

AGUSTIN FERNANDEZ interview

Many things can be said about Agustín Fernández. One can speak of him as the untiring traveler of the 1950's, as the brilliant graduate of the San Alejandro Academy in Havana, as the young artist who caught Paris by surprise with his one man show at the Furstenberg Gallery, as the close friend of Mapplethorpe, chronicler of both flesh and spirit. We can see him as the father of Clodio, Clea and Sebastian, as the husband of Lia, his faithful companion during sleepless nights, or simply as what he is: one of the greatest Cuban artists of all time, born during the second decade of the twentieth century and who continues to fascinate into the twenty first century with his blending of poetry and metaphysics.

Agustín Fernández moved to Paris in 1959; in 1968 he left France and based himself in Puerto Rico where he lived until 1972, the year in which he settled in New York, the city where he still resides, works...and, of course, creates.

An artist like no other. Violent. Enigmatic. A man with a long history as a painter. His first exhibit in Havana in 1951 launched a long career which continues to thrive. Since, his work has been admired in cities such as Caracas, London, Madrid, Milan, Paris, Sao Paulo, Washington, D.C., and of course, New York. For a number of years now, he has been regularly showcased in the Latin American auctions at both Christie's and Sotheby's in New York.

His work is included in important private and public collections such as The Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Museum of Modern Art of Latin America in Washington, D.C., El Museo de Ponce in Puerto Rico, The Detroit Institute of Arts in Detroit, MI; and

my work than in any other...I would like to be considered a metaphysical painter à la Morandi.

Of Realism and Abstractions

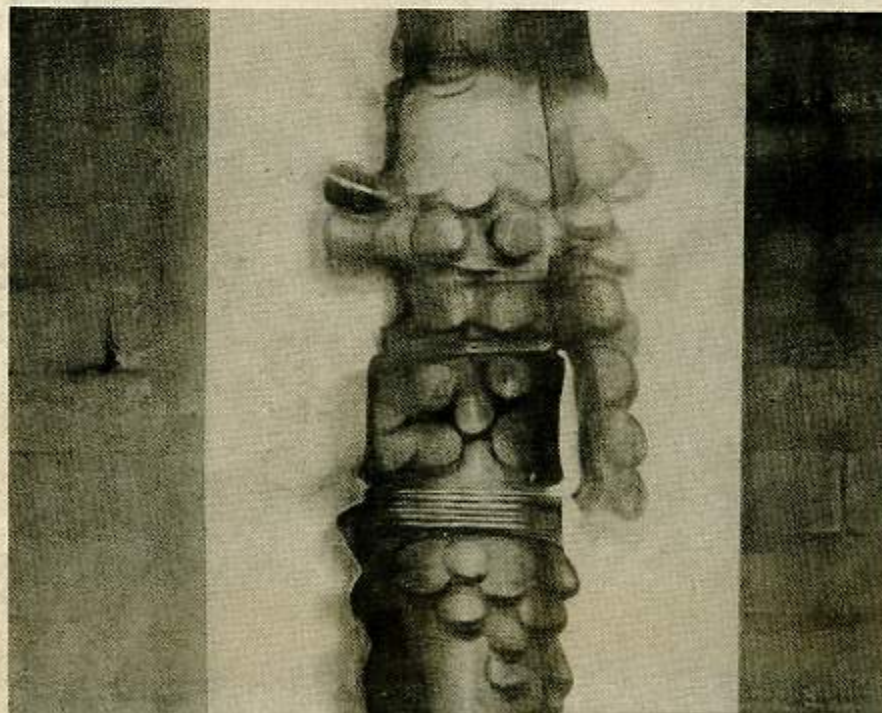
As a painter I use a realist technique, but the emblems I invent are not realist. They are purely imaginative...Painting is a thing of the mind. My realism is not nature, or landscape, or still life but the psychological world...I have never been interested in magical realism.

I am a formal painter. Absolutely formal. My technique has several layers. I superimpose different ways of painting. Similarly I tend to depict one object covering another, discovering it: its essence revealed by analogy...At the San Alejandro academy where I studied I learned about the academic. I took

from this experience what interested me and disregarded a great deal. Certainly my use of black, my sense of space, and the way I paint atmosphere are counter to the academy approach...The absence of anecdote in my work has led some to consider me an abstract painter. Others have proclaimed me classical because of the skin of my painting. Yet others have dubbed me a realist because of my precision. I just consider myself simply a painter. That is what I am.

On Painting, Painters and "Painters"

One must distinguish between what is painting and what is not. What is art and what isn't. There are all type of painters: real-



But let us not say anything else, instead let us allow the creator himself deconstruct his symbols for us, let us have Agustín Fernández, the man, the artist, unveil his demons, his most obsessive hopes. Let us surrender to the artist and his thoughts. Let us surrender. He will guide us.

Of Art and Sex

During my first show the Cuban poet Emilio Ballagas explained to me that art stems from art, it is not created in a vacuum...I am not a realist, I have no interest in replicating nature...In my work there are diluted influences or coincidences with the ideas of other artists. You can find echoes of Arman: the accumulations - but the obsessions are mine. Part of my painting also stems from an interest in baroque painters such as Caravaggio and Velásquez, classical sculpture, Louise Nevelson, and also Mondrian. All things which on the surface are quite removed from my images.

I work in series. Paintings. Drawings. All of varying sizes. Sometimes flirting with the gigantic, but always with the same ideas, the seen, the visual world that surrounds me, the city, everyday objects, human anatomy. I am also influenced by processed art such as the Greek sculpture Athenea polimastea. Other of my ideas are elicited by a phrase such as "obsession as a thought process," a phrase which unleashes in me a series of images, emblems, situations...My emblems hint at body parts, or parts of machinery...I have always painted with an allusion to still lives.

I am not exclusively an erotic painter. I tread that thin line between realism and abstract painting. My work has nothing to do with the pornographic even though it deals with the erotic. For me the erotic is not a fad, it has been with me since the sixties...Yes, in my work one finds sex and punishment, but I represent sex so that it is devoid of its physical or animal nature, so that it becomes its own essence. Caliban looking at himself in the mirror...Sexuality is just one of my themes. But the public seems more interested in this aspect of



Drawing • 1994-1995

merchant. There are artists without work who are nevertheless artists. There are those who have an extensive *oeuvre* but are not artists. Other classifications abound.

Painting is elitist.

It is not for placing above sofas, showing in galleries. It is not for pleasing architects and decorators, or curators and critics. Painting has an esthetic, an abstract, a historic value. It should not be used as something to put above furniture, to improve a wall. It should always seem abandoned, thus warning us that art belongs nowhere: that it only exists in isolation; that to use art is to distort it. Reminding us that if there had been a use for art it would have been to explain it as a concept.

I have survived this long as a painter because I am strict. Had I not had such a strict canon, I would have never painted what I have painted and continue to paint.

The painter is many things. First a wish, second a hand, later an idea, after a will, and finally a selection.

should take themselves, or be taken, seriously. Serious painting is not about fads, nor making little drawing. It is not trying to sell. In this time era should be devoid of a religious vocabulary. Painting is about a commitment between the work and its creator. A need to express in a non-verbal way one's self. This commitment is what separates some painters from others. An artist should not age but rather express growth with the passage of time. An artist should not become stylized. The artist must know how to distinguish between the well and poorly executed. Distinguish in himself between the artist, the decorator, and the potential

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Interview by Gustavo Valdés