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Teresita Fernández

NEW YORK,
at Lehmann Maupin

by Gregory Volk

View of Teresita Fernández's exhibition "Fire (America)," 2017, showing *Fire (America) 5*, 2017, glazed ceramic, 96 by 192 by 1 1/4 inches, and *Charred Landscape (America)*, 2017, charcoal on wall, dimensions variable, at Lehmann Maupin.



Among the fascinating aspects of Teresita Fernández's probing, landscape-themed exhibition, titled "Fire (America)," was her use of natural materials: clay, fire, charcoal, and paper. Installed on the back wall, the eight-foot-high, sixteen-foot-wide *Fire (America) 5*, all works 2017, appeared as a looming, blazing landscape painting from afar but consists of thousands of slightly askew glazed ceramic pieces. The top and bottom are lustrous black, suggesting the sky and earth at night. In the middle, on a dark horizon line, an orange, yellow, and crimson conflagration glows like a nocturnal forest fire. Nothing indicates the cause of the fire or where and when it might have happened, although the landscape, with its scale and rugged drama, suggests that of the American West. The image could represent a naturally occurring fire or one induced by global warming (wildfires in the Western United States have been dramatically increasing since the mid-1980s). The fire could also be the slash-and-burn kind routinely set centuries ago by Native Americans to shape their environment. Up close, you discover how intricate and hyper-constructed this work is. Reflecting the viewer, the ceramic pieces resemble little lenses or screens.

Fernández's sublime painting sans paint connects with the spiritually charged landscapes of Frederic Edwin Church, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran, but her work is more ominous. In addition to evoking the chaotic consequences of climate change, the image is a powerful metaphor for a nation currently racked by strife and convulsed by warring ideologies. Unlike the nineteenth-century

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paintings of the American West by Church et al., this work does not depict a specific place. Instead, it portrays an invented American landscape made quite literally of burned earth (clay fired in a kiln). Artwork and environment, human activity and nature, conjoin.

For the panoramic, quietly stunning *Charred Landscape (America)*, which ran around the perimeter of the entire gallery roughly at eye level, Fernández affixed small chunks of charcoal to the walls, and then drew with charcoal around them, freely mixing representational and abstract form. The installation emerged from either side of the ceramic mosaic, essentially extending the horizon line throughout the space. The charcoal pieces had a subtle doused-fire smell, and uncannily resembled little mountains, cliffs, and rocky outcroppings. Delicate mirror images appeared beneath them, like reflections on water, and beneath those were faint rubbings that seemed to dissolve into the wall. The billowing smoke, wispy clouds, and misty mountains of *Charred Landscape (America)* recalled the aftermath of an inferno. As the work enveloped you in the gallery, it also described a huge outdoor region, offering myriad views not of a single landscape but of many shifting ones. It was an enchanting and curiously soulful installation.

The exhibition also included a group of eight framed works, titled “Burned Landscape (America) 1,” in which Fernández artfully burned laser-cut sheets of paper. Scorch marks including flecks and larger irregular shapes look abstract, but also suggest floating landforms and reeling maps. In this environmentally and politically fraught time, such nature-culture confluences by Fernández are deeply compelling and altogether apt.

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