



Teresita Fernández/MATRIX 182 supernova

December 5, 1999 - January 30, 2000

**University of California
Berkeley Art Museum**

Teresita Fernández/MATRIX 182

“In *supernova*, I wanted to use a completely implied, hypothetical space—that imagined underneath where the viewers and works are situated. Concentric circles surround, wrap, and absorb the viewer.” Teresita Fernández

New York-based conceptual installation artist Teresita Fernández spent last summer on a fellowship at the American Academy in Rome. *supernova*, her MATRIX installation at the Berkeley Art Museum, is informed by a visit to Tiberius’s Cave in Sperlonga, a coastal city south of Rome. This ancient grotto-triclinium, that is, a nymphaeum and banqueting hall combined, dates from the Augustan era, first century A.D.¹ Sperlonga has been described as a “fantastic cave, with pools, four Homeric marble groups and other sculpture, which like a gigantic heathen presepio, faces the sea...”² Fernández, who possesses an instinctual ability to present illusions and transform physical sensations, was struck by the hypnotic, perception-altering reflection she experienced in Tiberius’s Cave. That she would be inspired by such a place is not surprising because pools and water, actual or implied, factor prominently in her iconography. Historically, grottos have been places of mystery, reverie, and eroticism. Fernández employs the visual form of the grotto to evoke some of these sentiments. Suggesting the pastoral, the idyllic, and the dramatic, grottos have been offered as an escape from the world of reality, from the rules and artifices of society.³ Interestingly, landscape architectural historian Naomi Miller also writes, “The grotto is a metaphor of the cosmos.”⁴

supernova refers to the luminous pattern that results from the extinguishing of a star. Fernández’s installation consists of six circular forms of varying size and color placed on the floor in the MATRIX gallery. Using the reflective surface of the gallery floor, the sculptures create the illusion of deep puddles or caverns descending into the core of the earth. Referring to the hallowed grotto with its secret inner recesses, these carved-out, planar objects seem to burrow into the ground. A layered, topographical stratum, Fernández’s floor structures echo the massiveness of Roman architecture. Hovering both over and under the ground, *supernova* creates a hypnotic vortex. The walls of the gallery are painted a light bluish gray, the same color as the exterior of the sculptures, creating a unified, ethereal atmosphere. This monochromatic similarity enhances the surprise of viewers as they peer into the forms to see hazy yet brightly colored depths. Large, elliptical rings thrown by the



rippling, luminous surfaces of the forms continue the repetitive optical illusion. The upper and lower realms are joined in a seamless transition between what might be sky, heavens, earth, water, and a subterranean core. Fernández is interested in evoking a phenomenal place that exists but is not specific or concrete, a place where viewers can assign their own impressions of location to the forms perceived. Inherent in the work is a dilemma; how does one explain and describe something one has not seen?

Teresita Fernández practices the architecture of illusion in her room-size installations. *supernova* seduces the observer into questioning received knowledge regarding the placement of the human body in space. She does this by employing perceptible, behaviorist, psychological, and cognitive concepts of space. There is play of parallax—the apparent displacement of the position of a body caused by a change of position of the observer—that occurs in Fernández’s installations. In her environments, spectators are encouraged to explore and to make their own connections. Here a viewer’s experience is often interrupted by the discontinuous time of involuntary memory. The artist creates non-places that exist only through the experience of time and motion that the viewer may make.

Presenting human-scale environments, Fernández activates the metaphysical part of architecture that results from an experimental knowledge of movement in space.⁵ In *supernova*, she leads the viewer to explore horizontal, vertical, circular, and non-linear movement. She succeeds in presenting what historian Uvedale Price called “intricacy in landscape—the disposition of objects that, by a partial and uncertain concealment, excites and nourishes curiosity.”⁶ Fernández’s work exists in a space between Baroque architecture—defined by architectural historian Vincent Scully as “architecture intended to enclose and shelter human beings in a psychic sense, to order them absolutely so they can always find a known conclusion at the end of any journey”—and the work of Richard Serra, the expanse of whose sculptures “allows one to perceive and locate a multiplicity of centers.”⁷ *supernova* may also reference the “picturesque” as defined by artist Robert Smithson who said, “The

Tiberius’s Cave, Sperlonga, Italy, 1999. Photo credit: Teresita Fernández.



picturesque...is based on real land; it precedes the mind in its material external existence.”⁸

The material external existence is what Teresita Fernández so skillfully calls into question. When I walked into her 1996 untitled installation at Deitch Projects in New York, I felt as if I had been let in on a secret. The experience transformed my notion of a physical interaction with art. The enormous “swimming pool” perfectly inserted between the gallery walls was an impressive, elegant object. My awe was clearly shared by other viewers as a blanket hush imposed itself upon us all. Ascending the stairs that led up to the walls of the pool left each viewer exposed to the gaze of the others. Without the traditional intimate accoutrements of swimming—water and swimsuits—dry and fully clothed, I felt somehow more visible. I was reminded of one of the few times that, as a child, I had seen the swimming pool at my parents’ home empty. My sister and I were allowed to enter the empty pool, but instead of running around yelling, we were reverently still. It was as if we knew that anything we revealed of ourselves would be absorbed, rather than reflected, by the empty space.

Fernández has employed the empty swimming pool form in several of her works. It is but one of the familiar spatial notions she distorts to effect a reconditioning of the viewer’s understanding of architecture and landscape. As Patrick Murphy, former Director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, told The New York Times, Fernández is “part of a new generation of conceptualists who insist on both an analytical and a suspension-of-disbelief approach.”⁹ Fernández’s methodology is a postmodern feminist one in which she presents seemingly contradictory notions of feminism and the feminine and demands acceptance of both. Her work is at once extremely feminine in its use of materials and volume, and critical of established, gendered ascriptions of space. In another untitled work, based on an unbuilt house with an interior pool that German architect Adolf Loos designed for the African-American performer Josephine Baker, Fernández included four rectangular “windows,” two on each side of the pool, that were reflective

Studio view of *supernova* series, 1999; work in progress; wood, acrylic, scrim, and paint; dimensions vary. Photo credit: Teresita Fernández.



from the interior and transparent from the exterior. In Loos's design, Baker, an exoticized Other, was intended to be observed as she observed herself.

Applying a postmodern feminist approach to Fernández's work provides an interesting context. Postmodernist feminists are able to maintain a constant yet evolving place within a shifting perception of social reality and identity. That is, they can perceive multiple realities without losing a sense of self-coherence. In addition, within postmodernist feminism there is no absolute; the context defines who people are at the moment. There is no inherent conflict with disparate and seemingly discordant perspectives. Thus, Fernández, by taking the familiar and distorting it just enough to make it either unfamiliar or less familiar, posits the possibility that self-knowledge about one's placement in time, space, and memory may be only partially true. She creates a subtle temporal and spatial disorientation that reminds us to remember to look around to know where, and perhaps who, we are.

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson
Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

¹ A grotto is an artificial cavern, usually with fountains and other water works; a triclinium is the dining room in an ancient Roman house; and, a nymphaeum is literally a "temple of the nymphs," but generally a Roman pleasure-house containing fountains and statues.

² Naomi Miller, *Heavenly Bodies: Reflections on the Garden Grotto* (New York: George Braziller, 1982) pp. 23, 25. The author thanks the artist for suggested readings.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 20, 27.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵ Yve-Alain Bois, "A Picturesque Stroll Around Clara-Clara" in *October: The First Decade*, ed. Annette Michelson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987) pp. 350, 352. Note: the definition is indicated to be from the *Petite Robert Dictionary*.

⁶ Uvedale Price, *Essays on the Picturesque, as Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful* (London: J. Mawman, 1810). Quoted in Bois, p. 353.

⁷ Bois, p. 355.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 346.

⁹ Ann Wilson Lloyd, "From an Architect of Desire, Many-Layered Constructions," *The New York Times*, March 21, 1999, Section 2, p. 41.

Teresita Fernández was born in 1968 in Miami, Florida. Fernández attended Florida International University in Miami where she received her Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1990. She then attended Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, and earned a Master of Fine Arts in 1992. Currently, Fernández lives and works in New York City.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2000
Project Room, Castello di Rivoli, Torino, Italy
Site Santa Fe, Santa Fe, NM

1999
"Borrowed Landscape," Deitch Projects, New York, NY
Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, PA

1998
ArtPace, San Antonio, TX
Masataka Hayakawa Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

1997
Masataka Hayakawa Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

1996
Deitch Projects, New York, NY

1995
"Real/More Real," Museum of Contemporary Art, Miami, FL

Selected Group Exhibitions

2000
"Wonderland," St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO
"La Ville, Le Jardin, La Memoire," Villa Medici, Rome, Italy

1999
"Luminous Mischief," Yokohama Portside Gallery, Yokohama, Japan
"On Your Own Time," P. S. 1 Institute for Contemporary Art, New York, NY

1998
"Threshold," The Power Plant, Toronto, Canada
"Seamless," De Appel, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Untitled, 1996; wood, walls sprayed with paint, and pencil drawing; 20' x 40' x 21'. Photo credit: Tom Powell.

"Arkipelag: Insertions," Stockholm, Sweden

1997
"The Crystal Stopper," Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York, NY
"X-Site," The Contemporary Museum, Baltimore, MD

1996
"Enclosures," The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, NY
"Container 96," Copenhagen 96, Copenhagen, Denmark
"Defining the Nineties," Museum of Contemporary Art, Miami, FL

1995
"Selections Spring '95," The Drawing Center, New York, NY
"Fine," TBA (Thomas Blackman) Exhibition Space, Chicago, IL
"The New Orleans Triennial," The New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, LA
"South Florida Cultural Consortium," Boca Raton Museum of Art, Boca Raton, FL
"South Florida Artists Invitational," Margulies Taplin Gallery, Boca Raton, FL
"Thirty and Under," Ground Level Gallery, Miami Beach, FL

Selected Bibliography

Drolet, Owen. "Teresita Fernández," *FlashArt*, March/April 1997, p. 111.
Harris, Jane. "Intimate Immensity," *Art/Text*, February/April 1999, no. 64, pp. 39-41.
Ho, Melissa. "Teresita Fernández," *New Art Examiner*, July/August 1999, pp. 56-57.
Lloyd, Anne Wilson. "From an Architect of Desire, Many-Layered Constructions," *The New York Times*, March 21, 1999, Section 2, p. 41.
Morgan, Anne Barclay. "Focus: Teresita Fernández," *Sculpture*, January/February 1999, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 8-9.
Smith, Roberta. "Teresita Fernández, Borrowed Landscape," *The New York Times*, June 4, 1999, p. 33.
Williams, Gregory. "Into the Void," *World Art*, 1999, no. 20, pp. 58-61.

Work in MATRIX
supernova, (series 1-6), 1999.
All six works are wood, acrylic, scrim, and paint.
Dimensions vary.

Untitled, 1996; detail; wood, walls sprayed with paint, tinted glass, and pencil drawing; 15' x 40' x 20'; Photo credit: Thompson and Thompson.

Please Note:

Teresita Fernández will give an artist's talk on Sunday, December 5, 1999, at 3:00 p.m.

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson will give a curator's tour of the exhibition on Wednesday, January 26, 2000, at noon.

The MATRIX Program at the UC Berkeley Art Museum is made possible by the generous endowment gift of Phyllis Wattis.

Additional donors to the MATRIX Program include the UAM MATRIX Council Endowment, Ann Hatch, and the California Arts Council.

The museum also wishes to thank the LEF Foundation for their support of Teresita Fernández/MATRIX 182 *supernova*.

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Borrowed Landscape (Citron, Cerulean, Violet Blue), 1998; installation view; wood, colored fabric, light, and pencil drawings; dimensions vary. Originally commissioned by ArtPace, A Foundation for Contemporary Art/San Antonio. Photo credit: Anson Seale.

cover: *supernova* series, 1999; detail, work in progress; wood, acrylic, scrim, and paint; dimensions vary. Photo credit: Teresita Fernández.

above: *Landscape [projected]*, 1997; installation view; oculus, light, pipes, fabric, sound component and paint sprayed; 8' x 20' x 30'. Photo credit: Anne Gummerson.