

Fanny Sanín in front of her work *Acrylic No. 2*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas. 60 x 58 in. (152.4 x 147.3 cm). *

FRANCINE BIRBRAGHER-ROZENCWAIG, PHD.

Francine Birbragher-Rozencwaig [FBR]
How did you get started as an artist?

Fanny Sanín [FS]

I remember that I liked drawing and painting since I was little. My sister Rosa Sanín and I were very close, and we both drew. Geography and zoology classes were the ones I liked the most because I could paint maps and animals. My parents saw that we had a lot of interest, and they gave us a private teacher who gave us painting and drawing classes at home. When we decided to go to university, we entered Los Andes. It was five years of very academic studies and an important source of knowledge. We enjoyed the beautiful atmosphere that existed at that time.

FBR: Who were your teachers and classmates?

FS: My sister and I started in 1956, during the second semester. The sculptor Hena Rodríguez was the director of the School of Art. I took drawing and sculpture classes with her. All the classes were quite academic but very important for the beginning

of my career. I also remember Luis Linares, Antonio Roda, Jorge Elías Triana, Astrid Álvarez, Eugenio Barney Cabrera, Gloria Zea, and Marta Traba, who taught art history. Marta was very important. She radiated culture and enthusiasm. Julia Acuña, Nirma Zárate, Camila Loboguerrero, Elisa Gómez, and Beatriz González, among others, studied at Los Andes. We were all women. It was not a school just for women; men simply did not enroll. In addition, we took classes with Daniel Arango, Andrés Holguín, and Indalecio Liévano Aguirre, with whom we covered broad areas of knowledge.

FBR: When did you begin to develop an interest in abstraction?

FS: My inclination towards abstraction comes from two teachers. One was Armando Villegas. I did not take classes with him at the university but knew him. I loved his abstract work, which is not well known. The other was David Manzur. On the other hand, we visited exhibitions and saw what Colombian artists like Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar, Edgar Negret, Omar Rayo, and Carlos Rojas were doing at the time. I remember that David Manzur taught the fresco technique.

The problem was that we had not taken composition classes, so Mazur began to teach us. I made a mural with him and then I began to make drawings in class, abstract ones, based on composition. After the classes with Villegas and Manzur, I no longer continued with figuration.

Five years of the career passed, and my sister Rosa, Gloria Rosas, and I were the first three to graduate from the Faculty of Art of Los Andes at the end of 1960.

FBR: After graduating, you stayed in Bogotá.

FS: Yes. In 1961, with Rosa Sanín, Gloria Rosas, Olga Van Archen, and another artist friend, we decided to open an art office, "Linearte." In the same building, there was a group of friends who had graduated in architecture from Los Andes and recommended that we work for their clients. We did everything: drawings for billboards, window displays, commercial drawings, and designs for textiles. But it turned out that those clients often took the designs and did not pay us. It only lasted a year and a half.

In 1962, I married Mayer Sasson McKeown. He was going to do his master's

Fanny Sanín

Color has always been one of the main motifs in my painting. Color and form always go together. When I think of this red, I'm also thinking of form, you see? Color and structure are two elements that go together. The shades I use are created colors. Although I work with colors taken from the tubes, I mix them to achieve a personal palette.

degree in electrical engineering, so we went to the United States. While Mayer was studying at the University of Illinois at Urbana, I continued painting and taking classes in printmaking and art history. When Mayer graduated, he was offered a teaching position at the Tecnológico de Monterrey. We had no desire to return to Colombia, so he accepted, and we went to Mexico in 1963.

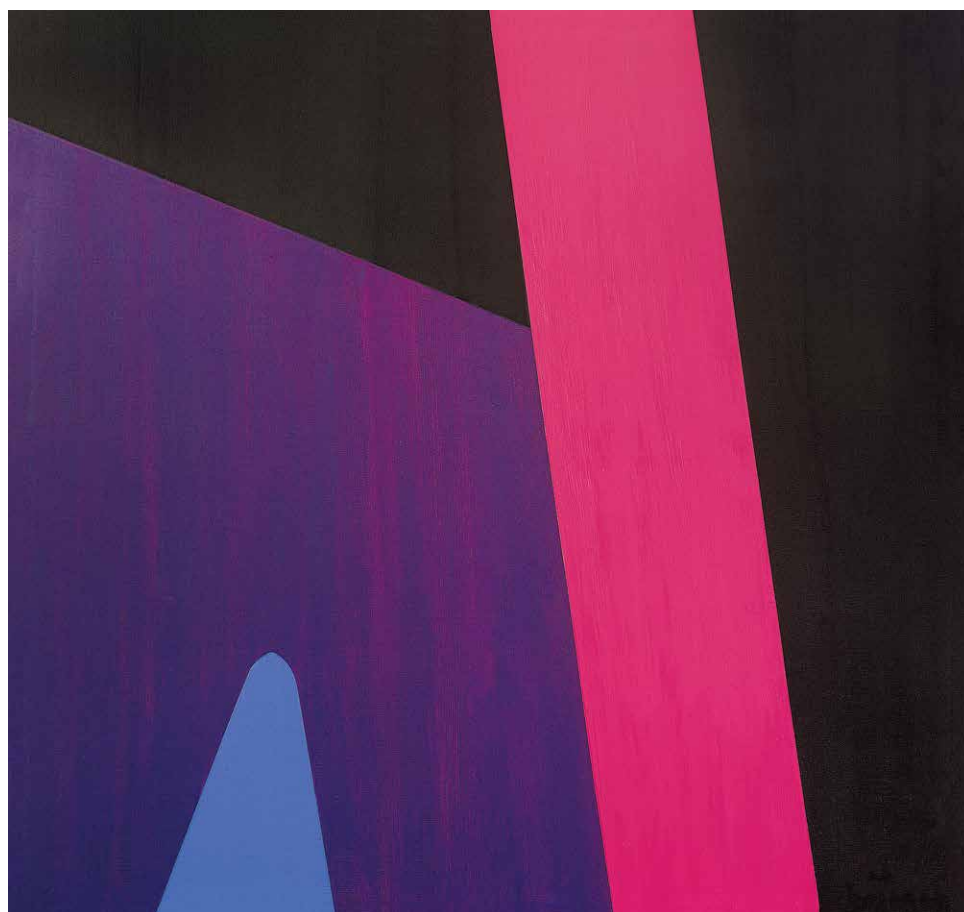
FBR: How did it go in Monterrey?

FS: Monterrey was a great revelation. People told me: "How are you going to Monterrey? Men are very chauvinistic and won't support you!" Exactly the opposite happened. I received tremendous support. Within a year, they were offering me an exhibition. I had already participated in some Salones Nacionales in Colombia, in an exhibition that Marta Traba had organized in Cali, and in some collective exhibitions, but my first solo exhibition was in Monterrey.

FBR: Did you keep in touch with Colombia?

FS: I never lost contact with Colombia. I don't know why people say that I became detached. I have always been

Fanny Sanín. *Oil No. 7*, 1969. Oil on canvas. 64 ¹⁵/₁₆ x 68 ⁷/₈ in. (165 x 175 cm). *





Fanny Sanín. *Acrylic No. 4*, 1970. Acrylic on canvas. 65 x 78 ¾ in. (165 x 200 cm). *

Fanny Sanín. *Watercolor, March 26*, 1960. Watercolor on paper. 24 x 24 in. (61 x 61 cm). *



very present! I had great friends like Germán Rubiano, who, from the beginning, was one of those who supported me the most. I participated in group shows in Bogotá and Cali. I was in all the Salones Nacionales of the time and even in the Biennials of Medellín. Later, I exhibited at the Museo de Arte Moderno, the Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango and the Museo Nacional in Bogotá, the Museo Rayo, and the Museo de Arte de la Universidad de Antioquia, among others. I especially value receiving the Honoris Causa Master of Arts degree from the Universidad de Antioquia. I have not forgotten that my roots come from Colombia and that is why in 2015 I donated nine works from different periods to the Museo Nacional de Colombia.

FBR: Going back to Monterrey, tell us about the first exhibitions.

FS: I had a painting exhibition in a small gallery in 1964. Then, I had an exhibition of drawings in the architecture department of the Tecnológico de Monterrey. We became good friends with a group of professors, and they connected us with Manuel Felguérez in Mexico. He introduced us to Mercedes Oteyza, married to the writer Juan García Ponce, who directed the Casa del Lago in Parque de Chapultepec. We went to visit her, and García Ponce told Meche: “You have to do an exhibition for Fanny!” She said, “Yes, of course,” and I showed an exhibition at the Casa del Lago in 1965. Since it was in the park and people had the habit of going for a walk on Saturdays and Sundays, they came in to see the exhibition. For me, that was something new.

Years later, something similar happened in Bogotá when Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar introduced me to the Galería Garcés y Velásquez and told Alonso and Azeneth that they should invite me to exhibit.

Marta Traba invited me to exhibit at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, which was located on the campus of the Universidad Nacional at the time. That was my first solo exhibition in Colombia in 1965.

FBR: Tell us about your aesthetic language, your style, and how they have evolved.

FS: Different stages can be considered. My book *Fanny Sanín—The Concrete Language of Color and Structure* [2019] outlines them. [1] I made the first abstractions

when I was a student at Los Andes and took classes with Manzur. An example is *Watercolor, March 26, 1960*.

FBR: In oil on canvas works done in Mexico between 1963 and 1965 and in London until 1968, a more expressionist abstraction can be perceived.

FS: Yes, what they call Abstract Expressionism here. Marta Traba called it “organic expressionism.”

We went to London from Mexico for two years, where I continued studying engraving and exhibiting my work. The paintings from that period are still organic but have less texture, and the colors are flatter and more orderly. While in Europe, I visited an abstract art exhibition in France where they showed monumental works by artists from the United States, such as Sam Francis, Helen Frankenthaler, and Mark Rothko. That exhibition was like an awakening. When I returned to Monterrey, I began to refine and create what they call “hard edge.” German Rubiano translated it as the “borde neto.” That “hard edge” period lasted about a year. Those works were exhibited at the OAS Museum in Washington. Among the paintings from that period is the canvas *Oil No. 7, 1969*, which was included in the Venice Biennale in 2024.

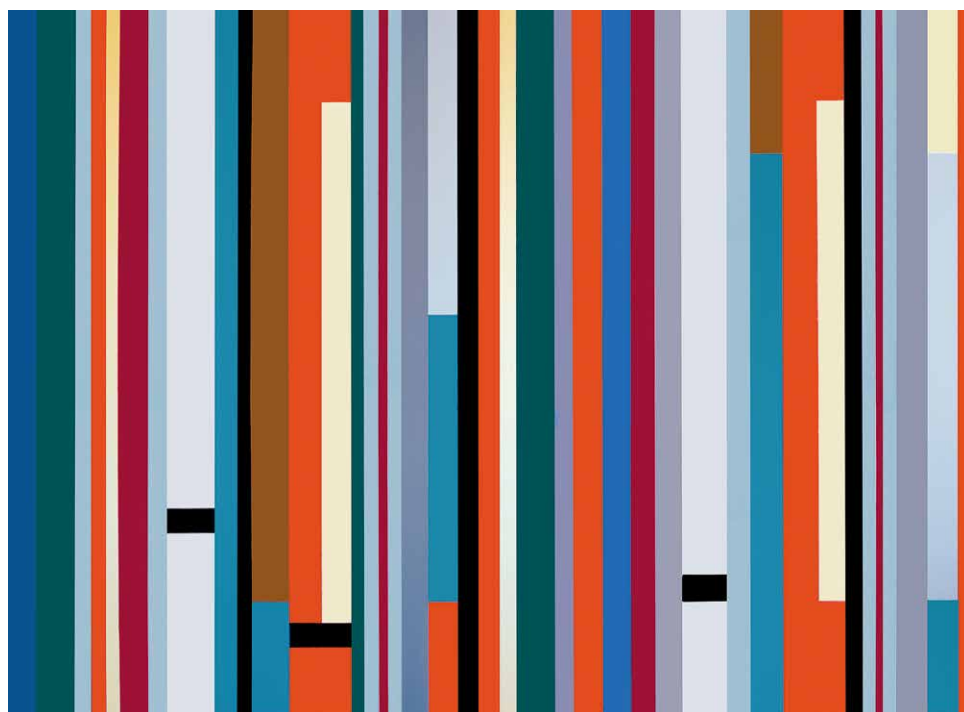
FBR: Unlike the others, that painting has a curved element.

FS: That work caught the attention of the curator of the Biennial, Adriano Pedroza. He came to the studio with Ana Sokoloff. We showed him many paintings, but he wanted that specific painting because it was different from the others. The treatment was close to my expressionist work, but it had a geometric oblique band that, according to him, predicted my geometric work. It is curious that the curved element you mention appears again in a work from 2014 without me remembering that it was in the one from 1969.

FBR: Another painting with curved lines is *Acrylic No. 4, 1970*, belonging to the collection of the Museo de Antioquia in Medellín.

FS: That painting was awarded at the Coltejer Biennial in 1970. I donated it to the museum, which was putting together a collection of works awarded at biennials that made history in Medellín.

FBR: The paintings from the early 1970s have very particular tones. Tell us about the role of color in your work.



Fanny Sanín. *Acrylic No. 5, 1973.* Acrylic on canvas. 85 x 116 in. (215.9 x 294.6 cm). Museum of Fine Arts Houston Collection *

FS: Color has always been one of the main motifs in my painting. Color and form always go together. When I think of this red, I’m also thinking of form, you see? Color and structure are two elements that go together. The shades I use are created colors. Although I work with colors taken from the tubes, I mix them to achieve a personal palette.

FBR: Symmetry appears in the mid-seventies.

FS: Symmetry began in 1974. Beverly Adams, curator of the Museum of Modern Art [MoMA] in New York, wrote a whole chapter on the transition from my expressionistic work to symmetrical geometry in the book.

FBR: At the same time, there is a change in the tones. They are, so to speak, more opaque.

FS: It is curious that you mention this. When German Rubiano referred to this work, he said that the tones in my work were “muted” colors, referring to what they put on the trumpet to lower the sound. He said that the tones in my work did not lose their resonance, although they were subdued colors.

FBR: In the seventies, you arrived in New York, where you settled permanently. Explain to us what the process of creating a work is like. You make several preparatory drawings before making a painting.

You don't just make one but several until you find the combination of color and shape that merits, so to speak, a painting on canvas.

FS: That is the creative process. I like to investigate more, see more possibilities, and continue until I finally say, that's it! It doesn't mean that the other one couldn't have been, but I create a unique work in the end. The same thing happens in music and literature, which go through multiple versions and possibilities. That's where creation is in those studies. I can't tell you what I felt because that can't be explained in words.

Another important thing is to have a certain work discipline. I have a lot of discipline. Sometimes, I can spend the whole day trying to solve a study, and it doesn't work out. I could think: "I wasted my time," but no. I took a step to be more prepared and move forward the next day. Sometimes, people ask me

what inspiration is. and I answer: "I have no inspiration." I work assiduously and persevere until the work emerges or is defined.

FBR: Returning to the work, changes continue to occur formally and visually. Vertical and horizontal lines were seen at the beginning of the eighties, and diagonals appeared at the end of that decade.

FS: You are very good at that because you got to the essence. In my first retrospective exhibition at the Museo de Arte Moderno in Bogotá in 1987, organized by Eduardo Serrano and curated by the Australian John Stringer, there were no diagonals. When it opened, I walked through the galleries, and it was like looking at my life there because there were paintings from the sixties to the eighties. I felt overwhelmed because it was as if they were showing me a film of my entire life up to that point. So, I said to myself: And now what do I do? I have never

made sudden, drastic changes. My work has always followed an evolution. After the exhibition, I began to make studies and the only element that changed was introducing diagonals. That was all I did for practically a year, and the result was a single work. In the past, I did not want to introduce diagonals. It was a well-known element among Argentine and Venezuelan abstract artists. Still, I had not felt the need to use it, but that was the only thing that changed at that moment. It was very important.

FBR: In addition to paintings on canvas, you make works on paper that are not preparatory drawings but compositions. Tell us about them.

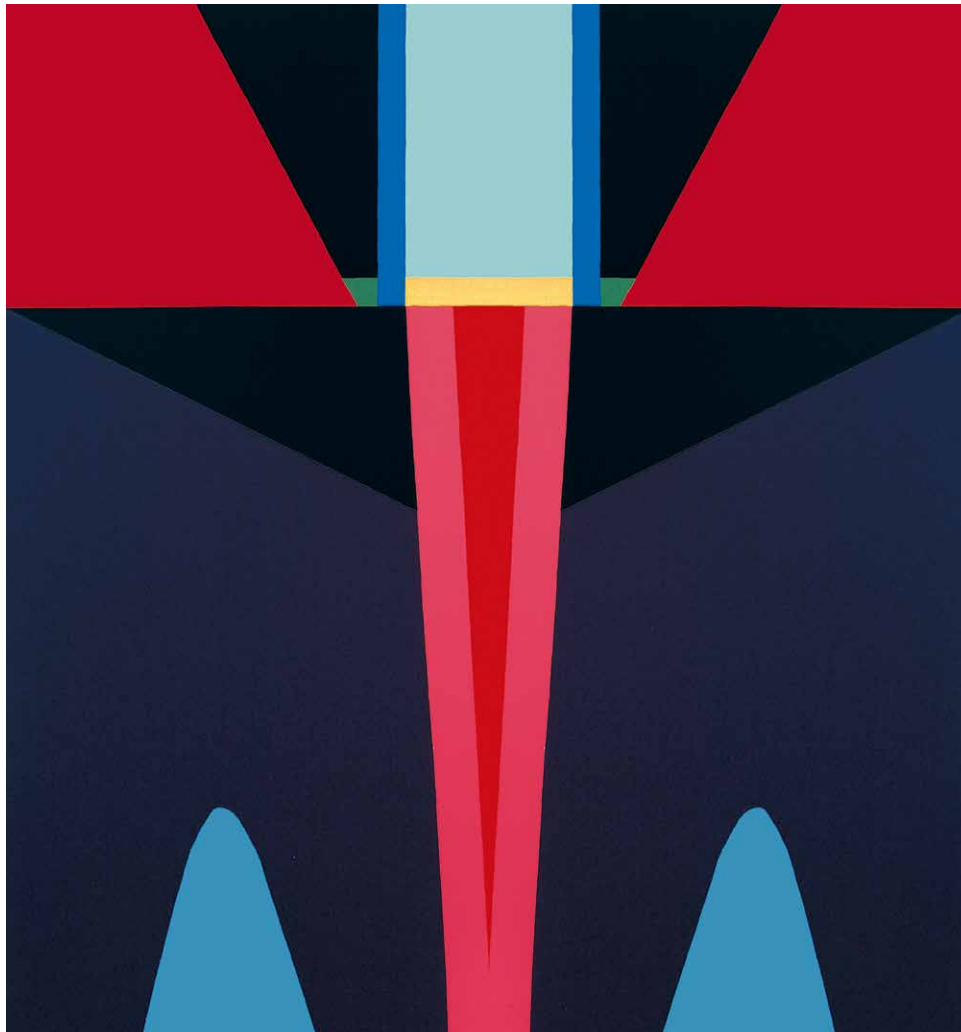
FS: I like paper. I like working in another context. For those compositions on paper, I also make studies. I never work on two works at a time. It doesn't matter if it's paper or canvas. When I'm working on a piece, I'm committed to one theme.

FBR: Mayer and I were talking about the large number of female artists who began their careers in the mid-20th century and were not recognized during their lifetime.

FS: There was discrimination When I came to New York in the early 1970s. It was when female artists protested because they were not being exhibited in galleries. If you read the art pages of the New York Times and saw the gallery ads, they hardly mentioned any women's names; the vast majority were men. By chance, one day, I was passing by the Museum of Modern Art and saw the female artists protesting. I remember that it opened my eyes to see that they were protesting because the museum was not exhibiting their works. Much later, in 2023, three museums in England, France, and Germany organized an exhibition of abstract expressionist works made between 1940 and 1970 by female artists from 29 countries to dislodge the concept that only male artists in New York were doing important works in this style. It is also curious to see that my geometric work from the 1970s is now shown in museums in the United States alongside works from that period by male artists such as Kelly, Noland, and Gene Davis. All this is like a new reading of art history.

In the 1970s, if you wanted to contact a gallery, you showed the work on transparencies. You left it, and if you were lucky, you spoke to the owner. They saw

Fanny Sanín. *Acrylic No. 1*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas. 60 x 56 in. (152.4 x 142.2 cm). Private Collection. Bogota *



if he was interested in the work or not. At first, I had no luck. Some of the gallery owners told me: “What happens is that women get married, have children, and don’t pursue a career. We lose the money we invest, so it’s not good for us to have female artists.” That was not the attitude in the galleries in Colombia since I exhibited at the Galería Garcés y Velásquez, now Galería Alonso Garcés.

At that time, women created organizations for women artists, not necessarily feminists. I exhibited in New York at a gallery called Phoenix, and it went well. The first critical note of my work appeared in the New York Times, which was written by John Russell in 1982. I exhibited in other galleries and in collective shows. That is how I met Carmen Herrera. She was also discriminated. She was a very good friend of ours. In 2004, the Latin Collector Gallery organized an exhibition in New York with work by Carmen, Mira Schendel, and myself, in which Carmen was “discovered.”

FBR: What exhibitions have you had recently, and what is your next show?

FS: Of the recent ones, I am pleased with *Umbrales para la Contemplación*, curated by Adriana Herrera at the Durban Segnini Gallery in Miami; *Sanín & Sanín, Realidades Cromáticas* [Sanín & Sanín, Chromatic Realities], curated by Eduardo Serrano at the Galería Alonso Garcés in Bogotá; the mural I made at the Universidad de Antioquia in Medellín; and *Eyes Wide Open*, curated by Larry Rinder at Sicardi-Ayers-Bacino in Houston. In June, an exhibition of works from the sixties to the present [*Acrylic No. 1*, 2024] opens at the Americas Society in New York, curated by Edward Sullivan and Aimé Iglesias.

FBR: How do you feel about having been able to be an artist and express yourself as you like, with your own language, and to reach this moment in which your works are part of the collections of almost all the art museums in Colombia, the Tate in London [*Acrylic No. 2*, 2011], the Reina Sofía in Madrid [*Acrylic No. 2*, 1973] and numerous museums in the United States and Latin America?

FS: I am interested in seeing the work, recognizing it, and preserving it, but not necessarily in fame or commercial value. I have had a lot of support in life, and I am always very grateful to the people who have valued my work and



Fanny Sanín. *Acrylic No. 1*, 2024. Acrylic on canvas. 72 x 56 in. (182.9 x 142.2 cm). *

given me their support and recognition, including the group that runs the Fanny Sanín Legacy Project.

Thank you, Francine, for this very pleasant time and for your interest in my work.

NOTE

1. Fanny Sanín, *The Concrete Language of Color and Structure* (Seattle: Lucia I Marquand, 2019), with essays by Edward Sullivan, Beverly Adams, James Oles, Clayton Kirking, and Germán Rubiano, and introduction by Ana Sokoloff.

* Courtesy of the artist.

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