

sculpture

Teresita Fernández

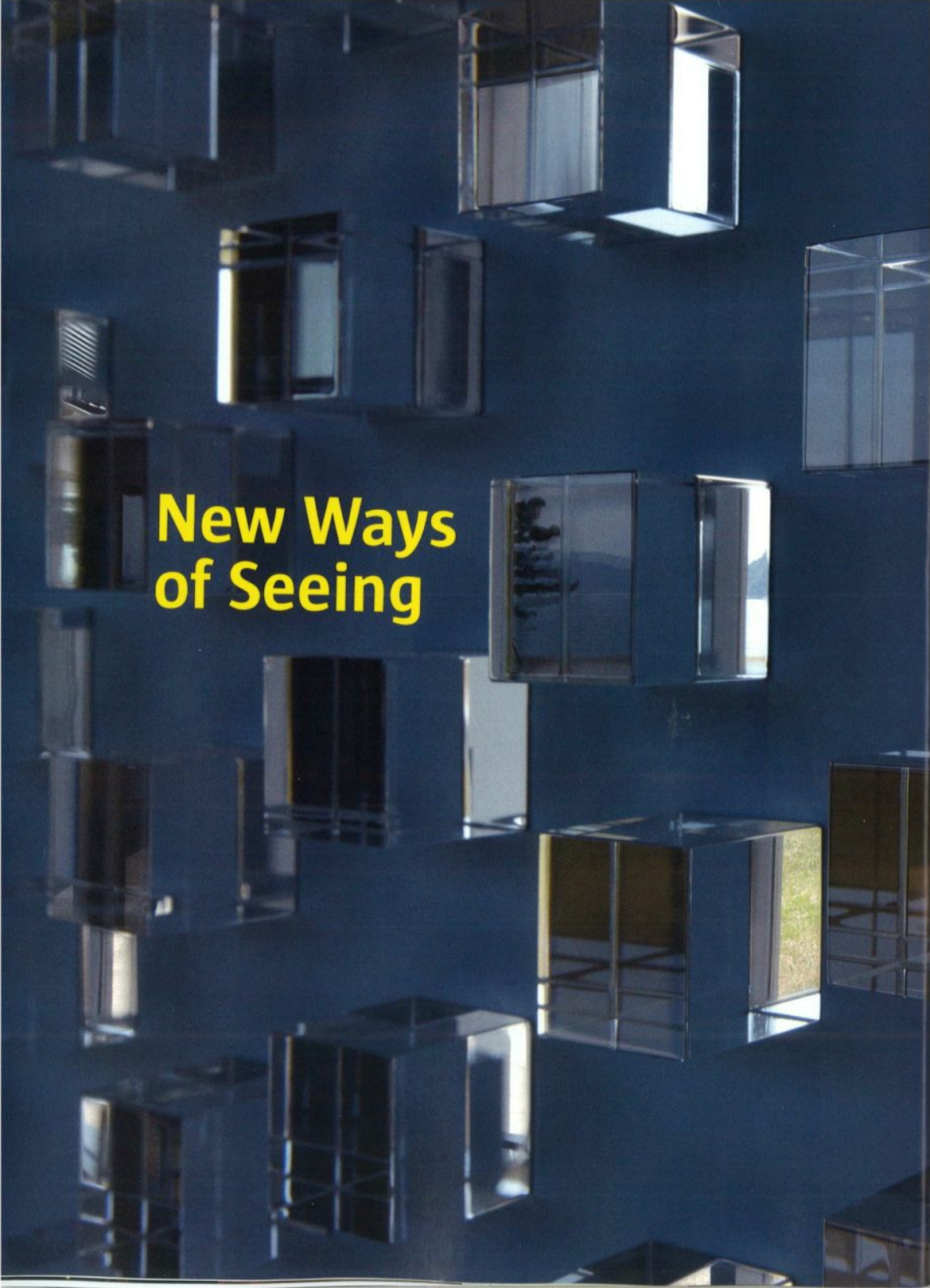
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**New Ways
of Seeing**



A Conversation with

Teresita Fernández

BY HILARY STUNDA

Blind Blue Landscape, 2009. Glass with silvering, 118.11 x 826.77 in. Detail of work at the Benesse Art Site, Naoshima, Japan.

NOBUJU ANDO/ARAWA, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LEHMANN MAUPIN, NY AND HONG KONG



Drawn Waters (Borrowdale) 2, 2009. Natural and machined graphite on steel armature, 121.19 x 43.5 x 86 in.

A graphite waterfall, a ring of silk fire, a bamboo “forest” of acrylic tubes, and a braille constellation set against a luminous night sky: Miami-born, Brooklyn-based Teresita Fernández explores natural phenomena while challenging perception with a new vocabulary of “seeing.” To experience the lingering resonance of her large works is to approach closely, step under, through, and above. The ambulatory motion erases preconceptions while revealing the unexpected.

A large part of Fernández’s conceptual process takes place during the research stage. Ultimately, her work is concerned with the fusion of ideas, expressed through an ingenious and innovative use of such materials as graphite, pulp paper, acrylic, silk yarn, and glass. The viewer is left with floating memories and metaphors.

In October 2012, Fernández was appointed by President Obama to serve a four-year term on the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, a small advisory group that consults with the president and Congress on prospective sites for future national memorials and museums. She won a 2005 MacArthur “Genius” grant and was the youngest artist to be commissioned by the Seattle Art Museum for its Olympic Sculpture Park. Earlier this year, Fernandez received the 2013 Aspen Award for Art at the Aspen Art Museum’s ninth annual ArtCRUSH gala.

Hilary Stunda: *Your works are concerned with perception. How do you define the act of seeing?*

Teresita Fernández: I am not interested in the scientific construct of “perception,” but in the kind of emotional response that a viewer has to a particular set of stimuli. My original interest—as far back as graduate school—was the idea of the ambulatory viewer. That’s what is important about sculpture and why I have never been a painter. There’s a sense of sculpture that, in its most basic form, you understand through moving. Yes, it’s connected to the eye in a traditional sense of perception, but it’s also connected to the fact of a moving body, a perceiving *being*, not just a roving eye. I reject the idea of a roving eye, that someone “has a good eye” or

“your eye does this or that.” Your body doesn’t really work that way. Your body moves around something and peels back layers of understanding through how you move.

HS: *The ambulatory participant of Seattle Cloud Cover experiences the cityscape through tiny holes of multicolored glass layered with images of colored photographs. Fifteen years earlier, in Bamboo Cinema, viewers walked through eight-foot-high, circular acrylic tubes that broke the visual plane into staccato rhythms, like a filmstrip.*

TF: With almost all of my work, there is movement. And it’s connected to a cinematic framework—things aren’t static; moving viewers are unraveling something and giving it meaning by how they’re moving around it.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LEBMANN MAUPIN, NY AND HONG KONG



Night Writing (Hero and Leander), 2011. Colored and shaped paper pulp with inkjet assembled with mirror, 49.21 x 66.14 in.

HS: You mention removing yourself from nature to understand nature. Referential constructions such as *Drawn Waters* (Borrowdale) allude to Robert Smithson's *land pours*. Do you see a connection to his work?

TF: Smithson is important to any artist of my generation, but I find there are many points of connection with his work. It has to do with how his practice makes anything fair game. It's something that happens completely outside the theoretical, an inclusive quality, a way of bringing things together that may have nothing to do with one another. There is a part of this in how I approach my work as well.

You can look at *Waterfall* from various points of view. From far away, it looks like an object; or you can stand underneath it, and it's like an interior, a shelter with light coming through from the other side.

The hot pink, hanging piece from my last show at Lehmann Maupin is experienced very differently. You walk in, and you're underneath it. It hovers above you. But then you go up to the balcony, and the work looks entirely different and evokes a very different reaction. The only thing that has changed is you. You perceive it differently.

HS: Your use of materials is wide-ranging and unconventional. The finished works allow materials to break free of their usual associations.

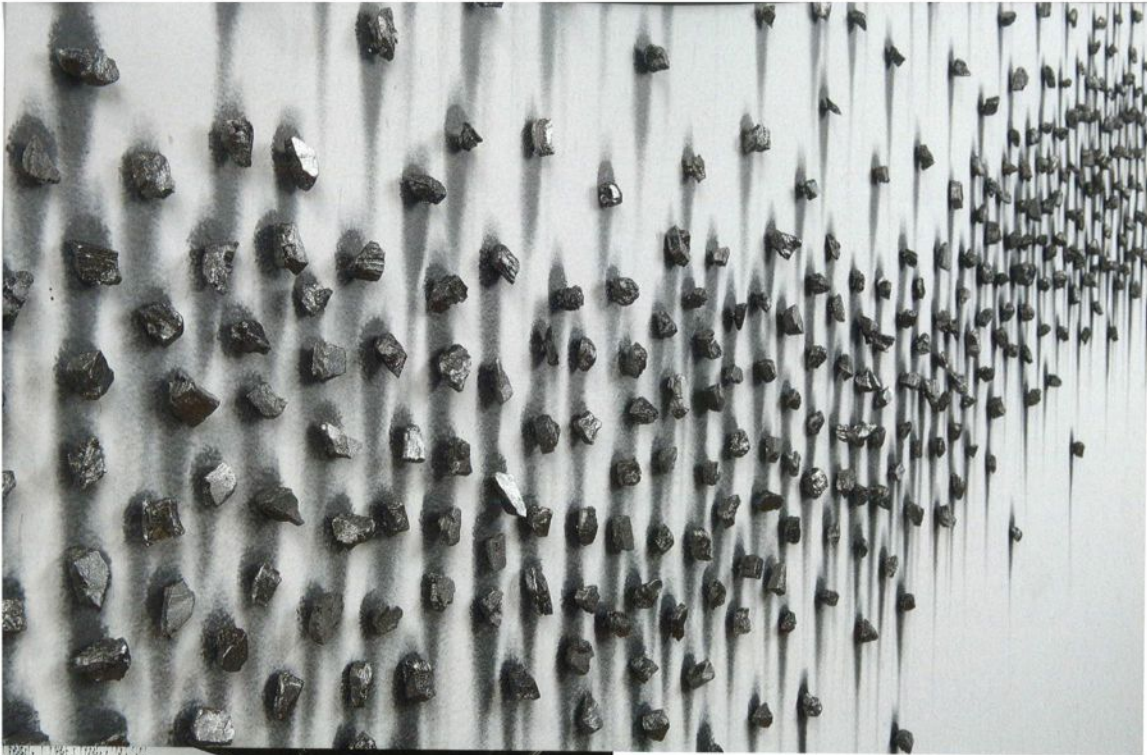
TF: I do a lot of research. I'm interested in the historical and cultural context of place and of materials, and I look at materials not only for their physical qualities—which are important—but also for the conceptual framework that they represent. Where does the material come from? What does it mean to other people? What are the anecdotes attached to the history of that material? It has to do with people and places and things and events. It has nothing to do with just the materiality of it. That really informs my work. The idea comes first.

HS: Speaking of bringing disparate ideas together, *Night Writing* is very layered—both in construct and in research.

TF: I was in Singapore when I started that project. I was doing a month-long residency with an amazing team of people who can basically make anything. I was reading a lot and researching, and I was interested in how human beings have always looked up to the night sky for information. The night sky becomes the first calendar, the first clock, the first map—the way that humans still orient themselves in space and time. As I started looking and developing these images, I came across an unrelated thing called “night writing.”

Napoleon wanted someone in his army to develop a system of communication whereby soldiers could communicate silently, without light or sound. An army captain named Charles Barbier came up with a system using a piece of cardboard with some

COURTESY THE ARTIST, LEHMANN MAUPIN, NY AND HONG KONG, AND STY, SINGAPORE



Left and detail: *Epic*, 2009. Graphite and magnets, dimensions variable. View of installation at University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum.

holes in it that corresponded to the phonetic sounds of the French language. It was clumsy—hard to work and hard to learn—so it was tossed out and never used by the French army. But a few years later, Barbier gave a presentation at the National Institute of the Blind in Paris, and there was a teenager in the audience named Louis Braille, who heard this and developed what we have come to know as braille. The departure point for me was that it was called “night writing.” Even though it has nothing to do with the night sky, stars, constellations, or even orientation in the landscape, when I read that, it became the connection.

HS: *Viewers see their reflections pass through tiny perforations in the paper, set against the night sky.*

TF: The constellations are actually braille. Language becomes the ultimate abstraction. I’m saying things in those works, and, of course, they are not legible. It’s about a connection between the tactile and the visual. If you can see, you can’t touch and read the braille. If you can read braille, you can’t touch it, because it’s behind glass. It’s language lost in translation, hiding in plain sight. An epic text that’s not accessible to the viewer—so the viewer projects his or her own read on it.

HS: *What is the time span from the unveiling of the research and idea to the installed and finished piece?*

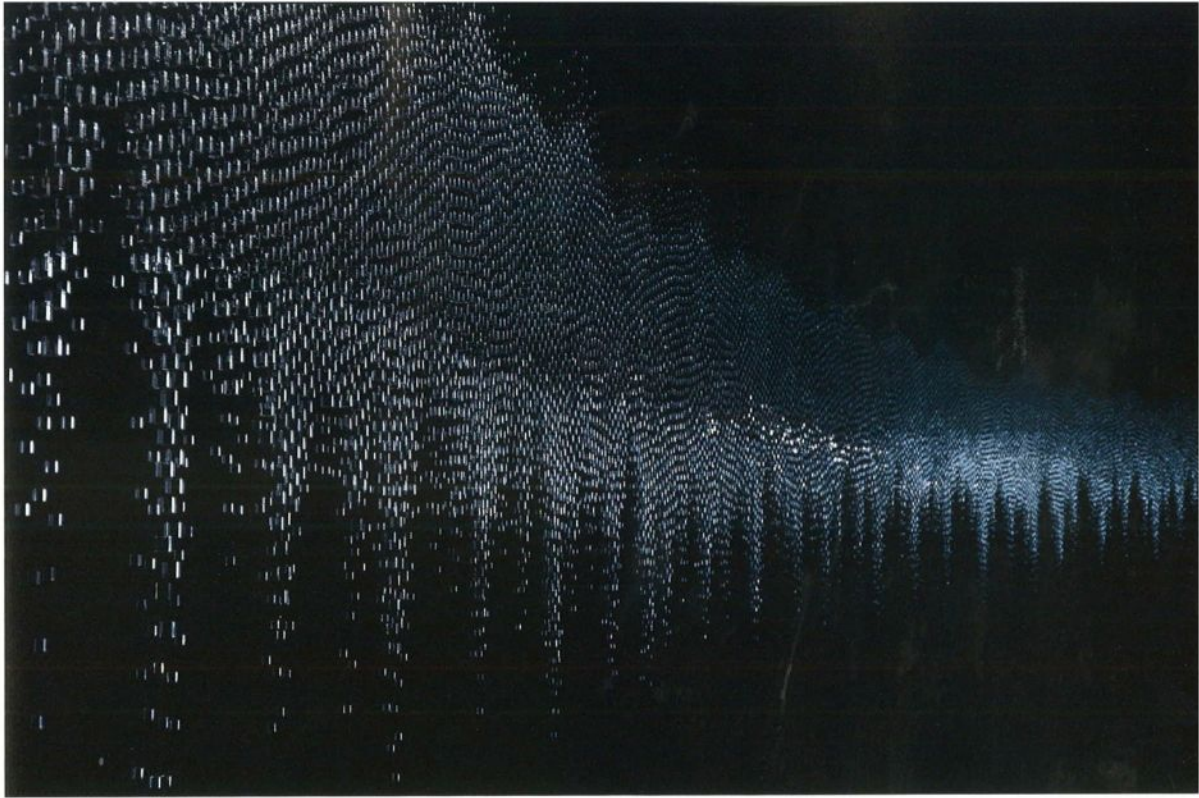
TF: Sometimes it happens very quickly; but there are pieces for which I do nothing but research for a year before I get anywhere. In the case of *Night Writing*, I worked on the ideas for a couple of months, and then the production of the work took about nine months. I was working with a team of pulp and paper masters. It was complicated technically, but I had help with part of it.

HS: *How do you arrive at the final “product?”*

TF: A lot of people think my work is about formal elements that come together in the end, but it couldn’t be further from that. The art is when I put together different bits of cultural and historical artifacts and information. Suddenly, it’s a new project—then I figure out how it’s going to look. This is why I always say the work is completely conceptual. The art is the creation of those connections. I bring together points of information that have nothing to do with one another and create a lyrical and poetic connection.

HS: *I’m interested in how the conceptual is born from seeking.*

AARON IGLER, GREENHOUSE MEDIA, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LEHMANN MAUPIN, NY AND HONG KONG



Above: *Blind Blue Landscape*, 2009. Glass with silvering, 118.11 x 826.77 in. Right: *Stacked Waters*, 2009. Cast acrylic, site-specific installation at the Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin.

TF: It takes a lot of research to get there. I'll read 10 books that have nothing to do with each other, just looking for that little tidbit. Research is a very blind act of searching and searching. It's like going down the rabbit hole. It takes you one place and then takes you somewhere else. It's not theoretical research. I travel, I read literature; I look, I watch films.

HS: *Are you drawn to any particular place or era? Is there something that you find particularly compelling or rich in material and ideas?*

TF: No, but I do have places that are important to me. There's a very solemn, poetic, quiet, and subtle quality to the Japanese sensibility that has always been very important to me. Earlier in my career, I was showing in Japan; interest from institutions and collectors started there before anywhere else.

HS: *How does the Japanese sensibility relate to your works?*

TF: Their way of thinking and living and moving through places and spaces influenced my sensibility. The kind of situation that I try to create evokes particular emotional reactions in the viewer. It's an immersive yet quiet sensibility. My work does not hit you in the face. It's not necessarily entertaining or easy to look at. You have to slow down and spend some time with the work to be engaged. With time, things start to unfold slowly and subtly, significantly. That's the kind of engagement that interests me.

HS: *Your works are often referred to as architectural. Would you agree?*



TF: There's a notion that if you make something big enough it's architecture, but that's not true. It's sculptural. What I am trying to do is sculptural, not architectural. One of the big differences between architecture and art is that an architect gets a brief. You have a site, a client. Artists don't have a brief. I have to make a question. That's the hard part of the work. You must ask yourself what you are interested in. Why is it interesting, and where does that take you? You have to start from nothing.

HS: *Do your works surprise you once they are installed?*

TF: Almost always. There's a lapse in my process between conception, idea, and planning and the actual work being installed. I do a lot of models, and I have tools to figure out a lot of things. Even



Above and detail: *Nocturnal (Navigation)*, 2013. Polyester resin, gold chroming, and polished brass rod, site-specific installation at the U.S. Coast Guard headquarters, Washington, DC.

as if you are next in line—another artist from another generation realizing the material’s potential. There was a lot of testing. I spent a year just trying to find the right kind of graphite, which ultimately came from Sri Lanka. Again, that was an investigation into materials. I was interested in landscape drawing, which led me to the history of pencils—then graphite. I ended up in 16th-century Borrowdale [England], where graphite was first discovered and mined. It was another rabbit hole. I needed to get graphite, and graphite is mined all over the world. So how do I find the right graphite?

HS: *In this piece, object and process morph from two-dimensions to three; it’s the act of drawing in a three-dimensional way.*

TF: Yes, especially in this piece. The conceptual is the hardest part of my process. I was consciously aware that I was making sculptures with graphite. Where does it stop being a drawing, and where does it start being a sculpture? The word “drawing” is a noun, but it’s also a verb. The act and the object become one. Even with *Drawn Waters*—every time I assemble that piece I feel that I am *building* a drawing. It just happens to be three-dimensional.

though I can predict how something is going to behave—how it’s going to hang, how it’s going to physically hold up, how you’re going to move around it—what I have never been able to do is predict how it’s going to make you feel. Of course, that’s all anybody cares about. It’s something I can only imagine. Usually the work is a big production, so it’s not like I can build it in my studio. I don’t experience it in its completion until it’s installed and put into a space.

With a piece like *Epic*, which sweeps the wall like a giant meteor shower made of thousands of pieces of graphite, the cast shadows smudge markings,

ELIZABETH BERKSTEIN, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LEHMANN MAUPIN, NY AND HONG KONG



Right and detail: *Yellow Mountains*, 2011. Pyrite, chains, and mirror-polished black anodized aluminum, 117.95 x 132.76 in.

HS: As a conceptual artist on the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, what do you hope to contribute?

TF: I am the only one who is an artist in the traditional sense. Sometimes my comments come out of left field. They're quirky and not just about technical or architectural issues. They're often about how people experience public spaces.

HS: What is currently on the table for discussion?

TF: Everything from monuments—like the Martin Luther King Jr. memorial and Frank Gehry's controversial Eisenhower memorial to the National Mall itself, individual works of art, corporate buildings, gardens, and new museum acquisitions at the Smithsonian. There is a need to reconsider what public space means. At the end of the day, it's a question of design. Good design changes the quality of peoples' lives. It's not just about how something looks, it's about how design affects how we use the space and how people will feel occupying it.

HS: Are you looking for a means of creating space that evokes the intent of the place and its history and power?

TF: It's a relatively young country. Almost anywhere in Latin America or in Europe, there is a sense of the town



square. This is the heart of the community, the place where everything happens, where neighborhoods convene and public life develops. The United States does not have that same tradition of public space. Moving forward, there's a great need to address how urban planners think about providing moments of public, accessible space—not just parks, but in-between spaces as well. That's where I see my responsibility.

Hilary Stunda is a writer living in Colorado.