



Anthony Hernandez 1988

Anthony Hernandez's photos, such as "Landscapes for the Homeless #1" (1988), are rendered impassively.

ART REVIEW

Reaching catharsis by 2 different paths

Stirring conceptual art, subdued photographs leave impact

By Charles Desmarais

The small, intense exhibition by Jill Magid at the San Francisco Art Institute and the sprawling show of photographs by Anthony Hernandez at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art have little in common. Magid's is a single work comprising several components: video, typescript documents, a large flower arrangement, a diamond ring. Hernandez's is composed of 160 photographs, many of them large in scale, presented in series but each a separate work of art.

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Jarred Alterman

Artist Jill Magid exhumed an urn containing the ashes of the late architect Luis Barragán for "The Proposal."

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Exhibits balance emotion, intellect

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Their topics are quite different, too. But I can't help comparing them for the way they address themselves to us as viewers, and the way each of them balances the uncertain weight of emotion and intellect on the fulcrum of their unique statement.

The Magid project, "The Proposal," has gotten ample attention in advance, both in earlier exhibitions and particularly by way of an Aug. 1 New Yorker article with the wholly accurate, utterly confounding title, "The Architect Who Became a Diamond." The story is that the artist took an interest in Luis Barragán, Mexico's greatest modern architect, who died in 1988. But when she tried to delve deeper into his life and work, she found that access to his archives and copyright to images of his buildings are severely restricted.

It turns out that a nonprofit foundation in Switzerland now has rights to most of Barragán's intellectual property. The foundation is controlled by Federica Zanco, an architectural historian who persuaded her husband to acquire the materials and set up the organization. Zanco has published a major monograph (now rare enough in English to command a price of \$200 or more), and she is at work on a comprehensive catalog of all the architect's work. But her attitude toward other researchers puts me in mind of a former colleague who, for more than two decades, allowed no one to see the ancient papyrus he was studying for fear that they might publish anything at all before he finished his magnum opus.

Magid reads the situation somewhat differently, casting the issue not as scholarly jealousy, but in psychosexual terms. And so the exhibition at San Francisco Art Institute documents in fine detail a two-year process: Winning family approval to exhume an urn of Barragán's ashes; removing and sending some to be synthesized into a diamond; and offering the diamond to Zanco, set into an engagement ring, in exchange for the return to Mexico of the archive. As the artist characterizes it, she offers "the body for the body of work."

A short video records the disinterment, the sound of chisels dislodging mortar ringing through the gallery. Library-style vitrines displaying official-looking documents provide background. A "Tapete de Flores" (Carpet of Flowers), like the ones some Mexican families create as Day of the Dead memorials, is centered on the floor. On a mezzanine, the theatrically lit diamond ring is displayed in a wall niche behind glass. Nearby, another vitrine holds a facsimile of a handwritten letter from besotted artist to obsessed archivist.

To call "The Proposal" conceptual art, which I do, is not to say that it is art that appeals primarily to the intellect. To the contrary, it is a full-on emotional assault, manipulating our fears of loss and death. Magid, no less than the commercial firm that turns the cindered corpse of a person



Stefan Jaeggi / Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen

A diamond ring with the inscription "I am wholeheartedly yours" is part of "The Proposal" at the San Francisco Art Institute.



Anthony Hernandez



Anthony Hernandez 1979

"Forever 51," left, is the quintessential Anthony Hernandez picture, while "Public Transit Areas #46" is one of his early photographs.

Jill Magid, "The Proposal": 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays; until 7 p.m. Tuesdays. Through Dec. 10. Free. Walter and McBean Galleries, San Francisco Art Institute, 800 Chestnut St., S.F. (415) 771-7020. www.sfaai.edu

Anthony Hernandez: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. daily except Wednesdays; until 9 p.m. Thursdays. Sept. 24-Jan. 1. \$19-\$25 (Free 18 and younger). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., S.F. (415) 357-4000. www.sfmoma.org

into a permanent crystal, plays on our impossible desire to own love.

"Anthony Hernandez," which opens at SFMOMA Saturday, Sept. 24, reveals an entirely different kind of artist. All picture-making is, to an extent, a simple matter of pointing: Look here, not there. Straight photography is partic-

ularly bound by that rule; it's what makes the medium the most cerebral of the arts (sight being the most intellectual of the senses).

Hernandez embraces such restraint. He began his mature career with a strong body of pictures more or less in the style of Garry Winogrand. People on the busy streets and beaches of Los Angeles, mostly defined by their gaze — strained, averted, hooded, hidden. By the 1980s, he was stepping back, often to where "person" became "figure," lost in a sterile expanse. (I organized a show from his "Public Use Areas" series in 1982.) Then, in mid-decade, the people disappeared.

I imagine that had to do with the artist's realization that the work was not about the individuals in the pictures, after all. The people were, if not exactly incidental, merely actors. The real subject was the

environment in which they were set.

It is an essential, if subtle, distinction. In his photographs, Hernandez observes but does not judge. None of the later works in the exhibition depict bucolic scenes, but even the emptied homeless encampments, the landscapes ravaged by failed development, the long views into the sewers of Los Angeles are rendered impassively. They are — they must be, to be visible to us at all — ordered visual arrangements of chaotic social settings.

I did not cry in the Anthony Hernandez exhibition, as I did when viewing "The Proposal." And yet, the SFMOMA show leaves me with a sense of loss more profound and, Lord help me, more permanent than anything I take from Magid's calculated tearjerker.

Maybe it's that mechanism we call catharsis, that purging of stifled emotion we seek from

a good sad story. Magid wrings it out of us; Hernandez withholds it. As we finish our visit to her exhibition, Magid gives us a musical soundtrack and the scent of dying marigolds, filtering through the gallery, as we read in her letter, "You needn't feel alone anymore."

One of Hernandez's latest photographs — from the series "Forever," which, according to curator Erin O'Toole's catalog essay, records details in the surroundings of the homeless — centers on a small clod of concrete, gray against a gray block wall, suspended on a bright orange thread. It is the quintessential Anthony Hernandez picture: a static event in monotone, crammed with detail yet dumbly deflecting our comprehension.

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