

“Great images have both a history and a prehistory; they are always a blend of memory and legend, with the result that we never experience an image directly.”

Gaston Bachelard  
*The Poetics of Space.*

# Rafael Ferrer

Rafael Ferrer's work generates a kind of primal energy—sometimes aggressive, at other times lyrical. The present exhibition is the third in his series of one-man museum shows this season. The first, *Enclosures* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia from September 25 to October 30, 1971, was the largest and most comprehensive in addition to being probably the most powerful and disturbing of the three exhibitions.

In Philadelphia, five differently organized spaces comprised one expressive totality. The first enormous room was filled with gigantic cage and cradle-like structures of telephone poles lashed together with rope, wood and tarpaulin on a peat and charcoal covered floor. Illumination came from blinding airport runway spotlights wired within the structures, and the acrid odor of creosote permeated the room. It was a scene set for guerilla war—portable canvas stretchers for carrying wounded hung like meat carcasses in the largest cage—that evoked memories of Giacometti's *The Palace at 4. A.M.* or Francis Bacon's macabre paintings.

The second area was a white slab, topped by four soundless television sets, which one had to crawl beneath in order to reach the three enclosures beyond. One of these was a chilling corrugated steel-lined room, lighted by white neon tubing, containing one long telephone pole on two sawhorses. The opposite room, in stark contrast, glowed red from a twisted mass of neon lying on a cradle of telephone poles. This room was permeated by the stench of calf-hide rotting in a tub of water on the floor,



and behind its slanting wall of corrugated steel was the fifth space in which slides of Puerto-Rican scenes were shown in continuous succession.

Ferrer's exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art from December 9, 1971 to January 9, 1972 was surprisingly gentle and lyrical. It consisted of a room-within-a room entered by crawling through a tiny door and passing down an extremely long, high and narrow hallway on a floor of soft spongy humus. The only object in the hallway was a red, white and blue neon sign high overhead which read *ART FOR HUM*. The floor of the large room was covered with chunks of charcoal. Its two long walls were braced by a series of 2x6" buttresses angling from the floor, exteriorizing an interior space. The same slides as those shown in the Philadelphia exhibition were projected here across one short wall and a corner. Groups of images—one of a Puerto Rican bay during the day and illuminated by red and green lights at night; another of an old man's hands carving pork; a series showing a tarpaulin-covered truck being opened by a boy; shots of fruit stalls, slums, flags, fish being cleaned, the Governor's palace—were shown in discontinuous sequence. The effect was akin to seeing a movie in still shots. Six airport runway spotlights shone on the other short wall, and five rough, poster-like woodcuts were aligned on it near the ceiling.

Ferrer says, "...my work is concerned increasingly with creating spaces you can inhabit and spend time in." He also utilizes the restrictions of time as organizing and decision making factors. They provide Ferrer with the basic working method for his grease, hay, ice, and

water pieces. A sculpture made only of ice, such as *MOMA Ice Piece*, 1970, obviously depends on the effects of time (and the weather) more than on any other factors. His *Deflected Fountain*, 1970, *For Marcel Duchamp*, in which he used himself to change the course of a fountain in the courtyard of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, lasted only as long as he was able to withstand the force of the water against his body. There are obvious debts to Duchamp in both works, and to the late Italian sculptor Piero Manzoni in the *Deflected Fountain*. Manzoni's *Socle du Monde* sculptures of the early sixties permitted a person to be sculpture simply by standing on them. In 1970 Ferrer, by way of tribute, made a series of silk-screen prints from his four *Homage to Manzoni* polaroid photographs of himself standing on one of Manzoni's magic bases. Perhaps the greatest influence of Duchamp on Ferrer's work is to be seen in the importance of time as an element in his strategy. Duchamp's Readymades, stamped with the exact date and time of their execution, are crucial. The covert quality of Duchamp's *Given: 1. the waterfall, 2. illuminating gas* in Philadelphia and the limited time period of direct exposure permitted to it, seem to have been the source for Ferrer's Whitney piece of 1970, in which the work is visible only while the canvas door is pulled open. Afterwards, all that is retained is the memory of it, with all the vagueness and error memory always confers on experience. This is, of course, a truth about any work of art which Duchamp and Ferrer have only exaggerated in order to expose. Memories are not motionless things, and the more tightly they are bound to an image the more accurate they are. That

is, at least part of the reasoning behind much emblematic painting of the sixties. Ferrer's imagery is much more complex than this kind of painting, however. It is a three-dimensional, literal collage in which each element carries a host of individual references, and each part relates to the whole.

One of his most frequently utilized elements is a drum set. Ferrer was a professional drummer at one time, a fact which may lie behind his obsessional use of the image. A drum, whether it is sounding or not, can set our deepest, most primitive emotions in vibration. It is simple and loud—the most natural, elemental musical instrument. But a drum set as we know it today with its pearly sides, shiny and metallic, is a very artificial thing. When Godard panned through the forest to a drum set in *Weekend* we got the same deep shock of an unexpected juxtaposition of contradictory images that we received from the way Ferrer used a drum set in his 1970 Whitney piece. Unlike Godard's movie, the drums were not being played at the Whitney, and that increased the feeling of uneasiness caused by the drum set seen against leaves and views of glaciers.

Ferrer explores the conflict between indoors and outdoors, nature and the man made, sophistication and simplicity in all his works. Nature for the urban dweller of today is something seen in an architectural context, be it through the windows of our apartment, an endless channel of buildings lining city streets, or the filmic frame of a moving vehicle. Rarely do we contact nature directly, and then only as a visitor. For urban people "nature" is mostly architecture. We dream of a different



time while we live in pre-fabricated dwellings which we rarely even own, and surround ourselves with manufactured objects of every description. But Rafael Ferrer was born in tropical Puerto Rico in 1933 and grew up there. He experienced nature directly, and observed an architecture of invention, accretion and casual simplicity. Urban man doesn't build his house out of branches, straw, poles or scraps. He buys the "right tool for the job" not being obliged to make-do with whatever is at hand. He fits himself into a pre-given space, while natural man builds his space around himself to fit his needs. When we enter Rafael Ferrer's work we confront leaves, branches, hay, poles, peat moss, charcoal and logs. These things of nature are often located inside that most basic form of shelter—a tent. Bending poles support; greased paper allows the passage of light; remnants of corrugated sheet metal can be the "found materials" for an improvised house.

Ferrer now teaches at the Philadelphia College of Art and lives in Philadelphia. His life is very complicated, as complex as the lives of all of us. Collage is the technical method developed by twentieth-century artists to express the complexity of contemporary life in all its multi-levelled richness. Schwitters used it literally to bring together the myriad bits and pieces of his daily life, and the Surrealists used it literarily to fuse everyday reality with the dreams of night. Ferrer uses it to combine his past and present, his reality and his fantasy. His work affects us because, on some level, he brings together the disparate elements of our own lives as well.

The way Ferrer uses light is one of his most effective means of generating powerful emotional reactions to his work. His *Enclosures* in Philadelphia provided very forthright examples of this, but he has used the same kinds of light with much different results in other works. We have been taught to equate light with the path man took to reach wisdom, with reason and the intellect, awareness, the sun, warmth, safety, and progress while darkness implies our primitive origins and negative forces, blindness, passion, instinct, evil, danger and melancholy. The colored light of Flavin, Sonnier and Nauman's sculptures or the white light of Morris, Asher or Turrell take full advantage of the positive aspects of light, albeit in extremely varying ways. Ferrer usually does the same, but occasionally, as in his Corcoran piece, he reverses the traditional significance of light. In that work the viewer was in darkness when he stood erect and had to regain his knees, like an animal, in order to see the light. It was a strategy based on contradiction, similar in its startling effect to Magritte's day-blue sky over a street-lighted night scene in *Empire of Light II*, 1950. Much of the best twentieth-century art has made similar demands on our ability to reverse our thinking, to relearn, empathize, and see anew.

To be effective, art must touch our deepest psychic levels. It must maintain the obsessive power of a timeless magical image, while reflecting the complexities and contradictions of the present, and it must also point to new paths of seeing, feeling, and understanding. Rafael Ferrer's work does, I think, all this.

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Pasadena Art Museum  
January 11 —  
February 27, 1972