

The Kind Cruelty. León Ferrari, 100 years



Exhibition view **THE KIND CRUELTY. LEÓN FERRARI, 100 YEARS**
Museo Nacional Reina Sofía. December 2020
La Justicia / 1942-1992 V Centenario de la Conquista
(Justice / 1492-1992 Fifth Centenary of the Conquest)
Photo credit: Joaquín Cortés/Román Lores. Archive of Museo Reina Sofía

- DATES:** 16 December 2020 – 12 April 2021
- LOCATION:** Sabatini Building, Floor 4
- ORGANIZATION:** Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid) Van Abbe Museum (Eindhoven) and Musée National d'Art Moderne Centre Pompidou (Paris) in collaboration with Fundación Augusto y León Ferrari Arte y Acervo (FALFAA)
- CURATORSHIP:** Fernanda Carvajal, Javier del Olmo, Andrea Wain and FALFAA's team
- COORDINATION:** Carlota Álvarez Basso
- TOUR:** Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven: 8 May 2021- 26 September 2021
Centre Pompidou, Paris: April - August 2022

Exhibition organized by

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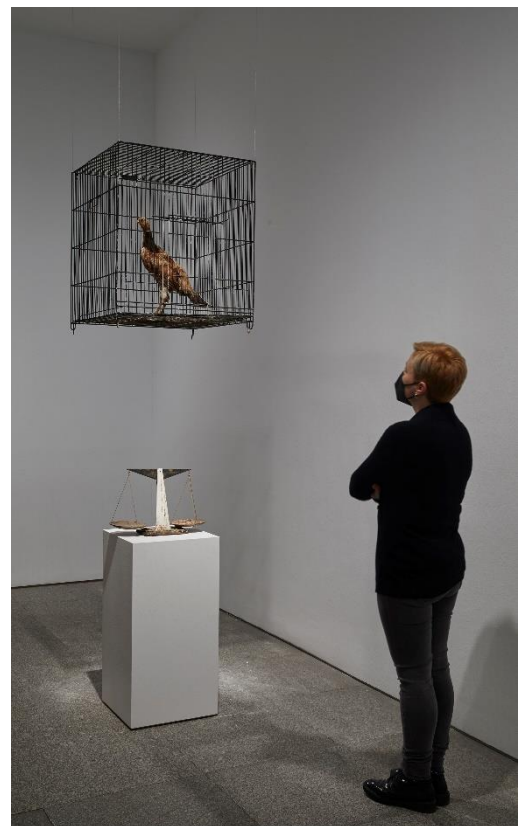
The project *The Kind Cruelty. León Ferrari, 100 Years* stems from an agreement reached between Fundación Augusto y León Ferrari Arte y Acervo (FALFAA, Buenos Aires) and Museo Reina Sofía and aims to shine a light on the work of **León Ferrari** (Buenos Aires, 1920–2013) in Europe, preserving his heritage through three institutions by dint of **a far-reaching and pedagogical vision fostering the contextualization and dissemination of his legacy.**

The project is a long-term collaboration between three museums: the Reina Sofía in Madrid, the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven and the Musée National d'Art Moderne Centre Pompidou in Paris. The Ferrari family proposed to each of these institutions the donation of a complementary heritage set that covers the diversity of techniques, themes and materials that Ferrari used in his long artistic career and that **will be made known to the European public** in the exhibition that is now being held in Madrid, and will later travel to Eindhoven and Paris.

The show is named after a book of poems and collages published by the artist in 2000 and dedicated to his son Ariel, who disappeared during the Argentinian dictatorship. The exhibition shows **around 300 works** including **an important donation made by the family to the Reina Sofía Museum Foundation, that comprises a set of 15 collages, drawings, an sculpture, a video, one of the *Final Judgments* from his "Excrements" series, and 219 unique copies of objects and series by León Ferrari, among which the installation *La Justicia / V Centenario de la Conquista de América* stands out.**

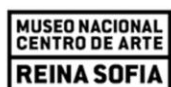
The Kind Cruelty invites the visitor to understand León Ferrari's oeuvre as "a deconstruction of the pedagogies of violence propagated by the bellicose and religious array of Western history", in the words of the curators. Ferrari's legacy makes up a broad repertoire of works that **explore a display of materials and languages to examine irreverent forms of assembling and dismantling visual and discursive power rhetoric, be it political, religious or in the media.**

The artist's work, moreover, shuns traditional art-world categories; hence one of the main strands of the show evincing how the work León Ferrari produced in the 1960s — his initial drawings, collages and watercolors, wire sculptures and his engagement with writing and poetry — reveals an early area of exploration in which formal experimentation, poetics, concepts and politics combine. Thus, the exhibition **surveys a dismantling of the binary distinction between an abstract phase and political phase in Ferrari's work**, with the two poles actively and singularly present through his career.



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La Justicia (Justice), 1991. Ferrari Family Collection)
Photo credit: Joaquín Cortés/Román Lores
Archive of Museo Reina Sofía

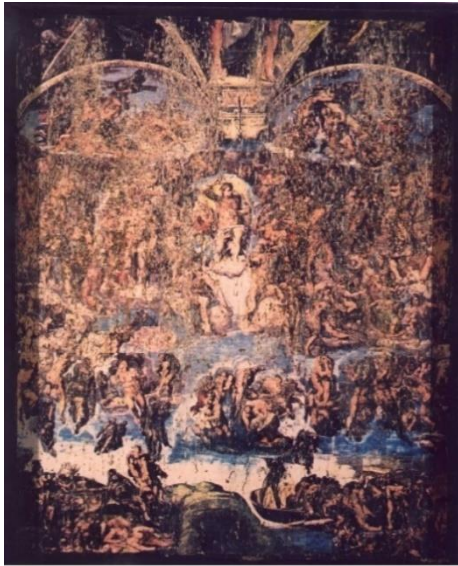
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An intricate practice between art, politics and life



LEÓN FERRARI
Juicio Final
(*Last Judgement*, 1994)
Collage, pigeon's excrements over Michelangelo's
Last Judgement reproduction)
Donación Fundación Museo Reina Sofía

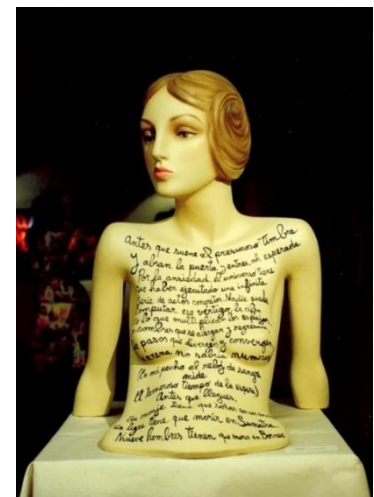
The exhibition is structured by a non-linear approach around seven major conceptual axes that do not follow a chronological order but intersect and re-signify from one room to another.

The show starts with **Justice and Judgements**, a room where the visitor can find *Juicio Final* (Last Judgement, 1994), donated to the museum, where the artists questions the limits of divine and human justices. The artworks in this first room were made to denounce religion's defense of torture, and to question the definition of art as tradition, process and result. They invite us to denaturalize what we know about art, to corrode the rules and traditions that dictate what an artwork is and how it should be made.

The next room, **Ferrari Laboratory**, shows the artist's production by the late 1950s and early 1960s, which includes his experiments with chemical compounds used in his artistic practice. In this period, Ferrari used distorted writing to secretly vent his first political messages and he investigated various inks, pigments and the possibilities of color in his watercolors, on which he made the traces of his first collages materialize—the beginning of an enduring practice of cutting out and rearranging the images and words of others. During those years, he explored poetic language, the spatiality of volume and drawing that imitated writing.

The techniques of collage and re-assemblage of meanings permeate León Ferrari's oeuvre. The third room, titled **The Religious Archaeology of Violence**, includes seminal works such as *La civilización occidental y cristiana* (Western Christian Civilization, 1965) where the artist identifies that the seed of the Vietnam War was to be found in the Judeo-Christian tradition and its message of punishment directed at those who do not share the same faith. The artwork features a crucified Christ on an American military aircraft and was installed at Instituto Di Tella in Buenos Aires. The institution's decision to withdraw the piece from the exhibition sparked a debate in the press that marked the beginning of a long history of censorship. Ferrari's aim was to denounce a society so apathetic that it had come to see such forms of violence as natural.

In *Relecturas de la Biblia* (Rereadings of the Bible), a collage series begun in 1985, Ferrari did the opposite: he inserted images of war as well as sexual, scientific and pagan cultural images to ichnographically rewrite the religious texts of the Old and New Testaments; with critical stands to misogyny and homophobia. Several pieces from this series show the atomic bomb as the materialization of hell on earth.



LEÓN FERRARI
La espera
(*The wait*, 1994)
Painting (Fragment of *The wait* by Jorge Luis Borges)
on a mannequin
Fundación Augusto y León Ferrari Arte y Acervo

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LEÓN FERRARI
La civilización occidental y cristiana
(*Western Christian Civilization*, 1965)
Painted wooden warplane and Christ in cast
Fundación Augusto y León Ferrari Arte y Acervo

Another space in the exhibition, **Ideas of Hells**, shows Ferrari's *objetos-infiernos* (Hell-objects) that provoked constant reactions from different religious quarters. In this works, the artist denounced the Catholic Church's discourse on hell, using household items, trinkets and devotional objects purchased from religious shops, exposing saints and religious figures to the torments of hell. We thus find plaster saints in a blender or a Virgin covered in plastic scorpions and cockroaches, forming an ironic series on divine justice. Ferrari wanted to expose the absurdity of a faith that uses threats to conquer believers. In his view, the real hell was a mental one: living with the idea of eternal punishment.

Challenging Impunity shows Ferrari's involvement in a series of collective political art initiatives that reached their climax with the *Tucumán arde* (Tucumán Is Burning, 1968) experience. He also returned to collage in the series

Nosotros no sabíamos (We Didn't Know, 1976), made with articles clipped from various Argentinian newspapers about people who had disappeared, daily reminders of horror for all the world to see, and *La justicia* (Justice), later renamed *1492-1992 Quinto centenario de la Conquista* (1492–1992 Fifth Centenary of the Conquest), a work that links the distant and dissimilar historical processes of the conquest of the Americas and the Argentine dictatorship to reveal the continuity of an illegitimate violence that is repeated with cyclical regularity.

In the mid-1990s, Ferrari used newspapers as a support for the series *Nunca más* (Never Again, 1995), in which he unburdened himself by sharing his first-hand experience of horror. This collage series illustrates the republication in instalments of the report issued by the Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons or CONADEP) that was widely circulated with the Argentinian newspaper *Página12*.

Another section of the exhibition includes a sound installation based on the staging of *Palabras Ajenas* - León Ferrari's first literary collage made in 1965 and 1966 - that mixes political and religious themes in the long imaginary dialogue between more than one hundred and sixty characters. Ferrari conceived the text to be represented in theaters, in a 10-hour play. It was first performed in 1968, in a shortened one-hour version in English.

The version produced by Ruth Estévez, José A. Sánchez and Juan Ernesto Díaz and which had been presented for the first time at the REDCAT theater in Los Angeles in 2017 and later at

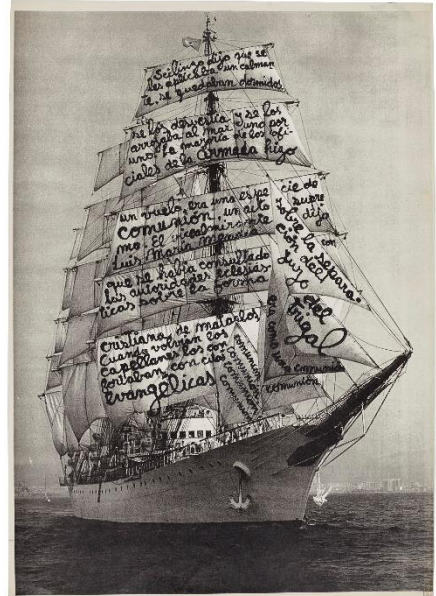


LEÓN FERRARI
Nosotros no sabíamos
(*We didn't know*, 1976)
Collection of news about repression
Fundación Augusto y León Ferrari Arte y Acervo

the National University of Colombia and at the Jumex Museum in Mexico, was performed at Museo Reina Sofía on April 14, 2018.

The exhibition ends with the room **Ways of Doing / Intangible Ferrari**, a non-chronological survey of León Ferrari's life, a constellation of his ways of doing that reveals his career as a complex tapestry of art, politics and life through unpublished documents and works stored in his personal archive.

Two events —his trip to Italy in 1952, when his elder daughter contracted tuberculous meningitis, and his exile in Brazil from 1976 and the desperation of his son Ariel in February 1977 by the repressive forces of the Argentinian state— introduced unexpected disruptions and shifts in Ferrari’s life plans. Both occurred on the border between public and private, between intimate time and historical time, and provide the clues to understanding what we call the “Intangible Ferrari” and show that Ferrari lived his life the same way he made his artworks.



LEÓN FERRARI

Sin título

(*Untitled*, 1995)

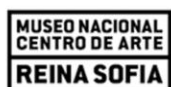
Painting on paper (fragment of the confession of Scilingo over a reproduction of *Fragata Libertad*)
Fundación Augusto y León Ferrari Arte y Acervo

Through these two episodes, this room presents a biographical archive of actions, thoughts and strategies that reveal the intimate and emotional engineering of the ways of doing he developed inside and outside the field of art. Ferrari investigated pigments, lines and metal with the same virtuosity he applied to his pharmacology studies to find the right cocktail of antibiotics for treating his daughter's illness, or to doing background research for the legal proceedings to find his missing son. The most bureaucratic aspects of his human rights activism and the plans of the churches he worked on with his father underwent a metamorphosis in his collages, prints and heliographs. These intangible processes left their mark on his tangible output and broadened the vision of the political and ethical commitment that defined his life and work.

About León Ferrari

Trained as an engineer, León Ferrari (Buenos Aires, 1920-2013) was a self-taught artist who started his career in the 1950s in Rome, where he made his first sculptures in terracotta. Since then, he developed a complex career using all kinds of materials and artistic techniques. After the coup in Argentina, he went into exile in São Paulo, where he remained between 1976 and 1991. In 1999, his work is included in the *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s* exhibition at the Queens Museum of Art in New York, and in 2000 in *Heterotopías. Medio siglo sin lugar: 1918-1968*, at the Reina Sofía Museum. In 2007 León Ferrari received the Golden Lion at the 52nd Venice Biennale.

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Activity: Illustrated Iconoclasm. León Ferrari and Audiovisuals

To mark the hundredth anniversary since the birth of Argentinian artist León Ferrari, the Museo Reina Sofía has organized an audiovisual series to accompany the retrospective *The Kind Cruelty. León Ferrari, 100 Years*. The season comprises an opening session featuring an encounter with the exhibition's curatorial team and the screening of a selection of audiovisual pieces that present the figure of Ferrari through a biographical, cultural and artistic lens, understood from the dynamics specific to an Argentinian and Latin American geographical framework.



The programme tries to evoke the ties Ferrari established with other artists and professionals in his medium, rendering a narrative of the impact they had on his career. This project between Fundación Augusto y León Ferrari Arte y Acervo (FALFAA, Buenos Aires) and the artist's family spotlights the figure of León Ferrari and delves deeper into certain aspects conveyed in the exhibition held in the Museo, reflecting on what is displayed in its rooms in relation to a series of screenings in which the artist comes to life in different roles as producer, actor and

interviewer, deploying an array of audiovisual languages and genres. Thus, the programme shows León Ferrari at his most diverse creative facets, allowing a reading, via different formats, of his critical and perpetually controversial view of social and political injustices in Argentina, Latin America and the Western and Christian world.

For further information about the cycle:

<https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/activities/illustrated-iconoclasm>

For further information:

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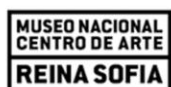
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