

Veronica Fernandez

at

by John Ewing

Abstraction, to hear Veronica Fernandez describe it, is more like playing with blocks than with brushes. Starting with pieces of plywood, she begins her paintings on the studio floor, pushing the pieces around until they arrive at shapes that catch her interest. Then, with paint-soaked rags and sandpaper, Fernandez incorporates color and surface texture to create a hybrid of painting and sculpture, challenging the boundaries of both.

“I have a need to interact with the materials on a very physical level,” says the San Antonio College instructor. “Stretching a canvas just doesn’t do it for me.”

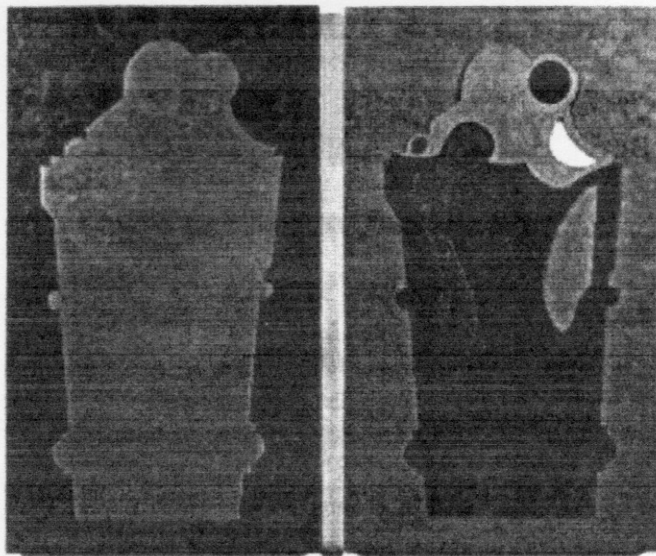
With “Configurations,” a selection of recent work shown at SAC’s Visual Arts and Technology gallery, Fernandez relates this organic approach to principles of Gestalt psychology. Just as the sum of a personality is a synthesis and transformation of contrasting parts, her abstractions of landscapes and found images are configurations of shape, color and dimension.

One series of four paintings refers to geography, specifically those distances furthest north, south, east and west the artist has traveled. These “landscapes” are inspired by Fernandez’s snapshot collection of roadside billboards. She uses this object/plane relationship as a compositional theme, colliding rectangles of layered wood and adding surface details. Fernandez evokes the horizon without being representational, as in the abstracted Michigan sky and frozen lakes of “Fifty Below.”

Beautifully constructed, the interior sides of these wooden components overlap, one edge rising out of

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the picture plane and the other disappearing into it. This dynamic surface tension is further emphasized by contrasting fields of color, which are layered and distressed for depth and complexity, like peeling sur-



faces of abandoned billboards. In one unified whole, there is both a painter’s suggestion of volume in space and a sculptor’s actualization of it.

“I’m interested in the shadows that happen with

“Something in Mom’s Kitchen” Acrylic on wood, 1998 by Veronica Fernandez shown at San Antonio College

these overlapping edges. People aren't expecting something like this to happen in a painting," says Fernandez of the reverse trompe l'oeil. "They think the shadows are painted, but they are not, creating an illusion that isn't an illusion at all."

Her background might explain Fernandez's playful subversiveness. Leaving San Antonio and traditional canvas painting in the early 80's, she studied sculpture at the Kansas City Art Institute. In no time, she was drilling holes into her work to determine "how much of a painting, historically speaking, is actually paint and how much is the physical structure of the object."

Fernandez explores this question with her own brand of "sketches" for larger works. These are her trial runs with materials, construction techniques and composition. Included in the exhibit "One" and "Three" are

small, wooden boxes whose titles refer to the number of ceramic knobs recessed into contrasting or complementary colored surfaces.

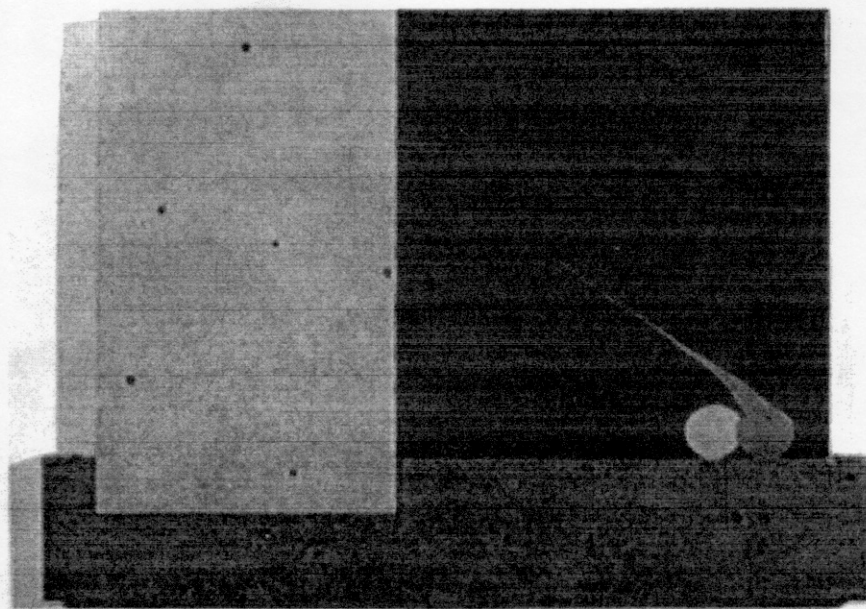
"I think a lot about how deep a two-dimensional field can be," says Fernandez. **"The knobs are inlaid to give us a sense of depth, but it is only a visual depth because we don't actually have access to that inner space."** The surfaces of the sketches are many layers of latex and acrylic which are close in color (e.g. violet and blue). The layers are scratched with sand paper and stained to emphasize the physical na-

ture of the paint and to create translucence, another kind of depth.

"I'm fascinated by these simple relationships," says Fernandez, "what happens when you place one thing next to another and how we perceive things when they are singular or in groups."

Like a primer for abstraction, the transformation of elements through combination is carefully expressed in the diptychs, "Froglike" and "Something in Mom's Kitchen." Taking a photograph of a canon and cutting it in half, Fernandez has broken down a recognizable

image and then built up something else in its place. Playing with pieces of wood and a wildly vibrant palette, she conducted experiments on the work itself. She painted in layers, mixing and matching until the combination of colors and shapes found its own specific harmony. The paintings suggested



road-kill to one viewer and an ice-cream mixer to another, thus the titles.

"It's an intuitive process. Colors change when you put them next to each other and combine them with shapes. I can't at any time separate the elements," says Fernandez, describing her idiosyncratic approach to painting and, perhaps, the greater mission of abstraction. **"One part may be really great, but if it doesn't work with the whole, it's not worth having that one part be great."**