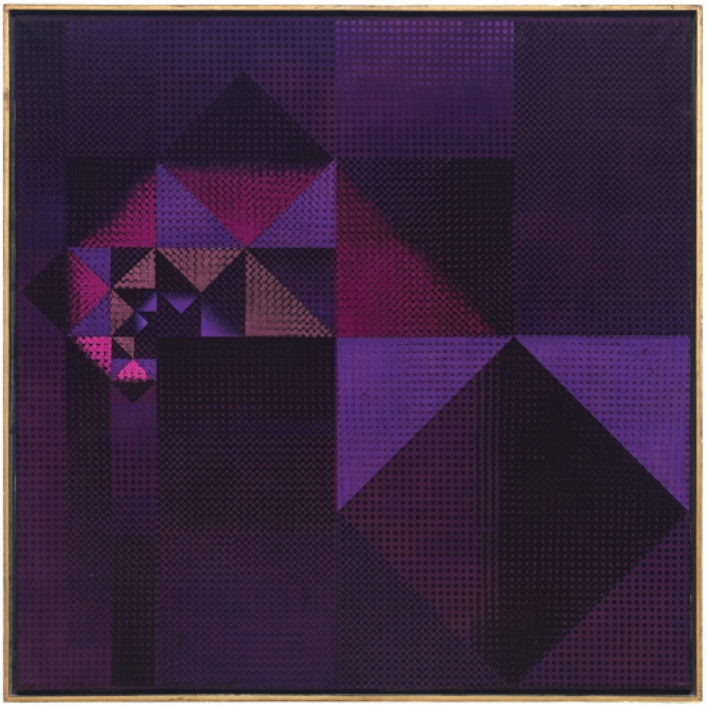
José Antonio Fernández-Muro: Geometry in Transfer

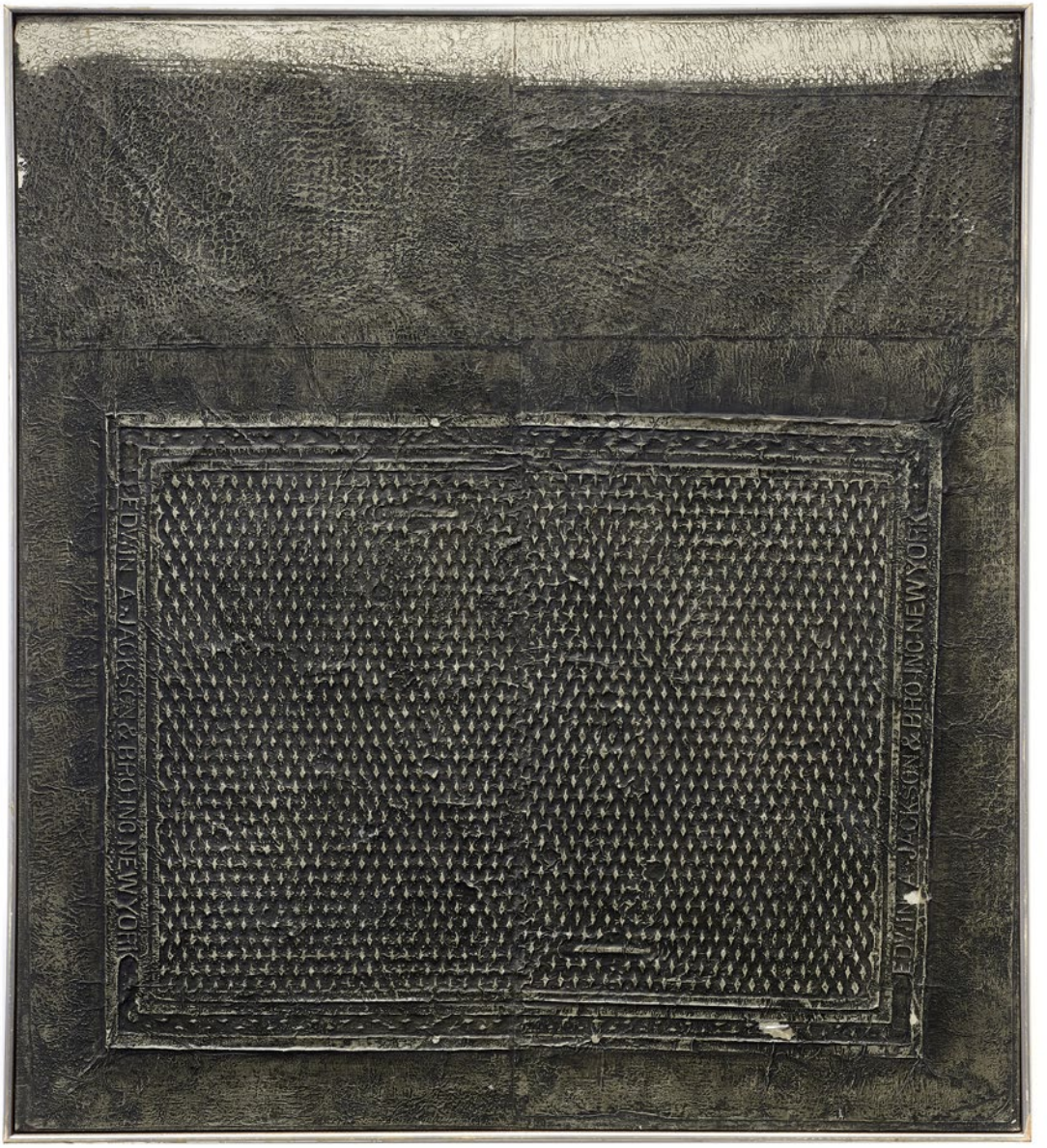


Cuadrados en espiral (Spiral Squares), 1959

Círculo azul (Blue Circle), 1960

Untitled, 1963

Vicious Circle, 1963



Leaden Gate, 1964

New York Cover II, 1964

José Antonio Fernández-Muro: Geometry in Transfer

Megan Kincaid

The Spanish-born painter José Antonio Fernández-Muro (1920–2014) cultivated his artistic ideology and style amid the proliferation of postwar abstraction in Argentina. After establishing himself among the leading abstract painters in the region as a member of Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina (GAMA) and Grupo de los Cinco, he relocated to New York City in 1962 with his wife, the painter Sarah Grilo, and their two children, Verónica and Juan Antonio. Following a year of acclimation to his new environment, he began to reincorporate recognizable imagery sourced from the metropolis's urban topography, such as manhole covers and sewer grates, into his paintings. Among his most identifiable and celebrated, these works are generally regarded as his artistic zenith, achieved in the creative cauldrons of Manhattan.

The nine works included in the exhibition *José Antonio Fernández-Muro: Geometry in Transfer* evaluate these embossed aluminum foil compositions as continuations of the formal language the artist pioneered in Buenos Aires. This revised emphasis recognizes Fernández-Muro's own assessment of his signature transfers not as contingent on the "influence" of the New York art scene, but rather as based on "suggestions received through the elements of the streets, the atmosphere of the city."[1] This essay plumbs this notion of suggestion over influence by reviving the enduring artistic preoccupations and ideological positions he established amid Argentina's vibrant modernist milieu. His interests disclose a fascination with the streetscape as a wellspring of visual stimulation, even in his early figurative paintings. Expanding our understanding of the open road to broader conceptual applications also lends new insight into the artist's restless migrations—his constant travel and robust metropolitan spirit that informed his engagement with street imagery.

Importantly, New York was just an eight-year layover on the artist's roaming travel itinerary. While residing in Midtown Manhattan, he journeyed extensively throughout Europe and Latin America to participate in exhibitions and conduct independent research. And in 1970, the Fernández-Muro family gave up their shared studio space and apartment on East 50th Street for Europe. Taking up residence in Spain, where Grilo and their son, Juan Antonio, had built a modernist family retreat in Marbella, the couple also maintained a studio in Paris. By 1989, Madrid became their permanent home, presenting renewed opportunities to establish enduring relationships with museums and commercial galleries and to participate in the dynamics of cultural production. Both Fernández-Muro and Grilo actively increased the presence of Latin American art in the Spanish capital well into their seventies, staging important coterminous solo exhibitions at the Museo Español de Arte Contemporáneo in 1985 and serving as cofounders of the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Latinoamericano in Madrid, which opened its doors in 1999.

Fernández-Muro's elision of national identification intrigued followers of his work from the start of his career, even before he initiated his lifelong travels. Consequently, his debut on the international stage was propelled by his itinerancy. At only twenty-eight, he was the subject of a solo exhibition at Galería Buchholz in Madrid—the Spanish outpost of the "degenerate art" dealer Karl Buchholz. In 1947, the artist and his family returned to his native Spain, likely to provide the occasion for their precocious Toño (his nickname) to show his recent work to the gallery. An article by Eduardo Llosent for the Spanish newspaper *ABC* covering Fernández-Muro's paintings on view at Buchholz noted the difficulty of ascribing his representational compositions to a single source: "If we did not know the nationality of José Antonio Fernández-Muro, it would be difficult to establish the aesthetic meridian that corresponds with this type of painting. Spain? Italy? We would wonder, without ever choosing."[2] This consternation over place reflects a conventional recourse of art historical study to explain artistic attributes through national identity. Moreover,

Llosent's observation makes possible an alternate approach to this Spanish Argentine peripatetic as someone who held many identifications at once—without ever choosing between them.

Indeed, Fernández-Muro's robust oeuvre of paintings, drawings, and prints exceeds the boundaries of geography or nationality. Though Spanish by birth, the artist resoundingly refused this classification. As his grandson, Mateo Fernández-Muro, remarked in a recent interview, his grandfather was a veritable "melting pot of different visual idioms from Europe, North America, Latin America."[3] Even when living in Buenos Aires, he traveled extensively throughout Europe, first for his own cultural enrichment and later on a UNESCO travel fellowship for museological study. The artist's family would join him on these trips—transforming relaxing vacations into cultural missions, seeking out architectural and artistic landmarks. Numerous color transparencies in the Archive of Sarah Grilo and José Antonio Fernández-Muro recount the family's intellectually driven excursions, including a 1964 trip to Paris they took while living in New York, where they examined everything from the tympanum of Notre-Dame to the posters that adorn the city's winding alleyways.

In each city that the artist called home, he continued to develop a visual language that was grounded in his earliest efforts to extend the affordances of abstraction. His varying style consistently received critical appreciation and cultivated eager collectors in three continents for more than seven decades due to his intuitive handling of color and refined technical processes. To this point, Fernández-Muro's work across these centers possesses a distinctly metropolitan grain—a commitment to modernity and urbanity resulting from cultural stimulation and the visual rhythm of the city.

Nonetheless, it was in Buenos Aires's cultural hub that Fernández-Muro found both his roots and a productive point of departure in the city's recent history of concrete art. The magnetic pull of abstraction wrenched the young artist away from the figurative tradition practiced by his mentor, Vicente Puig, and into the trenches of the geometric and the concrete. Works from his figurative era feature distraught and impoverished urban subjects, embroiled in domestic troubles. A representative painting, *La vecina* (The Neighbor, 1945), is a somber portrait of a middle-aged woman wearing a dress ornamented in a baroque floral pattern posed on her balcony, overlooking a street in the urban center. His portraits of the period typically opened onto urban scenes, illustrating both the local architecture and the trade economy. In *La vecina*, captivated by the operatics of transportation and commerce, Fernández-Muro depicted a horse-drawn carriage hauling precariously placed parcels to unknown destinations. The artist's attention to the street as a site of vital activity presaged his later transfer paintings of the 1960s that grafted the actual surfaces of these thoroughfares.

José Antonio Fernández-Muro, *La vecina* (The Neighbor), 1945. Oil on canvas, 35 7/16 × 27 9/16 in. (90 × 70 cm). © Estate of José Antonio Fernández-Muro

Demonstrating the achievements of his early output, *La vecina* was reproduced alongside a still life in a review of Fernández-Muro's solo exhibition at Buenos Aires's prestigious Galería Witcomb, published by the conservative national newspaper *La Prensa*. The painting confers the artist's mitigation of directions in abstraction alongside longstanding figurative painting traditions in the city—observed acutely in his mixture of crisply rendered geometrical compositions with expressive applications of paint. A 1943 review of these portraits by the essential Argentine art critic Jorge Romero Brest located this duality: "He is preoccupied with obtaining a rich and dense material, with taking care of the precision of the

form, and finally, with achieving a deep expressive unity."[4] The critic's concise evaluation, published in *Argentina Libre*, outlines the three essential principles of the artist's nascent practice: to probe the material outputs of paint, to create a compositional apparatus based on geometrical forms, and to marshal these impulses into evocative, moving portraits. Though the artist abandoned figurative painting by the decade's end, he never relinquished these foundational convictions.

In Buenos Aires, where the figurative tradition coexisted alongside emergent abstract tendencies, Fernández-Muro's portraits and still lifes were institutionally acclaimed, launching him into Argentina's premier circle of visual artists by the mid-1940s. A painting from his 1944 solo show at Galería Witcomb was acquired by the capital's Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, an important achievement reported on by the local press.[5] *La Nación* also celebrated the gold medal prize he won at the XXII Salón de Santa Fe for his still life *El paño azul* (The Blue Cloth). Notwithstanding the success of this style, the artist quickly commenced his second "fundamental stage," beginning what he called "an abstract epoch" based on geometric construction.[6]

Incidentally, Fernández-Muro's first solo exhibition of his representational paintings, in 1944, coincided with the landmark publication of *Arturo*, an artist-run magazine dedicated to the dissemination of concrete abstraction. Following the precepts of the Uruguayan master Joaquín Torres-García, the artists affiliated with the single-issue publication advocated for non-objectivity and formal invention.[7] The injunctions put forth by *Arturo* prompted a profusion of experiments with concrete abstraction, splintering the artists involved into the influential groups Madí and Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención (AACI).

While this particular history has been robustly documented, the generational ramifications of concrete abstraction—both its promises and relative failures—have received less attention. As Alexander Alberro acutely broached in his study of the movement, concrete artists were roundly critiqued for "dilettantism and dismissed for their work as recklessly aloof and indifferent to the plight of the people (*el pueblo*)."[8] The death knell came from inside the Argentine Communist Party, as members grew skeptical of the capacity of non-objective art to incite and reflect social revolution. While Tomás Maldonado, the leader of the more politically oriented AACI, continued to uphold the ideological postulates of concrete art, the loss of the art movement's political organ hampered the growth of his group. New interpretations and developments were required. Fernández-Muro—who was part of "la generación intermedia," a group inspired to work in abstraction by the artists affiliated with *Arturo*—proposed a modified version of concrete abstraction that accounted for some of its shortcomings.[9]

El cuadro es mio y desaparecio?

1953

MANHÃ — Quarta-feira, 5 de Agosto de 1953

ARTES PLÁSTICAS

CONVERSA COM UM ARTISTA JOVEM DA ARGENTINA

Tomás Maldonado, pintor concreto, fala de problemas da arte abstrata, figurativa e

Prepara-se o Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio para a inauguração da mostra de pintores e escultores da Argentina, num ambiente de trabalho intenso, com quadros entrando e saindo, carpinteiros, repórteres, telefones, gente, muito entusiasmo e bom humor. Descem Rouault das paredes com seus claros escuros melancólicos e belos, para colocar telas de côres vivas, geométricas e revolucionárias. Entram sócios reclamando por mais convites e outros que, desejosos

Enquanto a diretora do Museu de Arte Moderna discutia alguns detalhes da disposição das telas com os pintores argentinos Tomás Maldonado e Miguel Ocampo, saiu o flagrante com um belo quadro abstarto

de comparecer ao vernissage, procuram, à última hora, ingressar para o quadro de associados, medida que, dizem sempre, "estavam para tomar há muito tempo, mas que por falta de oportunidade, etc." Estouram flashs e os operários despreocupados continuam seu barulho ensurdecedor.

As datilógrafas secas na cadeira matraqueam suas máquinas. D. Nicota dá ordens em todos os sentidos, atende telefones, e com uma fita métrica na mão vai medindo distâncias, baixando e levantando quadros, pedindo sugestões a Quirino Serpa, ao Décio Vieira, ao professor Aloísio de Paula, a Carmen Portinho — resfriadíssima! — e aos dois pintores argentinos que vieram acompanhando a exposição, e que, possivelmente, estariam um tanto assustados com o movimento, assim à brasileira.

Conseguimos entretanto, conversar um pouco com Tomás Maldonado, deixando Miguel Ocampo para outra oportunidade.

UM CONCRETO EQUILIBRADO E SERENO

Indagamos logo por que fazia pintura concreta, e como ocorrera a sua mudança de linha, caso tenha sido, como a maioria, figurativo antes de concreto.

— As mudanças bruscas de linhas, tanto em mim mesmo como nos outros, sempre me pareceram aspeitas — responde, depois de alguns instantes. Cheguei até à Arte de Buenos Aires. Depois de algumas interrupções para colocação de quadros, volta ao repórter e ao tema, com muita serenidade, como quem já tinha meditado longamente sôbre a matéria. Ainda sôbre o figurativismo lembrou a existência de outra mania:

— E' preciso olhar a arte figurativa com olhos não-figurativos". Ora, isto é repetir, em ordem inversa, o êrro de certo público que insiste e se obstina sempre em descobrir imagens figurativas em pinturas e esculturas concretas.

— Não é lícito associar uma linha curva com a cintura de uma senhora sem roupa, como também não é permitido a cintura de uma senhora sem roupa reduzir-se a uma linha curva... E' preciso reconhecer de uma vez por tôdas, que o único modo de olhar a arte figurativa é com olhos figurativos, assim como o único modo de olhar a arte concreta é com olhos da arte concreta. A cada um o que lhe pertence...

A PINTURA MODERNA NA ARGENTINA

Sôbre a situação da arte moderna no seu país, Maldonado evita um pronunciamento direto. em considerações, sôbre a dências da arte moderna." tôda a parte devem solucio blemas iguais.

— Porque se seus propósi sempre são concordes, sua vivida, é a mesma. Si igualmente, do espírito reb além disso, juntos, promove beldia do mundo. Alguns poderão dissimular sua o ção sentido, mostrando-se certantes, terroríficas ou vas. Outras, com sinismo, proclamar-se inofensivas. nunca conseguem fazer por muito tempo sua secre resa combatente. Por tôda te, a arte moderna é co porque, em tôda parte, sab ela é combatente.

Insistimos sôbre a existê não de apoio oficial à arte na em Buenos Aires. Ele responde:

— Em meu país, a atit cial com respeito às "tendê arte moderna" não difer plesmente de outras atit resto do mundo. E se algu za se pode dizer sôbre es de é que começou a ser p ra.

E explica ser algo igual os ingleses, na crônica di os, definem como "situaç da", ou seja, situação na ambiguidade e a ausência reza não chegam a afast ranças, permitindo mesmo lar algumas.

— O certo é que, se algu res oficiais continuam manifestações de um aca e de uma fealdade desco outros, ao contrário, favor tendências modernas e se por assentar as bases de u tura atual e viva.

Quanto à reação do públ tenho, tem progredido gra te nestes últimos anos a ção de correntes modernas tanto, a falta de iniciativ das desfavorecem o surto, volvimento.

O GRUPO DE ARTIST CONCRETOS

Respondendo sôbre as ori formação dêste grupo que amanhã, o entrevistado co ceu o origem e expos seus dez elementos realiza ano aproximadamente, em Aires. E' apenas uma frent tistas de vanguarda, enco se entre êles alguns arqui Miguel Ocampo, Clorindo Rafael Onetto.

E encerrando a entrevist donado manifesta a satisfa sente em poder expor co colegas no Museu de Arte na do Rio, cujo trabalho mismo louvou. Fôz também vor de quatro jovens artista leiros cuja pintura conhece Abrahão Palatnik, Ivan Se raldo de Barros e Lygia Cl

MUSEU DE ARTE MODERNA DO RIO

Newspaper clipping of the article "Conversa com um artista jovem da Argentina," in *Correio da Manhã*, August 5, 1953

Key to understanding this successor to concrete art in Argentina is a clipping from an interview with Maldonado in the Brazilian newspaper *Correio da Manhã* about

concrete painting and the problems of abstract art, published on August 5, 1953. Speaking in Rio de Janeiro on the occasion of an exhibition of work by GAMA's members at the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio, Maldonado expounded on the forces acting against modernism in Argentina, while celebrating those who "favor modern tendencies and strive to lay the foundations of a current and living culture."[10] Fernández-Muro, whose work was included in the exhibition, represented this contingent. In fact, he was promoted as the anonymous poster child for the generation carrying out the "rebellion of the world." His unidentified painting—comprising geometric compartments in black and white and captioned as "um belo quadro abstrato"—stands between Maldonado and Miguel Ocampo and was positioned as the embodiment of the new directions of concrete art. Recognizing the painting as one of his own in a cursive inscription at the top of the torn-out newspaper page, Fernández-Muro inked, "The painting is mine and has disappeared?"[11]

The disappearing painting registers the quiet contribution of Fernández-Muro to the progress of geometric abstraction in Argentina. His particular geometric schemas, notable in their slight irregularity and skewed orthogonal lines, represented the frontier of abstraction in Latin America. Drawing on his extensive training with Puig, where he developed an interest in figuration that featured the stacked geometries of architectural facades, he quickly established a distinct abstract style that refigured variegated buildings into simple shapes. With geometric compartments incised with lines both delicate and hefty, these compositions were soon exported as emissaries of the recent developments of the Argentine avant-garde. In addition to participating in the GAMA group show at the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio, which traveled to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Fernández-Muro was featured in the second Bienal de São Paulo in 1953. While the inaugural biennial in Brazil championed the rigid doctrine of concretism as expounded by Max Bill, Fernández-Muro and his cohort would reimagine this orthodoxy and radically revise its mathematical purity two years later.

The next year would bring more contact between Fernández-Muro and the forebears of concrete abstraction in Buenos Aires. Selected by the entrepreneur Jacobo Soifer to participate in the collective Buen diseño para la industria from 1954 to 1955, the artist and Grilo joined Ocampo and Alfredo Hlito in producing textile swatches intended for mass production.[12] This crossover between industry and the avant-garde encouraged Fernández-Muro in his impulse to utilize commercial grade products in his high art compositions, generating textual overlays like those imagined in his designs for Buen diseño. Shortly thereafter, he began to use perforated screens to add textured surfaces to his geometric paintings. These works, including the two earliest in the exhibition, *Cuadrados en espiral* (Spiral Squares, 1959) and *Círculo azul* (Blue Circle, 1960), overlaid metal grates and other industrially produced devices onto complex, sweeping geometric composites. For *Cuadrados en espiral*, the artist covered the conjoined network of fractal diamonds and squares with a densely packed grid. In *Círculo azul*, a luminous circle and a cavernous expanse of loosely defined geometries are overpainted with numerous campaigns using the perforated surfaces, with the repetition of the grid transfer producing dizzying optical effects. These expressive surfaces, layered onto hard-edge compositions, further demonstrate Fernández-Muro's advancement of concrete art in affective and dimensional directions. His experiments with transfers compounded over the next few years and found new outputs once he was living in New York City, ultimately leading to his most celebrated series.

In 1962, the artist immigrated to the United States, settling in New York City so that Grilo could complete a John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship. Their time there exceeded the length of her grant, as both artists discovered a sustaining climate in the city's international art world and many exhibition opportunities for Latin American artists. Fernández-Muro's group identifications in Buenos Aires finely conditioned his pictorial principles, preparing him to generatively modify his emphasis in New York on urban imagery, the commonplace, and the transfer technique. Suiting his predilections, the street reemerged as the subject of his transfer paintings. As with *La vecina*, the physical attributes of the pavement and the signs of commerce and infrastructure took center stage. Meanwhile, Grilo also established her own signature

style during the same years and in response to shared stimuli—dense smatterings of text, stencils, cursive handwriting, and loose scribbles echoing street graffiti and torn posters.

Sarah Grilo, *Charts are dull*, 1965. Oil on canvas, 72 × 73 in. (183 × 185 cm). © Estate of Sarah Grilo

Indexes of urban life, the New York paintings were typically composed of sheets of foil that Fernández-Muro pressed against street surfaces to capture images such as Campbell Foundry manhole covers and sewer grates manufactured by a handful of now defunct forges. Though the artist had previously utilized transfers to embellish his geometric paintings, his practice was quickly assessed by critics as an extension of Pop art's preoccupation with commonplace objects and mass culture. John Canaday, the arts critic for the *New York Times* who extensively covered Fernández-Muro's exhibitions in the United States, interpreted the appearance of manhole covers as "an unexpected reflection of pop's interest in the everyday."[13]

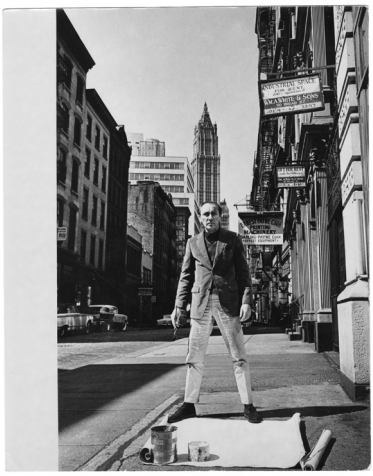
Canaday would redress his own simplification of Fernández-Muro's influences in a review published just five months later, observing that the artist's gilded panels "revived and polished up some devices that he tried out as long as ten years ago."[14] In addition to consistent interests in "vibrating dots" and textured surfaces, Fernández-Muro had earlier and independently come to similar conclusions as his Pop art comrades about the need to address mass culture in the visual arts.[15] Writing in 1958, four years before the apotheosis of Pop[16] and his resettlement in New York, Fernández-Muro acknowledged the trend to "equate" the plastic arts "with certain mass consumer products."[17] The artist was well aware of the implications of the culture industry flirting with the high arts, lamenting that this depreciation of visual art forms served a "generalized expression communicable to everyone."[18] His rejoinder to the "crisis of the arts" was a retrenched commitment to the highest levels of craftsmanship.[19]

In spite of his objections to the "persistent modification of formal appearances" common to mass consumer products, Fernández-Muro turned to these same industrial products in his transfer paintings.[20] His meticulous material-based practice allowed him to enter the arena of the found consumer object, and in 1954 to work in textile production for Buen diseño, while maintaining the rigor he associated with the plastic arts. Notably, his transfers of external surfaces in both Buenos Aires and New York were achieved through a multi-step process that required extreme technical skill. Thomas Messer, then director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and an essential champion of Latin American art in the 1960s, wittily pronounced this as "the artist's refusal to loosen his wrist."[21] In any case, Messer accurately identified the extreme control and precision that Fernández-Muro applied both to material facture and compositional structure.

To be sure, the artist estimated that his exacting process differentiated him from the Pop artists to whom he was so frequently likened. Responding to a set of questions posed by the Cuban art critic Luis Lastra Almeida for a 1962 feature in *Américas* on Latin American artists working in New York, Fernández-Muro fervently denounced the waning emphasis placed by his new peers on what he called "the high values of painting."[22] Disparaging the "false 'popcorn' culture" that undermined artistic integrity, the artist distanced himself from the emergence of what has been called "bad painting" and the growing dominance of Pop art.[23] It bears reminding, however, that at the time of Fernández-Muro's rebuke, the two primary figures of Pop in the United States also relied on handmade exactitude: Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol both painted manually, faithfully replicating their appropriated subjects in a brawny visual language.

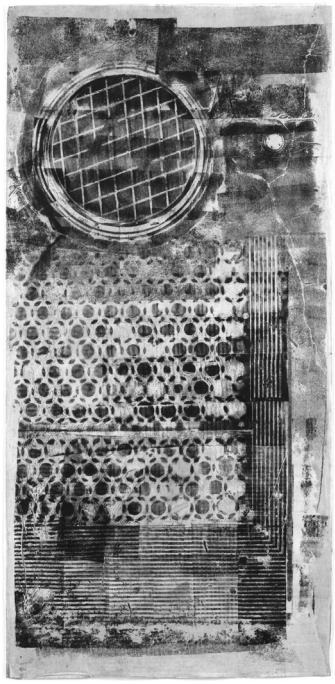
Despite the centrality of process to the artist, neither Fernández-Muro nor Messer, who was among his most vocal

advocates, ventured into cataloguing his 1963 turn to aluminum foil rubbings in their writing. Records of this process are best disclosed by a set of street portraits and studio snapshots taken by the Bonino Gallery staff photographer Lisl Steiner. Magisterial images of the artist wielding rolls of paper on downtown streets unveil the studio Fernández-Muro unearthed in the city. Yet these press photographs taken in 1965 are somewhat misleading. Posed in an assertive stance, the artist grasps a fine paintbrush in his hand and employs opened cans of paint as paperweights to hold down wispy sheets of white paper. In actuality, the majority of his transfer paintings were accomplished by impressing metal sheets onto sidewalks and metal grates, likely using his hands or other blunt devices to graft the raised textures.



Lisl Steiner, José Antonio Fernández-Muro, 1965. © Lisl Steiner

As this process reminds us, the paintings made between 1963 and 1966 align Fernández-Muro's practice with the tradition of surrealist frottage in New York, resurrected in the 1950s through the efforts of the émigré artist Sari Dienes. The Hungarian-born assemblage artist and printmaker had first begun making inked frottage impressions on tombstones and, starting in 1953, on New York streets. Her sidewalk rubbings were a physically taxing business, requiring her to carry and unroll large sheets of paper in order to ink large expanses of pavement. She solicited help from younger artists, including the then-obscure Jasper Johns, who translated the technique to produce his infamous castings. The parallels between the images of Dienes at work and the staged photographs of Fernández-Muro on Beekman Street a decade later locate a historical trajectory that inured the Argentine painter to the New York avant-garde.



Sari Dienes, *Soho Sidewalk*, ca. 1953–55. Ink rubbing on Webril, 80 × 38 1/2 in. (203.2 × 97.8 cm). Courtesy the Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2021 Sari Dienes Foundation/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Undeveloped negatives displayed for the first time in this exhibition—also taken by Steiner—show the artist assembling numerous impressed aluminum sheets, fabricating a complex aggregate of multiple parts. Fernández-Muro sometimes stamped one image repeatedly on a single sheet, creating a grid composed of street symbols. In his small-scale works, he often meditated on the possibilities of a single surface texture. A suite of four small aluminum paintings in this exhibition chart the various directions of his transfers. For example, *G* (1966) addresses systems of measurement and recording—numerical and alphabetical alongside simple mark-making ledgers. Alternatively, *New York Cover II* (1964) and *Untitled* (1963) demonstrate different modes of stamping a single iconography multiple times. Whereas *Untitled* produces an imperfect repetition of abstract lines, crosshatches, and the letters "A" and "C,"

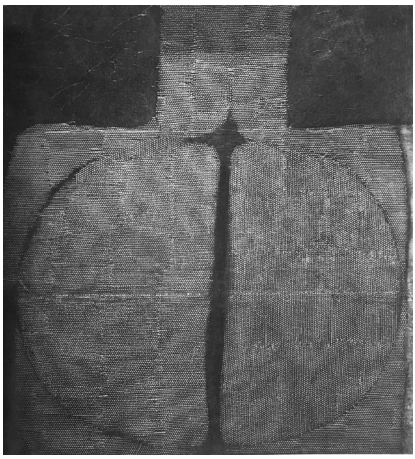
in *New York Cover II* the artist neatly stamped the same manhole cover twice on the same sheet. The latter, though, still demonstrates the arbitrary nature of frottage—wherein unexpected surfaces and imprecise processes yield unpredictable results.

Lisl Steiner, José Antonio Fernández-Muro at work in his New York studio, ca. 1965. © Lisl Steiner

For his large-scale compositions such as *Rojo (Leaden Gate)* (Red [Leaden Gate], 1964), the artist often combined two or more embossed sheets, imprinting different grates or found textures. This practice of first isolating and then combining multiple symbols allowed the lived sensation of the city to emerge. Walking briskly or looking down occasionally, city dwellers receive visual stimulation as fragmented clips that are recombined into coherent wholes. In this way, Fernández-Muro's medley of surface textures, arranged in rigid compositional frameworks, provide more than just visual play—they function as cognates for a form of modern looking.

Unlike inked frottage, the embossed aluminum assemblages also share the material properties of the original surfaces. The metal sheets have a material affinity with the cast iron grates—thus, applying one industrial byproduct of metal to capture the likeness of another. Indeed, the artist described this period as "free abstract 'matter' painting," emphasizing the importance of the physical properties over the incorporation of images.[24] To this end, Fernández-Muro often amplified the shiny foil by carefully overpainting sections of the assembled sheets with oil paints. After combining the individual pieces of foil and pasting them onto rigid backboards, the artist lathered lustrous coats in gold, red, and other radiant hues. His color choices added a celestial dimension that recalled ecclesiastical applications of metal and gems. As a reporter for the *Buenos Aires Herald* exclaimed in 1962, the paintings were "glowing yet severe like the richly draped and gilded interior of a cathedral . . . from the largest painting in burning Cardinal red to the small gold reliefs that have the solid richness of Byzantine ikons."[25] In Fernández-Muro's metallurgical manipulations, trodden sewer grates ascend to the divine.

These works also tease open the seams of rigid, non-representational art. By selecting symbols with emphatic geometries, such as the circular manhole cover and the rectangular subway grate, Fernández-Muro displaced recognizable images into abstract devices. Intermediary paintings made in New York prior to his incorporation of street iconography demonstrate his consistent use of overlapping geometrical schemas in purely abstract paintings. *Colima I* (1962), of this hinge moment, and *Leaden Gate* (1964), which contains a city utility cover, both place rectangular forms as the primary element of the composition. The circle inscribed at the center of *Colima I*, likely achieved by incising the surface, recalls the manhole covers of the works made just two years later. In this way, Fernández-Muro asserts that commonplace symbols that depend on geometrical forms can take on non-representational properties.



José Antonio Fernández-Muro, *Colima I*, 1962. Oil and mixed media on canvas. 69 × 63 in. (175 × 160 cm). © Estate of José Antonio Fernández-Muro

The title of this exhibition, *Geometry in Transfer*, refers simultaneously to Fernández-Muro's practice of imposing transferred surfaces onto his geometrical

compositions, the translation of ideas between Buenos Aires and New York, and the expansion of concrete art at mid-century. From the 1950s until his final known work made in the 2000s, Fernández-Muro remained a dedicated practitioner of abstraction while continuously testing its boundaries by integrating external textures and referents. For him, symbols proffered abstract potential. So engrained in our visual worlds, they operate fugitively—moving beyond their initial contexts to refer back to the geometric and the elemental.

NOTES

1
José Antonio Fernández-Muro, quoted in Luis Lastra Almeida, "Artists among Skyscrapers" in *Américas* 15, no. 1 (January 1963): 28.

2
Eduardo Llosent, "Vázquez Díaz, Illanes, Fernández-Muro," *ABC*, 1949, n.p.

3
Mateo Fernández-Muro in Juan Gabriel Ramírez Bolívar, "Interview with Mateo Fernández-Muro," *Vistas* 6 (November 2021): 45.

4
Jorge Romero Brest, "Solo Dos Valores Ofrece Su Salón," *Argentina Libre*, 1943, n.p. All translations are by the author.

5
An article published in *La Nación* reported that the artist's landscape painting *La ventana de Santo Domingo* was acquired by the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, describing the honor as a "reconocimiento estimulante" (stimulating recognition). "Exposición de José A. Fernández-Muro en la Galería Witcomb de Buenos Aires," *La Nación*, June 1944, n.p.

6
José Antonio Fernández-Muro quoted in Julio Trenas, "Fernández-Muro y la pintura 'máterica,'" *El Pueblo*, no. 33, 1966. From the original text in Spanish: "Entiendo que en ella hay tres etapas fundamentales: una figurativa, que va del 43 al 48; viene luego una época abstracta, geométrico constructiva, y después, una abstracta libre 'matérica,' que es la que estoy haciendo en este momento."

7
For an informative account of concrete abstraction in Latin America that contextualizes the significance of *Arturo* (1944), see Mari Carmen Ramírez, "Vital Structures: The Constructive Nexus in South America," in *Inverted Utopias*, ed. Mari Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea, 191–201.

8
Alexander Alberro, *Abstraction in Reverse: The Reconfigured Spectator in Mid-Twentieth-Century Latin American Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 65.

9
Jorge Romero Brest opened his essay for the 1961 exhibition *Cinco pintores* at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires, by describing the artists, including Fernández-Muro, Grilo, Ocampo, Kazuya Sakai, and Clorindo Testa, as "la generación intermedia de artistas nacionales."

10
"Conversa com um artista jovem da Argentina," *Correio da Manhã*, August 5, 1953, n.p.

11
Inscription on a clipping of "Conversa com um artista jovem da Argentina" by José Antonio Fernández-Muro, from the Archive of Sarah Grilo and José Antonio Fernández-Muro.

12
In 1954, Fernández-Muro was commissioned by the entrepreneur Jacobo Soifer to produce various pattern designs for commercial purposes. The artists formed a communal workshop, sharing designs and formats. This important crossover between industry and the avant-garde included Fernández-Muro, Grilo, Ocampo, and Hlito, as well as Maldonado, who participated infrequently due to travel.

13
John Canaday, "Art: Argentina's Blue Plate Special; New Painters Shown in Minneapolis," *New York Times*, September 9, 1964, 49.

14
John Canaday, "Julius Bissier, 72, Given Biennial at Lefebre's," *New York Times*, February 13, 1965, 18.

15
Canaday, "Julius Bissier," 18.

16
In 1962, Andy Warhol's famed exhibition of *Campbell's Soup Cans* was held at Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles while Leo Castelli Gallery hosted Roy Lichtenstein's breakthrough solo presentation.

17
José Antonio Fernández-Muro, "Declaraciones para la revista *N.V.*," 1958. Unpublished note in the Archive of Sarah Grilo and José Antonio Fernández-Muro.

18
Fernández-Muro, "Declaraciones para la revista *N.V.*"

19
Fernández-Muro, "Declaraciones para la revista *N.V.*"

20
Fernández-Muro, "Declaraciones para la revista *N.V.*"

21
Thomas M. Messer, "José Antonio Fernández-Muro," *José Antonio Fernández-Muro: Paintings* (New York: Bonino Gallery, 1965).

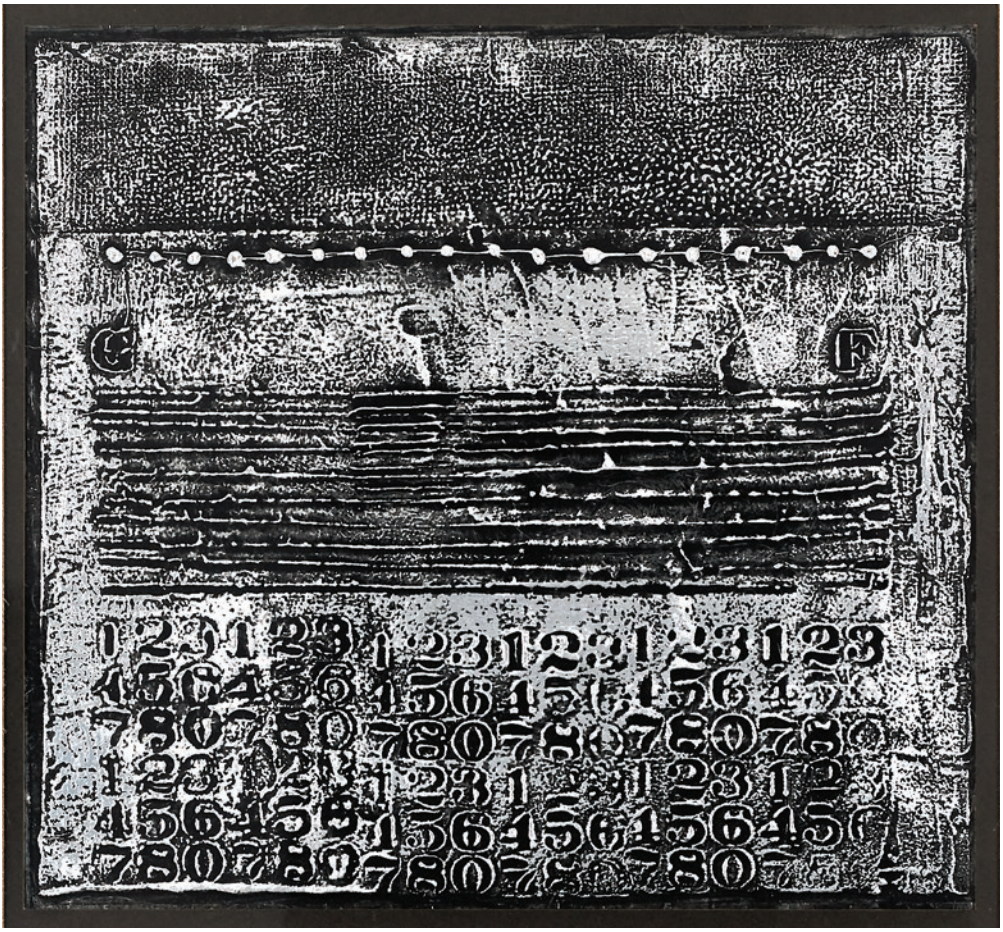
22
Fernández-Muro, quoted in Lastra Almeida, "Artists among Skyscrapers," 28.

23
Lastra Almeida, "Artists among Skyscrapers," 28.

24
José Antonio Fernández-Muro, quoted in Julio Trenas, "Fernández-Muro y la pintura 'máterica,'" *El Pueblo*, no. 33, 1966.

25
"He Has Found Spanish Gold," *Buenos Aires Herald*, July 5, 1962.

Great Society, 1965



G, 1966

CHECKLIST

Cuadrados en espiral (Spiral Squares), 1959
Oil on canvas
45 5/8 × 45 5/8 in. (116.2 × 116.2 cm)

Círculo azul (Blue Circle), 1960
Oil on canvas
51 × 38 1/8 in. (129.5 × 96.8 cm)

Untitled, 1963
Oil and aluminum foil on canvas
12 1/8 × 9 3/4 in. (31 × 25 cm)

Vicious Circle, 1963
Oil and aluminum foil on canvas
19 7/8 × 18 in. (50.8 × 45.7 cm)

Leaden Gate, 1964
Oil and aluminum foil on canvas
40 3/4 × 36 3/4 in. (103.5 × 93.3 cm)

New York Cover II, 1964
Oil and aluminum foil on canvas
18 × 15 in. (45.7 × 38.1 cm)

Rojo (Leaden Gate) (Red [Leaden Gate]), 1964
Oil and aluminum foil on canvas
40 × 36 in. (101.6 × 91.4 cm)

Great Society, 1965
Mixed media on board
18 × 15 in. (46 × 40 cm)

G, 1966
Oil and aluminum foil on board
9 3/4 × 11 in. (25.4 × 27.3 cm)

All works from the collection of the Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA)

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