



## The Fractured World: A Conversation with Elena Damiani

**The Peruvian artist, whose work expands the notion of traditional landscape, discusses the force of geological materials and our responsibility to the environment.**

Elena Damiani, Madeline Murphy Turner  
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The work of Peruvian artist Elena Damiani (b. 1979) focuses on the history of representations of remote landscapes in the Americas, such as volcanoes and waterfalls. It also proposes a reconnection with inorganic materials, like travertine, that offer evidence of past catastrophes. Existing at the juncture of history and geology, Damiani's always enigmatic art shows life on the planet to be fundamentally fractured and mysterious.

I spoke to Damiani about the intersection of nature in its idealized romantic guise, and a more current vision of nature as a vital and vibrant substance. Our discussion also focused on her work *Fading Field No. 1* (2012).

This conversation, which was conducted in Spanish, is part of a series of interviews with artists whose works were donated to MoMA in 2017 by Patricia Phelps de Cisneros. The interviews explore art's relationship with territory and nature, a subject that was chosen as the research focus of the Cisneros Institute for the 2020–23 period.

This interview has been translated from Spanish by Jane Brodie.

**Madeline Murphy Turner: To start out, I would like to ask you about the role that your architectural studies play in your current work.**

**Elena Damiani:** Before getting my Bachelor of Fine Arts, I studied architecture at the Universidad de Ciencias Aplicadas in Lima for three years. That was where I first came into contact with the elaboration of ideas in project form through a process of research, design, and critical revision. It was my introduction to different methodologies geared to creating a platform with flexible parameters on the basis of which I could develop a work. Studying architects like Tadao Ando, Luis Barragán, and Le Corbusier showed me how context and personal experience play a basic role in shaping ideas, and how those factors are visible in the final work and the language of each architect. While studying architecture, I also discovered my interest in landscape, natural materials, and in architecture that pursues harmonious habitation in a natural setting. I realized I was less interested in functionality than in the visual and plastic features of objects, and the relationships that arise between elements in the constructed space. Those interests have been constants throughout my practice as an artist, and they have led me to work with territory, geology, and landscape.



Elena Damiani. *Fading Field no. 1*. 2012

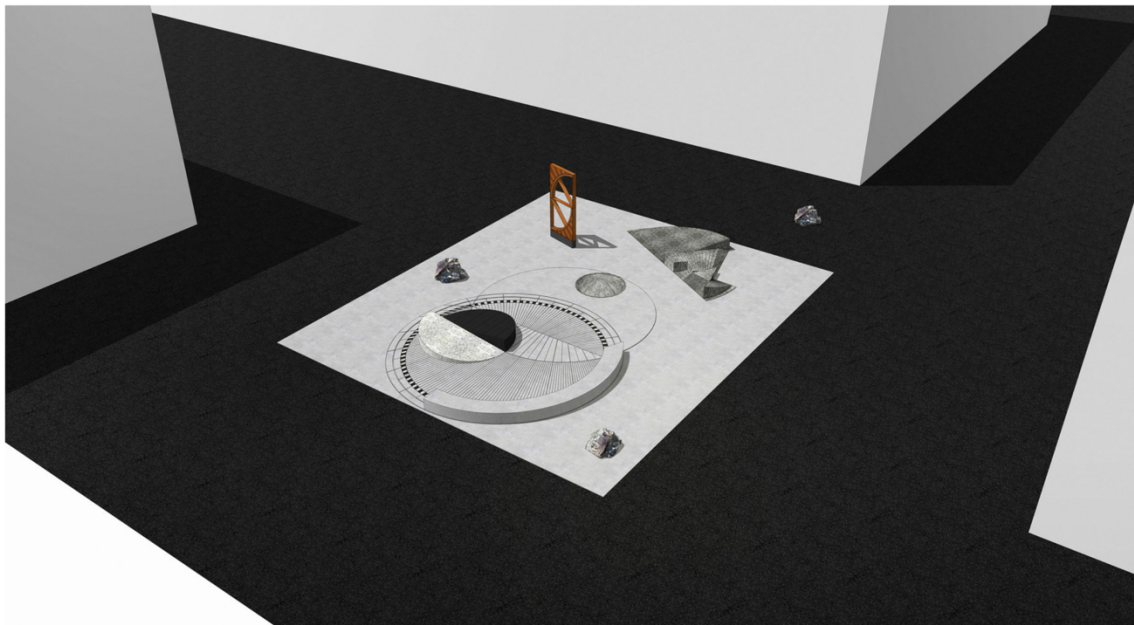
In recent projects, I have had the opportunity to work on scales closer to architecture. For instance, I am currently working on a piece for a public square in a new area of Stockholm (below). It will be composed of a series of sculptures in granite, concrete, and steel. I am working in conjunction with the city's landscape architects and urban planners; the buildings surrounding the square are being built at the same time as the piece. This is an opportunity, then, to grapple with how to construct a permanent space from the bottom up, a space that will integrate a new community and give it a sense of identity.

**Do the photographic images in *Fading Field No. 1*, like the images in the other works in the series, come from the archives of the US Geological Survey?**

In 2012, the year I made *Fading Field No. 1*, I started developing a system to classify the images I collect. The images are produced by both digital and physical media, and I classify them according to content and possible use. I was interested in working with archival

images that had been placed in the “geology and landscape” category, especially with the photographs in the “expeditions,” “landscapes of disaster,” and “fractured time” subcategories.

The two original images that make up the work come from Yale University’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. The color image in the background (below left) is a glass slide taken by mountain climber Emil Burgermeister, who explored national parks and forests in the United States from 1910 through the early 1930s. The image shows a section of Half Dome rock in the valley in Yosemite National Park in California. The image in the foreground is a view of an unidentified mountain; it dates from around 1900.



Vega City Square, 3D rendering, Public Art Commission for Stena Property. Curated by Ann Magnusson in collaboration with Haninge Municipality, AM Public, and Karavan landscape architects. Vegastaden, Stockholm, Sweden. 2018–ongoing

**What sets *Fading Field No. 1* apart from the other works in the series? Could you tell us something about the landscapes that appear in the photographs?**

*Fading Field No. 1* is the first work in what is, so far, a 15-piece series. The collage medium, which is central to my practice, makes itself very visible in this work. I make the landscapes in the series using found photographs of natural phenomena, geological processes, and remote landscapes, mostly in the Americas: views of erupting volcanoes, geysers, rock formations, lakes, glaciers, and mountain ranges.

**How do you engage the idea of the picturesque in this series?**

Though the series gives the impression of drawing on the picturesque, I actually see it as closer to the notion of the sublime. These images in collage show the power and diversity of a changing nature. The natural landscape in these works is riveting, but also savage. The magnitude of nature is so vast in these images, so far beyond what human forces are capable of, that it produces a sense of astonishment, of the unknown. This is particularly

the case in the works with images of plumes of ash from volcanic eruptions blended with large waterfalls or tropical storms.

**The group of sculptures you showed at the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo in Mexico City in 2015 addresses the question of the palimpsest, fissures, and cracks. Are those questions also important to understanding the Fading Field series?**



Emil Burgermeister. *South Shoulder of Half Dome (at Left) with Merced Range On Skyline; Little Yosemite Valley in Mid Foreground and Sierra Point At Lower Left. A25. c. 1906–23*

Those topics run through my art, especially my stone sculptures, where I try to represent the passage of time on the planet not as an orderly succession of events, but as fractured time composed of endless layers, some of them visible and others in the shadows. The landscapes printed on silk chiffon in the Fading Fields series change with the viewer's position, the light, and the space they are in. In an attempt to superimpose two different temporalities, the image of the natural landscape surfaces and vanishes like a memory blending into the space around it. The printed image can only be seen in full if you stand directly in front of the piece. If you walk around it, the image becomes incomplete, broken into pieces; it even vanishes at times, allowing a glimpse of the

background space.

**In her book *Vibrant Matter*, theorist Jane Bennett underscores the active role the non-human plays in human life. An example she gives is electricity, which can be one of the causes of blackouts. Bennett sustains, then, that the changes that occur in the world are not only the responsibility of humans, but also of non-human actors that produce events. In that framework, I wonder if the materials you use in your work—I am thinking of natural materials such as travertine in particular—should be conceived of as active agents rather than as static objects.**

The Earth is not static raw material, but something in constant motion and transformation—and we must relate to it accordingly. I agree that inorganic materials like travertine, breccia, and marble can be defined as agents if we attribute them with the “material vitality” Bennett speaks of; they play an active role and have the ability to animate, to produce effects, and to change the course of events. Geological materials have a force of their own; they might seem inert and stable as rock itself, but they are actually



silent markers of the passage of time and of slow transformation of matter. The morphology and composition of those materials lead to questions about the materiality of the Earth, revealing the interconnectivity of matter and the underlying processes that make up our environment. Analysis of natural materials enables us to put together an image of the composition of the natural world. Travertine, for instance, attests to geological processes like sedimentation and filtration that reveal the permeable quality of the Earth's non-consolidated materials and the porousness of the planet itself. These materials provide evidence of the interaction between flow structures and itinerant sediments with discordant morphology; they are what compose a dynamic surface hidden in a nebulous body.

We must enact a vision that allows things and human beings to interconnect. We must not reductively separate organic from inorganic matter: we ourselves are “walking, talking minerals.”[1] It's not that we are surrounded by the geological; we inhabit it and it inhabits us. The geological can inform not only our architecture, art, and design, but also our very existence. The sculptures I make call for a deeper vision of materials to show that those sedimentary or metamorphic rocks can act as witnesses to and agents of change; they can help us discover resonances and similarities that bridge the obvious differences between the human and the non-human.

**The Earth is not static raw material, but something in constant motion and transformation— and we must relate to it accordingly.**

**Elena Damiani**



Elena Damiani. *Fading field N 13*. 2019

**In an interview with Eugenio Valdés Figueroa, you express your interest in questioning science as absolute truth. Could you elaborate on your definition of truth and how it influences your method as an artist?**

I find the idea of absolute truth problematic. I have trouble accepting that reality can be reduced to explanations based on sensory experience or experiences mediated by technical devices. We can try to understand the universe we live in and construct knowledge by examining events from the viewpoint of science, and with science we can speak of probabilities and develop theories of who we are and what surrounds us. But I have trouble accepting absolute truths, since our knowledge is always determined by an observation of reality limited by our senses and by technical devices. It is impossible to get beyond our confines as finite beings or our thinking, which is correlated to the fact that we are human beings. We cannot develop concepts and reflections that exceed the human. At the same time, the word “absolute” is itself reductive, curtailing the space for dialogue, questioning, reformulation, and debate. I don’t deny that science can arrive at truths, but I am inclined to think that truth is relative, subjective, and partial.

And this idea of relative or partial truth enables exercises to deepen or renew knowledge, opening up spaces for the unknown. But I am more interested in the forms of research and representation science uses to reach its truths than in the truths themselves. I work with concepts and documents drawn from geology, geography, cartography, and astronomy to reinterpret those categories and our understanding of the physical world. In my artistic practice, I try to represent different ways of questioning our understanding of natural processes of creation tied to complex phenomena on different scales, the temporality of objects and their physical limits, and the notion of the absolute infinite. It is a constant search to understand the composition and workings of the structures that form part of an order of magnitude so great it is beyond the grasp of human experience.

**Do artists, in your opinion, have a responsibility regarding environmental issues?**

I believe that artists, like scientists, have a shared need to understand and question reality and to look for the meaning of our existence in the universe. While they work from different perspectives, both art and science are, in essence, attempts to better understand the universe and our position in it. We have a common interest in understanding the unknown. It is important to observe, from the perspective of art, science’s approaches and methods in order to understand the complex and changing nature of the reality around us. That encompasses, of course, the environment and the scientific advances that have provided information on climate change and a possible breakdown in our natural environment. As an artist, I feel I have a responsibility to make visible the unpredictability of time and the contingency of the environment, and to raise awareness of climate change, taking measures to reduce our now-obvious impact on the environment.

I am currently investigating solar geoengineering technologies that would offset global warming by redirecting the sunlight that hits the Earth’s surface. The technological ideas range from giant sponges to aerosol clouds in the stratosphere or bubbles on the oceans’ surface. My research is still in its early phase, and I have not yet decided what form the project will take, but I think it is important to begin a conversation about new models,

controversial models that might even incite fear because of their potential impact on the environment.

**In closing, I would like to ask you how the COVID crisis and lockdown have affected your everyday artistic practice, your work and ideas.**

When the pandemic hit, I felt the need to organize my archive. During the first months of lockdown, I updated my inventory of works from the last 10 years—something I had not had time to do before. I catalogued around 300 works produced starting in 2010; I gathered all the technical information, with photographic documentation, location, and a brief description. I have also updated the archive of images I collect for later use: an image bank of some 6,500 photographs from books, magazines, and public archives classified by scientific field, source, and possible use.

Just like the inventory of works, this one contains technical information and a brief description of each image to make it easier to locate and reference. For some years now I have worked in two studios in Lima, one in Mexico City, and one in Brescia where I work in stone and metal; I also have a small studio in my house where I work on paper. Some things are easier to work out through direct communication, which has meant that some production processes have slowed down a bit, plus other logistical complications like getting materials from abroad (larger shipments are required due to the decreased volume of commercial flights).

An exhibition I was in closed to the public when lockdown started, and the ones I had scheduled were put off indefinitely. In April, for instance, I was supposed to give a talk and guided tour of *The World To Come: Art In The Age of the Anthropocene* at the DePaul Art Museum in Chicago. We ended up doing a video tour of the exhibition and I recorded a video in my house where I describe my practice and explain the work in that show at the DePaul.

Almost eight months into lockdown, I realize how lucky I am to be able to keep working from my home with the support of the four galleries that represent me. I am being cautious, though, and I have reduced my production costs, concentrating on small-format works, except for that public art project in Stockholm. In recent months I have also worked with a Swedish-Mexican design firm on a line of furniture and utensils—something I had never done before and that interests me enormously.

Thanks to lockdown, I have had the chance to focus on, investigate, and rethink some of my ideas and projects. In the normal course of my day-to-day work, I rarely had the time to formulate a project without a specific end, that is, without a certain venue or show in mind, or a deadline. It's amazing how much freedom you gain, in the midst of so much uncertainty, when you are not tied down to a specific project or set of parameters. I have more time to read, investigate, and revisit ideas. I also have more mental space in which to question what my priorities as an artist really are.

[1] Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky, quoted in Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 60.