

# ARTFORUM

Athena LaTocha,  
*Untitled No. 2 (detail)*,  
2022, shellac ink, earth  
from Green-Wood  
Cemetery, demolition  
sediment from a Brooklyn  
construction site, and glass  
microbeads from New  
York State Department of  
Transportation on paper,  
custom raw-steel artist  
frame, 18 1/2 x 27 x 2".



## Athena LaTocha

JDJ

If “the medium is the message,” as philosopher Marshall McLuhan once said, then the message of Athena LaTocha’s art is death. The ten mixed-media abstractions on display in the artist’s show here were made of earth—culled from Brooklyn’s Green-Wood Cemetery—along with demolition-site debris, pulverized building materials, and the glass microbeads used in traffic paint, which she sourced from the New York State Department of Transportation. LaTocha’s framed compositions distill mortality into a concentrate, undiluted by any intimations of life—unless they feature the kind of glass bead called a “seed bead,” perhaps suggesting that the reclamation of wasteland for the sake of one’s creative endeavors makes it a fertile ingredient. That her dirt forms from a graveyard indicates as much, for Green-Wood is not necessarily a fallow and morbid place, considering all the flora and fauna that inhabit it. Was the inseparability of life and death the implicit theme of LaTocha’s exhibition? Her version of Gotham is not exactly “Fun City,” as former mayor John Lindsay characterized New York in 1966. It’s more of a picker’s paradise.

The Brooklyn-based Hunkpapa Lakota and Ojibwe artist grew up in Alaska. Early on, she became acutely aware of the devastating effects oil and gas drilling has on the “rugged monumentality” of her home state, as she explains on her website. Without question, her works are memento mori to it. In a sense, LaTocha is reappropriating what was taken away from Native American people by the United States government. Indeed, she spins poison into gold: Even though her art is culled from exploitation and darkness, she manages to imbue it with great light. Take *Untitled No. 3*, 2022, a horizontal strip of variegated whites, browns, blacks, and musty reds that calls to mind a sublime landscape on the brink of ruin, or *Untitled No. 4* of the same year, a marvelous abstraction that evokes J. M. W. Turner’s paintings with its crepuscular palette and stormy textures. LaTocha’s “pictures,” if that’s how you choose to characterize them, are bordered by dark-metal frames. Such presentation lends the work a distinctly funereal quality, as if each piece were lovingly displayed in its own heavy, raw-steel sarcophagus.

LaTocha is a protest artist, and her output has an important place in the histories of feminist and Native American activist art. Her images also function as Earthworks, in a way, though not as self-aggrandizing as Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, or as space consuming as Walter de Maria’s *New York Earth Room*, 1977. Instead, LaTocha invites the viewer into an intimate relationship with our fading planet and much of the toxic detritus that has shaped it. As Percy Bysshe Shelley does in his 1818 poem “Ozymandius,” the artist conveys the despair that attends death, rather than deny it with delusions of grandeur. “Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!” writes Shelley. “Nothing beside remains. Round the decay / Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away.” The pieces in this exhibition were ruthlessly physical, subtly Conceptual, and deeply emotional. Though modest in scale and materials, each work was gargantuan in scope and spirit.

—Donald Kuspit