

Christina Fernandez

MULTIPLE EXPOSURES

CURATED BY

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2022

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ARTS

UCLA
CHICANO STUDIES RESEARCH CENTER

CONTENTS

Foreword | 11
Sheila Bergman and Chon A. Noriega

Multiple Exposures | 13
Joanna Szupinska

A View from Here: An Introduction | 17
Rebecca Epstein

The Political Agency of the Self and the Other

Christina Fernandez's Photography, 1988–1998 | 25

Cecilia Fajardo-Hill

PLATES

MARÍA'S GREAT EXPEDITION

1995–1996 | 47

Embodying What Has Been Written Out of History

María's Great Expedition, 1995–1996 | 63

Chon A. Noriega

PLATES

UNTITLED MULTIPLE EXPOSURES

1999 | 75

This Troubled Inheritance

Untitled Multiple Exposures, 1999 | 89

Joanna Szupinska

PLATES

MANUELA S-T-I-T-C-H-E-D

1996–2000 | 99

Outside In, Inside Out

Christina Fernandez's Alternating Points of View | 111

Sally Stein

PLATES

LAVANDERIA

2002–2003 | 123

Nightcleaners Revisited

Lavanderia, 2002–2003 | 135

Julian Myers

PLATES

SERENO

2006–2010 | 149

PLATE

AMERICAN TRAILER

2018 | 165

Something Lost, Missing, or Unattainable

In the Landscapes of Crisis with Christina Fernandez | 169

Roberto Tejada

PLATES

VIEW FROM HERE

2016–2018 | 185

Composite

Three Conversations with Christina Fernandez | 199

Roberto Tejada, Susanna V. Temkin, and Joanna Szupinska

Exhibition Checklist | 220

Lenders to the Exhibition | 223

Acknowledgments | 224

About the Artist | 226

Education

Exhibition history

Bibliography | 230

Contributors | 232

Illustration Credits | 234

Index | 235

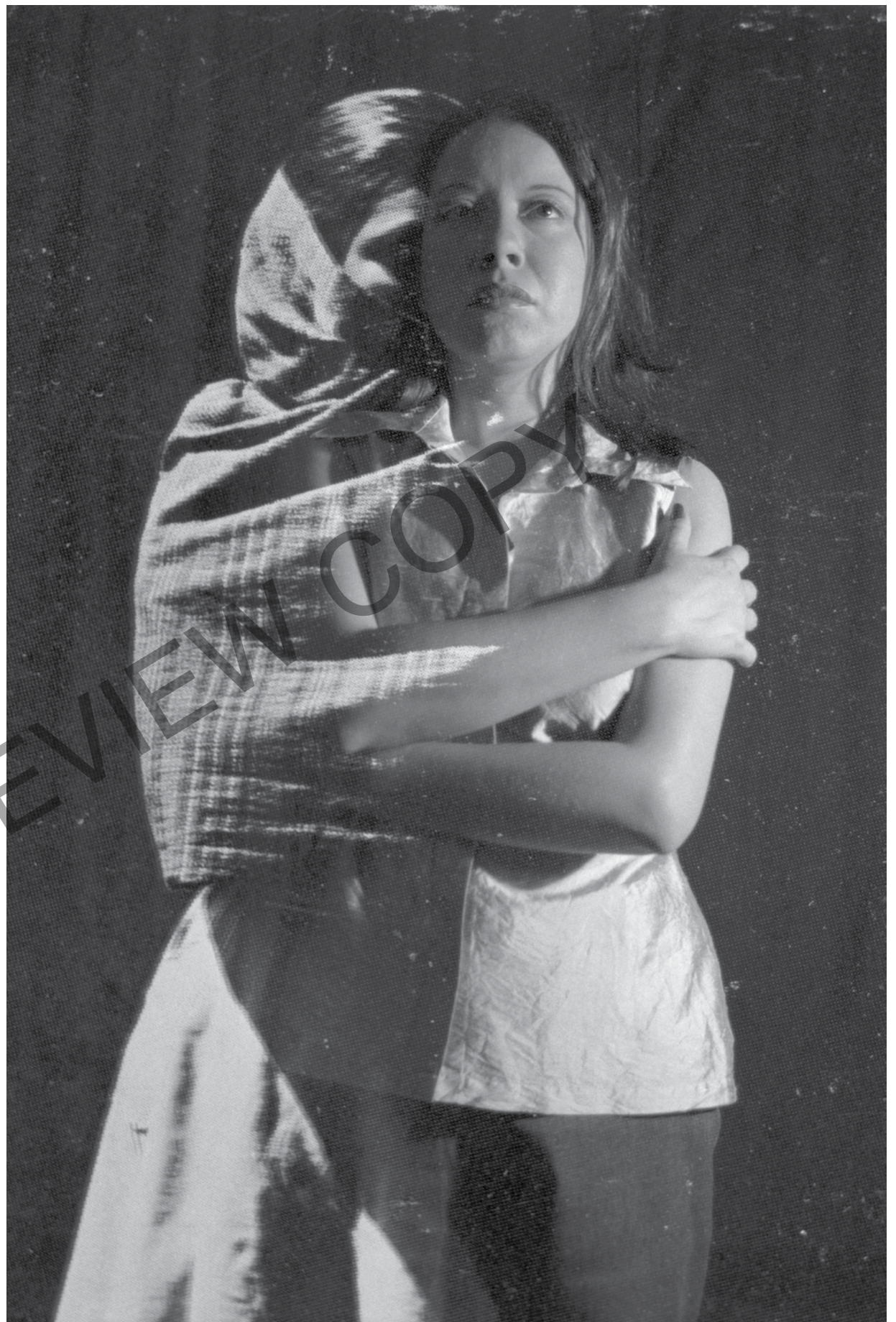


PLATE 11
Christina Fernandez
Untitled Multiple
Exposure #4 (Bravo), 1999
Archival pigment print
21 × 14¹/₄ inches
Edition of 6 + 2 AP

This Troubled Inheritance

Untitled Multiple Exposures, 1999

JOANNA SZUPINSKA

Two women stand, caught in an embrace (PLATE 11). Lit from opposite sides, one is wrapped tightly in a striped textile while the other, dressed in a collared sleeveless top, bares her arms. A protective gesture on one side, a pose of defiance on the other. One wears pants while the other has donned a full skirt that undulates in picturesque waves. One face is made up with eyeliner and glossy full lips, with perfect narrow eyebrows accentuating the freedom of tousled, highlighted, shoulder-length hair. The other is cast in dark shadow, with thick black hair gleaming, neatly pulled back to disappear beneath the shawl. We might continue to enumerate the differences between these women, united by the image but separated by time and space. But what holds our attention, too, are their remarkable similarities. They are women, first of all. Women, photographed. Mature, yet youthful. Each strong in her way.

The photograph is part of a series of eight made by Christina Fernandez in 1999. In each work, the artist has inserted the image of her own body into relation with historical images of Indigenous women in Mexico. Making two exposures on each negative, she first re-photographed works by modernist masters from art books, then dressed, posed, and lit herself in such a way that

Christina Fernandez
Untitled Multiple Exposure #4 (Bravo)
 (detail), 1999

her self-portraits, made in a lighting studio, would relate to her source material.¹ These double exposures include appropriations of images by the photojournalist Nacho López, the cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa, the Italian photographer and Communist activist Tina Modotti, and the “father” of Mexican modernist photography, Manuel Álvarez Bravo. Taking them in, the viewer is thrust from the present into the past, and back again.

The relations staged by the photographs in the series *Untitled Multiple Exposures* (1999) are not always those of similarity or comfort. They encompass both visual echoes and misalignments, and at times create or emphasize tensions between the two pictured women. *Untitled Multiple Exposure #6 (López)*, for example, shows the artist seemingly cradling the historical figure in her arms in a gesture of sympathy, as if inhabiting real shared space (PLATE 13). *Untitled Multiple Exposure #3 (López)*, by contrast, shows the artist miming the gesture of the other woman (PLATE 10). The repetition of poses calls our attention to tactile touch and self-comfort, prompting us to recall the feeling of embracing a loved one, or of clutching one’s own wrist. But the misalignment between the bodies, and a disconcerting shift in scale, suggests a relationship that is almost too close and even uncanny—as if Fernandez were a ghost possessing her counterpart, or vice versa. In one or two cases, as in *Untitled Multiple Exposure #7 (Bravo)*, this double image veers close to monstrosity (PLATE 14).

This uncanny quality is the result of the photographs' deft incorporation of multiple distances and disparities into single images. The photographic conundrum of who is pictured, and who is doing the picturing, is therefore of central concern. In addition to the temporal gap between source image and artistic intervention, the photographs navigate disparities of gender, ethnicity, social class, and more. The modernist photographers picture Indigenous women; Fernandez pictures herself. Considering the history of the photographers from whom she borrows produces further complication: not figured bodily, they are nevertheless present. It is significant to the meaning of the series, therefore, that the photographers Fernandez references are Mexican men, save Modotti, who as a European was also working at a determinate remove from her subjects. These distances of gender and nationality are folded into each work, producing a sort of triangular relationship between the modernist photographer, the Indigenous subject, and Fernandez. Each work in *Untitled Multiple Exposures* proposes a relationship between two (pictured) figures while also posing a relationship between two photographers. Fernandez looks at herself, looks at other women, looks at other photographers looking at women, looks at herself looking at pictures of women. We look, and we look at the photographers looking. The hall of mirrors produces ever more views.

This essay considers Fernandez's motivations for making this body of work and the significance of adopting the postmodern practice of re-photography. Next, I elaborate the freighted meaning of Álvarez Bravo's photographs, which count for three of the series' eight appropriations, considering both their imbrication in Mexican nationalism when they were made and their accrued meaning over time for the Chicano art movement. Fernandez's engagement with the modernists bears the weight both of an earlier moment in Mexican art history and of Chicano art that would embrace Mexican nationalist symbols beginning in the 1960s. *Untitled Multiple Exposures* therefore demands that these legacies be parsed. Throughout, we must keep in mind Fernandez's complex response to these practices through the incursion of self-portraiture. The essay concludes with a reflection on the matter of inheritance as Fernandez refigured it in a recent series of portraits devoted to her students.

CLOSENESS AND DISTANCE

Untitled Multiple Exposures was conceived in the wake of the artist's first visit to Mexico. "In the late 1990s I traveled to Oaxaca," recalls Fernandez. "I witnessed deeply held racism towards the Indigenous there." This racism, she felt, contrasted strongly with her "upbringing as a Chicana," which had encouraged a "profound identification with the Indigenous of Mexico." This experience, she writes, "amplified my awareness of race and class and the complexities of identity."² Fernandez reflected on the complicated nature of her sympathy for Indigenous women: "I felt a closeness to them, yet there's this huge societal and cultural gap between us. I had to examine why I felt I knew them."³

Fernandez turned to photography to work through her questions. How were these women, with whom she had identified so strongly, portrayed in the art historical canon? Upon her return to Los Angeles, she headed to the arts libraries at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), two schools where she had studied, pulling books with photographs by Álvarez Bravo, Figueroa, López, and Modotti from the stacks. Using a copy stand and a 35mm camera, Fernandez scrutinized the photographs she found by, simply, re-photographing them. She focused selectively on the historical images, picking out the Indigenous female figures. Orienting her camera vertically to carefully frame these women's faces, she created portraits of subjects who had previously been part of larger scenes. Compare, for example, the original photograph by cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa to Fernandez's selection in *Untitled Multiple Exposure #1 (Figueroa)* (FIGS. 1, 2). Here Fernandez chose one of the figures in Figueroa's foreground, eliminating the focus of his original composition. Using a macro close-up filter, her photograph articulates the half-tone pattern of the book's print reproduction—as in the texture made visible on the face of Bravo's model in *Untitled Multiple Exposure #2 (Bravo)*—pointedly marking out the mediated source of the image (FIGS. 3, 4).

Fernandez's education in the era of postmodernism and her familiarity with the working methods of the so-called Pictures generation inform her strategy. While her mid-1990s work

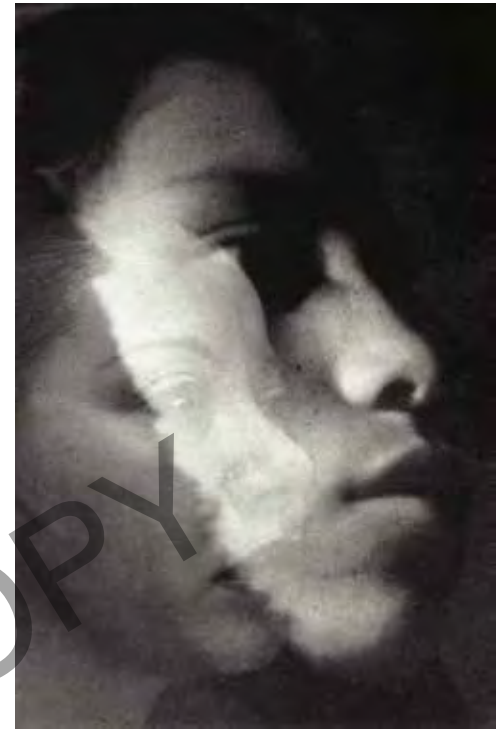


FIG. 1
Gabriel Figueroa Mateos
Velorio, 2020
 Digital image scanned from a test strip for the film *Río Escondido*
 (directed by Emilio Fernández, cinematography by Gabriel Figueroa), 1947

FIG. 3
Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *Muchacha viendo pájaros*
 (*Girl Looking at Birds*), 1931
 Gelatin silver print
 Approximately 6½ × 9¾ inches

FIG. 2
Christina Fernandez, *Untitled Multiple Exposure #1 (Figueroa)*, 1999
 From the series *Untitled Multiple Exposures*
 Archival pigment print | 21 × 14¼ inches
 Edition of 6 + 2 AP

FIG. 4
Christina Fernandez, *Untitled Multiple Exposure #2 (Bravo)*, 1999
 From the series *Untitled Multiple Exposures*
 Archival pigment print | 21 × 14¼ inches
 Edition of 6 + 2 AP



FIG. 5
Walker Evans
Alabama Cotton Tenant Farmer Wife, 1936
Gelatin silver print | Approximately $9\frac{1}{2} \times 7\frac{1}{2}$ inches

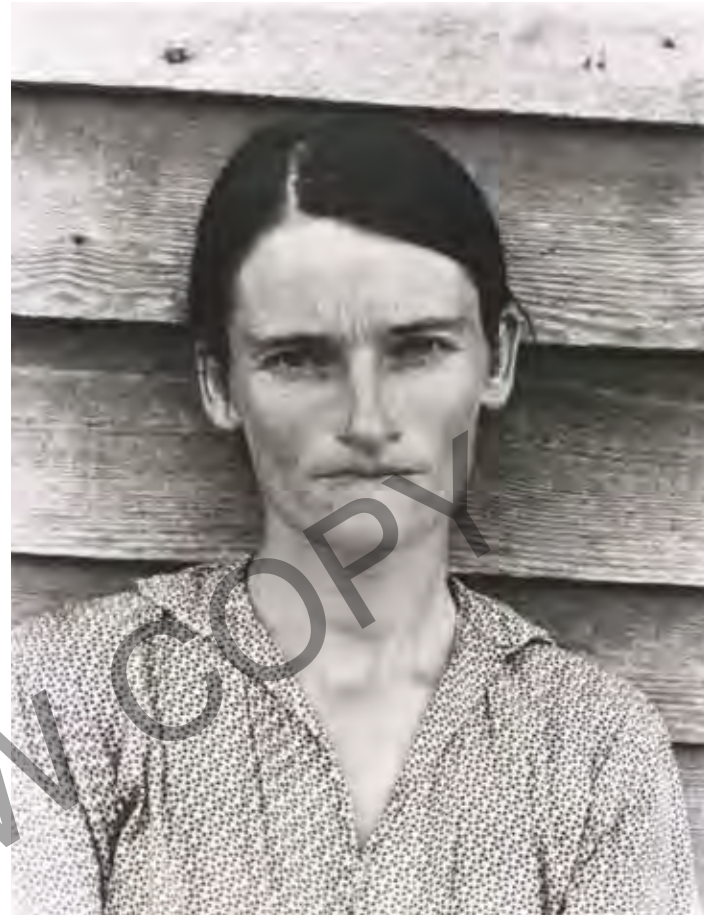


FIG. 6
Sherrie Levine
After Walker Evans: 4, 1981
Gelatin silver print | $5\frac{1}{16} \times 3\frac{7}{8}$ inches | Edition of 10

has sometimes been associated with that of Cindy Sherman, a more productive comparison in the case of *Untitled Multiple Exposures* is with the work of Sherrie Levine, who likewise reshot classic pictures from books and prints.⁴ *After Walker Evans: 4* (1981) is a signal example. Levine's photograph scrutinizes Walker Evans's Depression-era photograph *Alabama Cotton Tenant Farmer Wife* (1936), a portrait of Allie Mae Burroughs, a twenty-seven-year-old sharecropper and mother of four (FIGS. 5, 6). Commissioned by the Farm Security Administration, Evans nevertheless conceived of his practice as "non-artistic and non-commercial." Instead, he sought to find his own path, claiming, "I was a maverick outsider."⁵ But this attitude and the ambiguity around the status of documentary photography as art were quickly laid to rest when the Museum of Modern Art mounted a solo exhibition of his work in 1938.⁶

Decades later, by engaging the modernist myth of the "maverick" photographer, Levine turned to a photograph that decidedly had attained the status of "cultural myth."⁷ Yet, in her re-photography, Levine also mediated a photograph of a real person, prompting some of the same questions asked by Fernandez. Who is doing the looking here? What do we—viewers historically distant from Allie Mae Burroughs, and consumers of decades of received ideas about poverty and the Dust Bowl and so on—see when we look at this woman's face? Significantly, Levine's work, like Fernandez's, attends to "subjects that exist outside the dominant order," who are "externalized" as other.⁸ But does Evans's photograph, via Levine's version of it, stimulate a desire to know Allie Mae Burroughs, to empathize with her? What is at stake in this yearning? Alternately, can we access Burroughs only by way of the great photographer who took her picture? Along these lines, does

Álvarez Bravo's photograph, via Fernandez's version, stimulate a desire to know the Indigenous woman pictured? Or has myth encased her, rendered her merely an image—one that can only be accessed via the persona of the photographer who made it?

The limits of this comparison between *Untitled Multiple Exposures* and *After Walker Evans* quickly become clear. Levine's photographs foreswore the editorial impulse that Fernandez later embraced; Levine gulped down Evans's whole picture, while Fernandez engaged in a complex act of reorientation and salvage. Then, too, we must account for Fernandez's second step, of imposing her own mismatched image. Levine held herself at a studied distance, a distance Fernandez collapses to dizzying effect. Nevertheless, the comparison is instructive. It points out that we see iconic pictures through a double-voiced image: both the subject figure and the well-known photographer. It indicates the layer of "cultural myth" through which we must peer. And, as with Levine, the viewer's desire and empathy are at stake in Fernandez's photographs, in spite of all the mediations. So what is it, exactly, that we want from the pictures that Álvarez Bravo produced?

AFTER THE FATHER

Fernandez's photographic re-situation of iconic images requires us to pry open the box of history and parse its messy contents—not just to consider them as mediated but to assess how they have been mediated. In doing so, we must come to terms with the role that the racialized Indigenous woman was called to play in the modernist movement in Mexico, and consider how those inscriptions were grasped and understood ideologically over time.

Manuel Álvarez Bravo was born in 1902 in the middle of the Porfiriato, the long dictatorship that modernized Mexico under the edict of a "civilizing" Europeanism.⁹ He began photographing as a teenager in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution. In contrast with the previous regime, the 1917 Constitution embraced a Mexican identity based on notions of *indigenismo* and José Vasconcelos's *raza cósmica*. Today's visual clichés of Mexicanness were born in this moment: ritualistic traditions,

cemeteries, and cacti developed as motifs aligning with the new concept of the nation. The Indigenous figure, too, became a potent political symbol at this time, and the "pure" Indigenous woman emerged as a trope of desirability.¹⁰ Thus when Fernandez looked for the Indigenous female figure in Mexican modernist photography, she found her, unnamed, sometimes at the edges of photographs, celebrated but also flattened into a symbol of authenticity and innocence.

Álvarez Bravo's work participated directly in this dynamic, often by way of his attention to textiles like the rebozo, the traditional Mexican shawl that came to symbolize nationhood and revolutionary idealism.¹¹ The rebozo was likewise taken up by Frida Kahlo, who adopted traditional Tehuana dress of Oaxaca to assert "both a feminist and an anti-colonialist position."¹² Adopted by high fashion, transformed in fine silks for the politically aligned bourgeoisie, traditional dress became an affirmation of Mexicanness, and references to it were employed as part of a "symbolic use of timeless Mexican traditions . . . set in a Manichean opposition to modernization."¹³

In *Panteón, visitación (Visit to the Cemetery)* (1965), the source image for Fernandez's *Untitled Multiple Exposure #4 (Bravo)*, a young woman stands against a wall in one of Álvarez Bravo's signature compositional modes, her face turned away from the sun's blinding rays (FIGS. 7, 8). Beside her, a freshly filled grave rises in a mound from the earth beneath newly laid flowers and three tall, lit candles. The woman stands beside a wooden cross at another grave, this one overgrown with shrubs. The sun beats down, but she wraps herself tightly, her rebozo covering her arms and mouth. Art historian Roberto Tejada has argued that, in images like this one, "Álvarez Bravo made visible the pressure wedged between bourgeois pathology and its idealization of the working classes."¹⁴ His photographs, Tejada claims, scrutinize *indigenismo* as a "bourgeois pathology" that would simply invert prerevolutionary social relations rather than undo or complicate them. By this thinking, Álvarez Bravo's images go beyond simple ethnography or valorization of the Indigenous figure.

Fernandez's intervention exacerbates any critique implicit in the original image even further. In *Untitled Multiple Exposure #4 (Bravo)*, she has omitted the cemetery and heightened the



contrast between black and white. Only the woman's partially illuminated side remains. Fernandez's presence amplifies the visible disparity between the two women. She chose her outfit carefully, knowing that a light-colored top and bare arm would make her torso stand out in the previously unexposed portion of the negative, while her dark pants would recede into the darkness of the woman's skirt. Working from a thumbnail sketch noting how she had cropped Álvarez Bravo's image, she aligned her body with that of his subject. She posed herself and variably used a timer or a bulb shutter release that she stepped on to make the exposures.

On her contact sheets, we can discern multiple attempts made with each source image (FIGS. 9, 10). To achieve #4, she angles her face up and down, repositioning her arms. She stands alternately beside and behind the figure, and in one short sequence of three frames, mistakes the orientation of her film. Sometimes she seems caught off guard by the timer. Among the twenty-eight attempts, there is one frame in which she merges with Álvarez Bravo's woman in a perfect embrace. The result is a contemporary self-portrait of an artist, unveiled to ensure visibility, haunted by the image of a woman wrapped in a symbol of Mexican nationalism.

Such fraught repositioning is not just a matter of a contemporary artist's skepticism toward a modernist master. Nor is it merely a personalization—through the addition of self-portraiture—of the postmodern tactic of re-photography. It is further complicated by the artist's formation within the Chicano movement, which embraced pre-Columbian themes and neo-indigenism, either directly or by way of the Mexican nationalism of Álvarez Bravo's moment.¹⁵ Indeed, components of photographs by Álvarez Bravo, alongside others from murals and paintings by artists like Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, circulated in Chicano art as quotations, as "assertion[s] of difference and of the right of self-determination."¹⁶ *Untitled Multiple Exposures* therefore presents its critique of Mexican modernism, as it were, *by way of Chicanismo*.¹⁷ As viewers, we are left to grapple with Fernandez's complex insertion of California into Mexico, Mexican American into Mexican, and vice versa. In this way she troubles her own presumptions, projections, and desires—even as she enacts them.



FIG. 7 [OPPOSITE LEFT]
Manuel Álvarez Bravo
Panteón, visitación (Visit to the Cemetery), 1965
 Gelatin silver print
 Approximately 6³/₄ × 9¹/₂ inches

FIG. 8 [OPPOSITE RIGHT]
Christina Fernandez
Untitled Multiple Exposure #4 (Bravo), 1999
 From the series *Untitled Multiple Exposures*
 Archival pigment print
 21 × 14¹/₄ inches
 Edition of 6 + 2 AP

FIG. 9
Christina Fernandez
 Contact sheet, *Untitled Multiple Exposures* series, 1999
 Gelatin silver print
 8 × 10 inches



FIG. 10
Christina Fernandez
 Contact sheet, Untitled Multiple
 Exposures series, 1999
 Gelatin silver print
 8 x 10 inches

FIG. 11 [OPPOSITE]
Christina Fernandez
Alice, 2017
 From the series reflect/project(ion)
 Photo print on canvas
 35 x 23 inches
 Edition of 3 + 1 AP

CODA: MOTHER PORTRAITURE

Fernandez's navigation of these troubled inheritances poses intractable questions. What do we owe the past? What is real about our heritage and what is only a projection? What can be retrieved and what, through layers of mediation and namelessness, is irretrievably lost? Who are "we" in the midst of gender, indigeneity, and the unevenness of history? So, too, it is fascinating to see how Fernandez navigates the situation in reverse.

Fernandez has led the photography program at Cerritos College in Norwalk, California, for two decades. A recent body of work, the series titled *reflect/project(ion)*, meditates on education, mentorship, and the future—and, indeed, on what it means to (want to) become an artist. These portraits, made in 2017, show former students, posed within the college's institutional setting, with photographs they have made of their camera equipment superimposed on their bodies using a projector. Directed by their instructor, they participate in the making of her work in a sophisticated game of power relations. Whereas we might imagine that Fernandez approached Álvarez Bravo as a student scrutinizing a master, now she must inhabit the difficult position of teacher. What legacy will she leave these students, and how will they grapple with it? How can Fernandez teach and mold, yet also empower them? In a complex set of maneuvers that engage the quasi-familial relations of higher education mentorship, she invites their collaboration in creating these portraits, making space for their own agency while still circumscribing them within the frame of her own project.

In one photograph from the series, *Alice*, the subject leans against a cabinet (FIG. 11). We encounter her through a doorway and standing beside a wicket—thresholds and openings that evoke stages of life and the passage of time. Alice's photograph of her camera spans the walls in front of and behind her; a hand grasping a shutter release cable is distorted by the corner of the architecture. By projecting the image onto the scene, Fernandez creates dramatic perspectival lines in the foreground and diffused abstract forms in the background, confusing real space and flattening the picture plane. Meanwhile the subject's awkwardly placed feet and nervous hands—gestures that recall the clasped hands of *Untitled Multiple Exposure*

#3 (*López*)—fall into shadow. Thus we witness photography's unique ability to pull a tangible subject closer to the viewer even as it fixes that subject and submits her to the gaze, the paradoxical effect of simultaneous closeness and distance.



NOTES

An early version of this essay was presented as part of Charlene Villaseñor Black's graduate seminar on contemporary Mexican, Chicana, and Latinx art at UCLA in March 2020. I am indebted to the professor and to all the seminar participants for their thoughtful responses, which helped shape the present version.

1 My understanding of the artist's motivations and working methods is based on ongoing conversations and correspondence with her, starting in mid-2019.

2 Christina Fernandez, "Untitled Multiple Exposures," undated artist statement, provided by the artist in 2020.

3 Christina Fernandez, in conversation with Roberto Tejada, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, April 22, 2007, from transcript of audio recording.

4 Jennifer A. González discusses Fernandez's *María's Great Expedition* (1995–96) in relation to Sherman's Untitled Film Stills series (1977–80) in "Negotiated Frontiers: Contemporary Chicano Photography," in *From the West: Chicano Narrative Photography*, ed. Chon Noriega (San Francisco: Mexican Museum, 1995), 17–22.

5 Walker Evans, as quoted in Alan Trachtenberg, "A Book Nearly Anonymous," in *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 237.

6 Trachtenberg, "A Book Nearly Anonymous," 238–39.

7 This account relies on Douglas Crimp's early interpretation of these photographs. Douglas Crimp, "Pictures" (1979), in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 185.

8 Craig Owens, "Sherrie Levine at A&M Artworks" (1982), in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 115.

9 Pursuing a policy of "order and progress," General Porfirio Díaz served seven terms as president of Mexico (1877–80, 1884–1911, altogether thirty-one years) until the Mexican Revolution (1910–20) forced him into exile.

10 Art historian Adriana Zavala writes that Indigenous women became "raced exemplars of the archetype of 'pure' womanhood." Thus, "in the postrevolutionary period," we witness "the transformation of 'woman' as desire into the trope of the desirable Indian woman." Adriana Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition: Women, Gender, and Representation in Mexican Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).

11 Álvarez Bravo's ongoing attention to a variety of fabrics—wraps, sheets, bandages—amounts to a decades-long investigation of the concealed and the revealed. Roberto Tejada proposes the photographic significance of this attention in his analysis of a photograph of a partially nude model: "by framing the figure of a woman with various drapes that cover and disclose, Álvarez Bravo disputes the idea of a photograph as 'reality unveiled,' affirming instead the fabricated nature of appearances." In this way, the trope of the veiled figure has as much to do with the photographic medium as it does with sexuality and desire. Roberto Tejada, "Metropolitan Matters: Álvarez Bravo's Mexico City," in *National Camera: Photography and Mexico's Image Environment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 121.

12 Oriana Baddeley, "'Her Dress Hangs Here': De-frocking the Kahlo Cult," *Oxford Art Journal* 14, no. 1 (1991): 13. Baddeley, an art historian, argues that the "colonised body which Kahlo clothed in revolutionary idealism" functioned as a "symbol of nationhood" (16).

13 Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 234.

14 Tejada, "Metropolitan Matters," 133.

15 For an art historical account of the evolving uses of Mexican nationalist symbols in Chicano and post-Chicano art, see Víctor Zamudio-Taylor, "Inventing Tradition, Negotiating Modernism: Chicano/a Art and the Pre-Columbian Past," in *Chicano and Chicana Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Jennifer A. González, C. Ondine Chavoya, Chon Noriega, and Terezita Romo (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 123–34.

16 *Ibid.*, 127. Alternately, Chicano artists turned to Mexico to draw connections with "parallel human struggles around the globe." Cary Cordova, "The Third World Strike and the Globalization of Chicano Art," in *The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 112. See, for instance, Bay Area artist Rupert García's pastel-drawing poster design *Assassination of a Striking Mexican Worker* (1979), based on Manuel Álvarez Bravo's photograph *Striking Worker, Assassinated* (1934). By García's hand, the photograph's specificity is transformed into a universalist portrayal of capitalist brutality aimed at drawing attention to the plight of the downtrodden of the world.

17 For a discussion on the distinctly Chicano (and "after Chicano") negotiation of modernism, with special attention to the writings of Harry Gamboa Jr. and Rupert García, see Chon A. Noriega, "The Orphans of Modernism," in *Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement*, ed. Rita Gonzalez, Howard N. Fox, and Chon A. Noriega (Berkeley: University of California Press; Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2008), 16–45.