



GALLERY **WENDI
NORRIS**

INSPIRE

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CROSSING BORDERS

By **JOE SHEPTER**

She's ridden horses in water, mopped a polluted stretch of beach, and painted the United States–Mexico border fence blue. Ana Teresa Fernández is a dynamic young artist known for her beautiful explorations of border politics and gender issues.

Born in Tampico, Mexico, she moved to the United States when she was ten. While she always loved drawing, that was a hobby, not a job, in her world. "I grew up in a culture and society that

didn't allow me the space to think of art as an actual career or life path. It just wasn't a possibility," she explains.

Instead, she became a competitive swimmer and budding linguist, learning five languages by the age of 20. But art kept its hold on her, and she eventually wandered into a sculpture class at San Diego's Southwestern College. Impressed by her work, her professor insisted she go to a portfolio review for the San Francisco Art Institute.



"I was so clueless," she admits. "I had to ask her what a portfolio was. I still cringe at how oblivious I was about it."

She hastily developed photos of projects she had lying around and brought them in with an 82-foot-long drawing that she unrolled throughout the room. The review committee loved it and gave her a scholarship on the spot. Once she graduated, the Art Institute awarded her another

scholarship for her MFA, and a career was born.

These days, Ana Teresa is represented by Gallery Wendi Norris and works in media that range from painting and video to performance and site-specific sculpture. She's probably best known for physically challenging performances that she documents with hyper-realistic paintings.

RECLAIMING WATER

Ablution is a good example of her process. As with much of her art, its inspiration came from language, and in particular the derogatory term "wetback." "It seemed infuriating to me that water, used throughout history in mythology, folktales, and religion as a symbol for rebirth, purity, fertility and life, somehow shifted meaning when used as



an adjective for Latin Americans,” she says. “How could water be dirty when addressing this population?”

And so she donned a black cocktail dress and stiletto heels and swam in a pool for several hours every day for a week. The performance highlighted what some feminist and anti-racist thinkers call “intersectionality,” or the impossibility of separating race and gender in one’s identity. So her wet back referenced the racial slur, while her elegant clothes provided an impediment to her progress, much as cultural expectations of gender can do in life. Together with her display of athleticism, Ana Teresa’s performance showed how a strong woman could be burdened by those things but remain in complete control of her body and actions.

She then documented the performance in a series of realistic oil paintings, each created by a laborious process using 30 to 40 layers of paint. In one painting, her swimmer’s hand reaches out straight and strong, while the water swirls above, enhancing the sense of power and control.

ERASING THE BORDER

In *Borrando la Frontera (Erasing the Border)*, Ana Teresa confronted the fence between the United States and Mexico by putting on her black dress and heels and painting the fence sky blue.



On first viewing, the performance makes a simple statement of protest. But the more you watch it, the more you realize how rich it is in incongruity. The dress is entirely wrong for the task. The heels make you nervous as she teeters on top of the extension ladder. The beach that the fence cuts through is better suited for sun bathing than conflict. And the task is hopeless: One person could no more paint the entire fence than resolve the issues that led to its construction.

“*Borrando la Frontera* was a silent cry of exacerbation with the immigration policies that were and are happening,” she explains. “I found it highly ironic that the object that obstructed a path would be train tracks, a symbol of journey and movement. These tracks stand vertically next to each other, like prison bars across the sand and into the ocean, dividing land, sea, and sky. In my ideal world I wanted to topple them. The only way I knew how was through my own weapon: paint. I could paint them out.”

As with many of her performances, this one at first drew puzzled looks from passersby. But when she explained what she was doing, many of them got it and loved it. For them, living near the border was a burden too, and they responded by mentally blocking it out. With her painting, she brought it back to them.

“Political art is a risky business,” she admits. “It is often difficult to isolate a voice when there’s a multitude of voices screaming around you. This includes images as well. Issues become passé, grouped, didactic, or obvious. I found that mystery is often the loudest voice. I also never underestimate the intelligence of my audience.”

SOCIAL SCULPTURE

Ana Teresa’s work isn’t solely performance-based, however. Another passion is social sculpture: public art designed to evoke political or emotional reactions.



A good example is her award-winning *5W*, which appeared in February 2013 in public spaces around San Francisco’s 5M campus. She conceived of the project while teaching art in San Francisco’s Mid-Market, a neighborhood that encompasses a business district and a lower-income area. Mid-Market is also the focus of continual discussions on redevelopment and urban renewal in the city. When Ana Teresa overheard two garbage collectors talking

about a new building that had just opened, inspiration struck.

“The idea hit me like a lightning bolt: Who, What, When, Where, and Why,” she says. “For the last 10 years of being a more active participant in San Francisco, I came to realize everyone has an opinion as to what needs to happen in the redevelopment of the Mid-Market district. Who should stay? What needs to change? When will it happen?”

To bring 5W to life, Fernandez teamed up with designer and architect Johanna Grawunder. Together they created softly lit steel sculptures of the five words. These filled the area around the building, causing plenty of people to stop and wonder—and then start having conversations.

LEARNING MORE

Although Ana Teresa doesn’t have an exhibition live at the moment, her [website](#) features a wealth of images and videos exploring many of her projects in depth. Links to interviews and commentary provide a view into the energy and passion that drive her unique style.

Currently, Ana Teresa is working on a range of new projects, including a solo show due to debut in the spring.

