

Art Horse 2: *Athena LaTocha: The Past Never Sleeps*, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Recorded January 2, 2024

Welcome to *Art Horse*, an occasional audio essay about art. I'm Sommer Browning.

New Year's Eve is a letdown. I really think I'm going to stop celebrating it after my kid doesn't care about it anymore. I don't want to force myself to think about the past. I don't want to force myself to think about the future. Plus, the prevailing cultural notion around time passing, at least since I turned 35 or so, feels very mired in production and goal setting and expectations, and all three of those feel very obsessed with lack, with deficiency, with measuring up.

I told my friend Sarah, who I saw Athena LaTocha's exhibit with, when she asked about my resolutions, that I wanted to read more in 2024. She told me that people say the most successful resolutions are specific. Like, I'm going to read a book a week in 2024 or I'm going to read 100 books next year. And frankly, when I heard that I wanted to forego my solid state, condense into a liquid, splash myself into a puddle, and sink, rapidly, into the cracks of the museum's parquet floor. Not only would that be cool as hell, but it felt like the ultimate rebellion against lack, deficiency, and measuring up. Transmogrification. Be like water making its way through cracks, Bruce Lee said.

LaTocha's three huge rectangular abstract works in her exhibit *The Past Never Sleeps* are made of dirt, debris, glass, lead, mud, moss, sand, paper, and ink. They are imposing, roiling, topographical. They are intricate and infinitely deep in places—what I imagine Vantablack to look like. They are beautiful and upsetting. I really love them.

Each piece refers to a place. *Bulbancha (Green Silence)* is made with Mississippi River mud and Spanish moss. Bulbancha is Choctaw and is the name of the land area now called New Orleans. This piece is the most organic of the three. Maybe because it has areas of dark, vital green, and I can see some mossy fingers creeping across the paper. All the paintings are on paper. LaTocha calls them paintings—a word that in this case refers to the action of painting, not the substance—she paints with ink and dirt and sand, it doesn't seem like she ever uses much paint. I like the linguistic move of taking the paint out of painting. I think it's important.

And the paper is huge. On her website she says she lays the sheets on the ground and gets on top of them to paint. The other two pieces, *Burning*, *Sulphuric*, *Violent* and *It Came From the North* refer to New York City in that they are made with earth from Greenwood Cemetery, industrial sand from the World Trade Center, and other site-specific materials. These city pieces feel manufactured, they are very much of the built environment—their paper looks more like sheet metal, shiny, textured as if it's been pounded with hammers or scorched with blow torches.

They are most certainly landscapes. But landscapes of history and processes. Geological and human. I've visited the show twice now, and each time I felt very different things and had very different thoughts.

When I visited once, I thought that these pieces were like textbooks the earth would make to teach us about what we humans have done—how we've used the land and used each other's

bodies. I thought that if they are textbooks like this then they are also mirrors showing us to ourselves. If they are mirrors, then as I stand before them, I am reflected and become part of the work—not only as a chronological, causal, conclusion of all the history and processes that have occurred thus far, but also more materially—because like them my body is made of earth, water, and carbon, my thoughts are made with paper and ink.

In a lecture LaTocha delivered in 2023 at her alma mater, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, she talks about Philip Guston’s influence on her, particularly the profound doubt he would feel in the studio, his psychology as an artist I guess. She shares this quote of his—which ironically, feels like it has zero doubt in it—but that echoes through her paintings: *I think a painter has two choices: he paints the world or himself. And I think the best painting that’s done here is when he paints himself, and by himself I mean himself and this environment, in this total situation.*

When I visited the second time, I was lost in the thought that what LaTocha is doing is transmogrifying—but rapidly and repeatedly—back and forth between appearances. The natural forms look human-made, the built things transform into dust and earth. I saw all this at once so that very soon there was no way to distinguish. Is this steel or is this paper? Is this mud or is this shellac or is this moss? Yes. It is a new compound called steelpapermudshellacmoss—a new word to describe the moment we’re in—when the natural world is indistinguishable from the built because our hands are all over both. It’s hard to climb a tree that hasn’t been planted. It’s hard to swim in a body of water without a plastic wrapper bobbing next to you.

I want to both end this episode of *Art Horse* and start this new year by suggesting something I learned from LaTocha’s show. We don’t need to center lack or deficiency to make meaning, progress, or change. Her work doesn’t. Her work bridges worlds, offers ideas, proposes and creates similarities – the dirt is like ink, the paper like steel, art is a landscape is a textbook is a mirror. That’s generative. That’s life-affirming. I love it.

*The Past Never Sleeps* was curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver. It is up at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts until January 14, 2024. *Art Horse* is written, recorded, and edited by me Sommer Browning. *Art Horse*’s theme song is composed by Georgia Eli Browning. Thank you for listening.