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**Monumental Works of Contemporary Art Explore the  
Complex Relationship Between Humans and the Land**

VMFA Presents the Immersive Art Installation *Athena LaTocha: The Past Never Sleeps*



*Athena LaTocha: The Past Never Sleeps* features three works on paper: (left) *It Came from the North*, 2021; (center) *Bulbancha (Green Silence)*, 2019; (right) *Burning, Sulphuric, Violent*, 2020. Photo by Sandra Sellars, © 2023 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

**Richmond, VA** — Three monumental mixed-media works on paper by contemporary artist Athena LaTocha form the powerful installation [\*The Past Never Sleeps\*](#), on view through Jan. 14, 2024, at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA). Admission is free.

“The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts presents art and exhibitions that can foster important dialogues in our community,” said Alex Nyerges, VMFA’s Director and CEO. “Visitors to *Athena LaTocha: The Past Never Sleeps* will be drawn in by the immersive installation and inspired to consider their connection to and reliance on the environment.”

Driven by her interest in and respect for diverse landscapes, the artist’s work often explores the human impact on the land.

“My understanding of the land was influenced by both the rugged monumentality of the terrain and the impact of commercial industries upon the land,” said LaTocha, who was born and raised in Anchorage, Alaska. “To this day, I feel a natural affinity for places and things that evoke those memories, such as the mountains and deserts of the southwest, and excavation sites and earthmoving equipment found in the industrial landscape.”

LaTocha's process explores correlations between mark-making and displacement of materials. Over massive plains of paper on the floor, covered in inks and solvents, aggressively scored with tools like wire brushes, shredded tires, metal, soil and glass, the artist is immersed when forming her works.

LaTocha often incorporates materials and elements sourced from sites indicated in the titles of her paintings. The works presented in *The Past Never Sleeps* reference the landscapes of Louisiana and New York. In extracting materials from each site to use in the making of her art, LaTocha draws attention to the physical and cultural scars that are incised into the earth through industry, habitation and traumatic events.

Created in 2021, *It Came from the North* is a layered composition made of shellac ink, earth from the Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, demolition sediment from downtown Brooklyn, glass microbeads from the New York City Department of Transportation on paper and lead that was hand formed over glacial striations and grooves etched into Manhattan schist during the last ice age approximately 10,000 to 12,000 years ago. Manhattan schist, the bedrock under the borough, was formed about 450 million years ago. At that time, the continents of the world existed as a single supercontinent, called Pangea. *Burning, Sulphuric, Violent*, 2020, is a searing fusion of ink and sand from the World Trade Center building on paper. *Bulbancha (Green Silence)*, 2019, a moody painting made with ink, Mississippi River mud and Spanish moss on paper recalls lush, fecund landscapes of the American South and the indigenous peoples that inhabited the area now known as New Orleans.

"Athena LaTocha invites viewers to meditate on the landscape as a geographic space, a repository of history and a personified living entity," said Valerie Cassel Oliver, VMFA's Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art and the organizer of the exhibition.



Visitors contemplate Athena LaTocha's monumental painting *Bulbancha (Green Silence)*, 2019, on display at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Photo by Sandra Sellars, © 2023 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts



Athena LaTocha is a New York-based artist from Anchorage, Alaska. Photo by Sandra Sellars, © 2023 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

To learn more about the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, visit [www.vmfa.museum](http://www.vmfa.museum).

#### **About the Artist, Athena LaTocha**

Athena LaTocha (American, born 1969) is a New York-based artist from Anchorage, Alaska. She is of mixed heritage — her father is of Polish and Austrian descent and her mother is Ojibwe and Hunkpapa Lakota. LaTocha's works have been shown at institutions throughout the United States, including Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art (Bentonville, Arkansas); Institute of American Indian Arts' Museum of Contemporary Native Arts (Santa Fe, New Mexico); CUE Art Foundation and Artists Space (New York City); South Dakota Art Museum (Brookings); New Orleans Museum of Art (Louisiana); and the International Gallery of Contemporary Art

(Anchorage, Alaska). In 2022, she received the Pocantico Prize for Visual Artists awarded by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. The artist has also been a recipient of the Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship (2021), the National Academy of Design Affiliated Fellowship at the American Academy in Rome (2021–2022), the NYSCA/NYFA Artist

Fellowship in Painting (2021), the Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors Grant (2019 and 2016), the Wave Hill Artist Residency (2018) and the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Residency (2013). LaTocha received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and her Master of Fine Arts degree from Stony Brook University, New York.

### **About the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts**

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, is one of the largest comprehensive art museums in the United States. VMFA, which opened in 1936, is a state agency and privately endowed educational institution. Its purpose is to collect, preserve, exhibit and interpret art, and to encourage the study of the arts. Through the Office of Statewide Partnerships program, the museum offers curated exhibitions, arts-related audiovisual programs, symposia, lectures, conferences and workshops by visual and performing artists to schools, museums and other institutions throughout the Commonwealth. In addition to presenting a wide array of special exhibitions, the museum provides visitors with the opportunity to experience a global collection of art that spans more than 6,000 years. VMFA's permanent holdings encompass nearly 50,000 artworks, including the largest public collection of Fabergé outside of Russia, the finest collection of Art Nouveau outside of Paris and one of the nation's finest collections of American art. VMFA is also home to important collections of Chinese art, English silver, and French Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, British sporting and modern and contemporary art, as well as renowned South Asian, Himalayan and African art. In May 2010, VMFA opened the James W. and Frances G. McGlothlin Wing I after a transformative expansion, the largest in its history.

**The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is the only art museum in the United States open 365 days a year with free general admission. For additional information, telephone 804.340.1400 or visit [www.vmfa.museum](http://www.vmfa.museum).**

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