FORM’S TRANSGRESSIONS

The Drawings of Agustín Fernández
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Foreword by Carol Damian
Essay by Ricardo Pau-Llosa

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Untitled, 1981
graphite on paper
30 x 22 inches
Snite Museum of Art
Gift of the Agustin Fernandez Foundation
2010.032.002
Untitled, 1974
graphite on paper
30 x 21.5 inches
Snite Museum of Art
Acquired with funds provided by the Humana Foundation Endowment for American Art
2010.033.001
Agustín Fernández leaves a legacy of work that is marked by its independence from a comfortable artistic trajectory, while maintaining a close relationship with some of the most significant art movements of the twentieth century, including Abstraction, Surrealism, Assemblage, and Conceptual Art. His life followed a personal journey that reflected a constant pursuit of time and place through a wide variety of media, often inter-changeable and inter-related. His paintings appear as sculptural and his sculptures are informed by unusual assemblages of materials and a painter’s vision. The works of Fernández are also ambiguous. The hard metallic appearance of his paintings belies subjects that are soft and sensual, sometimes with erotic overtones. Science fiction or surreal, his images are complex in their incorporation of armor surfaces, snakeskin, breasts, and other symbolic references. He alludes to classical goddesses and existential notions of survival, as well as pain and violence, and transforms the very nature of ritual personalities into his own surreal versions of their essence. His unexpected juxtapositions are the product of years of philosophical and aesthetic exploration that took him from Cuba to Paris to Puerto Rico and New York and, in each location, he absorbed and participated in their rich artistic environments.

This exhibition marks our attempt to introduce his works on paper as key elements of his impressive career that have not previously been explored in depth, and help establish his role, not only in the arts of Latin America, but within the mainstream of international Modernism of the twentieth century. Although the works on paper have often been included in exhibitions as complements to the paintings and to reveal the extraordinary artistic technique that is basic to every media he masters, this is the first exhibit dedicated solely to works on paper. The drawings also offer a special insight into his process, not only technically but conceptually, as he experiments with familiar subjects, ranging from the inorganic to the erotic, by repeating and combining certain motifs. In his excellent and informative essay, curator Ricardo Pau-Llosa follows the development
of these motifs in Paris in the late 1960s, when Fernández begins to forego his painterly chromaticism and deploy a harder edge that best served the object described and its meaning with new dramatic impact. The stark, black-and-white forms of these compositions, in particular, lend themselves to graphic and print media, without the distraction of surreal painterly effects.

The works done with graphite, some with minimal color, on paper are from the late 1960s to the 1990s, and provide a comprehensive overview of his most recognizable subjects and familiar series: linear or circular abstractions, delicate patterns, phallic protuberances, breasts and mechanical oddities.

The Frost Art Museum is proud to welcome back the work of Agustín Fernández in this unique exhibition, and we are grateful for our partnerships with the Snite Museum of Art at the University of Notre Dame and its director, Chuck Loving, who initiated this project, curator Ricardo Pau-Llosa, and the Agustín Fernández Foundation.

Carol Damian

Director & Chief Curator

The Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum
Untitled, 1959
graphite on paper
14 x 13.5 inches
Private Collection,
New York

Untitled, 1972–1980
graphite on paper
30 x 22.25 inches
Private Collection,
New York
Untitled, 1979
graphite on paper
30 x 22.25 inches
Private Collection, New York
Untitled, 1972
graphite on paper
30 x 22.25 inches
Private Collection, New York
Untitled, 1984
graphite on paper
30 x 22.25 inches
Private Collection,
New York
FORM’S TRANSGRESSIONS: THE DRAWINGS OF AGUSTÍN FERNÁNDEZ

Ricardo Pau-Llosa

No visual artist of the modern era has focused so intensely on the rebellion of form against containment, on form’s lust to become time, as Agustín Fernández, the most consistently original and profound Cuban painter of his generation, and globally among the most outstanding artists of his era. While Fernández is mostly known for his painting, he considered his works in other media, especially his drawings, as equally important portals into his imagination. The works on paper gathered in this exhibition provide a comprehensive view of his audacious visual thinking and disclose Fernández’s journey into the essential restlessness of form with the same staggering range of power and subtlety of his paintings. This exhibition offers an opportunity to explore Fernández’s often overlooked works on paper which, like his mostly monochromatic paintings, disclose the oneiric origins of form.

Fernández was born in Havana in 1928 and studied art at the National Academy of Fine Arts San Alejandro (1946–1950), with a stint at the Art Students League in New York in 1950. Back in Havana, he studied philosophy and languages at the University of Havana, abandoning those studies in 1951 and beginning extensive travels to Europe, the United States, and Latin America. In 1953, he audited courses at Madrid’s San Fernando Academy and would have his first solo exhibition in Europe at the Galería Buchholz in the Spanish capital. In 1955, he had his first solo exhibition in the United States, at the OAS Museum in Washington, D.C., and two years later would obtain an Honorable Mention at the São Paulo Biennial. He was garnering commissions and awards in Cuba as well. In 1959, he had a solo exhibition at Caracas’ prestigious Museum of Fine Arts. This was the year that Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba, and Fernández availed himself of a scholarship to study painting in Europe to remain abroad, never to return to his native country. His long years of exile, during which he realized his most important work, had him living in France until 1968, then moving to Puerto Rico for four years, and finally to New York City in 1972, where he lived and worked for the rest of
his life. In 1960, he met Lia Epelboim, a Jewish exile from communist Romania, whom he married in 1961. She was his inseparable companion and support for the next 46 years; they had three children: Clodio, Clea, and Sebastián. Eerily in 2006, Lia and then Agustín would die within two months of each other, of separate causes, in Manhattan. He was 78.

By the time he embarked on his life as an exile in 1959, Fernández, then 31, was already a major figure in Cuba’s Third Generation of Modernists. The Cuban Vanguardia emerged in the late 1920s with painters such as Amelia Peláez, Víctor Manuel, and Carlos Enríquez using Expressionism and Cubism to broaden and deepen the range of images considered distinctly Cuban—colonial stained-glass windows, peasant scenes, tropical landscapes and still lifes, baroque urban interiors. Second Generation artists who emerged in the 1940s, such as Cundo Bermúdez, Mario Carreño, and René Portocarrero, continued in this vein under a more pronounced influence of Surrealism. Cuba’s Third Generation of Modernists emerged in the 1950s, a period of great expansion in the styles and ideas that inspired artists in Cuba and all Latin America. Geometric and Informalist abstraction, though diametrically opposed stylistically, ignited this Third Generation’s interest in a visual idiom that was free from regional flavor. A pioneer in this regard was the brilliant minimalist Carmen Herrera, but she had left Cuba for New York in 1939. All told, for all its vaunted internationalism, Third Generation artists such as Fernández, Agustín Cárdenas, Hugo Consuegra, and Rolando López Dirube would find that the imprint of an already congealed Cuban Modernist tradition would be harder to shake than the easily suspended tropical referents of previous artists.

It is the Third Generation’s extension of their predecessors’ ideas into many new styles and aesthetic concerns that makes them the embodiment of Cuban Modernism’s coming of age. These artists also continued this
cultural adventure for decades, most of them as solitary exiles, establishing by the very extra-territoriality of their careers the perpetuation of Cuba’s Modernist identity as a viable aesthetic tradition of the highest level, and not simply as the regional expression of imported trends. Apart from their heretical abandonment of a political system which many in the Western art world admire from afar to this day, it was the ability of Third Generation masters to expand concepts and aspirations forged during the short-lived Cuban Republic, and to do so in exile for over four decades, which makes them particularly heroic to those who believe in the integrity of the artist as the artificer of individual and collective freedom. It is also what makes them starkly problematical to those who still adhere to ideologies of the state. Among these Third Generation artists of Cuba, none would produce a body of work more complex, inspired, and impossible to ignore than Agustín Fernández, and the fundamental reason for this was his translation of themes established by Carlos Enríquez and Wifredo Lam into a unique tropological strategy which, in turn, enabled him to generate a new style.

Latin American Modernism did not wage war on representation, as did many schools and movements in European and North American Modernism and, as a result, tropes became central to the region’s twentieth-century visual aesthetics. Tropes (e.g. metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche) constitute ways of establishing a relationship between components in any form of communication—including art—that is radically different from the syntax of everyday, literal language or common signs. Tropes play a notable role in everyday expressions and representations, but it is in literary language and aesthetically conceived visual expression that they play a dominant role. They intensify the power of representation by foregrounding resemblances (metaphor), transferring and melding values among proximate images or words (metonymy), and establishing a part’s capacity to embody a greater whole (synecdoche). Perhaps it was Latin America’s roots in various religions and cosmologies in which liturgy and iconography are central—indigenous, Catholic, West African—which immunized the region’s Modernist painters from the anti-representational bias of post-Cubist art in Europe and North America. Whatever the reason, it is the primacy of tropes in Latin American Modernism which essentially differentiates it from the art of Western Europe and North America in the 20th century.
First Generation painters Carlos Enríquez (1900–1957) and Wifredo Lam (1902–1982) are important predecessors of Fernández philosophically, if not in terms of style or imagery. Enríquez authored ecstatic scenes where eros and violence converge. As disparate themes coalesced in Enríquez’s idiosyncratic transparencies, so did figures, and these with landscape elements. Swirling, veiled, incandescent tides of light drove his theatrical paintings where action is frozen as in a still-shot of a cinematic dissolve. Enríquez introduced into Cuban Modernism an Expressionistic approach to the oneiric tumult of early Surrealism. But more importantly, he grasped a major and atavistic characteristic of the Cuban collective psyche—its linkage of eros and violence, ecstasy and apocalypse, transcendence and subjugation. Enríquez’s insight would prove to be of great importance in the development of Agustín Fernández’s work. However, Fernández would abandon Enríquez’s metonymic, theatrical, action-driven approach to this idea and instead engage a metaphor-centered strategy of visual thinking.

The power of metaphor in early Cuban Modernism was first tapped by Amelia Peláez (1896–1968), who juxtaposed stained-glass windows (vitrales)—an iconic element of Spanish colonial architecture in Cuba—with the hard-edged color planes of Synthetic Cubism. Her influence on Cuban art has been staggering and is felt to this day, and some of Fernández’s own crystalline and richly colored still-lifes of the 1950s homage the pleasures of Peláez’s rhythmic, baroque designs. But it was Lam, a First Generation figure whose impact on Cuban art would not begin to be felt until the 1950s (he lived mostly in France except during WWII, when he returned to Cuba before moving on to New York), who provides an insight into the morphing of metonymy into metaphor which would have an effect on Fernández’s imagination. A protégé of Picasso and vaunted member of the late Surrealist circle, Lam quarried his mixed Chinese and African heritage for animistic ideas, and fused these with the Surrealist fascination with the tribal art of Oceania which, along with early Cubism, provided his visual lexicon.
Untitled, 1984
graphite on paper
30 x 22.25 inches
Private Collection,
New York
Untitled, 1976  
graphite on paper  
30 x 22.25 inches  
Private Collection, New York
Of particular significance for the subsequent development of Fernández's work is Lam's totemic figures and his recurring “femme cheval” (horse-woman) motif, less because of their eroticism, monochromaticism, and foregrounded linearity (all three important aspects of Fernández's mature work) than because they offer the first indication of a shift away from the metonymy-driven, mise-en-scène theatricality of earlier Cuban Modernism, toward the implosion in a single image of the elements previously dramatized in regionally inflected settings. Lam, impelled by the animistic objects and tales of transformations of the Afro-Cuban cosmologies that shaped his childhood in Sagua la Grande, painted the power of a single image composed of recognizable referents: woman, horse, plant, demon, et al. Lam's totemically conceived images heralded the dawn of complex metaphors in Cuban art, yet, for all their primal elegance, Lam's totemic images were mostly primary juxtapositions of partly fused components. What's more, they were anchored in metonymy by relying on the narratives of myth and ritual to be interpreted properly, and all narrative is metonymic. Fernández would dispense with ritual and narrative contexts—indeed with context per se—and construct metaphorical phenomena whose original components would be utterly subsumed in the image at hand. He would go further, however, to reconnect the metaphorical image—imploded, singular, free from context and narrative—to temporality, but on metaphor's terms alone.

All of Agustín Fernández's distinctive and revolutionary work was realized after he left Cuba in late 1959, to live as an exile for the rest of his life. In Paris, in the early 1960s, he interacted with major artists, such as Lam and Joan Miró, and connected with what remained of the Surrealist movement. In 1960, he had the first of three solo exhibitions in Paris at the Galerie Frustenberg, directed by Simone Collinet (André Breton's first wife). He would be a regular, until he left Paris in 1968, at the Salon de Mai exhibitions. The first two of his three children, Clodio and Clea, were born during this time. This was the period in which Fernández's palette, once polychromatic, became dominated by flesh tones and then, after 1963, by black and white. The early 1960s is also the time in which erotic imagery begins to emerge consistently and emphatically in his work. But the true revolution in his work, begun at this early stage of Fernández's life outside his homeland, had less to
do with the monochromes and the often unsettling eroticism that would remain fixtures of his style from this point on, and more to do with the aesthetic quest for the single-image metaphor, or what will be defined later as the Oneiric Metaphor. Eros and economy of color would be but two outward signs of Fernández’s tropological breakthrough and not, as almost all the criticism on his work to date has maintained, his defining triumph.

By the time Fernández had begun his life in Paris, Surrealism had been a staple of the Cuban and Latin American imagination for over a generation. In many ways, the Surrealist emphasis on dreams and their symbols, so indebted to the various schools of Psychoanalysis then in their heyday, simply provided a modern theoretical explanation for a cultural and aesthetic practice which had been fundamental to the Latin American world-view for over three centuries. The culture of the entire region—founded on the syncretism of Catholicism and various popular cosmologies (of West African origin, in the case of Cuba)—was steeped in liturgy and the discourse of transformation. Fertility (power, salvation) and sacrifice, translated into the contemporary language of eros and violence, formed the core tension of this discourse whose polytheistic system of belief encompassed animism, spiritual possession, trance, and oracular revelation. The substrata of Cuban culture and all of its arts were deeply influenced by this syncretism, enabling the painters, in particular, to resist the anti-representational bias of early Modernist schools, such as Cubism and Constructivism, by combining their visual idiom with that of Surrealism, the sole European Modernist movement which celebrated representation in the visual arts. Cuban Second Generation artist Mario Carreño, and later many Third Generation figures, coalesced these disparate styles with no regard for their mutual rejection, much as radically different belief systems had been alloyed to create the popular religions of the Caribbean.

This centuries-old, culturally pervasive link between representation and the unconscious, into which the style and ideas of Surrealism entered, had always drawn on tropes as the primary mechanisms of visual language. Well beyond the scope of actual religious practice—be it Catholic or Afro-Cuban—the Cuban and Caribbean imagination was spontaneously tropological, with or without regard to the fact that the power of these tropes
was rooted in syncretism. And while different tendencies in Cuban and Latin American Modernism gravitated toward distinct tropological schemes—Constructivist abstraction used synecdoche, regionalist narrative painting exploited metonymy—it was the painters of the unconscious who turned to metaphor with full force. Metaphor—which Freud and Jung used implicitly as the key to unraveling images of the dream state and other expressions of the singular and collective unconscious—is what enables symbols to embody and express variable meanings in one image. And while not all metaphors stabilize into denotations and symbols, all metaphors compress into one image two or more signifieds. Metaphor is simultaneity incarnate, enabling the mind to grasp more than one thing, event, or idea at the same time, thereby breaking the linear, causal, temporal sequence that typifies everyday experiences, be these cursory, analytical, or functional.

It is important to note that metaphor triggers a fusion of these simultaneously grasped elements which occur in the mind of the person intending the metaphor. To some degree, the metaphor initiates that fusion, mostly by suspending context, sequence, and narrative. The elements—at times melded and at other times distinguishable—are grasped simultaneously, and that is what enables metaphor to enact a unique act of the mind. All tropes stand outside the temporal and causal linearity of ordinary language and experience, but none more potently than metaphor. This temporal break is what distinguishes aesthetic or poetic awareness from all other acts of the mind.

Fernández's great breakthrough was based on translating the erotics of violence, established as a major current of Cuban visual thinking by Enríquez, into the single-image metaphor that Surrealism had presaged. But where the Surrealists saw juxtaposition and metaphor in a Freudian manner, as a way of liberating the Id from the restrictions of the cultural Superego, Fernández and the other major figures of Cuba’s Third Generation of Modernists focused on the image itself as a revelation of a dynamic and fertile cultural unconscious, a process which was not framed in the rhetoric of revolt against real or imagined oppression. After all, these Cuban artists were witnessing, and fleeing, the kind of Stalinist state extolled by Breton and those Surrealists who
still followed him. The Surrealist movement had been morphing into a political project with an overt totalitarian agenda since its inception.

On the other hand, there were any number of artists who exploited the power of tropes to understand the unconscious and creativity on terms which were different from those of Psychoanalysis or Marxism, and Fernández was one of these. It is important to note that this profound turn in Fernández’s style coincided with exile, for similar course-shifts into deeper waters occurred to other Third Generation artists in exile—Hugo Consuegra, Rolando López Dirube, José María Mijares, to name but three. Second Generation artists who also abandoned Cuba—Cundo Bermúdez and Mario Carreño, for example—and Second and Third Generation artists who remained on the island—Raúl Milián, Servando Cabrera Moreno, Raúl Martínez, René Portocarrero, et al—underwent no such total transformation in style or aesthetic concerns. It was the peculiar coincidence of the Third Generation’s avowed cosmopolitanism since the early 1950s, coupled with the subsequent reality of exile in the 1960s when they were in mid-career, which triggered an astonishing deepening of ideas and style in their work.

Fernández felt the pang of exile throughout his life. I recall Agustín and Lia coming up to me, with some exigency, after a reading I had given in New York in 2002. During Q&A, I was asked to comment generally about the impact of exile on my work. Agustín and Lia were both pained and disappointed I had not mentioned that “exile is about not being able to return.” It was what defined exile, and they were right to correct me. The tropological strategy Fernández had been working on since 1960 was rooted in this awareness, but it went dramatically beyond the banal social and political rhetoric which dominates the Dada and Surrealist-haunted installations, videos, and other experimentations of Post-Modernism. Fernández’s tropological strategy responded existentially to exile, hence it was never tainted by factionalism. By reconfiguring into single-image metaphors the link between eros and violence which early Cuban Modernism had articulated metonymically, Fernández was advancing the idea of a trans-territorial Cubanness which could be sustained through variable
Untitled, 1986
graphite on paper
30 x 22.25 inches
Private Collection,
New York
Untitled, 1980–1985
graphite on paper
30 x 22.25 inches
Private Collection, New York
tropes and images. What’s more, this bold idea far outstripped the infantilism of Surrealist rebelliousness. Fernández understood the culture he had abandoned had matured artistically, if not politically, hence its art was capable of living outside the womb of native soil. While there is no universality without regional specificity, there is no true personal or regional identity without a grounding in the horizon of the human condition.

If metaphor can be defined as the trope that unifies in one image one or more referents by positing a resemblance between them under the fanciful rubric of a substitution, what occurs when the elements of the trope are not simply things or ideas but a narrative or a process? Going further, what if the elements and narratives thus conjured engage the deepest mechanisms and concerns of the unconscious? What happens when temporality (time as experienced and grasped, time as being), in whatever image or symbol, is one of the elements of the metaphor? Given that metaphor—the prism of tropes—is refractory by nature, it divides the concepts or elements of the trope into their myriad implications and significations and makes them resonate simultaneously. In the case of a metaphor focused on temporality, everything linked to this concept—process, transformation—is brought into awareness or, to speak of it phenomenologically, the intentional field.

Fernández’s drawing (opposite) exemplifies how these concerns come together in a single image. The drawing recalls the construct of a portrait, while also using three-dimensional rendering to evoke a collage. The image of a strip paper, complete with fold and cast shadow, prototypes a mask with its simply drawn eyes and ears. In the layering of the drawing’s illusions, this mask hovers over a dark rectangle, echoing a board on an easel, from whose textures emanates the only three-dimensional image of the piece (other than the illusory layers): an abstracted back-view of a nude, buttocks and the insinuations of legs beneath the mask. The evocation of a portrait is buttressed by lines and forms that insinuate the neck and shoulder silhouette.

The different referential players in the portrait—figure, mask, dark shape, sheets, portrait, bust—come together metaphorically, not metonymically, because what is obviously in play is a vision of how different art
forms—drawing, painting, and sculpture—together define an artistic personality. The most salient feature—the sheet with the eyes and ears that embody individual identity—is in reality the least important, hence the crudest and sketchiest. The visceral force, the muscle behind creative identity, is the carnality of its presence and the way flesh governs our presence in, and awareness of, reality. It bursts forth and takes over, but in art it must conform to the rules by which various forces converge to shape creativity—tradition, ideas, technique, medium, symbols, meanings. It is a difficult and volatile convergence, hence the jig-saw effect of some of the contours.

In the unified single-image metaphor of this drawing, we confront the constant conflict between destruction and creativity—otherwise expressed as violence and eros—in Fernández’s art. Were this a metonymically conceived image, a story would unfold or a transference of meanings among the components would result. But only when all the elements are understood simultaneously and without narrative or context, do we intend a subtler reading. All processes lead to an end, to a destruction. This is what enables the theme of violence to come forth in Fernández’s work, and with it the ancillary motifs of protection, control, bondage, and liberation. But temporality independent of violence is also engaged—time as experienced in human, existential terms.

What better way to articulate time as an agent in our bodies and our lives than through erotic imagery? Fernández’s allusions, then, to genitalia, penetration, breasts, and orifices become understood as indicators of the link between time and identity, personality, individuality, and creaturely mortality. The images of armor, restraints, belts and the like become indicators of the fact that eros and violence have indeed melded into a single-image metaphor. They have converged, not through the translucent metonymy of a theatricalized Enríquez painting, but as a new conception of objectivity which can only exist in the mind, but claims the radical immanence of any object in the physical world.
The Oneiric Metaphor aims at the arrival of the new objectivity, fashioned in the deep unconscious, onto the life-world—Edmund Husserl’s term for the physical, sensorial world we share with other subjects. Oneiric here is not used to simply denote the dream state or the images conjured in dream, but the entire creative, image-creating faculty of the unconscious—i.e. the imagination. Despite the wider range attributed here to the word oneiric, the dream component of its denotation is useful because the single-image metaphor intrudes onto the life-world, and aspires to a presence in consciousness that is as immanent and enveloping as that of a dreamt image. The Oneiric Metaphor demands uncontested ontological status. It is not simply a juxtaposition, whose elements can be disentangled and reduced as if they were words in a fractured sentence. This metaphor cannot be converted, in the manner of foreign code or currency, into a new system of meaning or value. The Oneiric Metaphor resists reference-ruled interpretation, in the manner of psychoanalytical dream-interpretation or, for that matter, in the way most Surrealist art manipulates imagery as symbolism. The Oneiric Metaphor is not a riddle, in other words. It generates images which are real, i.e. immanent, hence they cannot be translated into a system of representation or explication, nor can they be transposed into another context, even as these Metaphors gather onto themselves, like elements in a landscape or props on a stage, a specific referential context. In the case of Fernández’s work, these contexts can be called ‘the erotic’ and ‘the violent.’

The most ambitious published study to date on the artist’s work is Agustín Fernández, containing an essay by R. C. Kenedy; the book was published in New York by Joseph A. Novak, editor, in 1973, a year after Fernández had moved to Manhattan after living four years in Puerto Rico, and coincides with the emergence of armor imagery in his art.1 It offers a thorough documentation of Fernández’s work up to that time, especially his Parisian decade, and Kenedy’s sprawling essay, though often convoluted, does make several important points. It signals the importance of metaphor in Fernández’s work, while accepting the traditional mode of differentiating it from both symbol (“beyond ambiguities. . . highly dogmatic”) and simile (dismissed as “simple”), but failing to distinguish it from metonymy and synecdoche—names of tropes he does not employ. At one point, when exploring Fernández’s erotic imagery, Kenedy states:

1The author is aware of a forthcoming book on Fernández to be published by the Agustín Fernández Foundation.
Untitled, 1983
graphite on paper
30 x 22.25 inches
Private Collection,
New York
Wings, 1982
graphite on paper
30 x 22.25 inches
Private Collection, New York
His icons are without exception shapes of deep and disturbing ambiguity. They reveal calculated correspondences with specific, verbally available references. They come, again almost without exception, from the night’s allegorical territory—if, indeed, one is prepared to make allowances for prejudice and if one assigns the mark of darkness to the organs of sex—(most people do, after all, make love at night); and in Fernandez’s instance, this judgment-like supposition is more than tenable. (n.p.)

Unable to resist the sordid narratives he feels are implicit in Fernández’s erotic imagery, Kenedy conflates allegory, metonymy, juxtaposition, and metaphor—obfuscating the manner in which these separate tropological devices operate in harmony in the work. He goes on to revel in the “deathly pigmentation. . . disfigured by pulsating scars—steel-pricked fistulae with hungry orifices,” before encountering what could be identified as a manifestation of synecdoche in Fernández’s art, but which Kenedy considers a metaphor: “The phantoms are in no way human. They lack not merely warmth. The animal being’s completeness is also absent from their make-up. They represent partialities grown whole” (emphasis mine). (n.p.)

Previously, Kenedy had introduced important, if undeveloped, insights. Still placing the imagery under the aegis of metaphor, Kenedy describes what could be seen as the presence of metonymy in Fernández’s paintings:

The canvas provides a platform for pictorial signs conceived to enact a role. After the play’s fashion, signals clash and enact the equivalent of drama. In the main, in these paintings the dialogue is between form and event. Form plays almost the traditional part of the hero in these compositions. It is a graphically tenable argument which indicates a feverishly conceived identity. (n.p.)

Decrying the “odious,” though inevitable, critical practice of separating form and content, Kenedy asserts that Fernández makes those distinctions impossible to maintain in part because “[h]is method is derived from the
narrative power of metaphor; and he exploits its tendency to unify several pictorial concepts in the equation of one image.” However, it is metonymy, not metaphor, which rules narrative and action in language as in visual representation. Kenedy points out how the “overall designs, which combine such an interpretive emblem, reconcile opposites (or antitheses) in order to bring out their lyrically terrifying latencies.” This presages somewhat the implosion of image that typifies the Oneiric Metaphor.

Kenedy is particularly insightful when describing the similarities and differences between Fernández and such diverse influences on him as Nicholas Poussin, Lucio Fontana, and the Surrealists. While Kenedy discloses the importance of tropes in Fernández’s visual thinking, he lumps these various, complex tropes together as “metaphor.” A clearer tropological analysis is in order.

Narrative falls under the domain of metonymy, the trope which establishes continuity between proximate elements. It is what binds words together to form intelligible sentences, notes to make melody, and on a broader scale what unites all the elements of all works of art and all texts into coherent vehicles for ideas and reflections. Metonymy is a prevailing trope in early Surrealist painting—De Chirico, Magritte, Ernst, Dalí, Delvaux—despite the Surrealists’ dependence on metaphor in Freudian decoding of dream imagery, which the movement assumed as dogma. Surrealist figurative art was metonymic by virtue of its emphasis on setting and implied or explicit narrative. It is the same reason that makes the paintings of Enríquez and Lam metonymic. All tropes have an impact on how we intend (i.e. apprehend) time, metonymy perhaps most evidently, for while it suspends sequence to allow all the words of a sentence or the notes of a melody to come together in thought before instantaneously establishing sense or unity upon completion, in visual expression metonymy aims at compressing actions into a single setting.

The operation of metonymy in the visual arts has one important difference from its function in language or music. The viewer intending a painting sees all of it at once, unlike the unfolding experience of the work
Untitled, 1981
graphite on paper
30 x 22.25 inches
Private Collection, New York
Untitled, 1984
graphite on paper
30 x 22.25 inches
Private Collection, New York
Untitled, 1980
graphite on paper
30 x 22.25 inches
Private Collection,
New York
which a reader of a text or a listener of music undergoes. The viewer of a painting, drawing, or sculpture may focus his intentional gaze on this or that portion or aspect of the work, but there is no mystery surrounding the confines or totality of the work. Painters of metonymy have to work within this condition of visible entirety which is ineluctable, so narrative must be expressed through juxtaposition of images. The question which continues to drive our approach to Fernández is, how does the Oneiric Metaphor subsume these conditions and strategies associated with metonymic art to come up with a new way of penetrating our sense of time? Specifically, Fernández’s enormous scrolls defy the visual unity of works of art, requiring artist and viewer alike to take them in sequentially. They, therefore, constitute an important key to understanding Fernández’s struggle to fold metonymy into a metaphor-ruled mode of visual thinking.

A similar drama unfolds in a regularly-sized piece (opposite page). It is anomalous in that it represents a multi-tubular form standing, rising as if on an empty plain. Intestinal and machine-like, as a single form it is solitary in its blank environs. Yet considered as a cluster, it is as abundant as it is mysterious in its communion of forms. And herein an intriguing paradox: The metaphorical unity of the shape is evident when we see it in its blank context, but its multiple inner contexts and components are intended when we bracket the emptiness surrounding it. This is the opposite of what we would have expected, with focus heightening its metaphorical integrity as a single image and context, enabling the metonymic properties to surface.

Inordinately opaque for an image in a Fernández drawing (opposite), the ruling form projects a resigned power of mobility and transformation. An intimate monument, it is a knot that will neither unravel nor bind. Ultimately, it is an icon of the enigmatic, yet living and layered, core at the heart of every work of art. Its stasis and the distance that separates it from the viewer are illusions. And herein we can resolve the tension between metaphor and metonymy that intrigued us at first. The form can communicate all this by the power of metaphor, but the form is metonymically conceived—folding and inter-coiling extensions, congealing into a segmented but unified shape—a distilled icon of metonymy itself, intended as metaphor.
Examples of the more familiar way in which metonymy operates in art—through juxtaposition—abound in figurative and narrative art. Diego Rivera's murals at the National Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico layer, in a quasi-geological manner, the myriad conquests and epics of Mexico's history. Viewers take these layers in by vertically bonding the elaborate, horizontally rendered scenes. Only metonymy, among elements gathered in a seeming randomness, makes the works of Robert Rauschenberg and James Rosenquist intelligible. Instead of layers, Enríquez used transparent juxtapositions between horses, people, and landscapes, and Lam used totemic conflation of referentially distinct elements to compose fantastic visions of spiritual possession. But the key is that the elements in metonymy must remain distinct, if adjacent, because without this spatial and cognitive separation there can be no transference of meanings from one element to the other. The intending, or grasping, of this transference between separate entities is the whole point of metonymy, hence the scenic, theatrical nature of metonymically conceived art. Even Lam's horse-women retain the distinctness of their composite elements, becoming themselves the scenarios or hosts for the transference of values between the fauna and flora that are represented.

In Fernández’s work, metonymy does play a role, but only in the formulation of ideas, not in the execution of images. Metonymy helps define Fernández's view of time, but only metaphor could make form a vehicle of temporal shifts and transformations without narrative, context, or theatricality. This exclusion of narrative and setting forces metonymy into a more abstract or idea-centered region of thought, but Fernández's interest in time is what keeps it in play in his mind. Fernández's use of metonymy exclusively as a conceptual device constitutes no small part of his genius.

Synecdoche—wherein a part takes the place of the whole—is also a part of Fernández's tropological arsenal, controlling the selection of images that will be employed in the Oneiric Metaphor. Nonetheless, it is an ancillary trope in Fernández's art, although for viewers consumed with erotic references, synecdoche can appear to overwhelm Fernández's work. If we allow the subject matter to determine our sense of the visual
thought in play, then the close-ups of over-sized phalluses, orifices, and breasts could be seen as a perverse reduction of the human figure—and, by extension, personality—to these parts and to our sexual instincts. But that would send us scavenging into the rhetoric of nightmare and obsession to give these works aesthetic license, a psychoanalytical justification secured by the saving elegance of Fernández’s impeccable delivery. This ploy is not new and, indeed, it has trapped more than one Surrealist art work in a hermeneutical tug-of-war between propriety and boldness. It does not help that Fernández was a friend of Robert Mapplethorpe whose homoerotic photographs bet the farm on the facile tension between effete decorousness and sadomasochism, a tack which, regrettably, has gotten overlaid onto Fernández’s work more than once. But painting is not photography, and subject matter does not dictate tropological thinking. In painting at least, the opposite is the case: tropological thinking determines how we intend images.

Fernández may well be the most profound painter of metaphor of his time. Beyond representing original metaphorical fusions, he examined and disclosed the structure of this trope and its relationship to temporality. However, his thematics were ruled by synecdoche, the trope which enabled him to focus on those parts of the anatomy which are emblematic of reproduction. Freud, Jung, Otto Rank and other major figures of Psychoanalysis had studied the link between sex and death, one of the most pervasive and complex universal archetypes in myth, literature, and art. Rank, in particular, analyzed the individual ego’s confrontation with its mortality. Beyond the obvious association of death with sex (reproduction, after all, is key to the survival of any living species), Rank’s greatest work, *Art and Artists*, connects the creative impulse with our individual and collective desire for some kind of immortality—through cultural memory if not through the transcendent endurance of the ego. Collective memory provides the basis for community itself, the sharing of values and lessons which define any culture or human group. Indeed, endurance of these shared memories is the primary, if not the sole, aspiration of culture.
However, for Fernández, as a new exile in a Paris whose intellectual world was ruled by Existentialism and whose visual arts were dominated by the offshoots of Surrealism—Informalism and Art Brut among these—the issues of cultural survival must have taken on a particularly strong, personal significance. His particular Third-Generation mission, to turn the eros/violence dichotomy of Cuba’s early Modernists into a universal idiom, added its own twists and pressures. After all, Cuba would eventually perish as a modern culture, and Fernández must have intuited this with increasing, if inescapable, dread. A new kind of tropology of image which directly addressed our experience of time was needed to deal, simply and universally, with the vortex of ideas and challenges he was facing. For Fernández, temporality was not only an abstract reminder of our finality, it was marked with the exile’s urgency and with the legacy of an aesthetic current he brought with him and which demanded perpetuation.

The Oneiric Metaphor Fernández would spend the rest of his life developing and refining compressed into a single image, free from context and scenario, the struggle between the forces of temporality and material form and their eventual union. Matter in Fernández’s work defies the usual animate/inanimate categorization, an aspect Kenedy pointed to. Synecdoche had split carnality from wholeness, so that even when Fernández is almost rendering a figure—as in his series of bird-like female torsos—it is never complete, and it is certainly not within a setting. These torsos, rather, fold into and surge from a world of shades made flesh. Breasts are the one anatomical part which is rendered most directly, while other referenced body parts mutate away from explicit representation in varying degrees. Emerging as they do at the very brink of reference, the forms assert a function, not in a being, but in the organism of the metaphor of which they are a part. That metaphor could only spring from the deepest, image-making faculties of the unconscious, and as it emerges from these depths, it also appears on the paintings and drawings to come forth unmediated, unprepared for the intentional gaze and living in the minds of others, raw, eclipsing all other concerns, but establishing its implacable presence.
All metaphor defies time, ruptures the quotidian linearity of existence, the syntax of experience. If metonymy is what suspends sequence so that we can compose sense from a flow of words, metaphor is what shapes each concept, each of those components or words. While this idea has been a staple of linguistics since Roman Jakobson helped found the Prague School in the 1920s, there is little evidence of its wide currency among visual artists or its critics. But even despite Formalist and Structuralist ponderings, metaphor’s role in our awareness of time remains mysterious. Essentially, metaphor posits the simultaneous apprehension of two or more referents under the guise of a comparison or a substitution. It is neither of these, for comparison and substitution belong to the outward, literal shell of the trope which is always bracketed permanently. No one but a pedant who is the butt of jokes takes metaphors or other tropes literally, as they always clearly mean something other than what they say, prompting some theorists to rightly question whether tropes are a part of language or some parallel construct of meaning that uses the attributes of language, but disobeys many of its rules of signification. There is no analogy in metaphor, per se, but an imposed grasping of two referents and all their resonant meanings and connotations at the same time. This is what metaphors are about, a rupture of the segmented, everyday experience of the objects of perception—or noemata—but at the level of the noemata themselves, and not the syntax or context in which they appear. Metonymy temporarily suspends sequence to enable the transference of meanings between its elements, but it is metaphor that defies the temporality of everyday life. Metonymy depends on the distance and setting of context, redefining it perhaps in the process, while metaphor rejects or ignores context altogether to trigger its own idiosyncratic act of the mind.

No wonder, then, that metaphor would come to dominate Fernández’s mode of visual thinking, with its inherent disruption of everyday temporal awareness in favor of a simultaneity-based apprehension of plural referents. The power of the trope must have become obvious to him from his youth, Cuba being a Caribbean culture of syncretism and transculturation, and the art of island itself—e.g. the juxtapositions of Peláez and Carreño especially—experimented freely with basic forms of metaphor in defiance of the reductivist dogma of European
Untitled, 1986
graphite on paper
30 x 22.25 inches
Private Collection, New York
Untitled, 1982
graphite on paper
25 x 22.25 inches
Private Collection, New York
Untitled, 1986
graphite on paper
30 x 22.25 inches
Private Collection, New York
Modernism. But the blunt, almost sculptural directness of Fernández's Oneiric Metaphors, especially after his move to New York in 1972, goes far deeper and beyond anything he had seen in Cuba, Paris, or Puerto Rico. He was inventing, knowingly or not, the Oneiric Metaphor, a tropological construct whose range and strategy was unique to his work.

Like the paintings, the drawings of Fernández can be studied in various groupings, but for the sake of emphasizing the way tropes operate in his art, these groupings are not necessarily defined by periods, but by concepts. For example, many drawings dramatize the union of two or more forms into one. Form itself seems to be the sustaining preoccupation in practically all these works—with its various roles in consciousness constantly analyzed and often changed. Form is the essential anchor of recognizability, the grounding of our sense of the world. Even when we perceive a thing which is totally new to us, and whose function or make-up we cannot even surmise, its noematic presence as a thing in the world permits us to engage it with an expectation that familiarity will be attained.

More unsettling, however, is what Fernández proposes—not utterly unrecognizable forms, but rather single forms, or clusters of them functioning as a new entity, whose referential power is partially subverted. It is not just a matter of oblique reference or subjecting a familiar image to a distorting or abstracting process as Cubism does in pursuit of an exaltation of bidimensionality. This kind of distortion constitutes a translation of a nameable element into a new language, or more precisely, into a new context. The tell-tale signs of metonymy are clear: journey, translation, transposition, new context. Most Modernist distortion is grounded in a metonymic premise wherein the referent and its new manifestation in the work become the reciprocal origin and destination of transferences. Even in Dada this occurs. Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* brackets functionality through juxtaposition, but ultimately the work establishes a circuit of meaning back to the life of the components in the life-world which, in turn, feeds the ironies and pleasures of experiencing the piece.
Fernández’s Oneiric Metaphor uses the resonant life of the evoked referents while severing this metonymic link to the life-world. Fernández is clearly not interested in changing our view of sexual organs, tubes, armor, lace, doilies, razor blades, belts, cuts, flesh, and other sources of images he employs. He appropriates the power of the image, and perhaps some of its reverberations in our deep unconscious, but there is nothing to gain by beating a way from this image back to the world. The way Fernández achieves this severance can be described as Referential Velocity, generated by the conflation of various fields of semantic resonance into a single image. One of many examples is the simultaneity of mask, body, collage, and bust in the drawing on page 26. One could say that this Velocity is not merely an effect, but a primary thematic concern of Fernández’s work, especially of his drawings—that he seeks to give the viewer a sense of the speed of tropological consciousness, a kind of self-awareness of how consciousness operates, which Husserl called “transcendental.” This cognitive speed is even signaled in some of Fernández’s drawings by a sense of blurred motion, but its power lies in the simultaneity of these referents whose participation in the world has been disarmed by the power of synecdoche, and whose new life in the drawing has been created by metaphor.

Fernández’s conflating and mutating forms are themselves indebted to previous primary juxtapositions. Coalesce the phallic images with constraining cords, and tubes emerge whose tangling, intestinal bundling contrasts with the flatness of the shadowed stencils and razor blades. The stencils—whose predominant evocation is a flowery wheel—in turn accentuate the sense of velocity. They have a flash quality, as if projected but for an instant on the new conjugation of form before us, a reminder, perhaps, of the shallowness and predictability of clinging to the vacated life of any image in the life-world. These are not flowers, after all, but shadows of doily patterns, lace ghosts that cannot bid farewell to solidity. That the wraith-like stencils are representations, several times removed, of flowers, augments the sense of velocity as these different levels of representation, like multiple ideas and referents, are intended simultaneously.
A number of drawings dwell on the shell quality of forms—their skin and the idea of contour and shape. Breasts are a recurring image in many of these, and for good reason. They are shapes which have a biological function and an erotic one—linked in a sequence of behaviors that spins a causal destiny for the very shape and concept of a woman's breast. Although breasts are a secondary sexual characteristic, culturally and artistically they are the most noticed and utilized sexual image. They produce sustenance and elicit arousal, they contain and they secrete, and they are, after eyes, the part of the human anatomy that is most easily rendered geometrically. Breasts also have a lively tactile life—felt, groped, suckled on, tucked, pinched, flattened, and lifted, they are sensitive and beckoning in the extreme. Skin’s acropolis is the breast.

In Fernández’s drawings and paintings, breasts appear in great profusion, and unlike the phallus and orifices, breasts retain a high level of representational proximity to their referent, in part because of the high profile skin acquires in the image of a breast, but also because of its protuberant nature. The Oneiric Metaphor’s level of radical intrusion into the life-world finds in the breast its anatomical emblem. No other part of the female anatomy is represented in popular media and pornography, as well as in fine art, as bracketable (or conceptually separable) from the rest of the body, a synecdochic ploy so pervasive in our culture that it seems natural. It is particularly revealing to note how Fernández’s use of armor imagery, which actually is often closer to modern machinery than to medieval defensive gear, is linked to breasts. The metallic shapes assume the role of a fantasized epidermal projection, skin’s sighing wish for invulnerability, and in the process the armor loses its essential quality of detachability from the body. In these images of fusion, breasts spring up, at times in Artemisian abundance, actively shaping the contours of armor, absorbing it as it were—an excellent example of Oneiric Metaphor appropriating the transference power of metonymy to generate an imploded image free from narrative, fantasy, and setting.
Untitled, 1984
graphite on paper
30 x 22.25 inches
Private Collection, New York
The theme of penetration dominates a substantial group of Fernández's works. The function of the synecdochic close-up is not to shock but to analyze the tension, even hostility, between two different conceptions of form. Despite the visual protagonism of the phallic shape, the formal nature of the passive space is reinforced by curvatures and other surface qualities. Nonetheless, of all of Fernández's works, it is in these that the spatial, contextual presence of metonymy is most clearly felt. As Karen Horney and other psycho-theorists maintain, the disappearance of the penis into the woman’s body during intercourse triggered fears and their subsequent taboos among early humans, taboos which linger in our sexual lore to this day. Neurotically, the dissolution of eaten food models a similar emasculating fate for the penis. What’s important to note here is that penetration is markedly different from the conflation which typifies Fernández’s Oneiric Metaphors, and often the representation of this act serves as a foil for the strategies of fusion otherwise in play in his art. When he evokes phallic images without allusions to intercourse, they function as any other image conceived metaphorically. In the works depicting penetration there is a Manichean struggle between metonymy and metaphor, as much as there is a formalist tension between passive and active forms.

This clarifies the two great concepts which dominate Fernández’s work—surface and form. The link or interaction between these two forces might explain why the image of the razor recurs in so many different works, at times as the principal image of a work, and at other times as the sole image and in cascading abundance. Reminiscent of both the scales of a fish and a shoal of them, the razor evokes a single element and a dynamic form comprised of a shifting group of them. Literally the defining instrument of edges, the razor is an everyday object whose resonances clearly fascinated the artist, much as the ladder intrigued the constructivist Joaquín Torres-García. The razor becomes a talisman, a key to understanding the Oneiric Metaphor in Fernández. It gathers within itself, in the simplest formal language imaginable, the themes of armor, skin, and laceration. It also beckons the hand which must use the razor to shave or cut. It is the icon and essence of the brush or whatever other instrument the painter might employ. Interestingly, the razor itself
does not undergo any metaphorical compression into other images. It emerges, haunts, colonizes, and even hives like a thunder of bees, but it suffers no change in Fernández’s art. It embodies the artist’s presence within his imagination.

The work of Agustín Fernández dramatizes and analyzes—two importantly distinct verbs—the way a specific tropological construct of the unconscious links the fundamentals of visual experience—thingness, thereness—to temporality. As the Oneiric Metaphor subsumes within its power the functions of metonymy and synecdoche, so it goes beyond the creation of startling images, at once erotic, sculptural, nightmarish, and ecstatic. It discloses that it is the nature of form in being able to swallow our sense of time, in response to, and rebellion against, the power of time to swallow all forms—living or not, individual and collective. That such Metaphor should arise from the deepest urgencies of the unconscious is natural, and yet it does so only in the work of the rarest of artists and under the most specific of circumstances. Had Fernández not inherited the philosophical tumult of Western art after WWII, along with the sudden expulsion from his own country, whose deepest ideas about art and creativity he would be instrumental in continuing to develop as a native of exile, the depth and intricacies of this profound mission in art might not have materialized. In the end, however, Fernández’s understanding of form as temporal, and temporality as formal, marks an enduring contribution to our own understanding of the unique power of painting and drawing to illuminate the way we think and live.
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