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Rafael Ferrer

BY DEBORAH CULLEN, FORWARD BY CHON A. NORIEGA. LOS ANGELES: UCLA CHICANO STUDIES RESEARCH CENTER PRESS, 2012. 104 PP. ISBN 978-0895511348

This monograph by contemporary art specialist Deborah Cullen marks the culmination of an overdue period of recognition for Puerto Rican-born, U.S.-based artist, Rafael Ferrer, productive from the 1950s to the present. The eponymous book, published by the Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC) as part of its series called *A Ver: Revisioning Art History*, consolidates the efforts of a 2010 exhibition, itself curated by Cullen at the Museo del Barrio in New York. That show, entitled *Retro/Active: The Work of Rafael Ferrer*, which was also accompanied by an edited volume, first brought broad attention to Ferrer's life-long and polymorphous creative efforts by highlighting the themes that transcend his shifting materials and seemingly restless stylistic approaches over time.

Cullen's monograph seems to correct one critique of the Museo del Barrio retrospective—which otherwise received mostly enthusiastic reviews—that its thematic organization obscured the logical evolution of Ferrer's *oeuvre*. This is an important concern since until recent interest. The artist had garnered the most attention for his post-minimalist and conceptual installation works of the 1960s and 70s, alongside the likes of Richard Serra and Robert Morris. In 1971, Ferrer even engaged in a public spar on the pages of the contemporary art journal *Artforum*, which he had also critiqued through his artworks for its dense prose, exclusionary content, and its provincialism. The substance of that revealing exchange may also indirectly elucidate the silence that more generally greeted Ferrer's changing work in the decades that followed, contributing to a perception that his life work of art-making was marked by confusing ruptures.

Cullen sets out to demonstrate the continuities “that link the earlier, notorious interventions to the later, more commercially successful canvas sequences as well as to his most recent works.” (1-2) In five principal chapters, lavishly illustrated with photographs and artwork, the author details the actual and artistic journeys of Ferrer's fascinating life, which began in 1933 in a privileged part of cosmopolitan San Juan, where he would return

throughout his life—if not in person, then through his music (he played the drums) and artwork. In the 1940s and 50s, he traveled to the U.S. mainland for school, across the continent to Hollywood with his actor-brother José Ferrer, and to Europe with an influential art teacher who would introduce him to the likes of André Breton, Benjamin Péret, and most significantly for the contemplation of Ferrer's own position in the art world, Cuban-born artist Wifredo Lam. Unafraid to criticize what he saw as the socially retrograde conservatism of the Puerto Rican art world, Ferrer established himself locally as a controversial figure who, in 1966, relocated to the U.S. to engage with the New York art scene.

Cullen walks us through Ferrer's early fascination with ephemeral materials—especially leaves and blocks of ice—that led to his association with “Process Art” and the inclusion of his installations at the Whitney Museum of American Art, MOMA, and other prestigious art institutions. More complex installations evolved with a broader range of materials in the 1970s, when the artist would also incorporate specific words and images into the spatial compositions. By the 1980s, Ferrer made what would seem like a dramatic shift in style when he adopted expressive figurative painting. He became associated for a time with the New Image artists, however he also was increasingly pigeon-holed as a Latin American artist approximating some kind of “primitivist” perspective—an association he did not welcome. Cullen observes the increasing complexity of his paintings in the 1990s, which beckon the viewer with more subtle, beautiful, and sometimes ambiguous compositions. In his most recent work, language and wordplay are now prominent in compositions; such elements had been more subtly embedded throughout earlier works, but here they more clearly synthesize his foundational interests in the absurd possibilities of Dada and the improvisational syncopation of jazz music.

Cullen's most significant contribution is her dedication to securing a place for Ferrer in art history. The mission of the *A Ver* book series of which this manuscript is a part, is to explore the “cultural, aesthetic, and

historical contributions of Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, and other U.S. Latino artists” based on the “conviction that individual artists and their coherent bodies of work are the foundation for a meaningful and diverse art history.”¹ The chronological ordering of his narrative alone allows Cullen to show how Ferrer’s artistic evolution—from his interest in the dematerialization of the art object to its subsequent rematerialization—has a fascinating logic. Within the context of his life and within the trajectory of the art world itself, Ferrer’s embrace of figuration in the 1980s coincides with a broader trend away from abstraction and towards an exploration of relativity and difference. Cullen reveals the coherence in his decades of productivity through Ferrer’s own history which straddled many worlds.

Although Cullen does not explicitly pursue the theme—something that may have further invigorated her portrait of Ferrer—her book still makes it possible to see his trajectory in terms of an urgency to explore the contingencies of space with increasing specificity. Although much of his early “Process Art” is described in terms of action and time, Cullen suggests that Ferrer was in fact laying the groundwork for his explorations of environment. His interest in the physical character of materials like ice and leaves might well instead be seen as giddy dances with U.S. geographies, unlike those left behind in tropical San Juan, so distant from East Coast winters and autumn on the streets of Philadelphia. His later works became more particular in their references, such as tarp installations with kayaks and painted faces, the words “Tierra del Fuego” inscribed on the wall; his were expansive journeys to faraway lands, though likely less exotic for Ferrer than for his audience. Subsequent works continued with expressive declarations of more clearly Caribbean realities: palm trees, pineapples, and *mulatas* through which the artist reflects on the brutal legacies of colonization. Despite the fact that Cullen writes that the artist himself has “noted that the core of his work ‘resides in an area of my mind which can very well be approached geographically,’” (76) she does not investigate his series of colorful maps created over the decades which juxtaposes land and text in the most specific statements of Ferrer’s persistent spatial inclinations.

In his foreword, Chon Noriega notes that “Ferrer’s diverse career makes him difficult to “map” according to the prevailing narratives for art history.” (xi) This brings us back to Ferrer’s exchange with *Artforum* which

was prescient in its recognition of the discipline’s ultimate inability to adequately assess a culturally and geographically hybrid artist like himself. Among Ferrer’s criticisms—offered with intellectual authority in perfect English—was that the publication remained ignorant of American hemispheric and linguistic diversity, something that automatically limited its ability to make sense of a person like Ferrer who sarcastically described himself as “[doing] all my work in Spanish.” (64) Cullen’s publication may help a broader audience to appreciate Ferrer’s work not as “primitive,” or “magical realist,” but as the vivid expression of a prolific artist whose authentic observations of the multitude of worlds he has experienced may help to expand our own.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 CSRC website <<http://www.chicano.ucla.edu/publications/book>>.