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Interview: Ana Teresa Fernández, “Foreign Bodies” at Gallery Wendi Norris

by MONIQUE DELAUNAY, EDITOR on 04/03/2014

Artist Ana Teresa Fernández is in Sao Paulo, Brazil when San Francisco Art Enthusiast talks with her about her upcoming solo exhibition, *Foreign Bodies* at Gallery Wendi Norris in April. Invited by Fundação Armando Alvares Penteado (FAAP), the leading private art university in Brazil, and a performance group called Coletivo Pi, Fernández is creating independent work at FAAP in an international artist residency program and collaborating with Coletivo Pi to create three live performances in Sao Paulo, Campinas, and Rio de Janeiro titled “Entre Saltos.”

Residences are critical to Fernández’s multimedia practice that explores the politics of Intersectionality, psychological and physical barriers that define gender, race, and class, and how that shapes personal identity, culture, and social rhetoric. Her residences have all been in politically- or socially-charged locations in the world like Cape Town, South Africa and Jakmel, Haiti. “Residencies are quite pivotal in my practice because it physically takes you out from your comfort zone and plops you in the unknown, in a situation that provides you with such a different perspective,” Fernández says. “All these cities are so complex and loaded with history and social challenges through race and disparity. When I’m in them it is like you are learning to swim all over again, learning to speak a new language, a new social exchange and practice. Here is where you have to become socially liquid to be able to have that osmosis with the community. To let people accept you and have a meaningful exchange. That you are not there to give nor take but just exist together and create together for a bit. And through art one can speak so much more broadly and cross those social, language or class barriers. I come out bathed with new information, new ways of existing and exchanging thoughts and practices each time I go to a residency.... And this in turn gives me confidence that art has the meaning and the weight to change the world even if just a little bit.”

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Ana Teresa Fernandez, *In Between (performance documentation at San Diego/Tijuana Border)* at Gallery Wendi Norris

Although her work impels her to be a world traveler, Fernández remains constantly inspired and encouraged by San Francisco, the city she calls ‘home.’ She arrived here 10 years ago, recipient of a scholarship to the San Francisco Art Institute during a portfolio review. “I was studying languages at a community college and taking one sculpture class. I was told to attend a portfolio day and showed up with 24 instant Polaroids of my work. I was given a scholarship on the spot. So I really had no connections to [San Francisco] until I began my studies of art there when I was 20. Now it is my home, where my imagination is constantly challenged and tickled,” she says. The city’s unique, intrinsic character both satiates and augments her curiosity, pushing her practice forward. “My work is so much about borders; physiological, physical, racial, class etc... San Francisco is a city that continually pushes extremes and these acceptable/non acceptable borders,” she says. “I like how San Francisco nudges at my comfort zone all the time. I find myself questioning the norm because of the conversations I get to have with thinkers, writers and artists that inhabit this city, such as Rebecca Solnit and Jennifer Locke. They inspire me and challenge me into seeing different vantage points and perspectives.” Unique opportunities afforded to her locally also instigate her ways of thinking and looking creatively at the ideas surrounding her artistic interests. “Over the last 10 years I have grown into an artist as well as a more open human being thanks to the amazing and courageous inhabitants of the Bay Area...San Francisco has been an immense support for me, my work, and teaching art to all sorts of communities.”

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Fernandez's personal life and experiences are the primary influence in the development of her work. She excavates her personal stories for meaning in order to engage with more universal ideas. "My personal experience is the foundation of my work. What I have seen, felt and touched in my life provokes my initial visual screenplays for my performances — what I have experienced going back and forth across country lines, being bi-cultural. And now, traveling and living in other countries, fuels me even more. I have more points of views and more experiences from which to grab and narrate in my work." Born in Tampico, Mexico, Fernandez mines from her experiences in Mexico, immigrating to the United States and beyond to engage with greater ideas of borders, both literal and figurative as well as communities, sexuality, and race to explore and even further redefine through a wide variety of media including performance, video, and painting.



Ana Teresa Fernandez, *Arrastre* at Gallery Wendi Norris

She is returning to San Francisco just days before her solo show, *Foreign Bodies* at Gallery Wendi Norris opens on April 3 in which she will display all new work that explores how women navigate geographic, social, and physiological boundaries between the United States and Mexico. "Foreign Bodies has been

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my most challenging exhibition,” she says. “It is first of all my most vulnerable. My paintings are what feel safe for me, and Foreign Bodies has everything: installation, video, photographs which I have never dared to show before. And even my paintings, they are some of the most challenging performances I’ve done... this entire show is about coming of age and passages of growth through rebellion.” Fernández’s performances explore how women and their bodies are symbolic of shifting political and social conditions, and she documents them in photographs and paintings. An emotionally complex series of photographic prints, the Arrastre series, which will be on view documents the artist’s performance as she rode a white horse inside sinkhole waters in Mexico, exploring an intriguing relationship between animal, artist, and a body of water loaded with personal and historical importance. “As a very young child I wanted to be Alex, the kid in Francis Ford Coppola’s film the Black Stallion, which was a metaphor for Alexander the Great’s first coming of age or conquest, a black horse. I mixed that metaphor as well as the prince rescuing a woman on a white horse. But instead I went to a sink hole in Mexico where thousands of virgins had been drowned as sacrificial offerings to the gods. I went into the sink hole and attempted to ride a wild white stallion, as a way to reclaim or change the history of that site. I came of age for many women who never got to come of age. It was a rebellious act such as painting the border out, erasing a bit of history, as a poetic politic stance.”

Another series of paintings that will also be on view in Foreign Bodies memorializes a performance along the USA and Mexico border, “Borrando la Frontera” from 2011 that is exemplary of many pervading themes in Fernández’s work. After painting a portion of the fence a sky blue that essentially visually obliterates the division, Fernández attempts to fit her body between the blue-painted rails, creating a heightened surrealistic performance. “My body is squeezing between two pieces of ‘sky.’ I mean it is quite surreal. I let myself go and really tried to push the magic and surreal aspect within the real...” In this way, Fernández’s paintings play an extraordinary role and push the medium beyond its own definitions, as the paintings concurrently document and reimagine the performance. She creates an intriguing relationship between documentation of the performance as non-fiction and the act of painting, which is often perceived as fictive, enriching the experience and material with more thoughtful layers. “Painting has held such a fictive and mostly male dominated view: I think of Ingres adding 3 or more vertebrae to a woman’s back to make it look more beautiful. Or I think of Orientalism and the idealization of the other. In painting performance I depict the truth, something that really did take place in space....Documentary work often states facts, but with my work, I wish to question the given.”

Ana Teresa Fernandez, “Foreign Bodies” will be at Gallery Wendi Norris 161 Jessie Street through May 31, 2014.

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Ana Teresa Fernandez, *Arrastre 2* at Gallery Wendi Norris