

STACKED WATERS 2009

By Annette DiMeo Carlozzi

From the book *Teresita Fernández: Blind Landscape*. Published by the USF Contemporary Art Museum and JRP-Ringier, 2009

In a massive interior space of complex geometries, a simple illusion has been constructed. A vision of deep water beckons, framed by arches, like a postcard view. Grounding an atrium rising to diagonal skylights, a grand stair and two lengths of an arcade lead to exhibition galleries—while the fiction unfolds in all directions. The watery blue surround shimmers and floats, illuminated by changing Texas light, which it absorbs and reflects throughout the day. Thousands of precisely measured acrylic strips ascend the walls, accompany the stairs, and lend the monumental entry a unified spatial coherence and the feeling of art museum-arrival. Configured horizontally, the stripes of stylized swirl gradually shift in color as they scale the walls, creating what the artist calls “a colored abstraction that fades from deep blue to white at the top.” Mercurial in nature, responding to *nature*, the newly commissioned work heightens the experience of ongoing change. Visitors move within this scenario, lured by the image yet fully aware of its fabrication.

Titled *Stacked Waters* in a nod to Donald Judd’s boxes, the work suggests that the space is a container—of experience, certainly, history, perhaps, but most lyrically, a vessel of water, a cistern, pool, or ancient bath. Subliminally, the museum has been introduced as a place of material, and even bodily, transformation. Where one is located becomes a question of interpretation, and self-consciousness is triggered, whether through submission to the fantasy or simply acknowledgment of the body’s reflection on the polished, mirror-like walls. Immersed, indeed at first seemingly submerged inside, the visitor ultimately “emerges” from the illusion at the top of the stairs more bodily aware, actively engaged in image-making, having negotiated some of the poetic tensions between what is and what may be—perfect preparation for the pleasures of careful looking promised by the galleries beyond.

Investigating the act of looking is central to Teresita Fernández’s work. She explores the reverberations between seeing what exists before one’s eyes and perception, a seemingly more subjective process of recognition. Meticulous and subtle, her works trigger kinesthetic sensations, prompt memories and associations, unleash new perceptions that challenge what is logically known. In *Stacked Waters*, her custom-cast acrylic surface features a stylized, ripple pattern that suggests flow, but such an organic allusion is directly contradicted by the installation’s handcrafted precision. Its measured vertical layers, conspicuous pattern shifts and seams, and disjunctive stair-stepped color merges all call attention to the artificial construction of this pseudo-aquatic environment. The mind struggles to envision a cool and bountiful volume of water even as it calculates the mathematical inter-relationships of six surrounding planes.

Since the mid-1990s Fernández has developed myriad sculptural scenarios that envelope the viewer. At the same time, she has been intrigued by a particular design of architect Adolph Loos: his 1928 unrealized swimming pool for performer Josephine

Baker. In that little-known masterpiece, Loos imagined voyeuristic one-way windows that would provide intermittent underwater views of swimmer Baker to visiting guests. In *Stacked Waters*, bodies occupy space in a playful manner related both to Loos' implied cinema and to the way that Judd's containers choreograph light; this was made apparent in a thrilling choral performance held recently in the atrium. Over 100 singers ranged up the grand staircase and around the mezzanine level above, while below, an audience of approximately the same size moved throughout the space peripatetically, experiencing the sights and sounds from vantage points of their own choosing. The audience's meanderings, spontaneous and sensorially driven, activated the space to its most dynamic capacity, filling *Stacked Waters* with both actual and reflected activity, the lines between viewer and performer, body and image dissolving as effectively as the architecture around them.