, all about how the material might change, all about obscuring what the original material was. There was a lot of real experimenting with how you make this effect happen."

Drawing is an important part of that process. Fernández often fleshes out ideas on paper that may relate to an installation but do not look like it. While she was making the rainbow sculpture, for instance, she drew images resembling the contours of trees reflected in water, but which are really composed of hundreds of abutting lozenge forms in brilliant hues. "The rainbow piece looks very different from the drawings but is actually put together in a similar way," she says. "It's made up of all these individual points of pure color.' Her works on paper sell for up to $3,500 and her installations for $25,000.

Another piece visitors can roam around until the end of this month is *Bamboo Cinema*, commissioned by the Public Art Fund and installed in Madison Square Park in New York. A grove of acid-green poles sprout from the ground in a maze of concentric circles. As visitors walk through the slight spaces between the poles, they experience something like the shutter of a camera opening and closing. This flickering effect increasingly distorts the surrounding park and traffic and buildings the deeper in people walk.

"There are a lot of cinematic references in my work that conceptually and visually have to do with the placement of the viewer," says Fernández. "You're really projecting yourself into these situations, which is exactly what happens in film. It's a kind of fantasizing, believing in what you're looking at so you become invested in it, even though you're completely aware of it's synthetic quality."

While the kids who run through *Bamboo Cinema* all day long may have only play on their minds, parents watching from a distance as their children disappear and reemerge within the grove could be imagining any number of scenarios. Based on a simple concept, *Bamboo Cinema* collects more complicated emotions, catching the flicker of thought through the mind.

Hilarie M. Sheets is a contributing editor of ARTnews. She wrote on contemporary sculpture for the June issue.