

## Art

# Athena LaTocha Digs Deep into Brooklyn's Past

The artist's wall-size drawing evokes a geologic mood within a neighborhood that has changed in recent decades.



Louis Bury December 15, 2021



Installation view of Athena LaTocha, "In the Wake of..." (2021), (all images courtesy of the artist and BRIC; photos by Sebastian Bach)

Athena LaTocha is known for enormous abstract drawings whose incorporation of natural materials from nearby sites evokes terrain, as in her use of red earth for an exhibition at Santa Fe's IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts. Yet none of her drawings have been quite so large or stony as the centerpiece of *In the Wake of...* (2021) at BRIC Arts. The 55-by-17-foot drawing theatrically occupies an entire wall of the Downtown Brooklyn arts organization's

sunken main gallery, accompanied by a soundscape composed of found urban noises. The drawing's mottled grays and tans — rough-hewn splotches of shellac, earth from Green-Wood Cemetery, and demolition debris, as well as craggy lead casts of outcroppings — are geologic in texture, color, and scale. Standing next to the artwork creates the sense of being dwarfed by a canyon wall or encountering an exposed cross-section of earth beneath the city sidewalk that's just outside the gallery's overhead, street-level windows.



Installation view, Athena LaTocha, "In the Wake of ..." (2021)

*In the Wake of...*'s geologic mood invokes a sense of deep time within an urban neighborhood that has undergone considerable transformation in recent decades. Some of those changes are visible through the gallery windows, with the jibs of several cranes poking up like giraffe necks from a nearby construction site, and newly and half-built glass high rises towering beyond them. The artist's drawing takes the long view on civic turnover, abstracting its material traces into flinty streaks and scrapes that evoke a sedimentary record. While the idiom "in the wake of" typically refers to the immediate aftermath of a specific event, LaTocha is more interested in the distant aftermath of a confluence of events, the point at which history's tail has gotten so long you can't easily trace effects back to causes.

Yet her compositional methods suggest that historical amnesia, while inevitable at geological time scales, nonetheless involves human agency at civilizational ones. In video footage of the artist's

studio process for the show, LaTocha uses dropper bottles, buckets, and brooms to mix together and apply an array of inky and earthen solutions to the gargantuan paper laid out on the floor. The resultant palimpsest of blurred and blended materials hints at the capacity humans have to hasten or delay processes of disappearance and forgetting, to obscure or maintain the cultural record. Such remixing distinguishes her drawings from art historical counterparts — for instance, Michelle Stuart’s earth rubbings; Betsy Damon’s cast of a dry riverbed, *The Memory of Clean Water* (1985) — that might seem similar in subject, materials, or visual effect but that possess a more direct, one-to-one mimetic relation to their referents.

The most direct representations in *In the Wake of...* can be found in the eight-channel sound piece, a projection of individual construction and subway noises, and in the lead casts affixed to the drawing like oversized band-aids. Both installation elements are realistic in their own right yet, in context, function as part of an unmistakably fictional composite. *In the Wake of...* calls attention to the vestiges of its own fabrication, from the gridded fold marks visible in its drawing paper to its reduction of the urban soundscape into isolated rumbles and drones. Like the sedimentary records they evoke, LaTocha’s drawings are a beguiling mix of intent and accident, specificity and abstraction, human reminders of inhuman oblivion.

***Athena LaTocha: In the Wake of...*** continues at BRIC Arts (647 Fulton St, Brooklyn, NY) until January 9, 2022.