

Alumna Teresita Fernández's work on exhibit at Pérez Art Museum Miami

[FIU news.fiu.edu/2020/alumni-spotlight-teresita-fernandez-brings-new-elemental-exhibition-to-perez-art-](https://news.fiu.edu/2020/alumni-spotlight-teresita-fernandez-brings-new-elemental-exhibition-to-perez-art-museum-miami)

By CARTA



By Zion Sealy

Alumna and conceptual artist Teresita Fernández has brought her biggest exhibition, "Elemental," back to her hometown of Miami; it will be on view until Feb. 9 at the Perez Art Museum Miami.

The art exhibit features sculptures and drawings seldom seen. Many of the pieces—including *Fire* (United States of America, 2017-2019) and *Viñales* (2015-2019)—challenge spectators to consider the political climate and social topics.

Last semester, Fernández gave FIU art and art history students a personal tour of her new exhibit. Afterward, she engaged in a discussion on topics ranging from achieving a sense of identity through art to the pains of establishing herself in Miami and around the world to growing up in the Miami area.

CARTA News sat down with the artist for an interview.



What does it mean to you to be able to bring your biggest exhibition, “Elemental”, back to your home of Miami? How did the culture at the time of your upbringing in Miami play into your identity as a Latinx artist? Being a first-generation college grad, what do you hope to achieve in the Latinx community by bringing your exhibition back to Miami?

I have lived in Brooklyn since 1998, but much of my visual thinking was formed in the Miami landscape where I grew up. Miami can be visually arresting, almost surreal. When I was a child, Miami didn't have any museums, but I occasionally saw art in people's homes: a small-scale Wifredo Lam, or an Amelia Pelaez painting, and through books. So, it is especially satisfying to come back and see the important presence that contemporary art now has here, and to be able to exhibit my mid-career survey in a world-class museum in the town I grew up in.

I've been fortunate to sustain a viable art practice for more than 20 years, but in general, people have a hard time perceiving an individual as both “excellent” and Latinx. Artists of color experience very different challenges in the art world. We live in a country founded on deeply-rooted anti-Latinx, anti-immigrant, and anti-Black sentiments and practices. In my work, I'm interested in unraveling these complexities of place and identity through beauty, materiality and experiential, visual, immersive prompts.

While I'm outspoken and proud of my Latinx identity as a conceptual artist, I am very much working from the specific and personal, so I reject any simplistic stereotypes and preconceived notions that have absolutely nothing to do with my work. There are almost no models for being a U.S. Latinx contemporary woman artist with visibility in the mainstream art world—one who also claims her ethnicity, without having to choose either/or. The constant need to choose between one's artistic integrity and representing identity for others, coupled with the lack of examples of Latinx artists in American museum collections, points to larger issues of institutional racism, whitewashing and inequity in our museums and art-history narratives, or what gets to be called “American art.”

What pathways did you take to reach the level of success you've achieved today, and how has your time at FIU played a role in your journey thus far?

After I finished graduate school, I spent some years traveling and doing artist's residencies in Rome, at the American Academy, and then in Japan - a place that helped shape my particular way of seeing the world. I ended up in New York for another artist residency and just never left. There is always the external, fetishized, and romanticized idea of "success", and then the quiet, less visible, inner one. Paying close attention to the inner one is what matters. The answer, the next step, is always in the work itself. There is no shortcut or formula. What externally gets read as "success" is actually grounded in a slow, decades-long studio practice that I've nurtured and protected.

How did it feel to have current students from your Alma Mater (FIU) come out to support and learn from you at your exhibition in the PAMM?

To young Latinx students at FIU, I would say, you are the future, and poised to become the largest, most influential demographic in this country. In many ways, this exhibition is a momentous opportunity to shape the context around my work and to shed light on the nuanced visual, art-historical, conceptual, personal, and sociopolitical intentions that are subtle, but nevertheless, very deliberate in my work - without having to choose one mode over another.

I think being an artist means making your own way, and that defining what that looks like to you happens precisely by working, doing, paying attention. It's not something someone can help you with or teach you to do. In great part, what I am able to offer to students is the important act of simply being visible, of not being erased or omitted, of taking up space, of having my work headlining a major museum show, of showing a decades-long practice of creating from the point of view of a Latinx woman with a history not unlike their own.

This notion, of seeing someone who looks like you with a name and history like yours is, sadly and deliberately, not something taught in their art history classes, or seen as a valuable part of the canon for what constitutes art history. Being able to imagine that you can create, have impact, see yourself in museums, and be a defining part of shaping the story of art that has been denied to many people like you is, in itself, a radical act.

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[Show Gallery Image 2](#)

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[Show Gallery Image 4](#)



