

Vol. 13, No. 2, Winter 2016, 311-326

## Nota / Note

### **Sandra C. Fernández: Fractured Layers of Dreams and Memories and Hope for the Future**

**Holly Barnet-Sánchez**

University of New Mexico

Sandra C. Fernández is an artist whose work addresses traumas and hopes of migration, dislocation, loss, and memory pulled from her own and others' experiences in childhood and beyond. Frequently delicate and understated, often made from fragile, ephemeral materials and discards, it nevertheless draws you in, commands your attention and packs a punch. You want to return for more. In doing so, it is important to remember to not only explore all she has created over the past twenty-five years, but to also pay attention to what she is doing now.

The work of Sandra C. Fernández is both straightforward and deceptive. Her many three- and two-dimensional pieces tell stories, are beautiful, the layers are subtle—but not decorative—and their messages are often poignant and painful. They are not without hope or a sense of promise. They invite the viewer to look for a long time and to think about what s(he) is actually seeing. Her many mixed media works of art visualize, in both formal and conceptual terms, her interest in multiple materials and

practices on the one hand, and the necessarily fractured layering we experience in our dreams and memories on the other. Even her two-dimensional pieces, often collages, or worked-over montages, have three dimensions—textures, layers, unusual juxtapositions of materials and imagery (cut-up photographs, pages from very old, carefully selected books, differing printing processes, hand written notes, embroidery—or thread drawings as she calls them—collaged bits of pencil shavings, tiny *milagros*, miniature dresses and skirts made from tissue paper and hand stitching). They speak primarily of her past and the pasts of others who share similar experiences of dislocation, exile, deracination, new beginnings. As with most art of substance, Fernández’s begins with the specific (in her case, the highly personal), which ultimately resonates with universal conditions and experience. Her most recent work is focused on the present and future of young “dreamers,” youths who are the beneficiaries of the so-called “Dream Act.” One such series is entitled “Borders.” These images are often more straightforward, but just as layered and nuanced as her earlier bodies of work. They speak to the poetry of Gloria Anzaldúa, and her signature piece, “To live in the borderlands means you...”<sup>1</sup>

Fernández was born in Queens and raised in Ecuador. Traveling on her own at three years of age to stay with her father in Queens, she experienced dislocation while very young. For years, she went back and forth between Quito and Queens, mother and father. That experience of repeated border crossings was formative and appears (via her first passport photograph) in various guises in several of her *cajitas* (small boxes that serve as part of her artist book series).

She is a self-identified Latina (as opposed to an Ecuadorian ex-pat), coming back in the late 1980s to the United States as a political exile. As a young woman from South America, her move to the Colossus of the North initially provided real safety and comfort on the one hand, a place of refuge from the turmoil and danger present in the Quito of those years. Her early prints portray the dread-inspiring police state she left behind. On the other hand, she was now in “the belly of the beast.” The history of U.S./Latin

---

<sup>1</sup>Gloria Anzaldúa, “To Live in the Borderlands means you”, in Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / Frontera; The New Mestiza*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 216-217.



“Layers of memory” 1995. Artist's Books:  
Cyanotypes printed on wood, plaited veneer,  
linen. 10 1/4 x 15 x 7 1/2 in.

American relations is one of military and industrial interventions that led many young Ecuadorians caught up in their nation’s repressions to flee to European nations in the 1970s and 1980s—rather than face a new trauma of coming directly into a hated nation. Ultimately, she made a new, and good, life as a graduate student, artist, wife, mother, educator, and now adviser to young students, many of whom are “Dreamers” at UT Austin, where she is an assistant professor of printmaking.

Fernández began as a photographer and she still uses that medium in her complex constructions. Her oeuvre now also encompasses printmaking, installations, public sculpture, artist’s books, and assemblage. Her work embodies her lived experience on both sides of many borders. She is drawn to, and fosters the work of, the young “dreamers,” the rawness of their approach that reflects their own experiences and education to date. She has exhibited widely in group and one-person exhibitions throughout the country and at international venues. In 2012, she was honored in her home country of Ecuador, with a solo exhibition at the Museum of the Casa

de Cultura Ecuatoriana (CCE), in Quito. It was a homecoming of sorts in which her body of work was positioned as mestizo (“The Memory of Mestizaje/*La memoria del mestizaje*”), in both the exhibition and the extensive full-color, bilingual catalogue. That is apt, if you think of the many ways we can conceive of her work as hybrid—formally, conceptually, aesthetically. Locally, in Texas, she worked for several years with the late Sam Coronado at the Serie Project, in Austin, a nationally recognized print workshop, in which she created some of the more prominent, exhibited, and published prints, based on her own photography, particularly the 19-color serigraph “*Enjaulada (Caged)*,” of 2005.



“Enjaulada” 2005. Serigraphy (19 runs). 24 x 30 inches. *Published by the SERIE project/Artist in Residence. Edition of 50.*

Over the years, in my various capacities as curator and art historian, I have engaged with the works of artists such as Sandra C. Fernández, whose lives and oeuvres are embedded in the trans-border experiences of exile, dislocation, relocation, memory and self-conscious identity-

construction/reconstruction. The writings of Anzaldúa come to mind once again, those on *nepantla*, the liminal space between there and here often marked by the total destruction of an old way of life—and not yet replaced by the new—it was a term used by the Aztecs after the initial phases of the Conquest, and the Coatlicue State—articulated by Anzaldúa as a site of creative transformation.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most important aspects of Fernández's work is her dedication to the understanding, acknowledgment, appreciation, and simultaneous erasure of long-standing concepts (and realities) of borders in the Americas. For many of us who work in Latino/a and Latin American art histories, it is time to break down the silos of these respective disciplines, to further understanding and the creation of new identities and new kinds of artistic practices that acknowledge shared qualities while also accepting difference. This is one of the reasons that the multifaceted, multilayered, and evocative work of Sandra C. Fernández is significant. Another is the way or ways in which Fernández has developed her own multidisciplinary approach to art making, her combination of “feminine,” “Hispanic” and “masculine” techniques and materials, as she writes in her artist's statement. While she has not necessarily innovated them, she has made them her own and found her own direction. The work of Carmen Lomas Garza, with her translation of traditional, folkloric *papel picado* techniques into narratives cut in corten steel, is one example of earlier work along these lines; as are the installations of Amalia Mesa-Bains and Pepón Osorio, or the more recent glass-based structures of Viva Paredes, whose career parallels that of Fernández. What each of these artists has done, including Fernández, is to take the particulars of their personal, familial and community lives—often including traditional, vernacular, and other non “fine art” materials and techniques—to fashion works of beauty, poignancy, and bite. As Mesa-Bains' says about her own work, “when an artist is seeking to engage viewers with difficult or painful ideas or realities, she or he must first seduce them with beauty in the work.”<sup>3</sup> Goya was one of

---

<sup>2</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, “Border arte: Nepantla, el lugar de la frontera,” in *La Frontera = The Border: Art about the Mexico/Unites States Border Experience*. (San Diego, California: Centro Cultural de la Raza & the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 1993) 107-114. Anzaldúa, “La herencia ce Coatlicue / The Coatlicue State,” *Borderlands / La Frontera; The New Mestiza*, 63-73.

the early practitioners of such an approach. Many artists have followed this path—it is a valuable and successful one.

During the years 2012-2013 through the summer of 2014, Fernández participated in numerous group and solo exhibitions, workshops, and visiting artist residencies in Texas, Oregon, New Jersey, and South Dakota that have fueled her creative energies as both a printmaker and mixed media artist, while making visible both her current and more historic bodies of work to broader audiences. There are also several upcoming exhibitions scheduled for the fall of 2014 in Chicago, South Bend, Indiana, Long Island, New York, Mesa, Arizona, and Denver, Colorado. The Fisher Museum of Art at the University of Southern California, long a distinguished venue for path breaking exhibitions, is planning a future solo exhibition of her work. Fernández is becoming more recognized nationally for her multiple bodies of work in various media, that address timeless themes with current resonance.

It is important to spend time with individual pieces within the different bodies of her work (assemblage, artist's books, prints, paper doll series, installations, public art), as they are indeed deceptive, the way that the work of Catalina Parra, or the vernacular *arpilleras* can be deceptive (and of course, they were all working to deceive the censors and police of Pinochet's regime in Chile). At first glance, there is a sweetness to many of them, a gentleness or playfulness that is displaced through the viewer's discovery and realization that the simple materials of tissue paper and "feminine" techniques of stitching reveal both the random memories of a child's world and a child's simple pleasures—and—the profound disruption of being torn away from everything one knows and loves. In one reworked print or collage—the viewer is treated to the bits and pieces of sweet memories, their sudden destruction, and the promise of re-constitution.

One of her stitched photographic montages of 2006, entitled "Generations," is from the series "Immigrants," that she began in 2004.

---

<sup>3</sup> Artist's talk, opening of "Geography of Memory: Land, Nature and Spirit in the works of Amalia Mesa-Bains, 1991-2011," August 28, 2011, Fresno Art Museum, Fresno, California. She has spoken of the seduction of beauty and difficult meanings at different times over the years.



“Layers of memory” 1995, Artist’s Books: Cyanotypes printed on wood, plaited veneer, linen. 10 1/4 x 15 x 7 1/2 in.

As is typical of Fernández’s layering, she employs several techniques to this digital montage of photographic “portraits,” four images of the young, the elderly, a shadowed profile, and a reverse negative of a small child. No one is smiling. Only the children look straight at the viewer as they are depicted beneath a scene of a dense urban landscape that takes up about one-fifth of the montage. It could be almost anywhere. The white mat is actually part of the artwork, filled with equally dense random machine-generated stitching, also in white. This is reminiscent of the small footprints used by the Aztecs in their *codices* and *lienzos* (maps) of their peregrinations. But the intensity and random wandering of this stitching indicates something quite frantic, it indicates a loss of direction, and perhaps of hope, while also creating a very pleasing lacy texture.

Contrasting with the white on white energy—that almost has to be felt rather than seen—are four slightly curved vertical “roadways” stitched in light pink, enhanced in places with a narrow salmon pink wash of paint. They can be seen either as more direct pathways through the maze of migration, or as the bars of an enormous cage that holds the entirety of the urban environment and the people within (echoing the earlier “Enjaulada,” but in thread). Touches of green stitching throughout possibly reference the land, an oasis, or pathways towards new destinations. Black stitching becomes the border of the entire work of art, and perhaps the border of these lives as well.

“Mujeres/Silvio Rodríguez,” 2012, is one of a series of images comprising a portfolio about “a piece of music, a song” by the noted Cuban composer Silvio Rodríguez.<sup>4</sup>

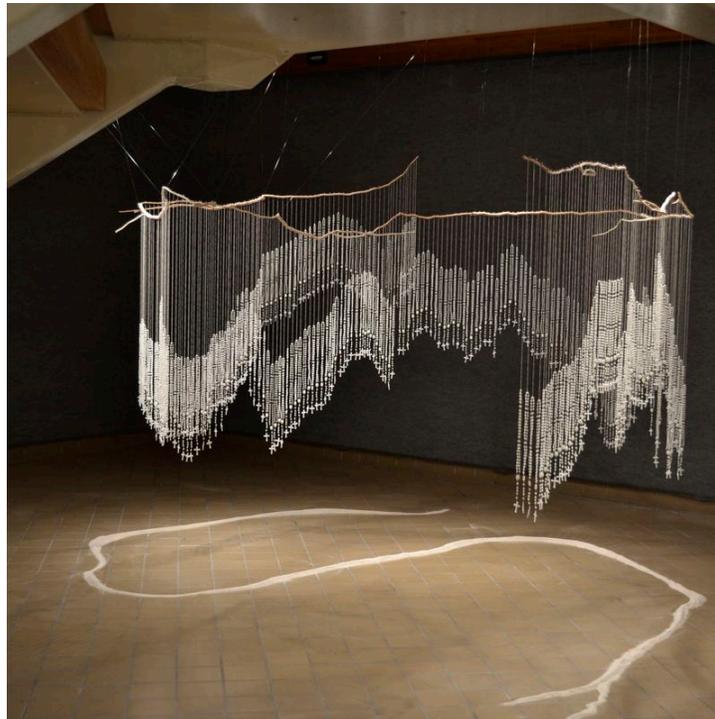


“Mujeres/Silvio Rodríguez” 2012. Etching and engraving. 13 x 15 in.

---

<sup>4</sup> Fernández wrote, “[Rodríguez] is a Cuban songwriter that was my Joan Baez when I was an adolescent. He is an idol in all South and Central America, specially to those who supported the Cuban revolution or any social change of the time.”

Abstract, free-floating figures of women of different sizes and shapes morph in and out of the intricate textured environment that envelops them. The trapezoid image and its surrounding mat are intimately bound together by the engraved traces of looping lines on the mat that echo the textures within the etching but also the lacy yet frantic thread drawing within “Generations.” Barely visible, they need to be felt, in the same way that Braille is a textured form of written language, designed to be “read” by fingers across the paper. It is this almost invisible but definitely present quality of Fernández’ work, that insists on drawing the viewer closer. This intimacy speaks volumes.



Fernández’s most recent work is a multi-part installation for an exhibition entitled “Migrations, Dreams and Dreamers,” opening September 10, at Western Kentucky University. It is scheduled to travel to Notre Dame in October and is titled, “In memory of those who crossed the Rio Grande to the land of the free. (*Cruzando el Río Bravo: Memorial a los muertos en búsqueda de la tierra prometida*)”, rosaries, thread, beads, tree branches and sand, 2014.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> According to the artist’s statement, “The installation is composed of rosaries that are hanging from a piece of thread attached to tree branches that I de-



At first glance, it is simply beautiful and graceful. The gently mobile white rosary hanging reminds me in some ways of a delicate lacy shawl, similar to the Spanish shawls I saw as a child when living in Caracas; shawls that were used by women going to mass or confession. I was fascinated by them, and coveted them, actually. They were different than the shawls used by flamenco dancers. Fernandez' use of rosaries is a very elegant and poignant formal and conceptual solution—the promise of being wrapped in the solace of prayer and mourning. They both blend with and

---

barked, peeled and sanded. When you see the installation from the top, you will see the topographic view of the Rio Grande. This work is about all those who have died crossing the border, in the desert or before reaching habitable areas. The prints are images of dreamers, students at UT. The photos are printed over pages of a 17th century book of Trials, Crimes and Misdemeanors in the reign of King Richard II, and enhanced with thread drawings and collaged pieces of paper. There are 19 prints of the dreamers and 4 additional ones related to the topic.”

contrast to the form and texture of the wooden branches—which are also graceful in their carefully finished surface that belies the dangers of crossing borders, bodies of water, deserts—the thread of sand on the floor (actually an excellent depiction of the now almost-empty great river—decimated by drought). The reference to the Rio Grande—or the Rio Bravo del Norte as they say in Mexico—resonates here in New Mexico, since we cross it every time we go to the west side of Albuquerque, and our southern desert is one of the desolate locus points of those trying to flee into the U.S.

Of course, there is more. The undulations seen in the rosaries are meant to indicate water waves—the beauty and danger of crossing water to get to “the Promised Land,” a trope as ancient as Moses and the Old Testament, as contemporary as this week’s news. When I looked more closely at a series of installation photographs together, the pattern created by the hanging rosaries reminded me of charts measuring seismic activity—and, although we don't really experience earthquakes in a material fashion in the desert southwest, our current waves of immigrants, especially of young people and children, and ways in which the U.S. federal and state governments are attempting to respond—for good or ill—have created a series of seismic waves or shocks far beyond the actual border region. Furthermore, although one can walk around the piece, and see through the hanging rosary shawl/waves, one cannot cross, one cannot walk through it. It is, indeed both transparent (one can see the images of the “dreamers” installed a few feet beyond) and impenetrable, as is often the case on the U.S. Mexico border.<sup>6</sup> The delicacy of Fernández’s “*Cruzando el Rio Bravo*” belies the violence of border crossings, while the accompanying prints mark a sense of hopefulness represented by the faces of the young “dreamers,” actual youths with whom she has worked. She brings a qualitatively different sensibility of land and migration, while grounded in the human tragedies to our immediate south, they can also represent the mass exoduses we are currently witnessing in far too many locations, especially in the Middle East. The border markers for the Rio Grande, of the sand and wood so elegantly rendered in this piece, now resonate with the even

---

<sup>6</sup> This last observation was made by Michael Gibson and José (Raúl) Ayala, students in my fall 2014 upper division/graduate art history course, “Latino Art in the United States,” during an extended discussion of this installation.

more volatile Palestinian/Israeli border. It is important to note here that Fernández recently traveled to Israel to see first hand what that border looks and feels like; to experience how it resonates with our own border with Mexico. There is still more: traces of the borders she traversed as a child and young woman between Ecuador and the United States linger in the spaces between the “shawl” and the faces of the “dreamers.”

The subtlety of this “*Cruzando el Rio Bravo*” is in striking contrast to the muscular fiberglass sculpture (with a similar title) by the late Luis Jiménez that memorializes his father’s own passage to the United States, or his depiction of the more recent militarization of the border region in his 2001 lithograph, “So Far From God.” Fernández’s installation is quiet and evocative, drawing an understanding of her thoughts, her sadness, and her hopeful determination out of the viewer who spends time walking around this piece. Mesa-Bains’ comments about the necessity of seducing with beauty, echo in this work, yet its implications also bring to mind the contemporary significance of Cherríe Moraga’s phrase from the 1980s: “Refugees of a World on Fire.”<sup>7</sup>

Fernández’ art works are bilingual. This is obvious in the use of both Spanish and English in her titles, generally as a direct translation between the two languages. One also finds handwritten text in Spanish in many of her prints, along with the incorporation of book pages, usually in English. Here is the stark contrast between a comforting informal script from the mother tongue and the impersonal, official typeface from an alien, English-speaking world. Sometimes, as in the case of her most recent work, handwriting in large colored crayon or pastel provides a palimpsest surface layered over 17<sup>th</sup> century printed pages. This back and forth-ness addresses her own experiences as well as those of other migrants/immigrants of having to switch worlds. Language is both a key path to understanding and one of our most persistent walls that block communication, comfort and trust. Since the early 1990s Fernández has created what she calls artist’s books—most often they are *cajas* or *cajitas*,

---

<sup>7</sup> Cherríe Moraga, “Refugees of a World on Fire, Forward to the Second Edition,” in Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back, Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1984) unpaginated.

small boxes, “containers of remembrance”—“transformations of memory” “to be read” for herself and her children.



“Postcards from my ancestors” 1994. Artist's Book:  
Cyanotypes printed on maple. 3 x 4½ x 3in.

Even her installations from 2005, “Innocentia,” “Dubitatio,” and “Experientia,” three oversize paper dresses/skirts with prints, photographs and text embedded within their folds, become containers of remembrance—shelters or hiding places from her childhood, as do her several two and three dimensional “paper dolls.”

These transformations of memory speak to the dualities of her life’s experiences of being home and not home, safe and in danger. Her bilingualism is therefore not just that of speaking two languages, it is of



“Innocentia” 2005. 7 x 7 diameter.

living in these dual spaces within herself and of her work to make sense of them. As she noted recently on her website, she is now able to bring it all together in her most recent bodies of work, and that new synthesis promises to draw us further into the worlds she visualizes for us all.

Most recently I have re-focused on prints and my latest efforts are an attempt to bridge the (physical) separation of who I am: a Latina woman who grew up in a Spanish-speaking country who has had to adapt, cope, and become a part of all that surrounds her-while still maintaining her roots. These prints are perhaps finally making peace with this life-altering struggle, and are a reflection of the person that I have become due to the acceptance of these challenges. My previous prints tend to depict these competing cultures together on the page, but in completely different fashions.

My Latina roots would be represented through the colorful stitching, while my newfound “American” culture would be reflected in the “flat” images on paper. My latest prints bring my two worlds together, carrying the differences on the same plane. I still utilize the stitch as a drawing tool, but now stitches are embedded within the metal, within the wood. All the competing cultural differences that embody who I am now are finally united, making up a completely new form of expression. It took me twenty-five years to reach this point of integration within myself and my art, and these newest prints are just the beginning; I am looking forward to seeing where this state of mind and new path will take me.<sup>8</sup>



“Niña de Chiapas” 1998. Mixed Media: Vandykes printed on veneer, cyanotypes printed on cheese cloth. Paper, thread, old positive paper photograph, worry doll. Machine sewing and hand stitching. 17.5 x 10 x 2.75 *In the Gilberto Cardenas Collection of Latino Art, South Bend, IN.*

<sup>8</sup> [sandrafernandez.info/section/242989\\_Printmaking.html](http://sandrafernandez.info/section/242989_Printmaking.html). Accessed 8/31/14.

**Bibliography**

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. "Border arte: Nepantla, el lugar de la frontera," in *La Frontera = The border: art about the Mexico/Unites States border experience*. San Diego, California: Centro Cultural de la Raza & the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 1993; 107- 114.
- . "La herencia de Coatlicue / The Coatlicue State," *Borderlands / La Frontera; The New Mestiza*, second edition, San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999. 63-73.
- . "To Live in the Borderlands means you", in Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera; The New Mestiza*, second edition, San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999. 216-217.
- [sandrafernandez.info/section/242989\\_Printmaking.html](http://sandrafernandez.info/section/242989_Printmaking.html). Accessed 8/31/14.
- Mesa-Bains, Amalia. Artist's talk, opening of "Geography of Memory: Land, Nature and Spirit in the works of Amalia Mesa-Bains, 1991-2011." August 28, 2011, Fresno Art Museum, Fresno, California.
- Moraga, Cherríe. "Refugees of a World on Fire, Forward to the Second Edition," in Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back, Writings by Radical Women of Color, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1984) unpaginated.