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Rafael Ferrer

Profile of an Internationally Recognized “Artist’s Artist”

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About the Author

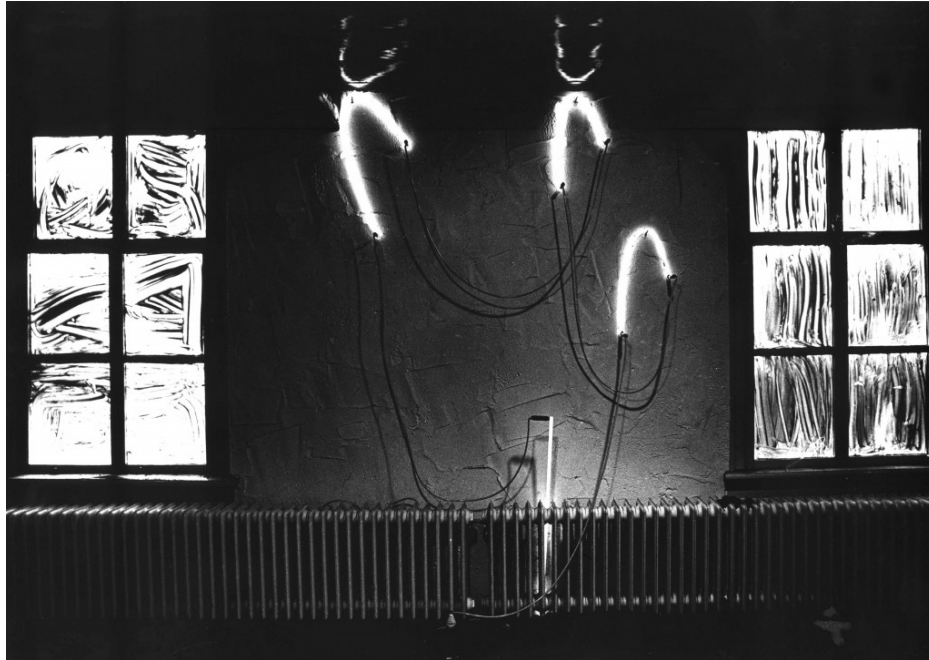


Chon Noriega is a Professor in the Cinema and Media Studies Program at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is the author of *Shot in America* (2000), and co-author of *Phantom Sightings* (2008), and *L.A. Xicano* (2011). Professor Noriega is also Director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, and Adjunct Curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

The profile below appeared in the foreword of the book Rafael Ferrer, by Deborah Cullen, originally published in 2012 as part of the award winning A Ver: Revisioning Art History book series. The A Ver series explores the cultural, aesthetic, and historical contributions of Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, and other U.S Latino artists. Chon Noriega is the A Ver series editor.

Born in 1933, Rafael Ferrer has encountered, engaged, and challenged art movements that define the twentieth century, including European surrealism, American post-minimalism, and Latino neo-expressionism. He has worked in sculpture, drawing, and painting, and also with assemblage, collage, actions, and installation. His prolific and wide-ranging body of work embraces contradictory aesthetic tendencies, from conceptualism to figurativism, using the seemingly simple materials at hand—everyday objects, scenes, music, and language—toward divergent ends. In this way, Ferrer has developed a distinct artistic language that is, as Deborah Cullen argues, “personal, poetic, and allusive” in its dialogue with both art history and the world around him. Ferrer’s diverse career makes him difficult to “map” according to the prevailing

narratives for art history. Simply put, he has been in too many places! Indeed, Cullen makes a convincing case for the impact of geographic location, and of the corresponding social, cultural, and interpersonal influences, on Ferrer's work. But she also reveals an underlying "continuity of approach and content" across various media, styles, and modes.



"Rafael Ferrer" 1970. Photograph republished courtesy of UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and Chon Noriega. Photograph by Rafael Ferrer.

In his large-scale painting *Solitude* (1998–99), Ferrer depicts an interior space with a single stool, a space that is evocative of an artist's studio. One can imagine that the painting is done from the artist's perspective as he enters the studio and thereby registers his "solitude" at the start of the creative process. And yet, the scene is anything but quiet, as the literal solitude of being alone in a room is contradicted by not only the array and clash of shapes, colors, and lines but also the mediums in which the artist works (signaled by the gas tanks for welding and paint on the floor). Like his other works, *Solitude* constructs a sense of monumental scale and dynamic action from the smallness of everyday objects and space. This painting, done during a period in which Ferrer reengaged in a playful visual dialogue with master artists' works, evokes David Smith's studio in Bolton Landing, New York, while it also gestures toward Ferrer's own relationship with welding, painting, and studio space. In this way, Ferrer conflates the general and the particular, the historical and the autobiographical, sculpture and painting, geometric abstraction and figurative expressionism, order and disorder—revealing the creative process to be a "solitude" that is profoundly social.



“Solitude”. 1998-1999. Photograph republished courtesy of UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and Chon Noriega. Photograph courtesy of Nancy Hoffman Gallery.

Born and raised in Puerto Rico but based in the United States in his adult life, with long and short sojourns in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Europe, Ferrer is at once from a specific place (“this one hundred by thirty mile rectangle,” the island) and an internationally recognized “artist’s artist” versed in and critical of the Western tradition. His references are at once conceptual and concrete, whether leaves, palms, or pineapples, in time-based installations, public art, or gallery-based objects. But if we are to appreciate Ferrer as an artist who has been in too many places—at the level of form—then we must also factor in the cultural hybridity that gives not only content to form but form to content. Now in his seventh decade as an artist, Ferrer is more active than ever before. Two recent installations, *Pizarras* (2005) and *Contraband* (2011), are composed of wood-framed slate tablets (ninety-seven and sixty, respectively), the kind once used by schoolchildren. Each of these small blackboards contains an image-text painting that engages in wordplay in either English or Spanish. In *Pizarras*, one tablet reads “voyvengo” (I’m coming/I’m going). The image of a whiteblack vehicle facing in two directions suggests a contemporary version of the pushmi-pullyu animal of the *Doctor Dolittle* children’s books. The Humvee-like vehicle itself suggests American militarism, status consciousness, and environmental degradation, here played out in the Americas through two conjoined yet self-canceling “I” action statements in Spanish.

Ferrer’s recent work uses handheld objects that once were emblematic of daily commerce (paper bag) and education (slate tablet). He is continuing his paper bag faces started in 1972. Both the paper bags and slate tablets are readymades that exist in the digital age as somewhat anachronistic objects—that is, they seem to be already drained of their use value and constituted as historical artifacts. These objects become the new medium for Ferrer’s extended wordplay and

image-text configurations, surfaces for playing with identities (rather than holding a new purchase) and teaching a new critical language (rather than learning one's letters). They presume an America already suffused with the Americas. Interestingly, Ferrer does not map "voy" and "vengo" onto each half of the white-black vehicle, but instead runs them together into a single handwritten word ("voyvengo") in which the last three letters appear over the black portion of the vehicle. In this way, Ferrer's work suggests two words and an abbreviation: voy (I'm going), ve (go [imperative] or you see), and NGO (nongovernmental organization). It is in this slippage that Ferrer opens up a space for contingency—the hallmark of his earlier postminimalist work—wherein going and coming play out against larger, unpredictable forces. It is the space of the artist himself, creating.

This profile is published on Apuntes courtesy of Chon Noriega and the University of Minnesota Press.

To purchase Rafael Ferrer, visit the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center:

<http://www.chicano.ucla.edu/publications/book/rafael-ferrer>