

San Juan Star
February 3, 1974

PERSPECTIVE

Jesse Fernandez The Artist

By FELIX J. BONILLA

I saw a fine show this week in old San Juan's Botello Gallery, a show which raises more issues, explores more pictorial situations than is the normal fare in our art galleries. Since I understand that one of the artists, Jesse A. Fernandez, is the STAR art critic, I expect he will not review it in your pages. (He could, because nowadays art teaching belongs to the universities where presenting a pictorial problem or situation, solving it in a dozen or more pictures, exhibiting these duly and then duly and with psychic distance judging and reviewing them critically, is or can be a normal requirement for graduation).

Since he may refrain ethically from

doing it, I shall attempt to review his part of the show in his stead for the paper.

First of all, it's a very personal show, personal in the sense that his emotional situations are laid bare to the questioning onlooker, yet apparently most people believe that his paintings and boxes are hermetic and impersonal lucubrations. He decorates their surfaces and captures their planes and spaces lovingly with vectors, mysterious straight-line scribbles, random letters and other signs.

This is an intellectual exercise, is one's first thought until one reflects on the fierce possessiveness and willfulness implicit in the lovingly painted signs. They capture each decorated plane as if it

were in danger of flying away and had to be willfully secured to earth. Each plane is a field or garden or finca that has to be mapped topographically, gardenized meaningfully, harvested with fastidious care, to leave significant traces of the gardening, mapping and harvesting acts. But, strangely each finished plane looks so bare at first. Why?

I don't know Fernandez personally, but I'd guess he is expressing a desperate sense of being without a finca to hold unto, that he can not wallow in a real motherland. He does not feel strongly attached or "afincado" to any particular place in this world. But he would love to be. So he attaches himself to each surface he creates, maps it, sometimes covers it with parchment, possesses it like a miser. I'll bet he touches each of them lovingly as he sees them come alive under his brush: bare, in austere greys and earth colors, but alive, as desert-like regions can be alive with intuitive abstinences, mysteries and beings.

His paintings still show traces of his fierce and repeated, yet elegant, stare at death: his exhibit at the U.P.R. museum of his series of skulls. Each skull was secured to his picture plane by curious vectors and devious cursive lines and messages. What did he express with that hypnotic staring at the repeated symbol of his own finiteness? His skulls were painted or rather drawn as if lovingly possessed and fondled too, as if they contained the secret of life and death. In a way they were boxes too. Maybe the grey matter once inside them has gone by now but who knows what spirits dwell in the great cavern behind the staring empty eye sockets? A mother's womb? A motherless child? A never-ending questioner in prison? There are no stars to be seen inside. Fernandez seems to possess, fondle and paint the skulls on the outside but he is really staring inside. He feels like an outsider. Don't we all, a little, in a similar painting situation?

But it is his boxes which seem to be most meaningful. I have seen only one at the Botello Gallery but I have also seen the eyes of my colleague Luis Hernandez Cruz as he described others to me. He loves them. I would like to see more of them; I have tried to see several times.

Found and random objects are lovingly encased in these boxes as if forever in hermetic compartments. They contain sumptuous materials, sensuously passing through holes into other compartments inside the same tactile box. There is a bird's egg which eyes three holes in a wall (Through which will it go? Or did it come?). Each box is a mystery box, a memories box, a resonance box, an anxious object over and beyond Harold Rosenberg's terminology.

So many of this century's works of art are anxious objects. They are all so personal, so personally meaningful. And in their personal but oft repeated anguish they become universal symbols. For they are objects, very real objects in Mondrian's usage of the word reality, objects in Duchamp's usage of the term. In a world whose best minds are becoming sick and tired of objects, they are the consumer's delight.

And they are personal, never again national, because nationalism has been

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dead, no longer creative, for over a century and a half. Yet each human being (especially the Mediterranean?) has been programmed genetically to want his "finca," to belong to some place, to always come back to the river where he was born, like a good salmon. To the Saxon "to be" includes the finca. Latins need two verbs: "ser" and "estar" to be somebody and to be some place. Are Saxons surer of their Empires?

Lastly today's works are "anxious objects" because Einstein's fourth dimension destroyed the comforting immemorial philosophical illusion of cozy space and time. Only energy exists. The Atom Bomb is energy's best symbol. (Petroleum is small league stuff). So most art works today are "anxious," naturally, because they can only speak of personal moments and anguishes and because we no longer belong to a particular place or space or to a particular time. Yet our genes still work in the old fashioned way.

In Roget's Thesaurus the word "container" or "receptacle" has more meanings and analogies than just about any other word. Even "Mythological Beings" has less. What a Box-full! From womb to tomb we are boxed, even the planet earth is a container: Vessel Earth. We are prisoners of all our little boxes. Mother is so far away but we cry in the womb. No stars.

That is why arte povera (or process or ecology or systemic, or Teatro Mundo or conceptual or earth-works, etc., are now the lustful vanguard art, biodegradable especially because it wants to happen outside the little boxes of museums or art galleries and wants to run away from the would-be consumers of art objects, the impressionable, well dressed, young and jargonistic elite who thought each vanguard was a capturable little box "famous for half an hour" a la Warhol. Bulls in the Colibri Gallery!!

But like original sin the boxes by Fernandez keep attracting us, regardless of current vanguards. He doesn't even like to exhibit them. Too personal? Or might they be roughly handled in a public place?

Is there a future for boxes? Yes. Because the womb is the cavern, and could be the cathedral and so many people feel alone and yet we are all together in the vessel.

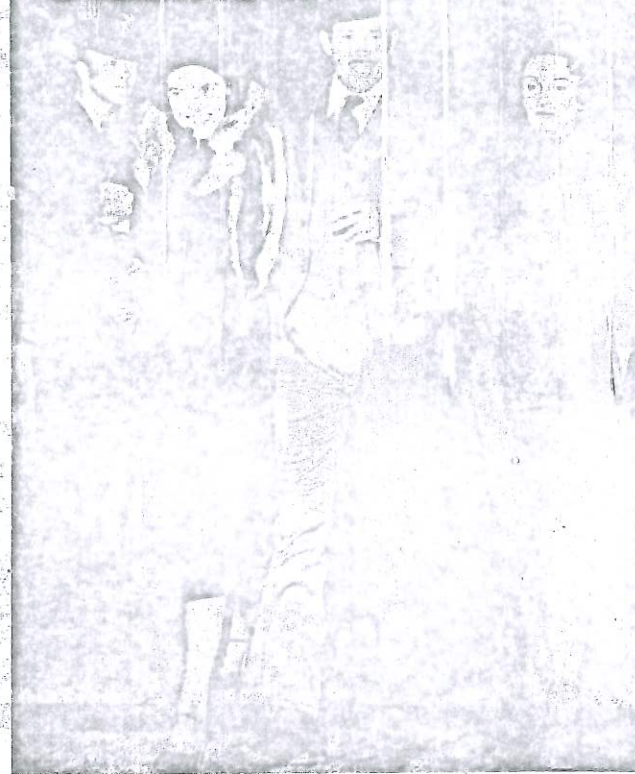
I wish Fernandez would sing to that: a lustful or a religious song to a finca or to an earth mother, (to our sense of humanity), or even better, to his drives or humanity's drives and fears. Then instead of precious, anxious, even tense objects waiting to be fondled and touched, his paintings and boxes will be serene cathedrals, an adult song to life as a conscious preparation for death: an all-encompassing hymn to those who are alive. Or dead. He can do it, because his writings, skulls and other "signs" show he has priestly potentialities.

But then, his boxes might lose their personal mystery and become like Duchamp's "Box in a Suitcase," mere intellectual concepts. It's a tough problem. And the boxes stare at us, and at him hermetically. They are alert, even possibly more so than Cornell's.

Maybe there are stars beyond, Fernandez. Besides, maybe you can laugh at me and at them and for good reasons. Do push on as you did beyond the skulls.

FEBRUARY 3, 1974

'DILLINGER'



"Dillinger" stars, from left, Michelle Phillips, Warren Oates and Chris Leachman. Academy Award winner. Playing at the Radio City, UA, Cinema 150, Cinemas Centro and Fox Delicias.

'Up the Sandbox'

By HOWARD THOMPSON
New York Times News Service

Can a nice young Manhattan matron daydream up some happy independence? What's the harm in a little round-the-clock fantasizing, with the ties to a loving husband, the nursery and the kitchen loosened but not unbroken? No harm, and "Up the Sandbox" is a joy.

Even with a few arid patches and fantasies that unwind a bit methodically at times, Barbra Streisand's sixth film is her sixth hit. Yes, think of it. An hour after seeing the new one, which is ripe, yeasty fun, it's hard not to think of this extraordinary young woman, perfectly wedded to the camera with her instant Modigliani face and timing.

She's the picture true, but the teamwork is admirable. Nearly everything works and meshes, starting with an adroit script by Paul Zindel, the playwright, based on Anne Richardson Holm's novel. Fortunately and even when they're way out, the vignette musings generally miss blandness and strain because our heroine is a bright, likable girl, not a pinhead.

Furthermore, Irvin Kershner has paced the picture — in which Miss Streisand plays a nonsinging role — with a kind of take-it-or-leave-it verve that nimbly enhances the sharp dialogue, the more thoughtful passages and the

performances. As Miss Streisand's leggy-professor husband, a young newcomer named David Selby cellent.

My favorite episode is a cacophonous family dinner, anniversary celebration of the husband's parents, that the daydreamer shares a catfight with her smothering mother, nicely played by Jane Hoffman. Another one, off to a brash start, gets a bit bulky, as Streisand and some black actors invade the Statue of Liberty with a

Another, which lands the star as an anthropologist squarely in the heart of Africa and some hostile natives seems forced — unless you wait Streisand closely.

The slyest portion, certainly, is her gamiest, is her squelching of visiting Fidel Castro at a local rally, with a bold posture reportedly earned the film, was as harmless as buttermilk, rating. As for taste, neither anything jarring about her check-in at a hospital for an abortion as her young spouse lunges testing.

Finally, cementing the occasional lapses and gaps is a striking score by Billy Goldenberg that gives the real pulse of the movie. Other than Barbra's baby and her sixth bou-