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Object Lesson: The León Ferrari bomber crucifixion that Pope Francis called ‘blasphemy’

BY CAROLINA A. MIRANDA | COLUMNIST

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It is the sort of sculpture that elicits a gasp. At least that’s what I did when I rounded a corner in the galleries at the Walker Art Center when I was in Minneapolis recently and came upon Argentine artist León Ferrari’s “La Civilización Occidental y Cristiana” (Western Christian Civilization). (I happened to catch it because I was in town for the arts journalism confab, [Superscript](#).)

The piece consists of a store-bought Jesus, in crucifixion pose, placed atop a re-creation of a U.S. fighter jet. Ferrari made the piece in 1965 as a statement against the Vietnam War, and it is now on view at the Walker as part of “[International Pop](#),” an exhibition that takes a look at pop art from a global perspective.

“It’s a very sensational work,” says the show’s co-curator Bartholomew Ryan. “We didn’t know what the public’s reaction would be to the work. But I feel that people find it very metaphysical. From a religious perspective, it’s this Christ that is crying. I like how it faces straight down, almost like a pendulum. It conjures a lot of other things, too: a kamikaze, someone going down with their plane.”

The piece also has an interesting history.

Ferrari is best known for his [text-driven pieces](#), which were exhibited as part of the two-artist show “[Tangled Alphabets](#),” at New York Museum of Modern Art in 2009. But over the course of his life (he passed away in 2013), he also produced ceramics, collage and sculpture in a variety of media.

In the mid-1960s Ferrari was asked to create an installation for the Instituto Di Tella Award, a prestigious Argentine prize. For that occasion, Ferrari produced a series of works that denounced the Vietnam War, among them various objects that offered representations of bombings of Vietnamese villages. But the centerpiece was the 6-foot sculpture that hung above the installation, showing Christ nailed to the bomber.

The piece caused a sensation before the show opened.

The controversy was so heated that “Civilización Occidental” was removed before it could even be seen by the public. Ferrari acquiesced to the withdrawal so that his other antiwar works could remain on view.

Around that time, Spanish poet [Rafael Alberti](#) wrote Ferrari an acerbic note about the whole brouhaha: “I really like your artistic anti-[Lyndon] Johnson pop projects. Let me know when they lock you up on [Martín](#)

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[García Island](#) so I can start an international campaign for your freedom.”

The piece marks a moment in which pop art is radicalized in Argentina — all in the months before the first of two oppressive military regimes takes over the country. (The latter dictatorship, during the late 1970s, would result in Ferrari fleeing to Brazil and the disappearance of his son, Ariel.)

“Ferrari was deliberately stepping into a pop aesthetic strategy but with a different underlying message,” explains Ryan — an unabashedly political message. “It was part of what we wanted to do with the show, which was slightly shift the foundations of what we think about when we think about pop.”

Interestingly, the 1960s wasn’t the last time this unusual crucifixion generated controversy.

In 2004, the piece was shown as part of a survey of Ferrari’s career at the Centro Cultural Recoleta in Buenos Aires. On that occasion, the local Archbishop, Jorge Mario Bergoglio — now better known as Pope Francis — described it as “blasphemy” and “an embarrassment” in [a pastoral letter](#).

There were protests, some of Ferrari’s pieces were attacked, a judge ordered the show closed, another ordered it to stay open — in the process launching a massive debate about freedom of speech in Argentina.

Ferrari’s response over the future Pope’s letter: “It’s a type of favor that Bergoglio did for me,” he told an Argentine daily. Never had a work of his generated so much publicity.

“International Pop” is on view at the Walker Art Center through Aug. 29. 1750 Hennepin Ave., Minneapolis, [walkerart.org](#).

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