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TERESITA FERNÁNDEZ INTERVIEW 2009

Anne Stringfield
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Anne Stringfield: Let's start by talking about how your work requires the physical presence of the viewer more than most other art—even other sculpture or installation. I'm reminded of one of the first things you recommended I read: Yve-Alain Bois' essay from October magazine, "A Picturesque Stroll Around Clara-Clara." There's a passage where Bois cites Le Corbusier's comment on Arab architecture, in which he wrote, "It is appreciated while on the move, with one's feet; it is while walking, moving from one place to another, that one sees how the arrangements of the architecture develop." This is true of both your immersive pieces and those that have a visual effect activated by the viewer.

Teresita Fernández: I'm interested in making works that generate a singular, intimate experience. So I do need someone to set a piece into motion and complete the circuit of meaning in the work. I am interested in this simultaneous presence of viewer as both spectator and performer, wholeheartedly complicit and willing. What I'm after is a lingering ephemeral engagement, slow, quiet, and with enough depth, kinesthetically, to be recalled by the viewers after the work is no longer in front of them. I think the best works of art somehow haunt you a little bit; I've always liked the etymological thread between spectator, spectrum, and specter.

AS: The effect is often akin to that of film—overtly in pieces like *Bamboo Cinema* or *Seattle Cloud Cover*, which break landscapes into flickering frames as the viewer moves through them, but more subtly, too, in pieces that reinterpret the screen, like *Ink Mirror* or *Projection Screen.*

TF: We are emotionally, unapologetically lured to images. We think of our dreams and remember sequentially, the automatic conventions of cinema being ingrained in our thought processes. As with reading, cinema places the viewer in this exercise of constructing images. I am interested in the utter subjectivity of the cinematic experience, and in understanding how the way we see things in our mind's eye is much more real, complex, layered, and personal than the thing itself. It's quirky—sometimes the catalyst that conjures up meaning, that sparks the valuable internal dialogue in the viewer, isn't, say, actual fire, but this odd, abbreviated detail of fire, or snow, or passing clouds, or moving water. It's around and behind and in you because you're experiencing it psychologically—you surrender to an image or a setting or a context. I've also always been fascinated by the idea (both visually and figuratively) of something that flickers or dazzles. To be visually dazzled and to be blinded are overtly similar experiences; seeing can become just a matter of subtle, almost imperceptible increments within the extremes of positive and negative, light and shadow, seeing and not-seeing, appearing and disappearing. Images are revealed not in these opposites, but in the very animated dialogue between them.

AS: The cinema also takes place on an epic scale, which is something you've embraced.

TF: So many of the references I work with touch upon vastness. Looking, by its very definition, implies distance, and rendering landscape is the ultimate grandiose gesture. So I have a hard time shrinking things down. Even when I make an object, what I'm really interested in is that suggested space beyond its edges. There are always two scales functioning in my work simultaneously. The big, immersive physical piece is often made up of small, accumulated elements that can only be absorbed up-close and intimately. A full-view photograph of a work like *Epic* gives you a general sense of the work, but tells you nothing about the fact that the overall image is actually made up of tens of thousands of very subtle, hand-drawn marks that emanate from small pieces of solid graphite. A piece like *Fire* reveals itself progressively as you get closer to it and realize that the entire ring of suspended, saturated color is constructed from many fine, dyed silk threads. There is, to borrow Gaston Bachelard's poetic description, a kind of "intimate immensity" that very deliberately runs through most of my work, a conversation between these out-of sync scales.

AS: Your pieces are in fact often so large as to be architectural. You've cited architecture as a key influence; how strong are the similarities between what you do and what an architect does?

TF: I've always been inspired by architecture in the sense that it is the ultimate form of immersive, constructed experience. My earlier work especially is directly informed by this sense of moving through rooms and between these thresholds of interior and landscape. But the most important parallel for me between architecture and sculpture has less to do with what something looks like or its sheer size and more to do with an ambulatory viewer. A piece like *Seattle Cloud Cover* is the length of a city block, but theway it's experienced has everything to do with this little canopy you walk under, and with the holes that you look through to frame the landscape and the downtown Seattle skyline. These holes relate directly to the size of your eye and to the speed with which your pace makes the cityscape appear and disappear through the colored glass. While in one direction the piece appears large, sitting just underneath the horizon, from another angle it compresses to altogether disappear. I like this idea of a sculpture on an architectural scale that becomes invisible in response to a viewer on the move.

AS: You also find a good bit of humor in your work, with shades of Commedia dell'Arte and Burlesque, but this isn't something that most people see when they first look at it.

TF: I love the Burlesque, though I cringe at using that word—it's highly misunderstood. I'm drawn to the original intention of the Burlesque not as a girly show, but as something that comes out of Commedia dell'Arte, as a form that overturns expectations. My work is not funny per se. There are two internal dialogues, one is my own, as I make the work, and the other is the viewer's, as a reaction. There's this triangle of delivery (the artist),reception (viewer, for lack of a better word), and the thing being transferred (the art), and there's a participatory aspect to humor that fits into this. So that while it may not be overtly funny, there is something to be gotten, something intellectual or pleasurable or simply optically scintillating, but

nevertheless given, and not necessarily gratuitously, not necessarily "gotten" by everyone. The optical illusions become visual play, literally (as in the overhead mirror of *Vertigo*, or the miniature convex mirrors) turning the viewer upside down—which, interestingly enough, is the original meaning of "Burlesque." What I'm trying to do is to make an impact by changing visual expectations of something—fire, clouds, foliage—while still referring to that thing. I found a marvelous quotation, taken from an interview with Diego Rivera's daughter, which I thought summed it up beautifully, especially the last line: "Picasso once said that every good work of art is a kind of joke. Diego Rivera, the revolutionary Mexican muralist, agreed. Every piece of worthwhile art, properly understood, is not only like a joke, it is shocking. It must connect its elements in a new way; the world comes to be seen in a new way. A punch line of a joke may get a laugh, or perhaps only a smile. A first view of a great work of art may make one smile, more likely not. But it will be shocking, often without the viewerknowing quite why. 'So art may not be a joke,' Rivera said, 'but it is always like one.'"

AS: In thinking about context, I keep coming back to Robert Smithson as the artist whose work most strongly parallels yours. Your mirrored pieces could be seen as descendants of his *Mirror Displacements*, you both take a profoundly intellectual approach to your work, you share an interest in frames and boundaries, in cycles of building and ruin, and so on. Just how important is he to your practice?

TF: Smithson is an important artist for me. He prompts this inclusive view of the world where all references are permitted simply because they strike a chord with the artist; where expectations about place are reversed and ideas become inverted. I have a cabin on a lake near the Franklin Mineral Mine, in the area where Smithson spent so much time. This is the place where I've reread all of his writings. Smithson's best work is all still intact, there to be explored, not in art museums, but virtually untouched in the very places he conceived it. You visit the mine, and enter a shabby little chamber full of dull, ordinary-looking rocks on shelves. When the lights are turned off and UV lights are turned on, the rocks glow with fantastic colors. It's otherworldly. What interests me is that the rocks were always phosphorescent, you just couldn't see it—it's something hiding in plain view. And Smithson does this all the time, a kind of anthropomorphizing of the landscape so that you, as the viewer, are not privileged. He makes the landscape, in fact, look back at you.

AS: Your new graphite pieces, the ones that make reference to the act of drawing and the history of the graphite mine at Borrowdale, also call to mind Smithson's Non-Sites.

TF: The work I'm doing uses graphite in many ways—from the drawn line, to precision-machined slabs, to its natural, rock-like state. My reference is to an actual, specific site: the valley of Borrowdale, in the Lake District in Cumbria, England. I started thinking about the history of landscape drawing, and about Leonardo da Vinci as the first Western artist to draw landscape for its own sake, not as a background. Graphite was first discovered in the 1500s in Borrowdale; it is to date the highest-quality graphite deposit ever found. Way before pencils were ever made, local shepherds would use it for marking their sheep, which I thought was just a gorgeous version of an animated drawing. I became fascinated with the idea of the actual landscape as physical drawing, the whole of Borrowdale sitting on a solid bed of graphite. My new works are all about making a sculpture that's really a drawing,

making a kind of dirty, dimensional, physical smudge. So that the act of drawing and the object of drawing become one and the same—the verb and the noun merge. To assemble the parts of a large graphite sculpture like *Drawn Waters (Borrowdale)* becomes precisely to engage in making a drawing.
AS: Drawing also implies open, empty space, which seems very relevant to what you do—the gaps between the threads in *Fire*, or the bars in *Bamboo Cinema*, or the clear glass in *Seattle Cloud Cover*—these airy interstices are what activate the piece, and make it seem to flicker and move. You also manage to concretize the open spaces in your structures beautifully, if more subtly, in stepped works like *Precipice or Dune*.

TF: Drawing is essential. My three-dimensional language often employs conventions of drawing and the two-dimensional. Take the graphite piece on my wall now, *Epic*, which sort of looks like a cloud formation or a meteor shower: the image materializes itself. It's almost the opposite of deconstructing something. I build something by dissolving these many points of reference, which is totally different from taking it apart. Rather, I'm spreading it or stretching it out in order to see it in a new way. Really it's a distortion with a kind of Mannerist sensibility. What you see is given form by a complex system of light, darkness, presence, and emptiness to establish a very detailed, layered phenomenon of seeing. And this is indeed very cinematic. It has everything to do with the shutter that separates images and organizes them into tiny moments of seeing and not seeing. To use the metaphor of a camera, if you look at something and it's focused, and then you take it out of focus, what you're doing is separating all of these points of information. You're saturating them with space in a way, spreading and stretching and abstracting in the process. And that is exactly what I do when I break up these images—I'm melting or disfiguring them.

AS: I know you've been looking at some Fred Sandback work recently; did he resonate more strongly with you since you've been thinking about drawing so much?

TF: In thinking of the history of drawing-as-sculpture, three-dimensional sketches, etc, I naturally thought of the work of Fred Sandback, and this idea of literally drawing or dragging a mark through space. But Sandback only makes sense to me as one reference point in a much stranger, more layered event that I'm trying to create in the work. If you could rein in notions of Sandback and fuse them with a slightly ridiculous take on Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, you'd begin to touch upon this rationally orchestrated but absurdly romantic and contradictory sensibility that I'm coming from. I think the cool, designed, methodical pretense of my work is almost like a foil for a deeper, more moving experience that is never spelled out. And sometimes, the end result is a piece that becomes a bit of an anomaly, steeped in references, historical and otherwise, that resist being explained, even to myself, but that nevertheless invent something.

AS: You've said that all abstract problems are blind—which made me think, in a literal-minded way, about the wall pieces you've made (such as *Burnout, Longing, Projection Screen*) in which small glass cabochons are arranged so as to prevent the eye from taking in their patterns all at once. This is, I think, the best example of you in a sense obscuring the view. We've talked about how your work touches on not-seeing—but I tend to think of your work as generally having an opposite effect, that of an amplified seeing, a seeing that is deepened with physical experience.

TF: First I'd like to note that it works the other way as well: blindness is, in return,

thoroughly abstract. You can rephrase blindness in terms of the varieties of not-seeing:shadows, darkness, inaccessibility, denial, cloaking, peeking, squinting, hiding, camouflaging. These, too, are degrees of blindness, though less specific to the physicality of the eye and more inextricably linked to thinking, dreaming, and imagining. In my new *Nocturnal* series, I am in fact trying to amplify seeing by dimming it. I'm constructing very dark relief drawings made with a wide range of graphite—shiny, drawn lines, burnished polished chunks of graphite that are dimensionally built up and smudged, etc—but everything is made of the same material. When approached directly, you see nothing, just a simple dark gray rectangle. But when you start moving, the pieces become animated, the light catching bits of highly polished, dense surfaces. It's almost as if the image develops before your very eyes, or as if your eyes are adjusting to the light so that what looks like nothing is actually a very detailed picturesque landscape, captured within that darkness. What from afar starts to read as a Reinhardt black painting turns out to have much more in common with a Goya or a Turner. And of course, the image is right in front of your eyes the whole time, like a passage from Camara Laye's *The Radiance of the King* or a hidden figure in a dense Wilfredo Lam painting, or Smithson's glowing rocks.

AS: There's a vein of eroticism in your work, too, though, like the humor, it can be overlooked because of the precision and perceived austerity of the individual pieces. A viewer can get there, of course, and quickly, especially in the case of the immersive works. Is this something that's in your mind when you're contemplating a new piece?

TF: It is. There is a restraint, because I'm always thinking about how efficiently I can refer to something—I definitely don't want to turn experience into some kind of sensual funhouse. But I have always been interested in the relationship between the tactile and the visual, the "eyes of the skin." And I'm interested in a seduced viewer who is active, present, involved. I am fascinated by how the visual lures a perceptive, engaged viewer, fully aware and willing to comply, into caring about an idea, thus putting the conceptual into practice. Many of my earlier works dealt with looking as a kind of voyeuristic delight, with allusions to water moving over skin. *Stacked Waters* is a bit of a return to that, in that there is an implied freedom to roam, to activate the space by indulging in its imagined water.

AS: Your comment about the link between the tactile and the visual makes the act of seeing, the saccadic efforts of the eye and brain, sound almost like a kind of Braille.

TF: It is a little like that. It goes back to this fundamental question of where it is that the image resides: is it in front of you? Is it behind your eyes, on your retina? On a screen? And what do you see when you close your eyes to remember what you've just seen? Seeing totally defies systemization. Because it's not just that we form images, but that we are constantly reinventing them, revising and editing within these tiny optical and psychological fits. There's this connection between the tactile and the visual that happens as an imagined sensation—it's highly mediated but terribly effective in prompting a real physiological response.

AS: You know, we keep using the word "viewer," or at least I do, when talking about the person confronting your work, and I am struck by how inadequate the word is, how detached from the actual experiencing of your work.

TF: I struggle wholeheartedly with the word "viewer" all the time … always. "Viewer" implies this nameless, impersonal subject that only works in some theoretical discourse. Works of art are so much more than what one sees, and I almost defer to the specificity of a viewer. There's a wonderful Cuban expression my grandmother used to always use,"Cada persona es un mundo," or "Each person is a world." You use it when someone's actions are inexplicable. Really, the right word is "*reader*," not "viewer." The act of reading in effect makes each of us into a world. Like drawing, reading is an active verb; vision implies distance and passivity, a casual onlooker who is relegated to the sidelines of an event rather than having an active impact on its outcome. I've always thought that when we read, we make something out of nothing; we assemble bits of information in an almost secret, interiorized, indulgent way. And we construct images based much more on our own experience of the world and our preconceptions of it, than what the text is telling us. It's a perfect description of what it is that I imagine the viewer privately does. And it is, of course, doubly alluring in that it is impossible to measure or describe.

AS: There's definitely a difference between seeing art when you're alert and actively interrogating it, versus the head-swiveling passive approach. And it can be such a pleasure to unearth something that the artist perhaps didn't intend, but that makes a serendipitous link to something you've seen elsewhere, or an experience you've had.

TF: I think it's a fundamental problem to assume that it's the sole responsibility of the artist or the artwork to inspire or prompt perception and engagement, and to guarantee meaning. A viewer's response can be as utterly stylized or predictable as a work. As an artist, I, too, depend on a thoughtful, willing viewer. Both exultation and disappointment in a work are overtly politicized moments that say as much about the viewer/reader as they do about the measurable materiality of what we call art. In fact, I would say that it is this internal dialogue, this fantasy of how one projects what one has experienced, that is at the core of my concepts. I think that it's that active work, that something-from-nothing that defines the experience.

AS: By "something-from-nothing," you mean the viewer-reader's extraction of meaning from the work?

TF: Yes. Again, it's like a book: you can "read" the book, but the book won't really giv unless you are completely invested in it, which is an entirely different kind of "reading."Part of the problem is that the visual reader is always seen as being physically outside of or separate from the actual art. As explored a theme as this is, we still walk into a museum and are conditioned to gauge how works are "placed" in a very traditional, formal way. We still often behave as though we're inspecting something. It's part of why I like making huge, immersive works. If something is an extension of your physical body, then you can't really be removed from it. This is what we experience again and again in great works of art, that they're not outlined by their measurable parts but rather by the quirky meanderings offered to them by their readers. And the edges, even in Minimalism, aren't hard—they're blurry.

AS: That immersion theme is all over your work—in the pool pieces that viewers descend into physically, or the Claude glass piece, which you once told me was meant to insert the visitor into "an inky snowscape," or "hothouse" at MoMA. You make so many references to water, too, as falls and waves and clouds and snow. It's hard not to wonder if this is your Florida provenance peeking through, a childhood of

backyard swimming pools and beach trips—or is it just that immersion is the best metaphor for what you want the viewer's experience to be?

TF: Water has such distinctly elusive manifestations—it's an idea more than an image. I've referred to it so many times but in varying and contradictory contexts. There are works that I've made that look at water in a totally graphic way that suggests colorful geometric abstraction (*Waterfall and Stacked Waters*), and then there are works, like my current pieces (*Drawn Waters (Borrowdale*), where I'm thinking about the history oflandscape drawing and about Leonardo da Vinci's moody studies of flowing water, or my *Nocturnal* series about the impenetrable, ink-like surface of water at night. So, yes, sometimes a sense of Florida waters comes in, but no more or less than imagined waters, or water that exists as a passage in literature, or water around Brooklyn, where I've lived for almost 12 years.

AS: All of the nature references have been thought to suggest south Florida, too, though of course the nature in your work is tidied up and tamed and manicured, which makes the connection more tenuous.

TF: I get the Florida question a lot. My early installations looked like empty swimming pools and I could have a conversation with someone and predict the moment they'd compose the narrative: young Cuban-American artist from Miami, empty pool, tropics, nostalgia, loss, and longing … every cliché you can imagine wrapped up into a narrative that I've never actually elaborated upon. While my personal history figures hugely in my understanding of the world, my sense of it looks nothing like that. The thing one knows well never seems exotic, so that while others tended to exoticize these aspects of my Miami origins, I myself was, as a student and young artist, totally exoticizing cold weather and dreary brick buildings, Tarkovsky and Bergman, and anything that wasn't sunny and superficial. It's as though all that glorious, perfect tropical beauty made me crave some good old-fashioned angst. Indeed, it's all so much more complex than the convenient layering of the narrative over the artwork. I've always found that there's a vulgarity to packaging one's identity or history into these neat little parcels. I am, of course, quietly aware of how my context is everywhere in the work, but this manifests itself like every other reference, ever so subtly and solemnly, and always unannounced.

AS: There's a tremendous amount of research that goes into your work, a wide-ranging array of visual and intellectual sources and extensive experimentation with materials and construction. It's lovely to think that so much concrete work goes into pieces that are in the end often so elusive.

TF: Well that's the beauty of it, that the research is essential but then has to be "unlearned" in order to see something differently. The work of the work has to disappear. And in order to resist expectations, to invent something, I have to absorb as much diverse information as I can and then hone it down to a highly distilled concept, event, or object. There's a kind of alchemy to it in a sense, because I never understand what I'm chasing or making in a logical way. I remember having a conversation with Félix González- Torres about this very idea, that while we all learn how to defend something critically, while one's work is framed and understood and validated conceptually, actually coming up with something is a total leap of blind faith, completely vulnerable and messy and rooted in doubt every single time. You can't trick yourself—what reads as "elusive" to others has to be truly elusive to

yourself too.