

# The shape's the thing

First  
Friday  
abstractions  
at Joan Grona  
Gallery

BY JOHN EWING

**I** hate canvas! It's too soft," protests painter Veronica Fernandez. "I want to deal with things physically, and painting a circle on a surface is not as physical as drilling a hole and sticking something in it." If this sounds like a sculptor lurking behind a painter's smock, there's a good reason; paint is only one of the tools Fernandez uses to explore her



## First Friday: Fernandez

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fascination with the shapes of common objects, from cactus and fishing lures to billboards and wallpaper patterns. These shape ideas evolve into wall-mounted, wooden cutouts that serve as base for a jarring and peculiar interplay of paint, surface textures, and colorful protrusions. Combining incongruous shapes and unorthodox methods, Fernandez' wooden abstractions are steadily building this "painter" a reputation for eye-popping originality.

In her studio off Frio Street, Fernandez is busy with new paintings that will be exhibited at Joan Grona Gallery this First Friday. True to form, hers is no traditional painting studio; scattered throughout are planks of wood, carpenter's tools, and ceramic shapes in bright colors. As an undergraduate painting student at San Antonio College in the early '80s, the uninspired Fernandez leapt at an offer to study sculpture at Kansas City Art Institute. "At that time," she remembers, "S.A.C. didn't have any real sculpture equipment. I went to Kansas City to learn technical skills, how to weld and work with wood. I didn't know if I would like sculpture, and here I am painting again."

In the same way that Jackson Pollock "invented" the drip technique to suit his creative needs, Fernandez synthesizes painting and sculptural practices to give full voice to her ideas. But like the multi-media assemblages of Robert Rauschenberg, the painter's adapted use of non-traditional materials results in works that can be, at first glance, inscrutable. Add to this Fernandez' fierce commitment to the abstraction of everyday objects, and the uninitiated viewer has a real workout in store. Where the artist finds inspiration in the free-form lobes of a "weird little cactus" on her patio, the viewer must contend with shapes extracted from their recognizable context and inserted into an adventurous, purely formal confrontation of shape and color.

Fernandez' formal explorations are her passion and ultimately the only "subject" in her art. "It's not important that anyone recognize the cactus. It's the shape I'm really interested in, and a lot of that other pictorial information can go," says Fernandez, who begins a new work with a special shape in mind. Some shapes come from her sketchbook, others are old and familiar friends. An avid fisherwoman, Fernandez' recent exhibition at Three Walls Space focused on her beloved collection of lures and sea-



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assortment of colors.

Hanging on the walls of her studio, the entire new body of work is in a constant state of flux, as new additions interact with the previous gestures. Progress on one painting can reveal changes appropriate to another. A handful of yellow thumbtacks added to one piece calls into question the surrounding colors. One piece so thoroughly disgusts Fernandez that she plans to sand it down to bare wood and begin again, a frequent decision in her work. Leaving every creative stroke open to scrutiny, Fernandez is at times maddened by her own design. "I don't like to be frustrated by the work. I'd rather leave a piece and come back in five hours, or two days, with fresh eyes and a clear mind. If it looks okay when I walk through the door, I'll leave it alone."

As an adjunct instructor at San Antonio College and Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos, Fernandez keeps in touch with the difficulties students encounter as they acquire the language of visual art. Teaching the color theories of Albers and Itten is particularly tough with required exercises her students "hate and find really boring."

the artist, the exhibition "looked a lot more thematic than it really was," an abstractionist's constant challenge in a left-brain, story-driven world.

Choosing a shape to start with is only the first step. Fernandez then constructs a preliminary wooden form that either expresses the selected shape or provides a counterpoint to a painted shape. Spackling and house paint are built up in multiple layers to create textures and a base for the more costly acrylics. The piece is then vulnerable to radical interventions. Surfaces are scratched and scored, edges are sawed, and holes are drilled for

For her own growth, Fernandez takes long, scenic road trips and skims the latest art magazines. "I cut out pictures of what I really like, but generally I don't pay attention to artists' names," says Fernandez. "I read the write-ups until something makes me mad, then I'll stop right there. I don't like to be told what to think about art." It's a fitting motto for an artist whose creation is guided by trial and error, mind and stimulus, with an inventive logic particular to itself and nothing else. ■

For more information about this exhibit and other First