



Rudy Fernandez (b. 1948)

***Destruction by Fire #4: Fall from Grace***

1995

Mixed media including lead, wood, paint, ceramic FA1996.10

**Look:** Have the group spend time looking at the artworks in the Southwest contemporary art gallery. Then gather the audience in front of the artwork to explore using conversation and questions.

**Inform:** The artist is using the traditional Mexican folk art form known as a *retablo* to present a very personal expression of his life experiences. By doing this he is asserting his connection to his culture while also remaining an individual. His painting is placed in a window-like frame and draws our attention to collage of forms that are painted and carved.

**Do:** Look at the various details at the center of the composition. **Ask:** **What details has the artist included?** As they identify the details, discuss the symbolic meaning of some of these. *The symbols may also have meaning for the viewers that are the same or different than the artist.*



**Cactus with prickly pear fruit** – for the artist, is a representation of a person’s true self. Although he carved these with a smooth texture, in reality a cactus has sharp, barbed thorns. He sees people as maintaining a hidden guardedness with which they protect themselves.

**Flames** – a symbol of violence, trauma and death

**Scrap of paper** (top right) – reads TEOTIHUACHAN (pronounced: te-o-tee-wa- con), the name of a great city in Mexico. The designs reference the ancient murals that were painted there. Here we see his reference to his pride in his indigenous heritage.

**Papers** (bottom right) – text written on one reads “Cuando los padres” (pronounced: kwan-doe-los-pa-dres) translation: When the fathers) and may reference the arrival of the Spanish missionaries. But may also hold private meaning for the artist.

**Red heart with a white saguaro cactus** – the artist’s “signature” and a symbolic representation of himself, the cactus acting as his soul.

**Carved red heart** – *might* remind some of the Catholic symbol of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, representing his love for humanity. It *may* have meaning for the viewers, ask the visitors to offer suggestions.

**Cascading white drape** – purity and innocence that has been crushed (by life experiences)

**Inform:** **The frame** also has symbolic intention. The three hearts in the lower portion of the frame signify: intimate love, love of family, and the love of friends – the artist identifies all three as sustaining him throughout his life.

**Ask:** **With this information, what do you think the artist means to convey by framing the inner composition with the very heavy outline of the lead frame.** (*There is no right answer, this question is to continue thinking about how we interpret symbolism in art for a broader meaning.*)

Other artworks in the exhibition:



Jose Rafael Aragon  
Retablo of Crucifixion, ca. 1840



Unrecorded artist  
Tin nicho, late 19<sup>th</sup> century

**Key Terms:** *retablo* (pronounced ray-ta-blow) a devotional painting; a frame or shelf enclosing decorated panels or revered objects above and behind an altar.

**About the Artist:** A Chicano artist, Rudy Fernandez was born in Trinidad, CO. His formal education includes: University Utah, 1967-69; Bachelor of Fine Arts, University Colorado, 1974; and Master of Fine Arts, Washington State University, 1976. He has been included in exhibitions at National Hispanic Cultural Center of New Mexico, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Tuscon Museum of Art, The Corcoran Gallery of Art and Museum of Mazalan, Mexico.

Sources: Julie Sasse, "Private Icons, Cultural Perspectives: The Paintings and Sculpture by Rudy Fernandez" (2001) <http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/2aa/2aa634>