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CONTEMPORARY ART & DESIGN

Christina Fernandez: Camera Lens as Window

By Eva Recinos April 20, 2018

The visual landscape of Southern California changes from city to city. Depending on your perspective, the region can feel like a mythical playground, an arid wasteland or a gritty, concrete labyrinth. Since the 1980s, photographer Christina Fernandez has linked her interiority to spaces in Southern California depicted through images that explore both SoCal as myth and the photographer's own Chicana identity.

Beginning more than two decades ago, Fernandez would drive through East Los Angeles at night—sometimes with assistance, sometimes alone—searching for laundromat storefronts to photograph. In an artist statement, Fernandez explained that she maintained an interest in “how the urban landscape speaks through the bits and pieces we leave behind in our day-to-day lives.” The *Lavanderia* series takes into account the everyday motions of laundromat patrons framed by aesthetic identifiers such as graffiti tags on the windows.





Once her eyes locked on a location, Fernandez set up her working space. She used a 4×5 view camera, a large format camera first developed in the 1800s that sits on a base. To operate the camera she had to “use a black cloth to see the image and focus on the ground glass in the back of the camera.” The black cloth prevents outside light from coming in and lets the photographer focus on the composition. This anachronistic way of photographing the streets of East LA made for some stunning images, which led to series like *Manuela S-t-i-t-c-h-e-d* (1996) and *Lavanderia* (2003).

Looking back, Fernandez doesn’t know quite how she did it. Not only did she work through the darkness, she often had to deal with questions from the owners of the laundromats, right at the moment when she ducked her head under the camera’s cloth.

In 2017, Fernandez presented *View from here* and *reflect/project(ion)* at Gallery Luisotti. The former followed the thread of photographing locations while introducing personal narrative and little-known history about California and Arizona. The latter focused on the students Fernandez mentors at Cerritos College. The exhibition signaled her return to photography after a hiatus of ten years. A single mother, Fernandez focused her energy during that time on raising her son; now she has found a different rhythm, a way to “create work with him in my life.”

Her most recent exhibition was part of *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA*. Fernandez’s *Maria’s Great Expedition* series—in which she recreates photographs based on her great-grandmother, Maria’s, life—was also

included in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's *PST: LA/LA* exhibition *Home—So Different, So Appealing*.

As someone with decades of experience under her belt, Fernandez recently noticed an increase in “self-generating activities,” with younger artists refusing to let a white cube be their only means for exposure. Fernandez has always “wanted to do both.” Throughout her career, she has sought opportunities in both traditional spaces—Gallery Luisotti focused specifically on getting her work into museum collections—and with artist-focused organizations such as Self Help Graphics and Avenue 50 Studio.

“I needed to be able to teach but also have a little bit of extra income for the things that I wanted in life, the goals that I have had for myself,” she said.

Fernandez describes herself as a “solitary artist.” Reflecting on her career, she admits that she “had to kind of strike a different balance for my work and... seek my own pathway in a lot of ways.”

Now, she guides the young photographers she teaches. Cerritos College, she explains, has a large Latinx population. She realizes her students’ photography asks “the same questions” about identity that her own work has explored. There’s a focus on investigating the self and cultural identity through photographs, even when cultural norms and family beliefs make that process challenging.

“There’s a lot of self portraiture, there’s a lot of portraiture, there’s a lot of going back home and photographing, there’s talking about home life and family,” said Fernandez. “All of the things that I talked about in my work.”

Beyond offering purely artistic guidance, Fernandez also helps students with the cultural challenges of pursuing their passion for art.

“I’ve seen that has been an issue, especially the daughter convincing the family,” said Fernandez. “Especially when they’re doing self-portraiture, some nudity is involved sometimes. It’s been a bone of contention.”

That intergenerational impact doesn’t escape Fernandez. In 2017, she also appeared in a photography show at Occidental College’s Weingart Galleries entitled *Chicana Photographers LA*. Fernandez was happy to see “a couple of generations” in the group exhibition, only some of whom she knew beforehand.

“There is a fraternity, a camaraderie, even though we may not be close,” said Fernandez. “Simply because of what we do, and who we are, where we come from. Which is really, really satisfying.”

Fernandez will present new work in the exhibition, *In The Sunshine of Neglect* on view January-April 2019 at both the California Museum of Photography and Riverside Art Museum. She said that even though her career has been fruitful, there are still “things that haven’t happened.”

Those remaining things drive her to continue exploring what interiorities she can express in detail through the camera.