

## ARTIST ANA TERESA FERNANDEZ ON ERASING THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER WITH BLUE PAINT

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Ana Teresa Fernandez, artist-in-residence with ASU's Performance in the Borderlands.  
Deanna Dent/ASU Now

There's a 50-foot strip of the U.S.-Mexico border fence in Nogales in Sonora, Mexico that bears little resemblance to the rest of the nearly 2,000 mile barrier separating the two countries. Rather than resembling the rusty bars that conjure images of prison cells, it looks like a clear blue sky on a cloudless day. It was painted early last week as part of Performance in the

Borderlands, an initiative of the ASU School of Film, Dance & Theatre headed by Mary Stephens that creates opportunities for students and community members to explore identity and politics through cultural performance. San Francisco-based artist Ana Teresa Fernandez, who was born in Tampico, Mexico, spearheaded the painting as part of the initiative's inaugural statewide artist residency program. During a residency that ran from October 5 through 15, Fernandez participated in diverse public engagement activities in Phoenix, Flagstaff, Tucson, Nogales, and Douglas — including the re-creation of a 2011 work titled *Borrando la Frontera* (Erasing the Border) created along the border dividing Tijuana and San Diego, which consisted of painting a section of the border fence blue.

Fernandez conceived both “paint outs” as a way of erasing the border. By painting the border fence blue to match the sky, she created the illusion that the fence no longer existed along a portion of the border. In each case, she worked alongside others to make it happen. About three dozen people painted with her in Nogales, including ASU students, community members, and her mom — whom Fernandez credits with raising her consciousness of the border.



One of many people who helped to paint a portion of the border fence in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico. Deanna Dent/ASU Now

While Fernandez was studying art in San Francisco (she holds a B.F.A. and an M.F.A. from San Francisco Art Institute), her mother took a photography class and began using photography as a means of documenting the border. Fernandez was working in cafes and restaurants on the weekends at the time, where migrants she worked with often shared their stories. The experiences made her “want to reconnect with the border.”

She began traveling back to San Diego, where her parents live, and started doing performances near the border. She’d sweep sand along the beach, for example, as a way of exploring the “political uncleanliness” of border sites. As Fernandez heard more stories, her sentiments grew stronger. “I felt such aggressiveness near the border,” she says.

“But then something really clicked,” she says. It was 2011, and Fernandez started wondering how well people on opposite sides of the border debate were really communicating with each other — and whether they should be screaming at each other or having more quiet, intimate conversations. She asked herself: What should I do?

Fernandez called her mom, and shared an idea: She wanted to “paint out” a portion of the U.S.-Mexico border. “Let’s do it,” her mom said. And they did. They hit Home Depot for paint, eager to find just the right shade of blue that would match the color of the sky. Fernandez recalls looking at about 80 paint chips, eventually settling on a color (MSL 5011) in the Martha Stewart Living exterior paint line, and being struck by the irony of choosing a product from a “DIY queen” who’d done time behind bars.

The next day, Fernandez was painting a portion of the border fence while perched on a tall ladder wearing what she calls her “feminist tango dress and stilettos.” Her mom and a carpenter she works with were there to support her. “I do all my performances in that attire,” she says. “It is a symbol of me tangoing, pushing and pulling against spaces, histories, and objects.”

Despite the uniform, Fernandez felt “super scared” and vulnerable. “My legs were shaking the whole time,” she says. Fifteen minutes in, she says, the police nearly arrested her. And after six hours of painting, Fernandez wasn’t certain she’d made the right choice.

But the experience was vastly different in Nogales, she says. While painting there last week as part of Performance in the Borderlands, Fernandez wore more practical clothing, including black shorts and tank top with tennis shoes. Her focus was community engagement rather than performance. Hence, no tango attire. And instead of Martha Stewart Living paint, she used a blue shade of Behr paint called Electra.

"I felt like I was carrying the fear of being arrested," she says. But her concern was for others helping with the project, rather than herself. Fernandez says it helped to be part of such a big group that was so excited about the project. "This time, I was with an entire community instead of being just one person," she says. "I had no doubt that this was the right thing to be doing."



One of many individuals who participated in ASU's Performance in the Borderlands in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico. Deanna Dent/ASU Now

Some came to paint after hearing one of the artist's many presentations during the preceding week. Others were simply passing by, and decided to pick up a paintbrush. "We collected people that wanted to work with us," Fernandez says. "It grew organically."

At one point, a border patrol agent approached the fence as a Nogales, Mexico resident previously deported from the U.S. was painting. The border patrol agent picked up a roller, and the two men painted the fence at the same time. For Fernandez, it was a moving experience. "I could not have dreamed of this moment."



Fernandez says she'd like to "continue the trajectory of the fence," adding that she's been asked to do a similar "paint out" in Texas. She's intrigued by the way the border fence penetrates through mountains and to the sea, and says she'd like to explore how it "ruptures different landscapes."

Reactions to her work in Nogales have been mixed. Fernandez says she was shocked to read "hate mail" in the comments section for an online article about the project. "I'm amazed by what a little imagination can stir up. All I did was put paint on a fence," she says. "I'm no threat." But Fernandez says it's also stirred up "elation and enchantment."

Most importantly, she says, it's spurred dialogue and debate. "I'm so glad that's happening."

Find more information on the artist's website and the ASU Performance in the Borderlands website.

<http://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/arts/artist-ana-teresa-fernandez-on-erasing-the-us-mexico-border-with-blue-paint-7761675>