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TROPICAL SCHOLARSHIP 2009

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From the book *Teresita Fernández:Blind Landscape*. Published by the USF Contemporary Art Museum and JRP-Ringier, 2009

In our laziness, we assume that the art created in a particular cultural moment is an expression of that particular moment. This is almost never the case. In my experience, the art of a particular time and place is more likely to be a compensatory gesture—an effort to replace those pleasures and comforts that circumstance and technology are presently taking away. As a result, I find it most rewarding to think of persuasive new artworks as wild cards that help us complete the hand that culture is presently dealing us. I think of Abstract Expressionism compensating for the post-traumatic blandness of postwar America. I think of Pop and Minimalist art as compensation for the elitist Marxist and Freudian critical culture that abstract expressionism created in its wake. I think of post-minimalism and conceptual art as compensating for the spectacular mindlessness of Pop and Minimalism in their grandiose cynosure.

From this perspective, new art may be said to have fulfilled this particular social function in the moment that it becomes culture, when it enters the realm of academic typing, history and sociology. At this point, art has become less interesting to those of us who are interested in new art as a prescient act of compensation that allows us to conjure up the ghost of Christmas Yet To Come—the presently invisible cultural deficit for which this new art is standing in as a wild card. This is why, even though I would never refer to a cosmopolitan artist like Teresita Fernández as a "Miami-based artist" or a even a "Cuban-American artist," I do think of her as a "tropical artist" who deals with issues that, in my own critical vocabulary, are peculiar to "Tropical America"—a cultural configuration that is only gradually gaining and expressing its new and accumulating relevance.

To begin with, Fernández has inherited a Latin-American history of art that is distinguished by its direct traverse from the Baroque to the modern untouched by the rationalist Enlightenment. This narrative, that jumps from the Baroque to the Surreal to the abstract, is less radical than it might seem, of course, since one narrative bloodline works as well as any other in a democracy, and, over the years, this elided history has created a modernist idiom of Latinized color and geometry that Northern critics (when they refer to it at all) call "sexy modernism"—a modernism that does not come freeze-dried by Enlightenment rage. These critics, of course, have not yet decided if "sexy modernism" is a good thing or a bad one, but I vote for good, mostly because it provides a persuasive alternate story for the coming of age that American painting underwent after World War II; it suggests a history that moves directly from the Mediterranean Baroque, through the actual and indigenous surreality of Latin culture, through the visual politics of revolutionary Latin-American modernism to the triumph of New York School painting. From Titian to Miró to Siqueros to Pollock to the new world of postwar art, in other words.

This is worth mentioning here because Teresita Fernández's work feels comfortable in

this flow, as does the work of other tropical Americans like Jorge Pardo, Jim Isermann, Ken Price, and Robert Irwin. All these artists engage in an odd romance between chaos and design. They opt for an impersonal rejection of Romantic auteurism. The work of these artists' is interesting as art, of course, but it is also interesting as a compensatory cultural proposition that seems to be on the winning side. This because behaviors, phenomena, and objects that, in the North, seem to invite or demand deconstruction are already in the process of deconstructing themselves in the mutable South.

In my view, then, the world that Teresita Fernández evokes matters more every day because Fernández's affection for tropical culture softens the hard distinctions between one thing and another, between one place and another and one identity and another thapass as hard currency in the intellectual casinos of the North. In the tropics all is flux—dirt turns to water, water turns to air, and air back to water and dirt. In this world, culture is the grid and the plane. All the rest is fluid nature, which, since most of it has been imported, qualifies as culture too, or the fantasy of it. The visual irony of Fernández's Ink Mirror, is that both the vertical, black, rectangular slab and the dune of white sand from which it arises are as natural as they are cultural—and probably something beyond both since they evoke an imported, imaginary landscape that humans built and in which real humans dwell.

Living in this world, in the fantastic temperate cocoon of Tropical America means that one's mind is not fully occupied with keeping one's body alive, so the mind and the body blur at the edges, and since your body is at home in the air around it, the self and the other blur at the edges too. The "class-language" of clothing is suppressed, as is clothing itself. The echoes of one's self move outward in arcs of physical resonance. As do the physical attributes of one's world. The bougainvillea in your yard is yours first, an extension of your body's centrality, and only secondarily, God's nature. One lives in a full world in which one is occasionally punished but never inconvenienced by the climate—a society in which fine distinctions are hard to come by.

So Fernández works at the edge of entropy but never beyond it. Her work exists in the domain of the translucent, the reflective, and the blur; she embraces the scatter, the splatter, the explosion and the splash, the grid and the plane, and only as much physical matter as it takes to achieve the curve, the shine, the dazzle, and the lineaments of culture.

Her objects occupy the realm of surfaces and not the realm of objects, because the easy Northern distinctions between space and volume, between one's interiority and one's exteriority, and between appearance and reality, dissolve in the South. Manners and morals become indistinct. The idea of "identity" has no practical meaning, and the qualified virtues of artistic chaos and abjection, that feel so necessary in the over organized North, approximate the conditions of tropical life so closely as to become trivial.

So this is my question. What is the wild card in the hand that Tropical America deals us? What do the tropics need? Or, what does an artist in this environment see that needs to be done? My suggestion is that the tropics are always in need of a good redesign, not Northern redesign that extends the bland encroachment of repressive geometry and not a Disneyworld re-production that only reminds of it's unauthentic

absence of thorns and insects, but a tropical redesign that speaks its own language, that provides a stable armature at the intersection of nature and culture for its mutable profligacy. Morris Lapidus identified this intersection as the curve, the shape nature and culture share, where mathematics, calculus, and physics meet the harbor, the bay, the wave, the dune, and the bend of the river.

Lapidus began his Fontainebleau Hotel on Collins Avenue in Miami Beach with the curve, because, as he told me once in an interview, curves signify leisure, because a curve is the longest, most beautiful distance between two points and we are tropical human beings who are not in a hurry. Also, curves are sexy because human beings are curved and the curvier the sexier. Curves also stand for change because curves are how we measure change and express it. Curves signify flexibility and adaptability to nature, because nature is not rectangular. Curves also stand for self-sufficiency and independence, because, as Richard Serra so aptly demonstrates, curved walls can stan free and straight walls cannot. "A lot of good things about a curve," Lapidus said, "and about ovals and circles and biomorphic shapes because they have no normative 'size' relative to any enclosure they might adorn."

For these and other reasons, I'm sure, Teresita Fernández organizes her work around the curve. She balances her work on this precipitous fulcrum. She deploys fields of stones and glass in rectangles and explodes them into biomorphic shapes without destroying the inference of their original shape so the exploding stones seem to tug back toward that configuration. She exploits the elevation map (with its stacked plates of variable configurations) as the classic signification of fractal nature's intersection with cultural geometry. Fernández translates the landscape and flora of the tropics into cultural object by translating them into horizontal and vertical plates that trace out the irregular planes of their configurations in fractal detail. Thus, in Fernández's language, "Precipice" becomes a crooked mesa of grey stairs; the "Dune" is a shaved, dazzled stack of concave planes—like a choir riser for tiny people. Her "Waterfall" is a slow free-floating curve of luminous blues that flows down from the wall to the floor, marked with horizontal lines that locate the planes of the space through which the object curves. Instances of willow, wisteria, acacia, falling water, and tidal residue present themselves in relief, in reflective, precision, as intricately cut stacks of stainless steel planes through which the light falls and from which it reflects.

The formal function of Fernández's planar objects, it should be noted, reverses the function of this practice in architecture. In architecture, the stacked irregular planes of the articulated elevation maps are intended to extend the contour of the landscape. In Fernández's sculpture, the vertical and horizontal plates accommodate her fractal objects with the rectangular enclosures in which they are exhibited—a minimalist device in baroque circumstances. All of these works, in fact, may be taken as confirmations of Bernini's contention that there is nothing so ephemeral or protean that a master sculpture cannot freeze it forever. Fernández's translucent yarn cubes, her pillars of fire and atmosphere, also speak to this aspiration and suggest a group show of works that share this ephemeral aspiration by Peter Alexander, Robert Irwin, and Jesús Rafael Soto.

The interesting point for me is that Teresita Fernández and all colleagues in this delicate endeavor (Pardo, Isermann, Alexander, Price, Irwin, etc.) are children of Tropical America. Their have a touchstone in those southern corners of the continent that in their climate, culture, orientation, and iconography are not properly America at

all, but not properly anywhere else. In the years of their innocence, these corners of the continent were literally nothing and nowhere at all—just big sky, big clouds, saltwater, sand, dirt,
and that full, luminous haze, created by light bouncing off the water that makes the atmosphere a thing in itself, a palpable realm of blur and dazzle. Nothing was quite itself. The sky, the sea, and the landscape blurred together at their intersections. There were also weeds, brush, palms, marshes, deserts, reptiles, assorted rodents, and a scattering of scantily-clad human beings. Nothing too organized, and, even today, in its penultimate cultural maturity, after human beings have added plants, streets, flowers, and architecture, Tropical America has not changed that much: as societies, Los Angeles, Miami (and New Orleans and Houston as well) are still less proper American cities, than swathes of equatorial wasteland divided into tribal neighborhoods.

In the years of its social lowering, theorists referred to the realms of Tropical America as hyper-places, or surrealities. Today they just shrug and say so what. They acknowledge that these places may not constitute nature or culture by American standards, but they are no less real. They admit that our comfort with the putative inauthenticity of these tropical cosmopolitan tangles speaks to the death of Culture as a viable idea and to the waning of Romantic Nature as an energizing concept and not to the "decadence" of these societies—especially when one considers the fact that, when approached from the South, Tropical America seems to be a perfectly ordinary and comfortable place. What has changed is that Tropical America, which was once regarded as a final refuge from Protestant America and not as an extension of it, has finally become a real place. More to the point, as mainstream America has become more and more a place from which one might seek refuge, this world has begun to look more and more like a viable alternative to the dominant culture.

One simple principle supports this option: The joys of Tropical America with all faults can be made more livable with less effort than the conformity of Middle America may be made more joyful. Any urban designer will tell you that the messy, chaotic infestation of human beings that constitute the America's tropics may be tidied up more easily than the rigid culture of the heartland may be relaxed into a more 21st-century posture. This assumption lies at the heart of Eames, Schindler, Neutra, Lapidus, Gehry, and many others, it informs the architecture of California Modern and Miami Deco, although the difference between these architects and artists like Fernández, Pardo, Price, Irwin, and Isermann speak volumes.

One would imagine that architects and designers, whose works are bound by their function and interdependent with the surrounding environment, would aspire to make a more generalized, less dissonant statement than artists with no such caveats who are creating singular objects. In fact, the reverse is true. All of these artists create handless and virtually impersonal objects that are routinely overwhelmed by the ego and theater of their designing and architecting colleagues. This because these artists, so often, degraded by their association with design, do, in fact, transcend design more profoundly than those who visibly reject it, because these artists are designing function and beyond, themselves, to some philosophical purpose. They are creating, for the first time in the West, some occidental approximation of scholar's rocks and Zen gardens, quiet sites and objects of contemplation that speak to a collectively imagined society. Each is a parable of sort, so if the work of Teresita Fernández seems too quiet for you, shut up and listen.