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**Exhibition Review:** *Christina Fernandez: Multiple Exposures*


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*Christina Fernandez: Multiple Exposures.* California Museum of Photography, Riverside, CA. September 10, 2022–February 5, 2023.

Suspended on the far wall of the first floor of UCR ARTS's California Museum of Photography (CMP), a piece of muslin stretched and framed serves as the backdrop for five sentences stitched in black thread. The lines read, "Looking down she saw that her stocking had a run. La migra came like a storm today. The end of a black thread was caught on her heel. It trailed away winding around the corner. She pictured an empty spool and feared they would notice it and find her." Sewn in all caps, the words tell the fictional story of a woman evading immigration officials (known in Spanish slang as "la migra") in a garment factory in Los Angeles, and in their bold font, obliquely gesture toward the authoritative. However, looking closely, viewers can see that the letters are all a little uneven, the stitching slightly off, the fabric and thread not able to embody full symmetry or sustain tidy edges. Instead, there's a sense of the human hand at work. Perhaps more pointedly, the thread—which has at once started to run, to catch, to trail, to wind, and potentially to signal the woman's whereabouts as she hides from la migra—has been recouped. It has been harnessed and drawn into the fabric to tell the story of the woman with whom it was entangled.

This sense of repurposing and entanglement, of taking a thing that can signal so many other things and repurposing it toward very specific new ends, forms a key theme in the work of photographer Christina Fernandez, whose body of photographs spanning three decades is featured in a thrilling exhibition at CMP in Riverside, California. Fernandez, who was born in Los Angeles, earned an MFA from the California Institute of the Arts, and now teaches at Cerritos College in Norwalk, explores Latinx identity and experience in her photographs. As the sewn piece, titled *Manuela S-T-I-T-C-H-E-D* (2000), suggests, Fernandez works with an acute awareness of the slipperiness of meaning, how it can move and morph, and how an artist operates within this fluidity and dynamism to create images that are complex emblems of equally complex encounters and relations.

The artwork with sewn words is anomalous in Fernandez's body of work, and indeed, is part of a larger series grouped under the title *Manuela S-T-I-T-C-H-E-D*, which is composed of photographs that feature precisely framed images of the exteriors of garment factories in East Los Angeles taken between 1996 and 2000. In *San Pedro Fashion* (1996), for example, we see the locked doorway of a streetside shop, with a folding

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*Starline Fashion* from the series *Manuela S-T-I-T-C-H-E-D* (2000) by Christina Fernandez; courtesy the artist and Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles.

security gate creating a diamond-shaped pattern across the doorway, and grids of bars blocking the small windows above. Half of the street, including the yellow double-line divider, runs along the bottom of the image, topped by the cracked sidewalk and bits of trash in the gutter. There's a telephone pole, wires, and a bit of gray sky, and a sense of emptiness and quiet. These rather nondescript elements are framed with a stolid formality and clear geometry that refuses the traditional aesthetic sheen of art photography as well as the storytelling imperative of photojournalism. Rather than reveal, the image refuses disclosure. We are barred entry; we are not privy to what happens on the other side of the wall.

Standing in the gallery viewing these images, one next to the other and each presented full size (30 x 40 inches), one becomes intensely aware of position and the spaces between viewer and viewed. We're invited to appreciate each image's symmetry, perhaps even the use of color, but there is also the invitation to do more, namely to contemplate what we do not see and why. As with the stitched muslin piece, we see one thing, but meaning blossoms, and if we are willing to hover in front of the image long enough, an entire set of social relations becomes keenly visible. As with the garment factory thread recouped to tell the story of the worker's life, the photograph in the gallery takes a detour, the aesthetic object détourned to explore the infrastructures that sustain it.

Fernandez uses a similar tactic in the series titled *Lavanderia* (2002–3) featuring the facades of laundromats, again in East Los Angeles, photographed at night using a large-



*Lavanderia #1* from the series *Lavanderia* (2002–03) by Christina Fernandez; courtesy the artist and Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles.

format camera, which allowed Fernandez to be exact in her composition. And indeed, as in the series *Manuela S-T-I-T-C-H-E-D*, the images are precisely framed; each photograph is segmented into multiple rectangles by the framing around the windows, beyond which we can see the circles and squares of the machinery inside. We can also see people tending to their laundry; the images, however, were shot using a long exposure time so that any movement becomes blurred. Human figures come to resemble a wash of color or a ghostly wisp. Finally, graffiti sprayed on the glass creates a layer of enigmatic language across the image, and at some point, we must decide whether to look at the writing and try to read it or ignore it to peer into the scene beyond.

In *Lavanderia #1* (2002), for example, stripes of white paint have dripped down from words spraypainted at the top of the door, creating a sense of dissolution or leakiness; inside, we see a person dressed in red, but the figure remains evanescent, almost glowing in a dark pink light. There are elements of red, white, and blue throughout the image, including in the Rite Aid logo on a plastic bag in a shopping cart just inside the door, adjacent to a large trash can, also in the very front of the scene. At the top of the right-hand door there is a sticker of the American flag, placed upside down. Taken together, these elements suggest a dynamic refusal of order and propriety, alongside a diminution of any sense of national pride. The graffiti is an active gesture of defiance, as is the flag's position, a symbol not of honor and allegiance but of disarray. What we witness, then, is yet another refusal, here enacted in the image that, beneath layers of insistent discursive complexity, also tells a story of quotidian care and the shared intimacy of laundry.

Echoing the *Manuela S-T-I-T-C-H-E-D* series, the images are formally striking in their size, symmetry, and formal elegance, and yet they refuse to remain aesthetically static. They prompt an awareness of the multiple layers that comprise the image, as well as the levels of the seen and unseen that tell the larger story of multiple social positions and radical social stratification. To be sure, different viewers will find different valences through which to meet the image. What is offered, however, is a layered emblem of meaning, summoning contemplation.

Working in a very different modality, Fernandez has also included her own image in some of her work, to profound effect. In the installation *María's Great Expedition* (1995–96), Fernandez imagines key moments in the life of her great-grandmother María, starting in 1910, when she was fourteen years old and living in Mexico, to her death in Los Angeles in 1952. In the project's series of six photographs, Fernandez stands in for the figure of her great-grandmother, wearing the clothes she might have worn and posing in overtly staged settings. In the photograph *1919, Portland, Colorado* (1995), for example, Fernandez wears a white dress and stands in front of a clothesline with detergent and bleach and a washtub at her feet. Fernandez interviewed family members to gather details about María's life, which grows increasingly complex as she travels from Mexico to the United States, and the narrated tale of a single mother raising a family while moving frequently from town to town suggests a life of ongoing struggle, defiance, and ingenuity. Fernandez makes no attempt to conjure the "real" here; instead, the images are clearly staged and even anachronistic, playing with the tension between research and representation. The images are also both self-portraits and reenactments, merging past and present while contemplating the role of history and memory through the life journey of an immigrant woman.

This particular exhibition of the work is significant in presenting the photographs in conjunction with the written narrative and map showing María's journey from Mexico and through New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, and California. The text begins in 1910 in Morelia as María leaves her family as a teenager and heads north, becoming one among over one million Mexicans traveling toward the US in the decade between 1910 and 1920. In six sections, the text follows María's journey: she has three sons and a daughter, is unfairly jailed, runs several businesses, and moves frequently, her life jostled by political and economic factors until her death. While the images offer both a great-granddaughter's expressive tribute and an inquiry on heritage, the text takes us into the specific details of a woman's life; it's difficult to imagine seeing the images without this narrative, which inserts a poignant personal story into a broader political history.

In the series *Untitled Multiple Exposures* (1999), Fernandez once again uses images of herself, in this case re-photographing famous portraits and layering her own image onto those images of Indigenous women of Mexico. The original black-and-white photographs were made by Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Gabriel Figueroa, Nacho López, and Tina Modotti, and the contact sheets on display as part of the exhibition showcase Fernandez's process as she creates an array of juxtapositions collaging faces together to find a final image. Rather than being an act of coy appropriation, the images point to mutual experience and a sense of shared identification. Who are we if not beings in relation to those who came



*Untitled Multiple Exposure #4 (Bravo)* from the series *Untitled Multiple Exposures* (1999) by Christina Fernandez; courtesy the artist and Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles.

before us? Fernandez's synthesized portraits show her standing with, alongside, and in solidarity; in some cases, she seems to hold and care for the second figure as in *Untitled Multiple Exposure #6 (López)* (1999).

The exhibition also includes several other series created by Fernandez during her career, such as *Space Available* (2004), documenting temporary studio spaces used by Fernandez early in her career. *View from Here* (2016–18) features eleven images of doorways and windows taken in the studios of other artists across Southern California. In each, Fernandez uses a short depth of field so that the interior frame is in focus while the view of what is beyond the frame remains a soft blur. The gesture returns the viewer to the inside space and to a feeling of intimacy and the frame appears again as a significant and recurring device, insistently reminding us of the central act of photography. In *reflect/project(ion)* (2017) Fernandez photographs former students at the college where she teaches, with images that the students have created of their photography equipment overlaid on the scene with a projector to create composite images; in this way, the spaces of the college, images of photography equipment, and the portraits of the students are

combined to suggest the intersecting discourses that constitute identity. And for the series *Sereno* (2006–10), Fernandez photographed scenes from her neighborhood in El Sereno, focusing specifically on the relationship between the built environment and the natural world.

The show, organized by UCR ARTS and curated by Joanna Szupinska, senior curator at CMP, with curatorial advisor Chon A. Noriega, a professor in the School of Theater, Film and Television at the University of California, Los Angeles, is beautifully staged in four clear sections in the museum, with excerpts from Szupinska's catalog essay helping contextualize the work in both English and Spanish. The 240-page exhibition catalog features 180 images, along with other essays by Rebecca Epstein, Cecilia Fajardo-Hill, Julian Myers, Noriega, Sally Stein, and Roberto Tejada, and interviews with Tejada, Szupinska, and Susanna V. Temkin, all of which elaborate on each series and its place within both the photographer's body of work and the larger histories of landscape and portraiture in photography. While there is much to tout here, including the celebration of a body of work steadfastly committed to an ineluctable interrogation of identity, heritage, history, and the experiences of Mexican Americans across thirty years, the show itself lacks bombast or bluster. Entering the first gallery, visitors are greeted by sequences of photographs and wall texts in full, bright light. One needs to move in close to begin to see the complexity and make connections. Each image is layered, and each points to others. The power of the show only slowly begins to emerge as each image sequence demonstrates yet another tactic deployed to question and query power and identity, and as viewers begin to discern formal and thematic connections. Fernandez's more landscape-oriented images—*American Trailer* (2018) and the series *Sereno*—are perhaps the most enigmatic in the show; they are located in a smaller second-floor space, and as such, invite a quieter form of consideration that feels exactly right.

While this particular installation of the exhibition is lovely, the show will travel to five other venues, as it should: the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas; Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Arizona; Princeton University Art Museum, New Jersey; San José Museum of Art, California; and DePaul Art Museum, Chicago. *Christina Fernandez: Multiple Exposures* directly engages the notion of “exposure” in its many valences, and greater exposure for Fernandez's work is both welcome and necessary.

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