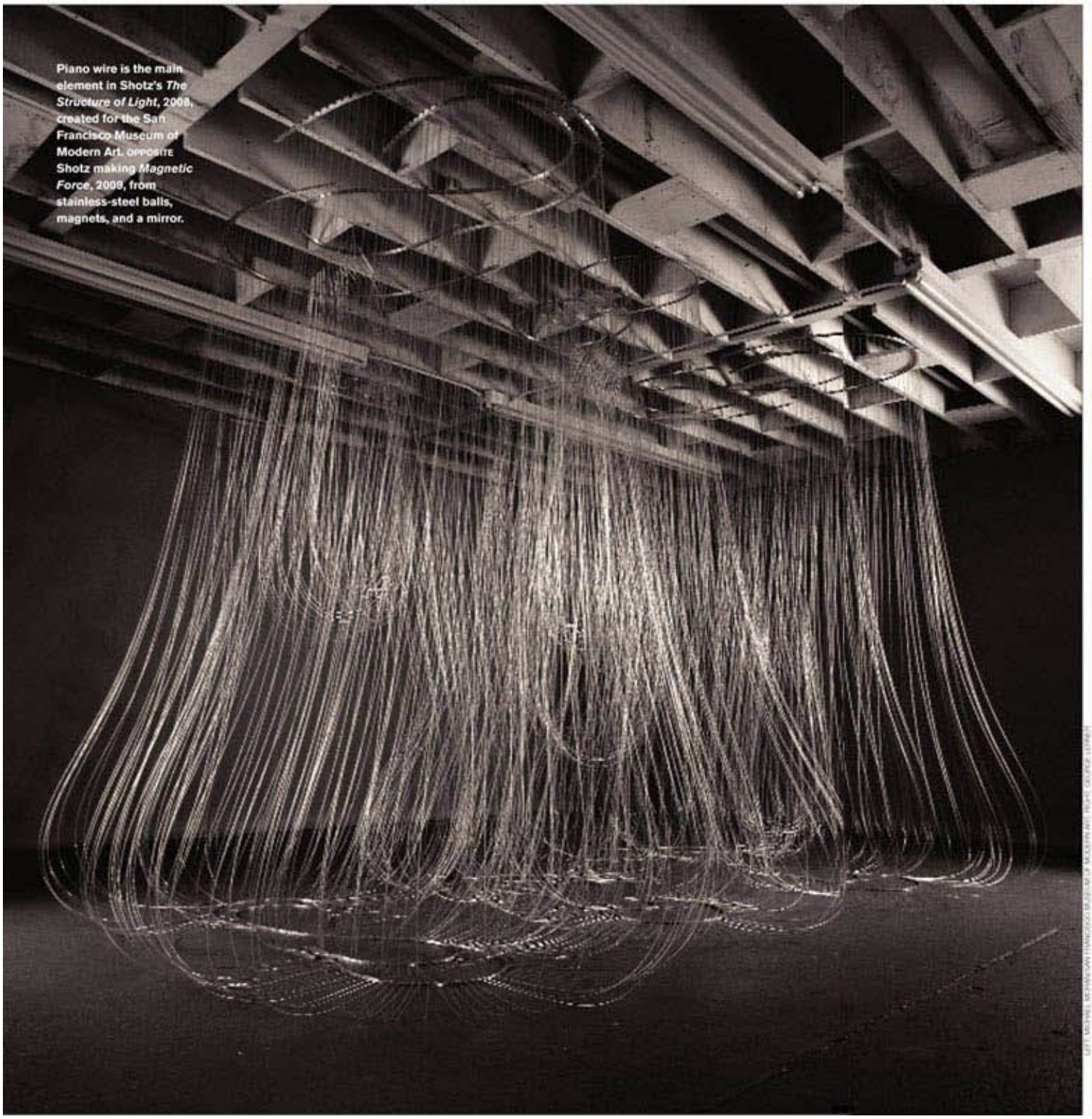
ARTnews
JANUARY 2010



Piano wire is the main element in Shotz's *The Structure of Light*, 2008, created for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. OPPOSITE Shotz making *Magnetic Force*, 2008, from stainless-steel balls, magnets, and a mirror.

Turning Piano Wire Into Light

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

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

From a distance, Alyson Shotz's monumental undulating screen, *The Shape of Space* (2004), looks like a frozen cascade of water. Shown in 2007 in the rotunda of New York's Guggenheim Museum, which later acquired the work, the piece is made from plastic Fresnel lenses—magnifying lenses ridged with concentric circles to focus light—that Shotz cut into ovals and stapled together. Up close it offers warped 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 experience looking through microscopes and telescopes during her days as a geology student at the University of Colorado at Boulder influenced the way she approaches space and perception in her large-scale sculptures.

On a recent morning in her two-story studio in Brooklyn's Red Hook neighborhood, Shotz, 45, expressed shock that the Guggenheim displayed the piece so prominently, 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 piece, titled *The Structure of Light* (2008), long strands of stainless-steel piano wire, strung with silvered glass beads and hung from a snaking armature, gently bow in on themselves in ethereal, shifting layers.

Shotz also used those materials for *Equilibrium* (2009),

Hilarie M. Sheets is a contributing editor of ARTnews.

ABOVE **Shotz used glass beads and piano wire to make *Crystalline Structure* (detail), 2007.** RIGHT ***Standing Wave*, 2009, a dichroic-acrylic and tape piece, is to be installed this month at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Ohio.** OPPOSITE ***The Shape of Space*, 2004, a screen made of plastic Fresnel lenses, in the rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum.**

the centerpiece of her show last spring at Derek Eller Gallery in New York, where her sculptures sell for $15,000 to $85,000. In *Equilibrium,* the drape and internal folding of the glinting strands suggest wormholes and other spatial constructs. "My sculpture is 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, let alone eleven, but there's almost a way of training your mind to imagine them."

Also in the show at Derek Eller was the large-scale *Thread Drawing #3 (Wave),* 2008, for which she nailed heavy straight pins to the wall in mutated grids and looped dark wax thread around their heads in a complex network of triangles. It looked like a billowing web or a magic carpet in flight across the wall. Considering herself a poor draftsman, Shotz learned the computer-animation program *Maya* during a 2006 artist residency at Yale University. Never fully satisfied with the results that she first printed as stand-alone 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 Glendale, 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 to her own devices in her room, where she created a studio of sorts, methodically laying out molds filled with flour, water, and food coloring that never quite hardened, and displaying sculpturelike costumes she made from cardboard.

While Shotz always loved nature and science, she found the study of geology to be lackluster. She kept taking more art classes at the University of Colorado until her mother suggested she transfer to the Rhode Island School of Design. She received a B.F.A. from RISD in 1987 and went on to get her M.F.A. from the University of Washington in 1991.

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

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DEREK ELLER GALLERY, NEW YORK (2)

with other mediums and finding ways to integrate photography, collage, and video. The first piece that hinted at the future direction of her work was *Reflective Mimicry*, which Susan Inglett Gallery in New York showed in 1998. It included a video and photographs of a woman walking in the woods, wearing a suit covered in hundreds of small, round mirrors. The play of the foliage reflected in 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, *Mirror Fence* (2003). She created the 140-foot-long picket fence faced in mirror for "Yard," a show at Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens about American suburbia. "The idea was to have this fence 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 minimal and organic forms in Shotz's work brings to mind Eva Hesse, while the sense of endless space and the participation of the viewer are reminiscent of Lygia Clark. Shotz has grown to admire Richard Serra's work, particularly his torqued ellipses, although her art was deliberately anti-Serra in the beginning. "There used to be a lot of machismo in sculpture departments," she says. "I hated 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 equations, Shotz is comfortable in scientific terrain. "I read this stuff to think about what the universe is made of," says the artist, who has a solo show up at the Warehouse Gallery at Syracuse University through the 20th of next month and whose *Standing Wave* (2009) will be on display at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, from the 30th of this month through April 11. "It's getting myself to think about space and gravity and light—these basic elements of life—and then making art that maybe gets other people to think about it." ■