

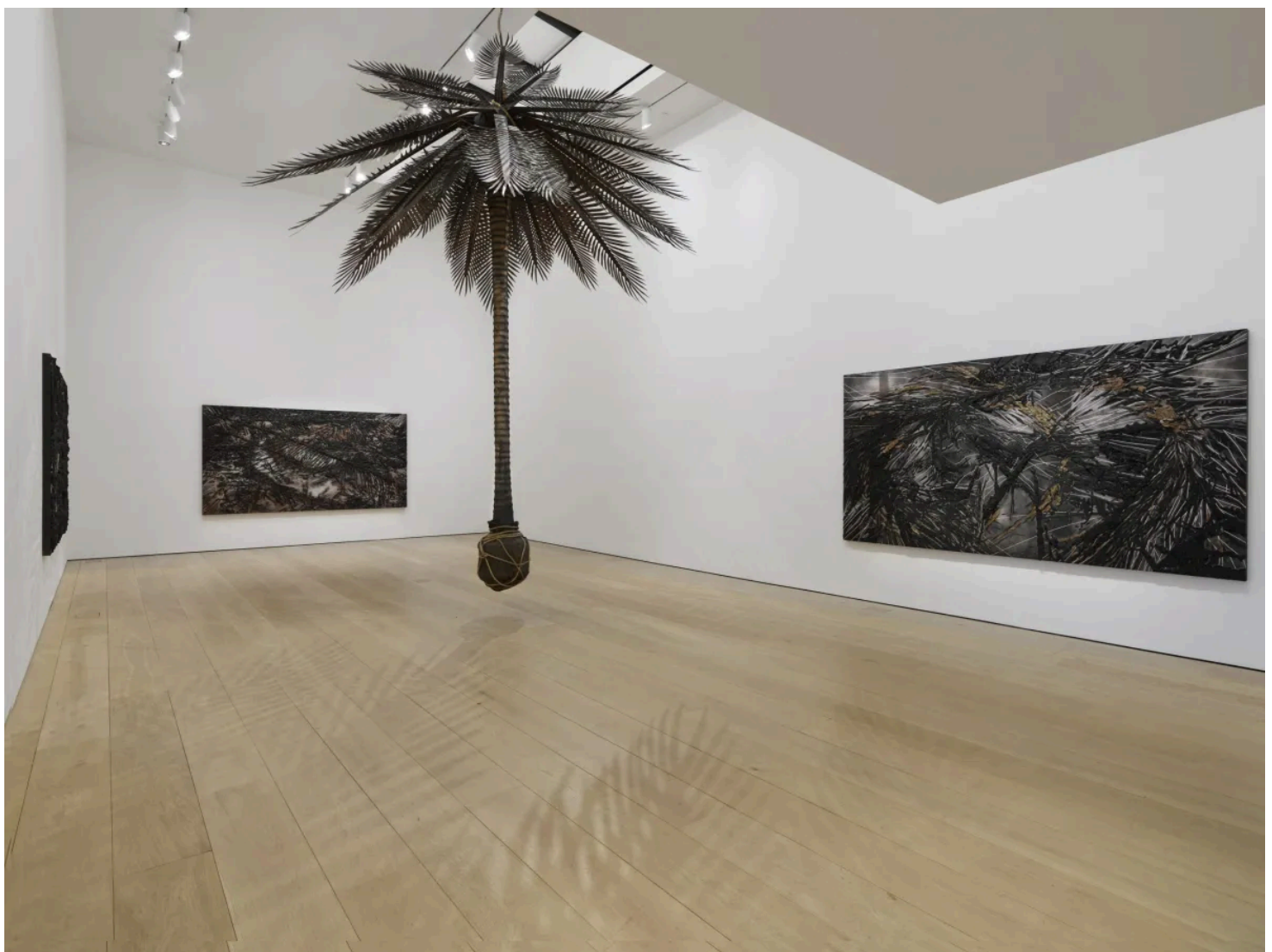
Art [Weekend](#)

Teresita Fernández Depicts Caribbean Colonialism and Eco-Trauma

Fernández employs motifs of darkness and obscurity to hint at the something beyond what we see.



Louis Bury January 2, 2021

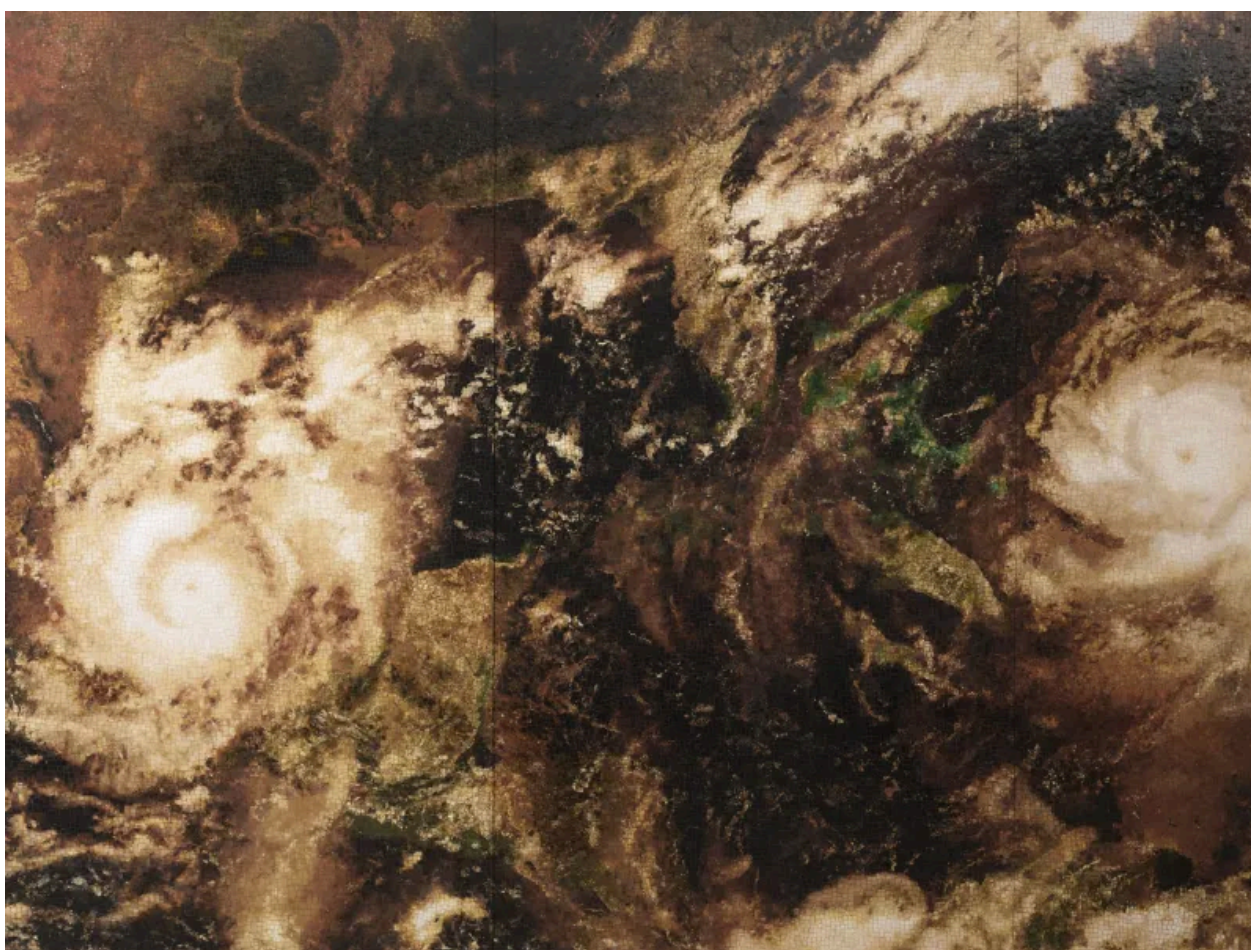


Teresita Fernández, *Maelstrom*, installation photograph (photo by Elisabeth Bernstein, all images courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul, and London)

A large sculptural palm tree hangs from the ceiling by a noose. The tree hovers about a foot off the ground, its base wrapped in a burlap sack and tied with rope, and emanates discomfiting stillness. Though palm trees typically symbolize tropical ease, there's nothing breezy about this

tree's soiled wooden trunk or rusty copper fronds, nothing relaxed about the way its rigid length dangles. The three charcoal-covered aluminum panels on the walls enhance the grim mood; each panel is covered with a jungle-esque density of rough-hewn materials such that only slivers of its reflective surface remain visible.

The palm tree, "Rising (Lynched Land)" (2020), and the surrounding panel series, *Black Beach (Unpolished Diamond)* (2020), fill one of three rooms in Teresita Fernández's latest exhibition, *Maelstrom*, at Lehmann Maupin. Each room conveys an ambient sense of Caribbean eco-trauma with the renowned artist's stylized understatement. Yet the lynched tree stands out for its blunt symbolism. Fernández typically operates on an allusive register, incorporating iconography into her work, but relying on the allure of visual suggestion to let things cohere. Her portentous palm tree, by contrast, delivers its disturbing, anti-colonialist message with uncharacteristic directness.



Teresita Fernández, "Caribbean Cosmos" (2020), (detail), glazed ceramic, 96 x 192 x 1.25 inches

That give-and-take between boldness and subtlety animates *Maelstrom*. The exhibition's other centerpiece, "Caribbean Cosmos" (2020), is a dramatic 8 by 16-foot glazed ceramic mosaic that depicts tan vortices breaking through inky darkness. It evokes both celestial galaxies and aerial views of earthbound storms. Though aestheticized supra-human vantages can sometimes appear grandiose, "Caribbean Cosmos" succeeds by virtue of its engrossing details. Its lustrous, mottled tesserae are a cornucopian delight of color — from sea green to blood red to coral pink — so

varied you might wonder how the tiles manage to coalesce into a harmonious gestalt when viewed from afar.

The lower level gallery also turns on differences between remote and intimate viewing. An arrangement of smudgy blue horizontal lines, reminiscent of Light and Space art, are drawn on all four walls. The vertical spacing between the lines creates the impression of a horizon-like band of blue at eye level, upon which are mounted 20 small, dark collages on wood panels. From a distance, only subdued flecks of color can be perceived within the collages; up close, they reveal cartographic regions of bright color obscured by layers of shadowy horizontal stripes.

Each collage is titled “Huracán,” followed in parentheses by the name of a historic, female-named hurricane such as “Hanna,” “Katrina,” or “Iris.” The titles are a dual reference: to the US’s mid-century practice of using only female names for storms; and to the country’s even more insidious mid-century practice of eugenics on Puerto Rican women, who were often uninformed about the contraceptive procedures, including sterilization, performed upon them.



Teresita Fernández, “Black Beach (Unpolished Diamond) 2” (2020), solid charcoal, wood, volcanic rock, and mixed media on aluminum panel, 72 x 135 x 2.25 inches (photo by Elisabeth Bernstein)

From its parenthetical titles to its motifs of darkness and obscurity, *Maelstrom* again and again hints at the existence of something beyond what we see. Even the visual essay that accompanies the exhibition on the gallery website — which functions as an annotated bibliography of the

artist's sources of information and inspiration, as well as an acknowledgement of the show's behind-the-scenes team labor — contributes to the dialectic between withholding and disclosure. In this context, it's worth noting that Fernández doesn't usually provide a self-authored explanatory apparatus for her work.

But it's the contrast between the lynched palm tree's stark figuration and the surrounding panels' mysterious abstraction that says all that needs to be said. The panels' titles allude to the well-known "Black Beach" chapter in Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, and their shrouded surfaces recall that same book's concept of opacity. For Glissant, opacity is a "right" that people, especially the colonized, have to *not* be understood, a right to preserve that part of themselves which remains incommunicable, irreducible, unknowable — not just to others but also to oneself. With disquieting elegance, *Maelstrom* asserts that same right for a geographic region that too often has been denied it.

Teresita Fernández: Maelstrom *continues at Lehmann Maupin (501 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through January 23.*