





Teresita Fernández, "Nocturnal (30 Nights)," 2013. Graphite and metallic paint on wood panel 30 panels, each 6×8"; 38.197×68.263" (overall). Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong. Photo by Elisabeth Bernstein.

FERNÁNDEZ: I'm not so interested in making a story out of my personal history because honestly I don't really think about it as something outside of myself. It would be like speaking of oneself in the third person. I can tell you that for the most part the things that are important to me and my personal narrative are nothing like the clichés of what people imagine growing up as a first generation Cuban-American might be like. I'm really interested in Chinese poetry and landscape painting and I have very deep connections to Japanese aesthetics and American literature. I read a lot. I grew up in the '70s in a yellow house full of books and four encyclopedias, all in English. I'm an American kid who spoke Spanish at home and ate black beans while watching *Wonder Woman* and *Charlie's Angels* with Cuban Danzon and *Soul Train* playing in the background, so it's really hard for me to speak to that narrative because a really big part of it probably looks a whole lot like every other '70s American suburban kid's upbringing. That said, when my parents arrived in Miami in 1959, landlords had signs in their window that said "Vacancy: No Pets, No Children, No Cubans." As that first generation of Cuban-Americans, we didn't have the luxury of "messaging up." We were brought up to value education, to work hard, to carry ourselves with a certain formality and solemnity.

In terms of being from Miami, it sits on a peninsula—it's the very tip of a peninsula; you're surrounded by water but framed by land on one side. You witness a spectacular, unreal sky event every evening, in addition to torrential flash rain showers that can last two minutes. My childhood memories of place, of flatness, of explosive color are formed there and are deeply important to me. But nobody ever really talks about the landscape in Miami—it's almost like you need to get away from it in order to see it. Let's just say I've worked really hard at representing myself with the ideas that are important to me and for me it's really about the work, not about the personal story. And so, it's not fun when those rather complex, layered, and subtle references are replaced with someone's exoticized fantasy about who you're supposed to be or some thin version of "memory"—usually someone else's—layered over my identity or my art. Most people have a very limited idea of what being bi-cultural is: they think it's one or the other, and they don't realize that the

two operate completely integrated. I don't think in English or Spanish, I think in English and Spanish. One's cultural experiences are not mutually exclusive, they're experienced as the ultimate normalcy, and it's very hard to explain that seamlessness and sense of wholeness to someone who isn't bicultural.

RAIL: So that narrative aside, was art a part of your childhood?

FERNÁNDEZ: Yes and No. Art was and wasn't a part of my childhood. I understand it better after having children of my own. People ask me all the time whether my kids are artistic, you know, that question artist parents are always asked, "Are they talented?" My answer is always like "Gosh, I don't know." But I can tell you that they do see art as a tool to navigate life. They see it as a way to problem solve and to understand the world. They draw every day, not to "make art," but just as a way of thinking, and because they want to. I grew up surrounded by a family of women who were couture seamstresses and made a living by sewing exquisite things. So when you ask me if art was a part of my childhood I would have to say yes, I had a lot of space to roam free and that spirit of unrestricted thinking and being able to try things and make things and have access to materials was very open. Did we call it art? No. We didn't call it art. Which is maybe a good thing.

RAIL: And how did you land in Brooklyn?

FERNÁNDEZ: After I finished graduate school I spent some years travelling. I was in Rome at the American Academy for a while, and then in Japan at an ARCUS residency, and then I was at ArtPace in Texas for a while, and then I came to New York for the Marie Walsh Sharpe Foundation residency and I just never left.

RAIL: What years were you in Japan?

FERNÁNDEZ: That was '98. It's interesting—I was showing in Japan and people knew my work there before here. The curators and gallerists I was meeting really understood the sort of quietness of my work and I, in turn, really responded to the setting. I've been back almost every year since, so I have a long relationship with Japan, and a lot of friends and art people there that have been very supportive over the years. I'm currently working on a project in Kyoto

with Hosoo, founded in 1688, which specializes in three-dimensional Nishijin weaving, historically used by samurai and emperors. I'm working with a 12th generation family member and weaving gold threads to create night scenes.

RAIL: Wow. That is incredible. So you sort of discovered the vocabulary you had been looking for in Japan?

FERNÁNDEZ: There is a kind of spirit with which the visual is treated and there's a weight and importance and presence that visual things have in Japan that I had always been very interested in and looking for, but I didn't know what to call it or how to harness it. There is something very particular in Japan that I recognized as oddly familiar and important. It was like looking at something and recognizing myself in it. For me, the presence that inanimate objects have there is very similar to what art does. It's easy to capture that tone in a photograph or in a film, or in a moody painting, but it's very hard to do that with three-dimensional materials. It's very hard to make a piece of cheap plastic hover and glow and seem ephemeral, especially when it's hot pink or bright yellow [laughs]. It's very hard to make ordinary, physical materials that very much just want to be what they are, transcend themselves and have a charged presence.

RAIL: Part of that transcendence comes from the tension between micro and macro in your work. Using thousands, or millions, of tiny pieces to construct something gigantic.

FERNÁNDEZ: It's very ephemeral too. In a lot of the pieces in *As Above So Below* I'm trying to make the material behave in a way that transcends its physical fact, its whatness. I liken it to a cinematic dissolve. I often ask myself, "How can I make something three-dimensional and sculptural that behaves the way a cinematic dissolve does?" It's a difficult problem. It's hard to do that with materials that don't just float in space. They sit on the ground, they're heavy, their edges are not blurry, gravity works against me constantly. And in the same sense, I'm also curious about how the "landscape," for lack of a better word, behaves. How does it shift? In *As Above So Below* it's important that the large glass bead installation "Lunar (Theatre)" and the lunar calendar titled "Nocturnal (30 days)" are right next to one another because it's a month. Lunar actually means month and with "Lunar (Theatre)" I was thinking of a landscape that is really a surface that is being perpetually changed and controlled by something above, something outside of itself. I had read a line in Susan Howe's little book on Chris Marker that read "the sea is a theater" and it struck me that the sea is a theater directed by the moon. And of course, we're also implied in that universal timing, those monthly cycles. We have a tendency to think of landscape as something outside of ourselves, and that's a notion that I want to invert—we're actually just an extension of the landscape, we're operating on the very same cycles. We are, in fact, amplified when we think of ourselves implied in the landscape in this way. We become huge.

RAIL: What you said earlier about trying to find our coordinates within the landscape is such a universal human experience. That's what we're all always trying to do. Is the title of the show, *As Above So Below*, a reference to hermetic ideas of a duality, wherein individual pieces supercede themselves in becoming a part of the bigger cycle?

FERNÁNDEZ: I'm actually not that interested in hermetic thought or alchemy. I know very little about it. One of the great things about being an artist is that I don't have to be a historian, I don't have to be a scientist—I'm not an expert in any of these fields. I might read three books on alchemy and pull out one line that to somebody who's a historian of alchemy

would be hugely distorted, but I'm taking it and using it to make art—I'm not trying to be "accurate." For me it's more about making connections, it's more about how I tie it into something bigger and invent a network of dislocated ideas that meet somewhere unexpected, an invented set of unconventional connections. Like most artists, I'm very opportunistic when it comes to what I read, see and observe. I'm always looking, trying to see beyond the obvious. I absorb everything and take what works for me, whatever seems important or quirky, I collect all of the fascinating loose ends and squirrel them away, let them incubate until they reveal their meaning. Like alchemy, there's an element of time here, of waiting, of sensing and trusting a process. Again, that burying of something in order for it to emerge as something else.

The struggle to find our coordinates is extremely important to me. If you look at my early work from graduate school and right after, it's very architectural. I was very interested in feminist architectural theory and aspects of the interior and built space. Then when I went to Japan it was like I crossed that threshold and went outside of the building and became interested in the manipulated landscape. In traditional Japanese architecture, with its dark interiors, there is almost nothing that separates inside and outside. Before I went to Japan, I was already studying shaped landscapes within Western gardening traditions, such as those used in Vaux le Vicomte and Versailles. If you look at Versailles you see the château here and the garden there, and the undulating shaped parterre patterns are often represented in illustrations from a bird's eye view. But the only way you can really understand that geometric layout is if you walk through it, if you trace it with your moving body. So it's that sense of the ambulatory viewer—a place you only understand by moving through it, you unravel it with your eyes and your pace and that can't be replaced by something else. It's very similar to what happens in "Black Sun." Your point of view or perspective flattens, compresses, and then expands into sweeping vistas as you move through the length of the gallery and see it from the second and then the third floor balconies. In Japan it was so interesting for me to see that even though the Japanese idea of the garden was completely different from the formal Western garden, it was still very much about placing oneself in the world. Over and over again, across cultures, the garden is a metaphor for the universe, a place to contemplate one's place in the world.

RAIL: How did your work change after you were in Japan?

FERNÁNDEZ: Right after I got back from Japan I made a piece called "Borrowed Landscape" (1998) which was really the transition piece between the more architectural interiors and the landscape. The pieces were like outdoor rooms or indoor gardens that inverted inside and outside. The freestanding rooms were made with sheer fabric around them and the floors were covered with these tiny drawings that looked like a miniature European formal garden parterre. They were intricate, geometric and vast, like huge landscapes, but they also looked like woven rugs. I was trying to merge the idea of the decorative landscape and the decorative interior. You're on the outside and you look into these spaces. You walk around the volumes like a maze of parterre and you look through the slit and you can see these tiny drawings from a bird's eye view, so you're sort of entering it.

RAIL: But you couldn't actually enter.

FERNÁNDEZ: You could only enter it visually but not physically, the traveling eye imagining a place. "Borrowed Landscape" is a bad translation of a traditional Japanese gardening technique called *Shakkei*, in which a vista is framed by an opening.



Teresa Fernández, "Borrowed Landscape," 1998. wood, fabric, oculus light, pencil, paint, dimensions variable. Originally commissioned at Artpace, A Foundation for Contemporary Art/San Antonio, TX, 1998–99. Courtesy the artist, Lehmann Maupin, New York, and Artpace.

A better translation of *Shakkei* would be "to capture alive." The landscape and the interior in Japan are only divided by a piece of rice paper, or nothing at all, so they're almost seamless. In *Shakkei* things in the landscape are composed within the opening of that structure.

RAIL: In *Shakkei* is the structure built as a part of the garden? Or is the structure the home or the building?

FERNÁNDEZ: It's as if the wall to a building were just missing, and it opens onto a scene. While it's a gardening technique, it's meant to be viewed from the inside, so the interior frames that vista almost like a diorama, but it's all composed of near and far distances compressed into a visual space that is perceived as flat. So you might include a shrub in the foreground, something else in the middle ground, and then Mount Fuji in the background. If you compose it a certain way, then from the interior, those things will line up to capture a living scene. It's like a shimmering projection, but in real space. I applied this same idea to "Black Sun." You walk into the piece and you see it compressed all flat, it just kind of looks like a three-dimensional smudge or squiggle, and then when you walk underneath it you realize there's 95 feet between here and there and it literally expands like an accordion before your very eyes—you unfurl it by walking. These were the kinds of things that I learned so much about when I was in Japan. And really, what it's about is that just like in that garden or the bigger landscape, you're implied. It's not just framing and capturing a view and holding it—but rather it's that understanding that scale is not fixed and that you actually expand and contract along with the world and the landscape around you. So that you're in the landscape but the landscape is not passive, it's also inside you.

This all goes back to the idea of trying to find our coordinates, which is the very essence of what my work is about, and it's also what *Shakkei*'s about. The way humans have always done that, since the beginning of time, has been by looking up at the night sky. The stars were our first calendar, our first way of keeping time, our first clock, our first way of navigating land and sea. They are the only fixed coordinates that we relate to over and over again in our continuous, vulnerable, human disorientation.

So to go back to your question about alchemy, my real intention in the work is not some calculated clever statement about alchemy, but rather a much softer focus. I try to make sculptural experiences and installations that harness that ephemeral, dissolving quality of night into day, or the moon's pull on water—things that are much harder to pinpoint or name.

I am also very interested in the idea of gold as a cultural phenomenon. What we often refer to as Western alchemy is really rooted in much more ancient traditions of mining happening in Africa, China, and in the Americas way before the European traditions ever evolved. Gold is present all over the world, and has, across every time period and culture been synonymous with the sun, with light, with radiance, metals connected to their heavenly counterparts, literally. The sun rules gold; the moon, silver; Venus is copper and so on.

The title of the show *As Above So Below* originally comes from the Vedas but it's a universal theme that can be found across countless religions, traditions and mythologies. It's that idea that the big is just a version of the small and the small is implied in the big, so that the very intimate contains that vast, and the boundless vast universe is made up of tiny little things. I'm recalling that beautiful story of Krishna's mother finding the entire universe inside her baby's mouth. All of the transcendentalists were of course interested in this too, the importance of the unique individual in the larger society. It enters our notions of "American literature" but through Eastern thought, as the Transcendentalists absorbed and extracted from the first translations of dozens of Asian and Islamic texts. So for me the line "as above so below" served not only as a way of looking at scale, the minute in the vast, literally and figuratively, but also as this perfect cue to deal with the horizon that marks what's below and what's above. My materials: pyrite, iron-ore, graphite—are mined from underground, but I often use them to depict the reflections or constellations of the night sky—again, we see that recurring universal connection between the subterranean and the cosmos.

RAIL: I thought a lot about the Hermetic ideas implied in the show, and I read them as a corollary



Teresa Fernández, "Golden (Scroll 1)," 2014 gold chroming and India ink on wood panel 12×108". Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong. Photo by Elisabeth Bernstein.

to Bachelard's concept of the intimate immensity, which you've been interested in for a long time. They're complementary to each other and also to the anecdote about your grandmother's idiom "every person is a world."

FERNÁNDEZ: "Cada persona es un mundo." I love that line. It's one of those things my grandmother would often say that's just such a nice little truism and part of how I see the world. Again, the thing about it is—and I resist this constantly—is that I don't like the work to become reduced to a kind of clever narrative. I don't really want to talk about the stars and alchemy and all of the things that I'm thinking about. Instead, I want you to be there and just sense and respond from a purely gut reaction. As a rule, I never speak near the work. While I love the research and developing the conceptual part, in the end the real challenge is not to entertain myself with narratives but rather to translate those ideas I'm thinking about into an installation or a sculpture that puts you in a place where you're experiencing those things without me having to call them anything or rationalize its meaning. That's the alchemy! That's the kind of pulling a rabbit out of a hat, where something magically shifts and becomes bigger than the sum of its parts in some mute, inexplicable way. The interesting thing is that when it works, when people actually willingly become an extension of the art experience, you don't have to explain anything at all—people who know nothing about art will have a moving experience simply by being present and receptive. There's nothing to get, they're actually just in it, which is what happens when you are standing in awe in the real landscape or when a poem makes no logical sense but resonates with some hidden chord inside of you. So rather than trying to create overt landscapes, or fake landscapes, or mini landscapes, what I'm really trying to create is an experience that offers that sense of just staring back at yourself, a quiet mirror to yourself. More than anything else, what I seek is to make an artwork that offers intimacy: it's the reaction I most value and it's the exact word to describe what I'm after.

RAIL: Do you feel a specific dependence on an ambulatory viewer that drives the process of making the work?

FERNÁNDEZ: A lot of the things I'm thinking about are really about transformation, and transitions, and the ephemeral, and so that sense of time invested in experiencing the work is important. It's an aspect of the work that I'm committed to because I feel more and more that intimacy is something that we're slowly losing. Everything is mediated, everything's choppy and in sound bytes. People think they understand something by searching for it and looking at it on a tiny screen, but there's a whole other kind of knowledge of understanding something that has to do with intimacy, with time elapsing—spending 20 minutes with something and slowing

down and understanding art not as an isolated object but rather within its wider context, beyond its edges, within its endless, nesting containers: a base, a gallery, a museum complex, North Adams, The Berkshires, etc. That long view approach is key. When I started working on the show I was thinking about very small things. I walked in and the space was so huge and I kept going back to this idea of making a show about the miniature, partially to humor myself in the massive spaces of MASS MoCA. The first part of my research was about bonsai, which isn't defined by the scale or the size of a plant, but by the fact that it is in a container: a plant in a container as big as this room, is still a bonsai. That's when I began thinking of the gallery and the landscape, and all of these things as concentric containers. I was so drawn to this idea that bonsai is just a very slow sculpture and if you think about it, the landscape is not that fixed Hudson River School painting—it's really a very slow moving sculpture. Whether it's seismic shifts or that diurnal/nocturnal passage, it's sculptural and physical. And the "viewer" is changing along with it, which is why the idea that the viewer is a given has always bothered me.

RAIL: I understand that using the word viewer isn't necessarily accurate, but I'm not sure that using reader, as you suggested as an alternative in your interview with Anne Stringfield, is accurate either. Reading is such a private activity.

FERNÁNDEZ: Yes, but that's precisely how I think of the visual—as an entirely private activity. Reading is so personal because when you read a book, it becomes a reflection of your own psyche and your own life. You put yourself into it, you're invested. The kind of art that I'm trying to make is the same exact thing—a sense that you can't really talk about it because it's such a private experience. I use the reader reference because it's easier for people to understand that you and I can both read the same book, but we construct very different images of what occurs, what's important, and why. That's the kind of viewer/reader I imagine. He or she is one that, without me having to explain it, without having to talk about that mountain, and the ocean, and the water, is remembering every mountain and every ocean, and that childhood memory that bubbles up, and all the baggage that we bring to interpreting an idea, whether it's in a book or a piece of music or an installation. This is what art does, right? It reveals to us something private about ourselves—it helps us find our coordinates. It becomes a touchstone in that endless human cycle of wandering and feeling connected.

RAIL: I wonder how that relates to the relationship between memory and imagination, and if that's something that you think about.

FERNÁNDEZ: I don't think my work is about memory or imagination per se, but I think both of those

things are put into practice. It's funny, memory is past and imagination is future and I'm interested in that actual real-time experience in between, which is, I suppose, the present. Because you're experiencing something in the present, you've got both memory and imagination framing it, but you experience it in the now, which is why you have to walk from here to there and it takes five minutes; you're processing this sense of being in the moment, of being present in the active building of image and meaning. It's no accident that thinking and walking have always been intertwined.

RAIL: But if we're bringing our own experience to the piece, we're bringing our memory to it.

FERNÁNDEZ: Absolutely, absolutely. But it would feel presumptuous and inaccurate for me to say that that my work is about just memory as an isolated factor.

RAIL: In terms of blindness, with the *Nocturnal* series you spoke about the dimming—about how toning it down actually allows one to see more—but the *Golden* series feels a little less dim in a way.

FERNÁNDEZ: More golden?

RAIL: More gold, more contrast. I'm curious about that.

FERNÁNDEZ: It's interesting you say that because I think those pieces made more sense the more I got rid of the gold. It's important when you're looking at those pure rich black inky surfaces that you actually feel and sense that there's gold behind it, even though it's completely covered up. I wanted it to feel like light trying to break through. "Golden (Scroll 1)" (2014) was made with the dimensions of a Chinese scroll in mind, that idea that when you open a Chinese scroll it's meant to be seen little by little as you unroll it. It's kind of the inverse of the ambulatory viewer; while you remain stationary you unroll it from right to left, little by little, and it's meant to be seen in sections that correlate to approximately the width of your shoulders. You become the figure in the landscape, and you never see it all open at once. You unroll and enter one scene and then you transition as one scene appears and the other disappears into the scroll. So you're literally in the act of creating a place. A place might include something that's composed very close to you or something that's far away. And the scale is constantly shifting and contradictory. Interestingly enough, the whole left side of this "Golden" piece, like the first part of the Chinese scroll that you read from right to left is always left blank. That frontispiece is referred to as the "Heaven," or the "moat"—a blank place you have to traverse. It's an empty space from which you slowly make your way into another scene, again that way-finding. The transitions are not abrupt: it's a dissolve, like the cinematic dissolve. Half the piece is entirely black, so your question about contrast is interesting because for me, this piece is all about the fact that this tiny image of recognizable landscape emerges out of a blackness and implies a

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sort of appearing out of nowhere. It's like the idea of something hiding in plain sight. You can't see it, but you perceive it somehow, like your eyes adjusting to seeing in the darkness.

RAIL: It makes me think of the smaller pieces here in your studio and the smaller ones in *As Above So Below*, particularly "Bonsai" on the little shelf—because it's the smallest, it's also the biggest.

FERNÁNDEZ: That's exactly why I put it there—you somehow become the size of things in your mind's eye. You are implied in the size of what you're looking at, and that thing shifts in relation to you. I really love that idea. We can call it "figure in the landscape" if we're talking about painting traditions, or we can talk about it as inhabiting the real landscape as we turn to take in a view from a precipice, but it's actually very fluid. So yeah, for me that tiny piece *is* the biggest one in the show—it's certainly the biggest image. It also takes up space beyond its physical edges, as it projects a much larger luminous glow on the wall behind it, and that too is part of its shifting size.

RAIL: It seems very much that it *is* the intimate immensity.

FERNÁNDEZ: It is.

RAIL: Bachelard describes how the way the experience of being in the middle of the forest is partly about being in the middle of the forest, but it's *really* about accessing the forest that is within oneself.

FERNÁNDEZ: Yes, absolutely! I often go back to so many literary passages that are about just that, from Hawthorne, and Thoreau, and Emerson—they were so aware of that core idea in Eastern thought, even though we think of those themes of the individual in society as something quintessentially American. Emerson's "creation of a thousand forests is in one acorn!"

RAIL: As we're sitting here talking I'm realizing how much your work is about language.

FERNÁNDEZ: So true. Language as a reference point is really important to me—I'm an etymology nerd. In the West, we tend to compartmentalize and separate



Teresita Fernández, "Bonsai," 2014. Gold chroming and fused nylon 7×6×8". Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong
Photo: David Dashiell.

the visual from language. But the idea of the painted Chinese landscape is synonymous with poetry: it's the same thing. There aren't really even different words for it. I'm very much interested in how—for the same reasons as I'm interested in landscape itself—language and etymology are not static: they're perhaps the most constantly evolving reflection of transitions and shifting values and I always marvel at how much it's tied to the visual.

RAIL: What about the title of "Black Sun"? There's a tension in it. In alchemy Black Sun is the stage of putrefication, death, and suffering, but the piece seems very much not that.

FERNÁNDEZ: The title doesn't come from that at all. It's related to alchemy in that it acknowledges that it's not all light: darkness is always in tandem—or in the Japanese sensibility of light being implied in darkness. We tend to single them out as the positive and the negative, but they're really just versions of one another. But to clarify, the title "Black Sun," comes from a Mesoamerican myth and image of the sun god, which is of course gold, disappearing into the west, into the underworld, only to appear

on the other side the next day. So it's about this diurnal-nocturnal passage. I loved the idea that this entity disappears into the west, because that's where the sun sets, but that it travels beneath us in a hollow underground space and comes out the other side. That dark to light transition—the sun setting and rising, the gradual shifting from day to night, those cycles that reverberate both inside and outside of us. "Black Sun" was an attempt to make an immense sculpture that could behave like that.

RAIL: I love that. And I love the reference to the Margaret Atwood quote in the catalogue: "Night falls. Or has fallen. Why is it that night falls, instead of rising, like the dawn? Yet if you look east, at sunset, you can see night rising, not falling; darkness lifting into the sky, up from the horizon, like a black sun behind cloud cover."

FERNÁNDEZ: Yes, it's from *The Handmaid's Tale*, I was moved by it when I first read it too. We're used to seeing it the other way around: the sun as rising. But actually, it's the night—the darkness—that rises in that endless cycle of concealing and revealing. ☉