

Her Art Reads the Land in Deep Time

Athena LaTocha has embraced geological materials from mesas, wetlands and bluffs in her large-scale works. Now, she's exploring what's underfoot in New York City.



The artist Athena LaTocha in Downtown Brooklyn. In making her new installation at BRIC House, she used local materials including debris from this excavation site, across the street from the venue. Sabrina Santiago for The New York Times

By Siddhartha Mitter

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On a bright morning recently in Downtown Brooklyn, the artist [Athena LaTocha](#) stood by a construction site where pile drivers and earth-moving machines were excavating the foundation for a new skyscraper, and examined the scene with a kind of creative recognition.

“This equipment is an extension of us, right? It’s an extension of the operator’s arm,” she said. “Reaching out and clawing back, making marks and movements, laying down materials and sweeping them back up — it resonates for me as an artist too.”

LaTocha had some familiarity with this site. She had retrieved rubble and debris from the excavation’s edge to use in making her large-scale installation currently on view at [BRIC House](#), a nonprofit arts space right across the street.



"In the Wake Of..." (2021), a 55-foot installation at BRIC House, in Brooklyn. Working on sturdy, resin-coated photographic paper, LaTocha pours ink, water, and soil and other materials gathered in the environment to produce dramatic earth-toned works that are abstract yet imbued with the history of a geographical setting. Sebastian Bach

Once mainly a painter, LaTocha, 52, now operates in a vein all her own, somewhere between painting and environmental art. Her works are made on sturdy, resin-coated photographic paper that she lays out on the floor, often at such large scale that she must crawl across them in the studio. She repeatedly pours and spreads pools of ink as well as heaps of soil and materials that she lets settle and pervade the surface, then scrapes and sweeps away.

Lately, she has added volume in the form of sheets of lead that partially overlay the main surface: They are crinkled like tinfoil, the result of working them by hand over rock formations, imprinting every fissure and striation.

The works present as stormy, earth-toned abstractions, but they are deeply site-responsive, their ingredients gathered in New Mexican mesas, Ozarks bluffs, Louisiana wetlands.

Now she has turned her attention to New York City and the geological and human forces that have shaped its terrain. Her [55-foot installation at BRIC, titled "In the Wake Of..."](#), and a companion piece in the [Greater New York](#) exhibition now at MoMA P.S.1, also involve soil from Green-Wood Cemetery and imprints of Manhattan schist bedrock striated by glaciers.



LaTocha's technique extends landscape painting yet it is not, in any conventional sense, landscape painting at all. "She takes the earth itself and paints with the attributes of the planet," said the artist [Howardena Pindell](#), who taught her in the M.F.A. program at Stony Brook University in the mid-00s and remains a friend. "It's a great leap forward for landscape."

It reflects, as well, deep communion with the land. LaTocha spends long hours in the sites that inspire her work, photographing, recording ambient sound, reflecting.

That immersion shows in the art, said Ruba Katrib, the MoMA P.S.1 curator: "It's hands-on, not like this distant viewing eye. It's actually in the landscape, touching it, embedded in it."

LaTocha has roots in American expanses: She grew up in Alaska, and on her mother's side she is Lakota and Ojibwe from the Northern Plains. But she resided mostly in New York City since graduating from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the early '90s and is now based in Peekskill, N.Y., where she has a studio large enough to make her monumental works.



LaTocha's "It Came From the North" (2021) in the Greater New York exhibition, currently at P.S.1. Lead sheets overlaid on the main surface are hand-imprinted with rock-face formations from a Manhattan park. LaTocha's work conveys "deep time," the exhibition's lead curator said. MoMA P.S.1; Marissa Alper

She remembers Downtown Brooklyn before the current development boom. But her take on the changes, far from nostalgic, emphasizes the much longer view. “I see what humans are doing,” she said. But research for the work had led her into “the history of New York, of the Lenape, and going back to pre-human times.”

Soil from Green-Wood, for instance, which the cemetery excavates to make space for new graves, is inherently connected to the city’s social history. But it is also some of the last undisturbed soil from an earlier epoch. “Where else can you get earth from predevelopment time?” she said.

The cemetery rests, as well, on heights formed by the Ice Age [terminal moraine](#), while the bedrock schist she imprinted dates even deeper in geological time. She carried 40-pound rolls of lead into a Manhattan park and meticulously captured the intricacies of the rock face. “You get very intimately connected with the detail,” she said.

LaTocha’s telescoped material history registers the onward march of human activity but also what existed long before. Another current presentation, at the [Visual Arts Center of New Jersey](#), in Summit, N.J., applies the same methods to engage with the Great Falls of the Passaic River in Paterson, a natural site that powered much of that city’s industrial history.



“A Thing Not Past” (left) and “17th Century,” both from 2021, in “Athena LaTocha: After the Falls,” at the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey. The rock-face imprints and environmental materials in the work come from the Great Falls of the Passaic River, in Paterson, N.J., which powered the city’s early industrialization. Etienne Prossard

At BRIC, she has incorporated an audio component, made with the sound artist [Maria Chávez](#), mixing recorded subway rumbles, construction hubbub and phases of silence. The entire installation “helps us very urban people to take a step back,” said Elizabeth Ferrer, BRIC’s vice president for contemporary art, who organized it with the curator Jenny Gerow. “It makes you think: what is that ground underfoot?”

LaTocha traces her fascination with the land to her Alaska childhood. Her father worked for the forestry department and built a home outside Anchorage on “a dirt road off a dirt road,” she said. The nearby mountainside offered sweeping views. “You were surrounded by immense depth, vast space, and incredible heights.”

Her undergraduate art-school education was formally rich and varied, she said. But it offered little exposure to critical views on the American landscape tradition in painting and photography and its involvement in ideologies of Westward expansion and settlement.

“Here are these guys going into the West with these massive mammoth plates,” she said of 19th-century photographers. “Then you start learning other histories, questioning roles and responsibilities. That pushed the urgency to expand my thinking.”



Detail, "In the Wake Of..." The materials used in this work include ink, earth from Green-Wood Cemetery, demolition debris, shellac on paper, lead. Sebastian Bach

Around 10 years ago, she put away oils and brushes for good in favor of her inks and environmental materials, which include tire shreds and other improvised tools to move substances across the paper. The turn has been fruitful, garnering critical interest, major residencies — the Rauschenberg Foundation in 2013, the Joan Mitchell Foundation in 2016 — and exhibition momentum after years of working odd jobs.

Katrib, the Greater New York curator, said LaTocha's work expressed the "idea of deep time" that runs through that exhibition. It is also timeless in how it envelops viewers, said [Manuela Well-Off-Man](#), the chief curator of the IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts in Santa Fe, N.M., comparing the effect to Mark Rothko or Anselm Kiefer: "It triggers some sort of experience from very deep back."

LaTocha's emergence parallels the rise of Native contemporary art as a field working out [curatorial](#) priorities and the [ways it is represented](#). She has exhibited in that context, including a notable [group show of Native artists](#) since the 1950s at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, in 2018, but remains "conflicted," she said, about being labeled by an identity category.

At the same time, she said, exhibition projects on the Pine Ridge reservation with the Lakota educator [Craig Howe](#) strengthened connection with her roots. “It was a great opportunity to spend more time with those stories, to reflect and visualize.”

The painter [Jaune Quick-to-See Smith](#), who is 81, observed that her own generation was conditioned to self-censor Native artistic references, while young artists now find them widely appreciated, leaving LaTocha’s generation somewhere in between.

Still, said Smith, who curated [LaTocha’s show](#) at the CUE Art Foundation in 2015, she found the work consistent with a distinctly Native approach to landscape: “It’s a holistic view,” she said. “So often the sky and land are merged, there’s no delineation, and she does that well.”



LaTocha on the heights of Green-Wood Cemetery, founded in 1838 but topographically shaped by the retreat of ice age glaciers. She used soil that the cemetery excavated in making her work at BRIC House. Sabrina Santiago for The New York Times

In Brooklyn, LaTocha rounded out a tour of field sites at Green-Wood, beginning in the maintenance area, with its mounds of rocks and soil from recent digging, and proceeding to the heights with its panoramic view of the city.

Next year, she will present a series of installations in the cemetery itself. “So much of the work we do here is about the residents who are buried,” said Harry Weil, Green-Wood’s director of public programs. “We never think, what about before [the cemetery’s founding in] 1838? And then thousands of years before humans were in the area?”

Looking across to Lower Manhattan, LaTocha shared her memories of 9/11, when she was close to the horror. Recently, she said, she had a residency in the new 4 World Trade Center building. Sunsets viewed from there, she said, could feel like the world was aflame.

And perhaps it was, she added, as our relationship to the planet hurtles toward a climate showdown. “Not to be gloom-and-doom, but it’s a possibility,” she said. “Depending on the choices that we make.”

Where to See Athena LaTocha’s Works

“Athena LaTocha: In the Wake Of ...” continues through Jan. 9 at BRIC House, 647 Fulton Street, Brooklyn: 718-683-5600, bricartsmedia.org.

“Athena LaTocha: After the Falls” continues through Jan. 23 at Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, 68 Elm Street, Summit, N.J.: 908-273-9121, artcenternj.org.

“Greater New York” continues at MoMA P.S. 1 through April 18: moma.org.

Siddhartha Mitter writes about art and creative communities in the United States, Africa and elsewhere. Previously he wrote regularly for The Village Voice and The Boston Globe and he was a reporter for WNYC Public Radio.

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