



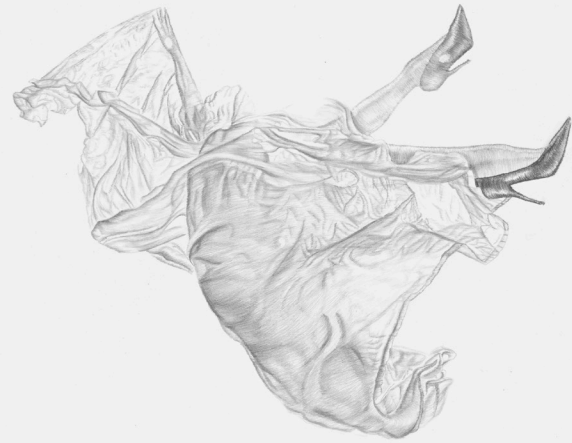
OF BODIES AND BORDERS

ANA TERESA FERNÁNDEZ

Essay by María Elena Ortiz

GRUNWALD GALLERY *of* **ART**

School of Art, Architecture + Design | Indiana University Bloomington



GAUGING GRAVITY 3
(PERFORMANCE DOCUMENTATION), 2018

Graphite on paper

22 1/4 x 30 1/8 inches (56.5 x 76.5 cm)

Once I came close to the experience of drowning. I was 14 bathing with friends in the Atlantic Ocean when I suddenly was caught struggling for breath, while rapid strong waves and divergent fast currents were wrapping my body in isolation. At shore, my friends did not notice that I was having trouble swimming. I wrestled vigorously with the currents, reaching a state of emotional despair and physical exhaustion. I gave my body to the waters, stopped moving; and with patience, I found my way back to my friends at shore. I would describe the experience of almost drowning as an awful yet unique feeling when you undergo several emotions in a matter of seconds. Underwater, your body begins to float upwards in an awkward posture with your mouth opened and your throat contracted. Then, your torso arcs and your limbs start to float backwards, as you begin to exhale small amounts of air, holding onto the last breath. Some of us are privileged to share our close-to-death encounters in bodies of water, but there are others, such as the ones who inspire artist Ana Teresa Fernández' recent body of work, whose drowning experiences often result in massive, silent deaths. *Ana Teresa Fernández: Of Bodies and Borders* is an exhibition showcasing a video, installation and a series of paintings and drawings, dealing with the current refugee crisis in Europe, specifically the drowning deaths of people attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea from Africa or the Middle East. In these works, she addresses a poignant subject—human loss in one of the world's deadliest borders—yet her renditions are exquisitely beautiful, paying homage to the lives lost at sea.

Dedicated to social and political issues, Fernández is a performance artist and painter, who often collaborates with communities to create her projects. She was born in Tampico, Mexico, and at age 11 her family moved to San Diego. After her primary home moved to the US, she would regularly return to visit family in Mexico—culturally living in both countries at the same time. Her world is and continues to be constructed in a liminal space, where culture is rooted in-and-beyond the Mexico and US border. In her artistic practice, Fernández often questions borders, citizenship and immigration, issues close

to her own biography. She explores contested sites, like the Mexico-US border, using several recurring symbols to create elegant compositions that appear both fantastical and real. Influenced by writer Octavio Paz (whose poems had a surrealist undertone), Fernández features bodies of water as frequent characters in her works, where she has attempted to swim wearing stilettos or tame a horse. She is committed to question stereotypical female gender roles; heels and her own body are central motifs in her performances and paintings. Similar to artist Regina Galindo, her practice is indebted to performance art. Her two and three-dimensional works emerge from site-specific performances, which are documented, edited, and result in videos. The paintings are images extracted from the performance, serving as another interpretation of the themes at hand. In these works, she illustrates, paying great attention to color, specific emotions felt throughout the performances in a particular moment. Through her visual metaphors, Fernández's works explore the relationship of life, politics and poetics, inspired by ideas of magical realism, surrealism, and contemporary complex realities.

In this new body of work, Fernández focuses on one of the world's most deadly borderlands, the Mediterranean Sea. Her intentions were to encounter firsthand the site, bringing forth real human issues through art. She travelled to Greece to create a performance in 3 days. On the coast of Greece, she would go into the water for a couple of hours in the mornings and evenings, wearing a black dress, black heels and a 6kl (13.23lb) belt. She covered her body with a white piece of fabric that resembled a burial shroud. Fernández submerged herself underwater attempting to drown, wrestling with the weight, cold waters and ungovernable currents. When she got to her last breath, she would go above water, take a deep breath, and submerge herself again. In this performance, Fernández struggled to survive, placing herself in a similar situation than the immigrants that have drown at sea attempting to reach Europe. Paying homage to the fallen bodies, the artist's gesture alludes the physical, spiritual and psychological moments of migration.



DRAWN BELOW, 2018

HD Video
8 minutes, 37 sec.
Edition 1 of 5 + 2AP

With a cinematic quality, *Drawn Below* (2018) is a video with sound generated from the performance—a mixture of beautiful scenes composed out of a dire situation. Shot underwater, *Drawn Below* is not a documentation of the performance, rather an agglomeration of day and night scenes undersea that capture magnificent compositions in which water, light and darkness are integral characters of the work. The sound of the video is unnerving—generated by the artist and inspired by the sound of human heartbeats when holding breath underwater. At first glance, she appears to be dancing gracefully, making it hard for the audience to realize that she is drowning. Fernández appears like a giant amoeba moving below the surface. The elements appear majestic and blue waters dominate the clips. Through its multiple dream-like scenes, one is seeing the artist under pressure trying to hold her respiration. Her body takes awkward positions, and her limbs move backwards and upwards, depending on the scene. Even though Fernández is an avid swimmer and surfer, this was a test of endurance, maneuvering additional weight and heels underwater. Fernández's shoes are a symbol of women's sexuality and sensuality—an object to seduce men or assert femininity. In Fernández's video they become another tool for human strength. *Drawn Below* presents both the beauty and horrific aspects of water, producing an allegorical effect with political and aesthetic aims. Here, Fernández gives people the opportunity to appreciate the Mediterranean Sea as a place of death and exquisiteness, while not forgetting that this site is a border, embodying the complexities of immigration and citizenship.

This narrative of borders, immigration, and human loss is at the core of Fernández's works. She explores border sites to make connections between issues that might not be visibly related, but share similar dynamics. With her recent works, it is easy to draw parallelisms between the tragic events occurring in the borders of the US and Europe. Similar to the US border, the Mediterranean Sea receives media attention as a site of immigration, where human loss occurs at a significant scale. It is the site of a massive exodus of people fleeing wars, environmental and economic hardships in impoverished boats. In 2015, over 3,000 deaths were reported in the Mediterranean. Like the US, immigration in Europe is a complex issue involving religion, race and racism, and the complexities of what it means to be European. In Europe, immigration heavily involves Africans and Middle Easterners, while the US is experiencing significant immigration from Latin people. For Europe, these current events show "Europe's indebtedness to those it includes and excludes, the refugee crisis likewise throws into sharp relief Europe's reluctance to attend to the question of race, and the myriad racializations and racisms that have formed part of Europe's anatomy." In the US the issue of race and immigration became obvious recently when images of Latin children in detention centers, separated from their families became public. Fernández's recent works allow us to make connections between the events happening in Europe and the US border, making apparent a global problem with immigration and citizenship.

Furthering the themes of her performances, Fernández makes performance-based paintings and drawings. Illustrating Fernández's hyperrealist style, the paintings are labor-intensive, taking months to create. Inspired by color studies, she overlays several layers of paint to create intensity through pigments. *Of Bodies and Borders 1 (performances documentation)* (2018) is an oil on canvas portrayal that reminds you of one scene from the video. To create the painting, Fernández reviewed many images taken from her video materials, selected an image to then start painting inspired by the photo. The painting shows a body underwater covered in a white fabric. The lushness of the fabric invokes a baroque feel to its texture, achieved by Fernández's intense play with color that highlights lights and

darks. At first glance, it is hard to discern the gender of the body, but the person depicted is wearing black heels. Their body is curved downward almost in a fetal position. Even though the image came from the artist's action, the painting could be interpreted as a dead body being discarded thrown into the water. In her graphite drawings, the artist continues to isolate movements of her body underwater. Much like the paintings, these delicate depictions assert Fernández's hand as an impressive draftsman. The drawings and paintings illustrate a specific emotion or condition experienced in the performance. These works allow Fernández to push the performance beyond the real moment when the action took place. In the paintings and drawings, she continues to edit and process the moment when she was struggling to survive in the Mediterranean Sea.

Fernández explores the complex dynamics of border sites to question the social barriers that affect human beings. In *Ana Teresa Fernández: Of Bodies and Borders*, she takes on issues of immigration in Europe by creating a performance and related works dealing with drowning deaths. At the same time, the exhibition deals with the issue of immigration and human loss, which resonates with the current political debates in the US. Known for creating works addressing the complexities of the Mexico-US border, Fernández represents the unsettled issue of immigration, borders, and bodies at a global scale, pointing to how borders are politicized in contemporary Western society. She is interested in using the political to create poetics that can help us connect with situations that seem far away from our realities, but share similar dynamics. Not all of us have come close to the experience of drowning, but through Fernández's works we can try to imagine the feeling of losing our final breath at sea while attempting to escape a horrible situation.

María Elena Ortiz

¹Ismi A. Lamb. "The Gates of Greece: Refugees and Policy Choices." *Mediterranean Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (2016): 67-88. <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed September 11, 2018).

²Agnes Czajka and Jennifer Suchland. "Mapping the Margins of Europe: Race, Migration, and Belonging." *philoSOPHIA* 7, no. 2 (2017): 205-214. <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed September 12, 2018).



DRAWN BELOW, 2018

HD Video
8 minutes, 37 sec.
Edition 1 of 5 + 2AP

ANA TERESA FERNÁNDEZ

Born in 1981 in Tampico, Mexico, Ana Teresa Fernández lives and works in San Francisco. She explores the politics of intersectionality through time-based actions and social gestures, which she translates into masterful oil paintings, drawings, videos, and installations. Performance becomes a tool for investigation as strong feminist undercurrents flow together with postcolonial rhetoric. Fernández also examines global sociopolitical crises relating to immigration policies and its effects on marginalized populations. Through her work, the artist illuminates the psychological, physical, and sociopolitical barriers that define gender, race, and class in Western society.

Fernández has exhibited at the Denver Art Museum (Denver, Colorado); Nevada Museum of Art (Reno, Nevada); Arizona State University Art Museum (Phoenix, Arizona); Grunwald Gallery at Indiana University (Bloomington, Indiana); Humboldt State University (Eureka, California); Tijuana Biennial (Tijuana, Mexico); Snite Museum of Art at Notre Dame University (Notre Dame, Indiana); Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (San Francisco, California); and Oakland Museum of California (Oakland, California). Her work has been collected by institutions such as the Denver Art Museum, Nevada Museum of Art, and KADIST Art Foundation.

The Headlands Center for the Arts granted Fernández the Tournesol Award in 2008. Her films have been screened at festivals internationally, including but not limited to the Madrid International Film Festival (Madrid, Spain); Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival (Clermont-Ferrand, France); Internationalen Frauenfilmfestival (Dortmund, Germany); Female Eye Film Festival (Toronto, Canada); San Diego Latino Film Festival (San Diego, California); and Honolulu Film Festival (Honolulu, Hawaii).