

Artbound Arts & Culture

By Oliva Wolf

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Long Overdue: L.A. Photographer Christina Fernandez Finds Her Time Under the Sun



Christina Fernandez, Contact sheet, Untitled Multiple Exposures series, 1999. | Courtesy of Christina Fernandez and Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles

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<https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/christina-fernandezs-three-exhibitions?fbclid=IwAR2q4EYy3SuJRkuN4C7HI4BjiDuhtea1YxiiUekmMeuYoqFNDVssYcR2r8o>

In a black and white photograph, two female bodies seem to merge. One, a woman from the past shrouded in a patterned cloth; the other, a modern woman whose arms wrap around herself protectively. The women come from different eras, but seeing them juxtaposed, suggests a more complex story of past and present. The photograph is part of Los Angeles-based photographer Cristina Fernandez's "Untitled Multiple Exposures" (1999) series, which uses the double exposure technique to combine old portraits of Indigenous women by modernist photographers in Mexico with self-portraits by Fernandez. Like the photograph, Fernandez's work is best understood in layers. "Multiple exposure is a photography technique, but it's also, you know, multiple sides of this complex artist," says Joanna Szupinska, a curator at the California Museum of Photography.



Christina Fernandez, Untitled Multiple Exposure #4 (Bravo), 1999 from the series "Untitled Multiple Exposures." | Courtesy of the Christina Fernandez and Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles

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Fernandez's series, "Untitled Multiple Exposures" (1999), was the inspiration for the title of her exhibition at the California Museum of Photography at UCR Arts, which features 30 years of the photographer's work. "**Christina Fernandez: Multiple Exposures**" runs through February 5. In addition, two other exhibits curated by Fernandez open this summer: "**Tierra Entre Medio**," will be located adjacent to "Multiple Exposures" in the Culver Arts building and "**Christina Fernandez: Under the Sun**" is currently open at Pomona College's Benton Museum. A monograph will also be published in collaboration between UCR Arts and UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center.

While Fernandez's work has finally gotten the attention it deserves, her photographs had already been presented in group shows at LACMA, MoMA and the Smithsonian. In L.A., Fernandez is represented by **Gallery Luisotti**, where she maintains a group of loyal collectors. Her career has been steadfast yet quiet, eluding extensive solo reviews.

According to scholars like Adriana Zavala and Arlene Davila, Fernandez's situation is unfortunately too common, Chicana artists have historically been underrepresented in museum exhibitions. Recently, however, **initiatives launched by the Getty and US Latinx Art Forum** have been trying to improve this. "By offering an in-depth look into a single artist's practice, I hope that our show will contribute a specific view to a much bigger trajectory of what we know as American art," says Szupinska.

Fernandez's first photographs were taken on a 35 mm film camera that her father gave her as a child. She played around with the camera a few times and — unsatisfied with the results — shelved it. Years later as an art major at UCLA, Fernandez was required to take a photography class. "I actually tried to get out of it, but my counselor said it was important," says Fernandez, whose focus was on painting, drawing and printmaking.



Christina Fernandez, "Juan," 2017. From the series "reflect/project(ion)." | Courtesy of Christina Fernandez and Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles

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Forced to take the class, Fernandez dug out her old 35 mm camera and was quickly hooked. "I loved the immediacy of photography and the ability to create layered images," she says. In 1989, Fernandez accomplished this by cutting up the negatives, layering and taping them together and then printing the final image. Although she was nearing the end of her program, Fernandez restructured her last year in school to focus on photography, the medium she would use for the rest of her career.

Szupinska had been following Fernandez's work for 20 years by the time she proposed a collaboration. "I felt very lucky when I realized she hadn't done a big show and that she said yes to us." The two have been working on the show for the last three years, which Szupinska likens to a marriage. "I'm so glad we embarked on it together," she says. "I've learned so much about her way of thinking and seeing."

The layout of her survey at the California Museum of Photography is mostly chronological starting with "María's Great Expedition" (1995-96), a series created during Fernandez's undergraduate years at UCLA that depicts Fernandez as her great-grandmother during her migration from Mexico to California. Towards the end is "American Trailer" (2018), a composited photograph that depicts the deterioration of a trailer in Riverside over several months.



Christina Fernandez, "American Trailer," 2018 | Courtesy of Christina Fernandez and Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles

Walking through the exhibit, viewers are invited to discover the threads that tie Fernandez's work together. She is influenced by postmodernism, often making use of collage, textual elements and appropriation. Social and political themes appear throughout, whether they're about Fernandez's own Chicana heritage, migrant workers or climate change. A daughter of activists, who ran a co-op and were involved in the Chicano Movement through United Farm Workers, Fernandez credits her family as a primary influence on her as a person and an artist.

"I loved my upbringing," Fernandez says. "There was always the possibility for change and, you know, things getting better."

At the heart of the show, physically and conceptually, are two series featuring different forms of layering. The first, "Lavanderia" (2002), features urban landscapes of laundromats in East Los Angeles and is Fernandez's most well-known project. A real-life layering effect begins with the graffiti painted over a window through which the viewer can see the obscured figures inside the laundromat, highlighting the ever-present distance that separates the subject from the photographer.

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1/3 Christina Fernandez, "Lavanderia #1," 2002. From the series "Lavanderia." | Courtesy of Christina Fernandez and Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles



The second, "Untitled Multiple Exposures" (1999) is where Fernandez takes the point of view of both the photographer observing the Indigenous women and the subject as she positions the image of her own body in relation to these women.

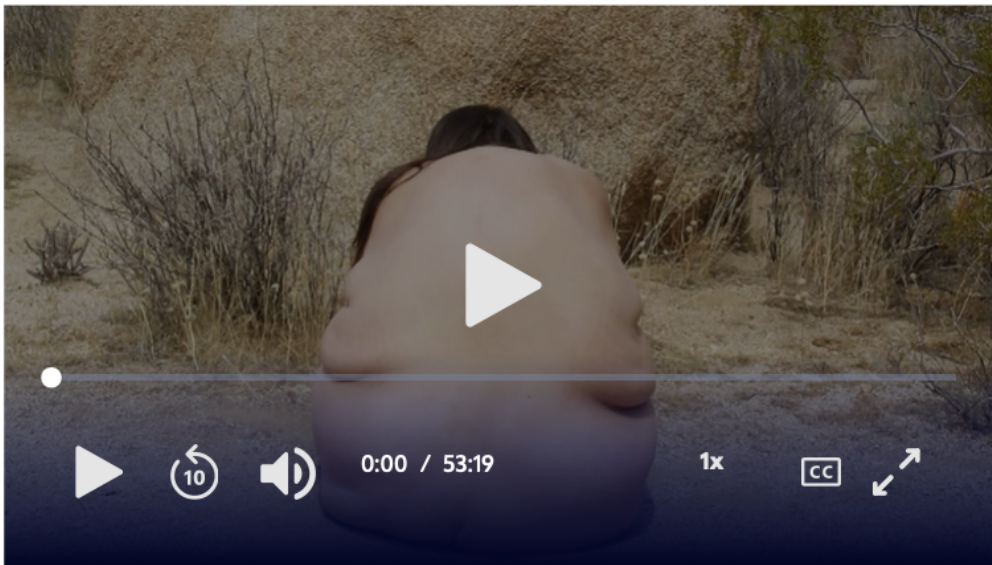
Though many of her digital photographs are **available online**, the physical layout of the exhibit encourages viewers to make connections about how the images (which also contain more detail in print) relate to each other. The chronological ordering also helps viewers to gradually understand Fernandez's visual language, which is more explicitly didactic in the beginning and significantly subtler by the end.

In addition to the survey, Fernandez's work will also appear in two concurrent exhibits that she curated. "Tierra Entre Medio" will feature Fernandez's newest work on burn areas and the suburbs alongside three up-and-coming Chicana photographers, Arlene Mejorado, Lizette Olivas and Fernandez's former student Aydinaneth Ortiz.

"I think what really inspired me to pull ["Tierra Entre Medio"] together was all the incredible artistic production that is happening with young Chicana photographers. There's lots going on, and it's very different from when I was coming up as a photographer." Fernandez can only remember two other Chicana photographers from her early days: **Laura Aguilar** and Delilah Montoya. Perhaps because of this lack of representation, Fernandez felt that reviewers sometimes overlooked the complexity of her work.

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Throughout its history, the natural beauty of California has inspired artists from around the world. Today, as artists continue to engage with California's environment, they echo and critique earlier art practices that represent nature in California.

"People saw a Chicana and didn't think about me being a competent artist; they saw the work in a very one-dimensional way," Fernandez says. "The past was really laden with an underground racism and sexism that I don't think young people understand as much, thankfully."

In the last few years, Fernandez has noticed significant improvements in the way that her work is viewed, and the community of Chicana photographers is now much stronger. As a professor at Cerritos College, Fernandez often finds herself mentoring this new generation of artists, who, in return, help to reinspire her love of photography. "I'm really excited for this group of women — the world is waiting."

The third show that Fernandez's work will appear in, located at Pomona College's Benton Museum, is "Under the Sun," a reimagining of two of Fernandez's past installations, "Untitled Farmworkers" (first exhibited in 1989) and "Bend" (first exhibited in 1999), combined with thematically relevant artwork from the Benton's own permanent collection.

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Christina Fernandez, photographer

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Fernandez had previously showcased her work at the Benton and expressed an interest in curating an exhibit with their collection (which includes over 17,000 items). In selecting which pieces to include, Fernandez completed her own deep-dive research. Bringing the contemporary and the historical in conversation together highlights the parallels between the two and encourages viewers to think about older works in a new light.

In one gallery, "Untitled Farmworkers," Fernandez places physical index cards in soil to display the names of laborers who have died from pesticide exposure and heat stroke. Integrated with Fernandez's own works are Jose Clemente Orozco's sketches of people posing in active stances, which amplifies the idea of bodies in the field. Photographs from the Battle of Wounded Knee and portraits of Cesar Chavez also coincide with Fernandez's interest in social issues.



Christina Fernandez, "End of Road," 2010. From the series, "Serenio." | Courtesy Christina Fernandez and Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles

In the other gallery, "Bend," Fernandez takes a step back from the political and focuses on light, landscape and domestic scenes. To find complementary art from the Benton, Fernandez used keywords such as "light," "sky" and "ruin" to search through the collection. Marilyn Bridges, known for her aerial landscapes, and Minor White, known for his acute sense of light and shadow, are two of the artists whose work will appear beside Fernandez's.

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"Who would imagine that somebody would want to open three shows all at the same time?" laughs Fernandez.

When looking back at the highlights of her career, however, not everything revolved on accolades and milestones. Instead, Fernandez points to her son, whom she had strapped to her in a baby carrier as she walked around her El Sereno neighborhood. Those walks became the setting of the series "Sereno." The two have also embarked on many road trips throughout the country, including one to the Japanese concentration camp Manzanar, which is featured in "View From Here," a series that imagines windows as frames through which history can be looked at. "I have wonderful memories, and they all have to do with raising my son and photographing with my son," says Fernandez.



1/2 Christina Fernandez, "Laura A. (Los Angeles)," 2018. From the series, "View from Here" | Courtesy of Christina Fernandez and Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles



When asked if a survey and a monograph were important goals for her, Fernandez says not so much. "I think artists are careful with wanting things that they do not think they will ever get," she laughs. "And I think that's the case with me."

"I was really focused on being a good professor, being a good workmate and a good mother and a good neighbor," Fernandez adds. "I think that there are a lot of different types of careers that artists can want for themselves, and I definitely have had the career that I wanted."

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