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Agustin Fernandez: a retrospective, October 30 - December 11, 1992

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Agustín Fernández: A Retrospective

The Art Museum
AT FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY
MIAMI, FLORIDA
Front Cover: *Beetle-Scissor,*
1992, Oil on canvas, 81" x 99 1/2".
Courtesy of the artist
Agustín Fernández: A Retrospective
October 30 - December 11, 1992

The Blue Still Life, 1956, Oil on canvas, 49 1/8" x 33 5/8", Collection of The Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami, Florida, Metropolitan Collection, Gift of José Martínez-Cañas

Essays by Giulio V. Blanc and Juan A. Martínez

Curated by Dahlia Morgan
for

The Art Museum
AT FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY
University Park, PC 110
S.W. 107th Ave. & 8th St., Miami, Florida 33199
(305)348-2890
Director's Forward

Agustín Fernández: A Retrospective is the first major exhibition in Miami of this celebrated Latin-American Modernist. It is also The Art Museum's first exhibition to develop the scholarship on an artist who has major paintings in our permanent collection. Fernández's work came to The Art Museum through two collections; eight of the works in the exhibition are from the collection of the Metropolitan Museum and Art Center of Coral Gables, and one work is from the Collection of The Oscar B. Cintas Foundation (a collection of Cuban-exile art). The exhibition also celebrates other "firsts." It is the first exhibition to feature both Fernández's paintings and sculpture and the first exhibition at The Art Museum to be sponsored in part by the Center for Latin American Arts and Studies.

I would like to acknowledge the special contribution of art historian Giulio V. Blanc who suggested the exhibition to me and generously devoted his time and scholarship to the project. Mr. Blanc wrote an essay for this catalogue and researched the chronological and stylistic development of Fernández's oeuvre. I gratefully too, acknowledge the participation of my colleague in the Visual Arts Department, Juan A. Martinez, art historian, who also freely gave of his time and expertise to produce the essay on Fernández's early paintings. Both essays contribute extensively to the knowledge of contemporary Latin American art history.

I am also grateful to the artist, Agustín Fernández. It has been a pleasure working with him. His willingness to assist in every facet of the exhibition has been invaluable. His wife, Lia, also graciously fulfilled any requests I made of her.

I am especially indebted to our small and dedicated staff, Regina C. Bailey, Coordinator of Museum Programs, Eva Van Hees, Community Relations, and Glen Gentele, Registrar/Preparator, for their skills, both scholarly and organizational.

Especially, I would like to thank the State of Florida, Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs through the Florida Arts Council, the Metropolitan Dade County Cultural Affairs Council and the Metropolitan Dade County Board of County Commissioners, the Student Government Association of FIU, and the Friends of The Art Museum.

This project however, would not have happened without the generosity of the institutions and private individuals who are listed as lenders to the exhibition.

Dahlia Morgan, Director

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Papalotes (Kites), 1950, Oil on canvas, 46 1/2" x 43", Collection of Ramon Ferreira, Isla Verde, Puerto Rico
A Preliminary Study of Agustín Fernandez's Formative Phase

Juan A. Martínez

Agustín Fernández is one of the most prolific Cuban artists of the 1950s generation. His formative phase and paintings (c. 1950-59) represent a period of intensive stylistic experimentation and the beginning of a sustained and subtle exploration of fantasy and eroticism as content. In this essay, I am interested in beginning the process of locating Fernández's early career and paintings in the context of Cuban (ie., Havana) social, cultural and art history at mid-century.1

In the 1950s the art scene in Havana consisted, for the most part, of about fifty or more practicing painters and sculptors, a small audience of middle-class intellectuals and professionals, a handful of exhibition spaces, an art academy, few critics, and even fewer collectors. During this decade different generations of Cuban artists and a variety of artistic tendencies co-existed in various degrees of harmony and tension. The one-hundred-and-thirty-year-old San Alejandro Academy of Fine Arts continued to be the main art school in the island, yet academic Cuban art (interpretations of nineteenth-century Romanticism and Realism) was in its death throes. The last two academic painters-teachers of stature, Armando Menocal and Leopoldo Romañach, died in 1943 and 1951 respectively.2

At mid-century the status-quo in Cuban art was represented by a loose group of artists, some of whom emerged in the 1930s (the vanguardia generation) and others in the 1940s (the second generation of modern artists). The vanguardia painters still active in Havana were Eduardo Abela, Víctor Manuel, Carlos Enríquez, Amelia Peláez, and Wilfredo Lam. The latter actually spent most of the 1950s traveling and living in Paris. The second generation of modern Cuban artists included Mariano Rodríguez, Rene Portocarrero, Mario Carreño, Roberto Diago, Cundo Bermúdez, Luis Martínez Pedro, Felipe Orlando, Mirta Cerra, and the sculptor Alfredo Lozano. In general, the first and second generations shared a similar anti-San Alejandro-academic-art attitude and an interest in the expression of Cuban ethos with the tools of modern European (Expressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, etc.) and contemporary Mexican art.3

The 1950s, or third generation of modern Cuban artists, was more varied in its aesthetic and thematic interests. Many artists of this generation took a stand against their predecessors on the grounds that their art was too representational, regional, and exotic. They wanted art to express universal ideals through organic or geometric non-objective forms.4 Los Once, a group of artists which included the sculptors Agustín Cárdenas, Tomás Oliva and the painters Hugo Consuegra, Fayad Jamis, Guido Llinás, Antonio Vidal, and Raúl Martínez, looked towards New York and Abstract Expressionism as their model. In avant-garde fashion they sought to revitalize Cuban art and bring it up-to-date with the latest developments in Western art.

Los Once were not the only artists in the 1950's introducing new styles and concepts into Cuban art. Parallel to their version of Action Painting are the geometric, intellectual abstractions of Sandu Darie, Luis Martínez Pedro (1950s on), Loló Soldevilla, José María Mijares (late 1950s), Rafael Soriano, and others. These artists also viewed art as a means to express universal ideals, but chose the way of Concrete Art to attain their goal. Their concept of art followed, through French and Argentinean intermediaries, the ideas of Theo Van Doesburg's 1930 manifesto entitled Art Concrete, which emphasized the elements of construction, purity of form, and rational thought in art.

The majority of the artists who emerged in the 1950s did not readily adopt Abstract Expressionism or Concrete Art as their model. Mijares (early 1950s), Osvaldo Gutiérrez, Agustín Fernández, Raúl Milián, Julio Herrera
Zapata, José I. Bermúdez, Antonia Eiriz, Angel Acosta León, and the sculptor Rolando López Dirube remained attached to the human figure and/or objects. Many of them followed in the footsteps of the first and second generations by appropriating the formal vocabulary of early modern European art to express, in a more ambiguous fashion than their predecessor, a Cuban presence in their paintings and sculptures.

The different generations of modern Cuban artists working in Havana in the 1950s were supported by a fragile art infrastructure. The government of Fulgencio Batista (1952-58) showed little interest in cultural matters, and even less in supporting the visual arts. The Ministry of Education, through the Directory of Culture and later the National Institute of Culture, sponsored sporadic national exhibitions, irregular purchase awards, and a few traveling scholarships. Batista's dictatorship and his neglect of the visual arts drove some artists into action. In 1954, a number of painters and sculptors from all generations, including Fernández, refused to exhibit in the Bienal Hispanoamericana because it was organized by a fascist government (Franco's) and hosted by a dictatorship (Batista's); instead they participated in the Exposición Homenaje a Martí, also known as the anti-biennial, at the Lyceum. To protest official neglect of the visual arts, twenty-three artists boycotted the 1956 VIII National Salon and published a declaration denouncing that the national salons "did not live up to their stated purpose: to develop the visual arts and promote an art economy."  

Civic support for art included the efforts of a few cultural or educational institutions, such as the Lyceum, Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo, and the University of Havana, which offered the artists exhibition space and organized conferences on art. The Lyceum (1929-1968) was a progressive women's association deeply involved in creating and advancing culture through art exhibitions, concerts, readings, conferences, and a circulating library; its gallery was the primary exhibition venue for modern Cuban art between 1929 and 1951.  

Nuestro Tiempo (1951-1960) was a cultural association made up of musicians, writers, actors, artists, and film-makers who organized and presented concerts, poetic recitals, art exhibitions, cinema, and conferences. Galería Nuestro Tiempo exhibited the work of the first two generations of modern artists, but was particularly receptive to the art of the third generation.

During this decade a few private galleries, including La Rampa, La Habana, and Color Luz, made a modest contribution to promoting modern Cuban art. Generally, collectors, who were mostly middle-class Cuban professionals, sought direct negotiation with artists. Exhibitions were announced and at times reviewed in El Diario de la Marina, and El Mundo, or magazines like Carteles, Revista Lyceum, and Revista Nuestro Tiempo. However, there was little in-depth criticism and the art journalism was primarily written by literary figures and cultural critics.

At best, support for the visual arts in 1950s Havana was minimal. Cuban artists in the 1950s produced an extensive and diverse body of works in practically an economic and critical vacuum. "Havana was the capital, but from a broader perspective it was a provincial town," recalls Fernández, "there were few artists, less critics, and almost nowhere to exhibit."  

Fernández (b. 1928) made the best of the limited possibilities available to a middle-class Cuban wanting to study and practice art in the island. His formal art education consisted of academic training at San Alejandro, and brief studies at the Arts Student League in New York. The teachings of Romañach, Menocal, and Ramón Loy at San Alejandro were not lost on Fernández, as seen in his lifelong attention to craftsmanship, mastery of drawing, and tightly organized compositions. However, his initial paintings like Papalotes (Kites), 1950, already show a total independence from the sentimental realism promoted by San Alejandro. Instead, Fernández was beginning to explore an abstract artistic language adapted from early modern European and Cuban art. His 1950-52 works also
show a connection to the decorative abstractions of his
teacher Yasuo Kuniyoshi at the Arts Student League.

In 1951, a year after graduation, Fernández had his
first one-man show at the Lyceum. The exhibition received
an enthusiastic welcome by the arts critic Rafael Suárez
Solís in his column "De las Letras y Las Artes," Diario de la
Marina (October 16, 1951). The artist's auspicious debut
in Havana was followed by more one-man shows, group
exhibitions, and favorable reviews. Fernández "is not yet a
master in his own right because his personality - due to his
age - is not fully defined, but his temperament and
authentic creativity are there," wrote Angel Lázaro for
Carteles (April 20, 1952, p. 40) on the occasion of the
artist's second solo exhibition at Galería Nuestro Tiempo.
Lázaro characterized his paintings as "festivities of color, . . .
a world of sensations, magic, and wonder." Encouraged by
positive response to his art and by his own youthful urge to
paint, Fernández produced a large body of works between
1952 and 1959.

During that decade, he also traveled to Europe, the
United States, and South America resulting in a number of
exhibitions (Madrid 1953, Washington D.C. 1955, New
York 1956 and 1958, and Caracas 1959), which began to
project his art into the international arena. In 1956, his
painting Naturaleza muerta y paisaje (Still Life and
Landscape, 1956) received Honorable Mention at the Sao
Paulo Biennial, and was acquired by The Museum of
Modern Art in New York. Fernández's Cuban period
ended in 1959, when he departed for Europe under a
scholarship awarded by the Cuban government. Since
then he has lived in Paris, San Juan (Puerto Rico), and is
now residing in New York.

By the time Fernández left Cuba he had developed a
formative style characterized by a predilection for
abstraction, brilliant colors, and still lifes. According to the
artist, he chose to paint still lifes because their history and
format allowed and encouraged technical and formal
experimentation. In the period from 1953 to 1956, he
moved quickly through personal adaptations of Fauvism,
Cubism, and Abstract Expressionism; he was absorbing the
formal lessons of modern and contemporary art in search
for his own visual language.

About 1952-53 the artist began to explore the use of
explosive colors and tactile paint application inspired by
the paintings of Pierre Bonnard and by Fauvism. In works
like Jardín de día (Garden by Day), 1953, and Pergola
(Trellis), 1953, he used the bold brushwork and color
scheme of early twentieth-century French avant-garde art
to express his own fantastic, dazzling, and erotic
interpretation of nature. Abstract organic forms suggesting
trunks, branches, leaves, and fruits take over the
composition insinuating teeming gardens or landscapes, as
much as still-lifes.

Soon Fauvism yielded to Cubism in a number of
Untitled paintings dated to 1954-55. In these works
Fernández reduced his bright palette to a few warm color
areas framed by solid geometric planes and contrasting
with darker cool tonalities. The shift from mixed-media on
paper to oil on canvas gives the surface a new luminous
quality which complements the sensuality of the forms.
Although more sober and abstract, the images continue to
evoke a mysterious and lush vegetation.

In form and content the 1952-55 paintings are related
to the works of his immediate Cuban predecessors.
Fernández admired the art of the first two generations of
modern artists, to which he refers as "la pintura clasica
cubana" (classical Cuban painting).  In the 1930's and
1940's the vanguardia and second generation modern
painters, including Víctor Manuel, Enríquez, Peláez, Lam,
and Mariano, painted expressionistic, abstract, or
surrealistic still lifes signifying an exotic, generous, and
sensual tropical land. Fernández's early paintings
synthesized his predecessors' visual language and
expanded on their mythical and erotic vision of Cuba's
bountiful nature.

His predilection for abstraction, chromatic intensity,
and suggestive images become more apparent in his art
when he approximated Abstract Expressionism in paintings
such as Cuba, 1955, and the aforementioned Naturaleza
muerta con paisaje. Having assimilated some of the major
tendencies in early modern art, he proceeded to learn from the dominant art movement of that decade. Inspired in part by the paintings of Arshile Gorky and Roberto Matta, his technique became more spontaneous, the compositions more fluid, and the images even more abstract. These looser, ambiguous, but still sensually evocative still life landscapes of 1955-58 bring to a close Fernández's formative, Cuban phase. His subsequent Parisian works (c. 1960-68) venture into mostly new territory.

From the perspective of the artist's career, the 1950s period is characterized by experimentation with different techniques and styles to express the mythical exuberance and eroticism of nature in the tropics. In the context of Cuban art and culture, Fernández's formative style represents an expansion rather than a break with the art of the pioneers of Cuban modernism. He continued their twenty year exploration of European avant-garde styles and Cuban iconography. In his late 1950s paintings, the artist began to disengage from "la pintura clásica cubana," and moved away from it altogether in his post-1960 work. In this respect, his formative style is one of the last manifestations of early modern Cuban painting (c. 1927-1950), and a bridge to the more varied contemporary tendencies in Cuban art after mid-century.

Notes

1. The bibliographical data on Fernández consists of numerous newspaper and magazine articles (mostly exhibition reviews), essays in exhibition catalogues, and brief entries in surveys of Cuban art: Loló de la Torriente Estudio de las Artes Plásticas en Cuba (Havana: 1954), Edmundo Desnoes and Oscar Hurtado Pintores Cubanos (Havana: 1962), and Marta de Castro El Arte en Cuba (Miami: 1970).

2. Ironically, when Cuban academic art was hopelessly exhausted the Committee of the Semicentennial of Cuban Independence published a lavish (42 color plates, 310 black/white illustrations, and 350 pages in three languages) book on its practitioners and gave it the presumptuous title:

3. For information on the first and second generation of modern Cuban artists, see two classic texts: Guy Pérez Cisneros, "Pintura y escultura en 1943" Anuario Cultural de Cuba (Havana: 1943) and José Gómez Sicre Pintura Cubana de Hoy (Havana: 1944).

4. There is little art criticism or art historical research on this generation of artists and 1950s Cuban art. The most thoughtful critical essay remains Desnoes', "1952-62 en la pintura cubana," Pintores Cubanos op. cit.

5. "Declaración de Principios de Artistas Plásticos... " Revista Nuestro Tiempo 9 (January, 1956), insert.

6. For an informative introduction to the Lyceum, see the encyclopedia Cuba en la mano (Havana: 1940) pp. 1058-59.

7. For an introduction to this art gallery, see José Antonio Portuondo, "La galería de Nuestro Tiempo," Revista Nuestro Tiempo 5 (May, 1955): 11-14.

8. Interview with the artist, Miami, April 21, 1992.

9. Interview with the artist, op. cit.
Naturaleza Muerta y Follaje (Still Life and Foliage), 1956, Oil on canvas, 56 7/8" x 36 7/8", Collection of The Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami, Florida, Metropolitan Collection, Gift of José Martínez-Cañas

Pergola (Trellis), 1956, Oil on canvas, 52" x 52", Collection of Omar Cuan, Miami, Florida
Untitled, Oil on canvas, 1956, 55 1/2" x 53 1/4" Collection of Mr. & Mrs. Modesto A. Maidique, Miami, Florida

Deve/oppement d'un Delire (Development of a Delirium), Oil on canvas, 1961, 78" x 72", Collection of Joseph A. Novak, New York, New York

Cousures (Sutures), 1962, Oil on canvas, 50 1/4" x 45 1/4", Collection of The Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami, Florida, Metropolitan Collection, Gift of José Martínez-Cañas
Sprout, 1966, Oil on canvas, 25" x 23", Collection of The Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami, Florida, Metropolitan Collection, Gift of José Martínez-Cañas

Objecto Hendido (Cloven Object), 1961, Oil on canvas, 32 3/4" x 23 1/4", Collection of The Art Museum at Florida International University, Metropolitan Collection, Miami, Florida, Gift of José Martínez-Cañas
Agustin Fernandez: Paris and New York

by Giulio V. Blanc

When he moved to Paris on a Cuban government scholarship in 1959, Agustin Fernández had already established himself as one of Cuba's leading young artists. At the age of thirty-one, he could already point to an honorable mention at the 1956 Sao Paulo Biennial and the acquisition of a painting by The Museum of Modern Art in New York. He had also had eleven solo exhibitions in Havana, New York, Madrid, Caracas, and Washington, D.C.

Fernández's career in Cuba began with his first one-man exhibition at the Lyceum, the Havana women's organization that served a vital role in showcasing young talent, in 1951. His canvases were color-filled and decorative in the most positive sense of the word, with reminiscences of Matisse, Bonnard, Vuillard and also of the tropical lushness of older Cuban modernists such as Amelia Peláez.

Fernández's still-lifes, full of sensuality that often erupted into vague erotic forms and juxtapositions, underwent a change after the artist left friends and country behind for the uncertainties of exile in Paris. Suddenly, color vanished, reducing itself to beige and, in 1963, to black and white with occasional touches of the palest pink. Eroticism asserted itself, especially in the artist's drawings. But the tension between a Cubist, even Cézannesque, structure of armor-like planes at once separate and unified, and the fleshy, ambiguous forms which emerged in the mid 1950s, was maintained. Jose Lezama Lima's comment regarding Amelia Pelaez's painting being a conflict between "carnality and structure" serves also for the understanding of Fernández.

There can be no doubt that in the early 1960s, carnality had the upper hand. In Development d'un Delire (Development of a Delirium), 1961, Objet Hendido (Cloven Object), 1961, Cousures (Sutures), 1962, and Sprout, 1966, the viewer is confronted with disturbing, fleshy images barely held together with surgical thread, in a state of constant metamorphosis. Their amorphous state teases us: animal, vegetable, or mineral? Comparisons to, or memories of, "erogenous zones" are unavoidable as orifices and vaguely anatomical shapes appear. At times, more solid metallic and leathery forms shelter or, more likely, entrap, softer ones. But ambiguity is all. Alain Jouffroy noted that these "are erotic images without identity. The forms employed do not obey established sexual symbolism."

In Untitled, 1966, from the collection of The Museum of Modern Art, a breast-like object is entrapped in a niche. Empty eyes, or growths, have sprouted on it. These marks also cover the "wall" the niche is set in. Beehive, 1969, and Razor Blades, 1970, are further counterpoints of flesh and control. Here, the artist has borrowed from the vocabulary or organic symmetry and regimentation of nature. The individual components of these hives double as breasts. He also introduces a man-made object that is a metaphor for pain: the razor blade.

While Fernández developed his aesthetic language throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the constant remained the precarious balance between undefined "flesh" and sharp or hard forms. We see this in La Grande Armour (The Grand Armor) of 1978, which appears to be composed of superimposed industrial metal plated or pieces of medieval armor. Closer inspection reveals protuberances that may be read as breasts or some kind of Amazonian breastplate. In The Warrior, 1975, and Shield, 1975, the hard, metallic aspect of Fernández is most in evidence. While delicate, sensual forms are present, as their titles imply these works connote brute strength. Shield could also be titled Hide, for it resembles the skin of some mythical reptile or the uniform of Attila the Hun.

Standing, Idolo I (Idol 1), and Idolo II (Idol II), all from 1978, consciously recall sculptures of pagan diets.
Standing is from the artist's Atenea Polimastia Series and transforms traditional representations of the multi-breasted Diana of Ephesus, a grim Asian idol having little to do with Grecian images of Apollo's virginal sister. The Aztec Coatlicue, also an awe-inspiring fertility goddess, comes to mind as well. Fernández's faceless goddess, with her delicate harness, razor-blades, and twenty-two gray pink breasts, is at once a symbol of nurturing maternity and of repression and castration.

To soften the edges as it were, the second half of the 1970s saw the appearance of blue and pink butterflies, paper doily patterns, and forms inspired by strips of cinema film and torn sheets of paper. Images derived from corrugated cardboard and industrial plastic tubing also made their appearance along with another potential object of pain; the clothes pin.

Figure in the Forest, 1980, is an important summation of Fernández's quest. Swirls of armor plate with reptilian scales (the snake, with all its connotations of sexuality and danger, became an important image in the 1980s) surround a pinkish form composed of what appear to be sheaths of torn paper. This creature has vestigial breasts, knees and orifices. The painting is a metaphor for the human condition, one fraught with anxiety, sexual and otherwise, in which the fragile self is engaged in never-ending battle with serpents that menace it from within and without. Fernández's "forest" is the selva oscura of Dante as well as that of Freud's paranoias, neuroses, and obsessions.

In the 1980s and the 1990s, color, at least sickly yellow and pale blue, became more prevalent as backdrops for the mechanical/organic forms. The intensity of Fernández's symbols increased in these years. Cordel (Rope), 1988, is a circular composition in which a two-toned contraption of belts and shields contain gray, organic shapes. There is a curious sense of order here, an attempt at Jungian centering. Could this be a mandala meant to contain overwhelming emotions and anxieties? But the magic circle barely holds and the large canvas appears ready to explode out of metaphysical space. Oculus (Eye), 1990, Metallic Flower in Landscape, 1990, and Beetle-Scissor, 1992, continue the theme explored in Cordel. In Oculus the mandala is composed of six rings or coils that imprison what resembles a phallus, the active life force capable, like the "earth mother" of both positive and negative actions. In Metallic Flower in Landscape, yet another metal girdle restrains a missile-phallus set against a "sky" of sulfuric and blue-gray clouds. Finally, in Beetle-Scissor, the male force has either broken out of its iron ring or is about to be sliced in two by it.

Agustín Fernández lived in Paris from 1959 to 1968. He quickly became part of the Parisian art scene, participating in the annual Salon de Mai and attracting attention of such prominent critics and writers as Alain Jouffroy, Yvon Taillandier, and Alain Bosquet. These critics, who had special interest in Dada, Surrealism, and their latter day manifestations, saw the artist as a Post-Surrealist. He collaborated with Bosquet and Taillandier on four "book objects" as well as on other limited edition publications such as Le Mille Pattes (The Centipede), 1965. Fernández's inclusion in the exhibition Picabia-Iene-Fernández at the Galerie Furstenberg, 1965, and Tanguy-Dali-Bellmer-Fernández-Ray at the Galerie André-Francois Petit, 1966, indicates how the artist was contextualized by the Parisian avant garde. Although he was far too independent to be an orthodox Surrealist, one cannot avoid understanding Fernández in terms of Dada and Surrealism. His themes: the unconscious; obsessions and impulses, eroticism, especially in regards to the female body; unexpected juxtapositions; and the dissection of violence and pain were all of interest to the artists of these movements. Antonin Artaud could have been writing about Fernández in The Theatre of Cruelty Manifesto when he provides "the spectator with the truthful precipitates of his dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his fantasies, his utopian sense of life and of things, even his cannibalism, pour out on a level that is not counterfeit and illusory but internal."

During the 1960s, Fernández created numerous three dimensional works of found objects, his children's toys, and other bric-a-brac. Like those of Duchamp or Man Ray,
especially the latter's *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse*, 1920, a sewing machine covered with a cloth and bound with a rope, the ephemeral nature of these assemblages adds to their mystery. The artist continued creating "objects" in the 1970s and 1980s.

Fernández's objects are intimately related to his paintings. In *The Cushion*, 1992, staples run down the center of a sagging "belly" of soft foam insulation which is contained within a frame of tiny square mirrors. *Clea at 14*, 1978, depicts, in a Victorian oval frame, the graceful life mask of the artist's daughter surrounded by the shards of a broken glass lamp shade. *Black A'moor*, 1980, and *African Head*, 1990, resemble Congo fetishes. They are encrusted with broken mirrors, nails, and razor blades. This collection of debris is balanced with brass door knobs, used power drill bits, buttons, and rubber and plastic tubing.

Other works balance fur and steel wool. Some have clusters of silver painted light bulbs of different sizes, toy wheels, and stuffed gloves. Always conscious of tradition, Fernández utilizes plaster and plastic busts in his ironic "homages" to Rousseau and Canova. He also delights in inflicting wild transformations on images by the Old Masters. The artist's mixed media collages are a further spin-off of the objects in their combination of such disparate elements as cut-outs from art books, architectural renderings and found objects, all of this highlighted with penciled trompe l'oeil shadows.

*Freud*, 1988, is an especially revealing piece. This metamorphosized nineteenth century book cover features a photo of Freud reflected narcissistically in a small mirror in conjunction with a door bolt and a fragment of yellow foam provocatively trussed up with rubber bands. The presence of the faded *ex libris* of the forgotten owner of this unidentified volume adds to the puzzle in which so many key Freudian references are invoked.

Visitors to the Fernández apartment at 43 Fifth Avenue, near Washington Square, in the 1970s and the 1980s (the family lived in Puerto Rico for four years after departing from Paris in 1968) were always struck by the extension of the paintings and objects into their environment. An unearthly white marble lobby with plaster wall decorations of cryptically smiling fauns and nymphs prepared one for what lay ahead. The vast, Marienbad apartment of endless hallways and passages with rooms opening into and out of them had itself become a giant object or stage. Empire sofas, inlaid Deco commodes, and an extravagant papier maché settee shared the rooms with opaline vases and cornucopias, a brass mosque lamp, two South American colonial columns, and a number of glass and metal *objets* chosen for their exotic shapes. Items encountered on the streets of Greenwich Village, for instance, and aluminum letters from a Chinese restaurant, could be seen alongside long-nosed Venetian carnival masks.

The walls and shelves of the apartment were covered with Fernández's paintings and objects and his studio, a small room considering the size of some of the canvases, was situated at the heart of the place. Incongruously, its floor was covered with a spotless Persian carpet. The only works by another artist to be seen were a series of elegant portraits of Fernández, his mother Hortensia, and his son Sebastian by Robert Mapplethorpe. The photographer met and became friendly with Fernández and his family in 1979 and this friendship developed until Mapplethorpe's untimely death in 1989.

Fernández took little or no interest in the artistic trends of the past twenty years. At most, in the objects, there are points of contact with some U.S. Pop artists of the 1950s and 1960s, notably Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. But his connection to Mapplethorpe demonstrates the relevance of Fernández to the New York avant garde in the 1980s.

Like Mapplethorpe, the painter combines technical and formal elegance, tragic, classical grandeur, with disturbing psychological insights. There are those who might be disconcerted by some of the shocking images. They delude themselves. The photographer and painter are simply mediums who transmit the distilled images of a cruel reality and of the demons of the mind.
The genius of Fernández has been the avoidance of caricature, vulgarity, and the specific. His dark vision is one of metaphor and symbol. It is a philosophical system of oppositions in struggle. As the poet John Ashberry wrote referring to Fernández, "poetry and metaphysics need not be the enemies of pure painting." An artist's artist in the Mandarin style of Duchamp, Agustín Fernández is a highly significant, if still incompletely appreciated figure in the art of this century.

Notes


5. The artist and his family moved to a new residence in Manhattan in early 1992.


**The Metamorphosis of Experience**, 1969, Oil on canvas, 79 1/2" x 50", Collection of The Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami, Florida, Metropolitan Collection, Gift of José Martínez-Cañas
Cordel (Rope), 1983, Oil on canvas, 107" x 100", Courtesy of the artist

The Warrior, 1975, Oil on canvas, 96" x 68 1/4", Collection of The Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami, Florida, Metropolitan Collection, Gift of José Martínez-Cañas
La Grande Armour (The Grand Armor), 1975, Oil on canvas, 103" x 68", Collection of The Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami, Florida, Metropolitan Collection, Gift of José Martínez-Cañas

Figure in the Forest, 1980, Oil on canvas, 108" x 80 1/4" Courtesy of the artist
Metallic Flower in Landscape, 1990, Oil on canvas, 52" x 52 1/2", Courtesy of the artist

La Nouvel Armour (The New Armor), 1992, Oil on canvas, 70" x 70", Collection of Eric Maspons, Miami, Florida
White Amor, 1980, Wood, wire, Xerox, matches, paper, 66" x 14" x 10", Courtesy of the artist

Black A'moor, 1980, Vacuum tubing, door knobs, plastic, 66 1/4" x 14" x 13", Courtesy of the artist
**Bookcover**, 1988, Matches, fur, rubber bands, wood, photograph, 15" x 24" x 2 1/2", Courtesy of the artist

**Portraits**, 1989, Wood, paint, photo collage, rubber bands, fabric, wire, steel, wool, 16" x 9 1/2" x 9 3/4", Courtesy of the artist

**Country Homes**, 1987, Book, 13 1/2" x 10" x 3", Courtesy of the artist

**African Head**, 1990, Vacuum tubing, buttons, metal, 20" x 12 1/2" x 12", Courtesy of the artist
Exhibition Checklist

Papalotes (Kites), 1950, Oil on canvas, 46 1/2" x 43", Collection of Ramon Ferreira, Isla Verde, Puerto Rico

Jardin del Cerro - al Medio día (A Garden in El Cerro in the Afternoon), 1953, Oil & tempera, paper on canvas, 80" x 53", Courtesy of the artist

Jose (The on Stand), 1954, Oil on canvas, 49 3/4" x 49 1/4", Collection of Joseph A. Novak, New York, New York

The Blue Still Life, 1956, Oil on canvas, 49 1/8" x 33 5/8", Collection of The Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami, Florida, Metropolitan Collection, Gift of José Martínez-Cañas

Naturaleza Muerta y Follaje (Still Life and Foliage), 1956, Oil on canvas, 56 7/8" x 36 7/8", Collection of The Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami, Florida, Metropolitan Collection, Gift of José Martínez-Cañas

Pegola (Trellis), 1956, Oil on canvas, 52" x 52", Collection of Omar Cuan, Miami, Florida

Still Life and Landscape, 1956, Oil on canvas, 48" x 55 1/8", Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York, Inter-American Fund

Untitled, 1956, Oil on canvas, 55 1/2" x 53 1/4", Collection of Mr. & Mrs. Modesto A. Maidique, Miami, Florida

Développement d'un Delire (Development of a Delirium), 1961, Oil on canvas, 78" x 72", Collection of Joseph A. Novak, New York, New York

Objeto Hendido (Cloven Object), 1961, Oil on canvas, 32 3/4" x 23 1/4", Collection of The Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami, Florida, Metropolitan Collection, Gift of José Martínez-Cañas

Cousures (Sutures), 1962, Oil on canvas, 50 1/4" x 45 1/4", Collection of The Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami, Florida, Metropolitan Collection, Gift of José Martínez-Cañas


Sprout, 1966, Oil on canvas, 25" x 23", Collection of The Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami, Florida, Metropolitan Collection, Gift of José Martínez-Cañas

Beehive, 1969, Oil on canvas, 64" x 48", Courtesy of the artist

The Metamorphosis of Experience, 1969, Oil on canvas, 79 1/2" x 50", Collection of The Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami, Florida, Metropolitan Collection, Gift of José Martínez-Cañas

Paper Shape, 1969, Oil on linen, 64" x 48", Courtesy of the artist

Razor Blades, 1970, Oil on canvas, 78" x 70", Courtesy of the artist

La Grande Armure (The Grand Armor), 1975, Oil on canvas, 103" x 68", Collection of The Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami, Florida, Metropolitan Collection, Gift of José Martínez-Cañas

Shield, Atenea Polimastia Series, 1975, Oil on canvas, 70" x 69", Courtesy of the artist

The Warrior, 1975, Oil on canvas, 96" x 68 1/4", Collection of The Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami, Florida, Metropolitan Collection, Gift of José Martínez-Cañas

The Bather, Atenea Polimastia Series, 1978, Oil on canvas, 91 1/2" x 48 1/2", Courtesy of the artist

Idolo I (Idol I), 1978, Oil on canvas, 99" x 27", Courtesy of the artist

Idolo II (Idol II), 1978, Oil on canvas, 99" x 27", Courtesy of the artist

Standing, Atenea Polimastia Series, 1978, Oil on canvas, 94" x 55", Courtesy of the artist

Figure in the Forest, 1980, Oil on canvas, 108" x 80 1/4", Courtesy of the artist

Portrait of a Headless Lady, 1980, Oil on canvas, 24 1/2" x 27", Collection of The Oscar B. Cintas Foundation

Cordel (Rope), 1983, Oil on canvas, 107" x 100", Courtesy of the artist

La Piel del Cocodrilo (The Skin of the Crocodile), 1983, Oil on canvas, 52" x 52", Courtesy of the artist

Metallic Flower in Landscape, 1990, Oil on canvas, 52" x 52 1/2", Courtesy of the artist

Oculus (Eye), 1990, Oil on canvas, 102" x 80 1/4", Courtesy of the artist

Beetle-Scissor, 1992, Oil on canvas, 81" x 99 1/2", Courtesy of the artist

La Nouvel Armure (The New Armor), 1992, Oil on canvas, 70" x 70", Collection of Eric Masporns, Miami, Florida

ILLUSTRATED BOOK

Le Mille Pattes (The Centipede), 1965, portfolio of drypoints by Agustín Fernández, text by Yvon Taillardier; printed by Lacouriere et Frélat, Collection of Ursus Books, New York, New York

SCULPTURE

Bottle, 1969, Ceramic, paint, photographs, aluminum rings, 11 3/4" x 3 3/4" x 3 3/4", Courtesy of the artist

Clea at 14, 1978, Wood, spray paint, glass, ceramic, 26" x 21" x 4 3/4", Courtesy of the artist

Black A'moor, 1980, Vacuum tubing, door knobs, plastic, 66 1/4" x 14 3/4" x 13", Courtesy of the artist

White Amor, 1980, Wood, wire, Xerox, matches, paper, 66" x 14" x 10", Courtesy of the artist
At the Beach, 1985, Wood, foam, paper, razor blades, Xerox collage, 36" x 9" x 12", Courtesy of the artist

Mona Lisa, 1985, Foam, straight pins, plastic, Xerox, 14 1/2" x 11 1/4", Courtesy of the artist

Country Homes, 1987, Book, 13 1/2" x 10" x 3", Courtesy of the artist

Bookcover, 1988, Matches, fur, rubber bands, wood, photograph, 15" x 24" x 2 1/2", Courtesy of the artist

Freud, 1988, Metal frame, foam, rubber bands, photograph, book, 8 1/8" x 10 1/8" x 2 1/2", Courtesy of the artist

Portrait of a Young Man, 1988, Photographs, foam, wood frame, rubber bands, Xerox, staples, tape, plastic, 27" x 16" x 6 3/4", Courtesy of the artist

Untitled, 1988, Wood, steel wool, nails, photographs, fur, 20 1/2" x 14" x 4 1/2", Courtesy of the artist

The Country Gourmet Venus, 1989, Foam, fur, wood, nylon, glue, ceramic, 24" x 13" x 17", Courtesy of the artist

The Enlightenment of Canova, 1989, Glass, bulbs, 24 1/2" x 14" x 4", Courtesy of the artist

J.J. Rousseau, 1989, Bulbs, cotton fabric, spray paint, wood, 29 3/4" x 15 1/4" x 7", Courtesy of the artist

Portraits, 1989, Wood, paint, photo collage, rubber bands, fabric, wire, steel wool, 16" x 9 1/2" x 9 3/4", Courtesy of the artist

African Head, 1990, Vacuum tubing, buttons, metal, 20" x 12 1/2" x 12", Courtesy of the artist

The Chariot, 1991, Bulbs, foam, wheels, plastic fingers, rubber bands, spray paint, 26" x 15" x 11", Courtesy of the artist

The Cushion, 1992, Plastic, mirror, foam, staples, 26" x 20" x 6", Courtesy of the artist

The Chariot, 1991, Bulbs, foam, wheels, plastic fingers, rubber bands, spray paint, 26" x 15" x 11", Courtesy of the artist
1928  Born in Havana, Cuba.
      Receives a formal education at a Jesuit boarding school and, following high school, enters San Alejandro Academy of Fine Arts.
1948  Goes to New York, studying for a brief period at the Arts Students League under the direction of George Grosz and Vasuu Kuniyoshi. Returns to Havana the same year, and enters the University of Havana to work on his doctorate in philosophy.
1950  Graduates from Sal Alejandro Academy and, within a year, has his first one man show at the Lyceum Gallery, Havana.
1951-59 Travels extensively between Cuba, Europe, the U. S. and South America
1952  Exhibits at the Galeria Buchholz, Madrid, Spain.
1954  First one man show in the U.S. at Pan American Union Washington, D.C
1959  First one man show in South America held at the Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, Venezuela. Travels to Europe under a scholarship awarded by the Cuban government. Moves to Paris. Has first one-man exhibition in Paris at the Galeria Furstenberg, directed by Simone Collinet.
1968  Produces series of erotic drawings and paintings. At this time his work evolved from a beige period and by 1963 he was working exclusively in black and white. Leaves Paris and move to San Juan, Puerto Rico. Destroys a number of his works. While in San Juan, he prepares a remarkable edition of twenty collages on serigraphy.
1972  Move to New York where he now resides.
1970/80s Dark brown period, machine-like forms prevalent. New objects
1978  Completes José Marti portfolio commemorating twenty years of exile.
1979  Meets Robert Mapplethorpe who photographs artist, his mother, and son Sebastian.
1982  Artist’s mother, who lived with the family, dies. Pancho, a Chihuahua, is a gift to the artist.
Mid to late 80s New collages and drawings.
1983/87 Travels frequently to Spain.
1987  Ceases to summer in San Juan.
1988  Suble return to color.
1992  Moves from 43 Fifth Avenue.

**ONE MAN SHOWS**

1951  Galeria Lyceum, Havana, Cuba
1952  Galeria Nuestro Tiempo, Havana, Cuba
1952  Galeria Lyceum, Santiago do Cuba
1953  Galeria Buchholz, Madrid, Spain
1954  Galeria Lyceum, Havana, Cuba
1955  Pan American Union, Washington, D.C.
      Duveen Graham Gallery, New York, New York
1958  Condon Riley Gallery, New York, New York
1959  Galeria Contemporanea, Caracas, Venezuela
      Circulo de Bellas Artes, Maracaibo, Venezuela
      Bodley Gallery, New York, New York
      Galeria Furstenberg, Paris, France
1962  Galleria del Cavallino, Venice, Italy
      Galleria del Naviglio, Milan, Italy
      Galeria Furstenberg, Paris, France
1966  Galeria Jacqueline Ranson, Paris, France
      Librairie Nicaise, Paris, France
1968  La Casa del Arte, San Juan, Puerto Rico
1970  La Casa del Arte, San Juan, Puerto Rico
1973  Galeria Colibri, San Juan, Puerto Rico
1974  Museum of the University of Puerto Rico, San Juan,
      Puerto Rico Retrospective Galeria Las Americas, San Juan, Puerto Rico
1976  Gimpel and Weitzenhoffer, New York, New York
      Gallery 24 Collection, Miami, Florida
      Metropolitan Museum and Art Center, Miami, Florida, Retrospective
1978  Osuna Gallery, Washington, D.C.
1979  ACA Gallery, New York, New York
      Meeting Point Gallery, Miami, Florida
      De Armas Galleries, Miami Florida
      Osuna Gallery, Washington, D.C.
1982  Osuna Gallery, Washington, D.C.
1983  F.I.A.C., Paris, France
      Metro-Dade Public Library, Miami, Florida
**GROUP SHOWS**

1956  Bienal del Sao Paulo (Honorable Mention) Salon Nacional, Museo de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba  
1957  Homenaje a Guy Perez Cisneros, Museo de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba  
1959  The U.S. Collects Pan American Art, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois  
1960  Peintres Cubains, Galerie du Dragon, Paris, France  
1961  Salon Comparaisons, Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris, France (Also exhibited in 1964-65) Anti-Processo, Galleria Brea, Milan, Italy  
1962  Amerique Latine, Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris, France Salon de Mai, Tokyo, Japan Neuf Pintres Neufs, Galerie du Cercle, Paris, France  
1963  Salon Iris Clert, Galerie Furstenberg, Paris, France  
1966  Tanguy-Dali- Bellmer-Fernández-Roy, Galerie Andres-Francois Petit, Paris, France  
1969  Le Livre comme Oeuvre d'Art Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris, France Latin America, New Paintings and Sculpture, Center for Inter-American Relations, New York, New York  
1970  Four Latin American Painters, New Orleans Museum, New Orleans, Louisiana  
1975  Latin America, Museum of Austin University, Austin, Texas  
1979  The Cuban Exhibition, The Armas Gallery, Miami, Florida  
1980  Latin American Exhibition, The Armas Gallery, Miami, Florida  
1986  Museo de Arte Moderno La Tertolia, Cali, Colombia  
1987  OutsideCuba, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey  
1989  Salon de Mai, Paris, France  
1990  Salon de Mai, Paris, France Anita Shapolsky, New York, New York  
1991  Salon de Mai, Paris, France  
1992  Anita Shapolsky, New York, New York  

**PUBLIC COLLECTIONS**

The Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.  

**EDITIONS**

**Brunidor IV**

portfolio 1 drypoint by Agustín Fernández, text by Gherasim Luca  
"Sept Slogans Ortophoniques," printed by Lacourière et Frélat,  
**Lettre a un genou**  

**Le Mille Pattes**  

**4 Livre Objets**  
binding by J.P. Miguet, text by Yvon Taillandier and Alain Bosquet, 7 drypoints, 7 collages and two objects for covers et Frélaut, 1946/6, Paris.  
The edition contains 4 books.

**Latin American Portfolio**  

**20 Collages**  
portfolio of 20 collages on serigraphy by Agustín Fernández, Text by R.C. Kenedy “Breakfast in Bed,” printed and edited by Galería Colibri, 1972, San Juan, Puerto Rico.

**Two Graphics**  
edited for the San Juan Bienal, 1976.

**José Martí Portfolio**  

**Master Editions**  

**Icarus**  

**Serigraphy**  
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