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UP AND COMING: Teresita Fernandez; From an Architect of Desire, Many-Layered Constructions

By Ann Wilson Lloyd

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HAREMS, tile work and parterre garden plans are just some of the lush references that the installation artist Teresita Fernandez embeds in her elegantly spare architectural constructions.

Ms. Fernandez, 31, a New York-based artist whose solo exhibition opened yesterday at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, could be called a sensuous conceptualist inasmuch as she strives to make a mind-body connection in her art. The scale and proportions of her room-filling structures must be experienced spatially, as with traditional sculpture and architecture, and their artifice perceived as illusion and perspective, as in painting and formal gardens.

Encoded within her works are subtle triggers for memory, erotism and fantasy, yet each one is based on critical theory, specifically feminist critiques of architecture and landscape design.

"Her work is not a dry deconstruction of an architectural lexicon, but a challenge for viewers to engage both intellectually and experientially," says Patrick Murphy, a former director of the institute and guest curator of the exhibition. "One thinks of Dan Graham and Michael Asher, but Fernandez differs by incorporating sexiness and humor. She is part of a new generation of conceptualists who insist on both an analytical and a suspension-of-belief approach."

Swimming pools have been of interest to Ms. Fernandez in the recent past. Installations in 1996 at Deitch Projects and the New Museum of Contemporary Art, both in New York, and at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Miami all simulated actual-size, empty pools that viewers entered, walked around or peered into from various angles. Such encounters were seductive, but also slightly discomfiting. Various, depending on which side of the tinted-glass portholes one was on, one felt like a voyeur, or on display.

These devices referred to the early modernist architect Adolph Loos and his unrealized 1928 design for an indoor pool for Josephine Baker that allowed the exotic singer-dancer to be observed through one-way submerged windows. Ms. Fernandez is not after specific narrative or tableaux, however. "I am interested in the projection of the body, in an imaginary, kinesthetic way, penetrating history and distance cinematically, almost like a daydream," she explains. "It's as if, through visual pleasure, your gaze positions you in a place without actually being there."

In Philadelphia, viewers of Ms. Fernandez's work might imagine themselves in a gauzy Byzantine idyll, or high overhead on an aerialist's platform. The longer one contemplates the work, the more allusions -- and daydreams -- suggest themselves. Five pieces from 1998, all titled "Borrowed Landscape," named for the Japanese garden technique of framing a distant vista, are on view (and will also be shown in May at Deitch Projects). "They are more erotic than the pool pieces, very saturated, with very palpable surfaces," Ms. Fernandez says. Each is a full-scale but intimate room with walls of draped theatrical scrim, brightly colored in shades of citron or aqua, through which one can only peer. The rooms are lighted by an oculus that pours simulated daylight onto an intricate gridded floor design suggestive of fancy tiles, oriental carpeting or possibly a formal garden maze. These subtly drawn grids are a continuing motif in her work and are visual mesmerizers intended to provoke constant and dizzying shifts in scale and perspective.

In Ms. Fernandez's newest works, platforms suspended just below the institute's soaring ceiling are more site-specific. From these dangle ladders with fragile, cast-plaster treads that disappear through overhead hatches, suggesting a scary mental journey to vertiginous, compressed spaces. "It's important to me to engage viewers first in something that involves them," she says. "Then, it's like a kind of seduction to lure them into thinking about it as an idea." Leaving details of her induced reveries up to us, Ms. Fernandez asks only for both mental and physical commitment to the trip.

Photos: "Borrowed Landscape (Citron, Cerulean, Violet, Blue, Citron)," a 1998 installation by Teresita Fernandez. (Deitch Projects, New York); At left, the artist in her Brooklyn studio. (Chester Higgins/The New York Times)

Ann Wilson Lloyd's last article for Arts and Leisure was on the painter Carol Rama.