



From left to right:  
Piano wire and lenses  
make up Shotz's  
sculpture 'The Shape  
of Space' (2004).  
Materials and lenses  
were used to create  
'The Shape of Space'  
at the University of  
California, San Diego.  
Photography by  
Christopher G. Young.

## Turning Piano Wire Into Light

Using lenses, straight pins, thread, and mirrors, Alyson Shotz makes ethereal sculptures that seem to dematerialize matter



From a distance, Alyson Shotz's monumental undulating screen, *The Shape of Space* (2004), looks like a frozen cascade of water. Shown in 2002 in the context of New York's Guggenheim Museum, which later acquired the work, the piece is made from dense Fresnel lenses—expanding lenses edged with concentric circles to focus light—that Shotz cut into web and twisted together. Up close it often escapes and inverted views through its kaleidoscope of apertures.

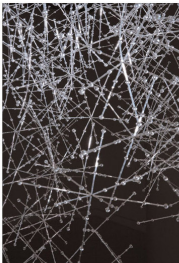
"It's a disorienting experience to look through lenses at things that are very small and very big and to think about what size something really is and where it is," says Shotz, who collects lenses and has used them in many works. Her experiments looking through microscopes and telescopes during her days as a geology student at the University of California at Boulder influenced the way she approaches space and perception in her large-scale sculptures.

On recent meetings in her tiny studio in Brooklyn's Red Hook neighborhood, Shotz, 45, expressed shock that the Guggenheim discovered the piece on a recent visit, joking that it was probably "the highlight of my life." She was subsequently invited to make an installation for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. In that space, titled *The Structure of Light* (2005), large strands of stainless-steel piano wire, strong with ultraviolet glass beads and held from a making structure, gently bow on or thrust into it ethereal, shifting forms.

Shotz also used these materials for *Earthlines* (2000).

BY MELANIE M. SHEETS

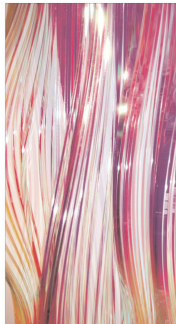
ARTnews January 2010 303



Shotz used glass beads and piano wire to make crystalline structures like *Earthlines* (2000) displayed at MoMA. Shotz's intricate wire and lens pieces, such as *The Shape of Space*, are in the collection of the Guggenheim Museum.

the retrospective of her show last spring at Derek Eller Gallery in New York, where her sculptures sell for \$15,000 to \$85,000. In *Earthlines*, the dense and tessellated feeling of the different strands suggest waterholes and other spatial constructs. "My sculptures are about creating volume without mass," says Shotz, who likes to read about cosmology and astrophysics. "It's hard enough to try to picture four dimensions of space. So, at least eleven, but there's always a way of training your mind to imagine them."

Also in the show at Derek Eller was the large-scale *Thread Drawing* (1999), 2006, for which she nailed heavy straight pins to the wall in incanted grids and looped dark wax thread around their heads to a complex network of triangles. It's a dense, like a flowing web of a single light or light stream, the wall. Considering herself a poor draftsman, Shotz learned the computer-aided design program AutoCAD in 2008 at her residence at Yale University. Several fully installed with the results for the first printed in small-scale works, she eventually had the idea to project the grids large onto the wall



to use as maps for creating drawings in three dimensions. Shotz was born in Clareville, Arizona. Her father was in the air force, and her family moved frequently across the Midwest and West during her youth. Her early exposure to art came during trips to Boston to visit her grandmother, who took her to museums and gave her Picasso coloring books. An only child, she remembers often being left in her own domain in her room, where she created a studio of sorts, methodically lining out model time with those wire and food coloring that never quite hardened, and displaying sculptural sketches she made from cardboard.

While Shotz always loved natural and social science, she found the study of geology "so addictive." She spent waking years and classes at the University of California and for the next year, she moved to the Rhode Island School of Design. She received a B.S. in Art from RISD in 1997 and went on to get her M.F.A. from the University of Washington in 1999.

Early in her career, Shotz made colorful paintings of organic forms, but she has always been interested in playing

304 January 2010 ARTnews



with other mediums and finding ways to integrate photography, collage, and video. The first piece that turned out of the future direction of her work was *Reflected Memory*, which Shotz began in 1994. She was inspired by a photograph of a woman walking in the woods, wearing a veil covered in hundreds of small, round mirrors. The play of the light reflected from those mirrors against the actual foliage of the background had the effect of dematerializing the person. "I wanted to explore the boundaries of the body," says Shotz, "and the idea that a person is made up of all the things around them."

She also played real and reflected nature off each other in her first large-scale sculptural installation, *Memory Forest* (2003). She created the 140-foot-long gallery forest found in nature for "what I believe is a better version of nature." It consists of American ashbarks. "The idea was to have this forest that would kind of disappear and then reappear," she says. "There was a real push and pull between which was the solid and which was the space."

The blend of mineral and organic forms in Shotz's work brings to mind Eva Hesse, while the sense of nonlinear space and the participation of the viewer are reminiscent of Light/Cloud. Shotz has grown to admire Richard Serra's work, particularly his sculptural reliefs, although she is not dissatisfied with Serra in the beginning. "There used to be a lot of confusion in my mind about reliefs," she says. "I found the fact that everything sculptural had to be made out of steel and welded together."

While she has never felt she had an aptitude for equation, Shotz is comfortable in scientific terms. "I read the text to think about what the artwork is made of," says the artist, who has a wide show on at the Warehouse Gallery at Syracuse University through the 20th of next month and whose *Structure of Light* will be on display at the Museum Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, from the 30th of this month through April 13. "It's pretty good to think about space and gravity and light—these basic elements of life—and then making art that might give other people to think about it."

ARTnews January 2010 305