

# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

LOS ANGELES

CARLEE FERNANDEZ

ACME

Carlee Fernandez's show "World According to Xavier" (all works 2010) reads like an affectionate yet brutally honest letter to her young son. Its diverse offerings—sculpture, video, photography—spanned the full spectrum of maternal love, from sensual rapture through humor and horror to intimations of death. Abounding in beauty and tenderness, the works also verge on the grotesque—as is usual in Fernandez's oeuvre. For more than a decade, the L.A. artist has altered and manipulated taxidermied animals, dissolving the boundary between natural and unnatural by melding a rhino head with a stepladder, a rat with a cluster of plastic grapes and, in a 2004 series of



View of Carlee Fernandez's exhibition, showing *Abstraction in Green* (left) and *Hanging Lily Pads* (right), both 2010; at ACME.

performance photos, half a black bear with her own naked body.

Birds and cats dominate most of the nine new works. *To Xavier, I Love You* is a lavish avian pile-up, balanced at eye level on a metal tripod. Two stuffed peacocks (one standard colors, the other snowy white) sit side by side atop the belly of an upended black swan, while a white swan with wings outstretched mounts the whole group like the mythical ravisher of Leda. A little blue parrot tucks snugly under the top bird's breast. In *Abstraction in Green*, Fernandez has wound black rope around a muscular chunk of redwood to string up a row of nine limp parakeets ranging neatly from lemon yellow to lime green. The artist thus riffs on still-life paintings that exult in bounty—the spoils of the hunt, the lush textures of exotic feathers—while whispering of mortality.

Fernandez also cleverly domesticates the wild, nurturing greenery in the hollowed-out back of a bobcat (*Derek's Plant*), and dangling a cluster of coral festooned with green and gold tassels overhead like a chandelier (*Hanging Lily Pads*). In her photographs and videos, she and her infant son are symbolically tamed, their wriggling flesh subordinated to abstract designs and art-historical references. The pair's legs poke out of diagonally striped tubular sheaths in the short film *Undulating Form in Black and White*. In the C-print *Hues from Brown to Pink*, the two stand strapped together, chest to chest, on a tree stump, like symbiotic semi-heroic statuary.

Fernandez displays earnest, appealing expressions for the camera, confidently harnessing multiple visual and visceral effects, much as she does by more oblique and impersonal means in her sculptures. Press materials characterized the show as her present to Xavier. Clearly, the silly, gorgeous and macabre world Fernandez conjures is an exceptionally candid take on the vexed gift of life she has given her child.

—Leah Ollman