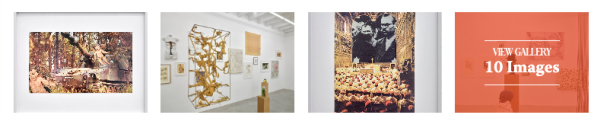
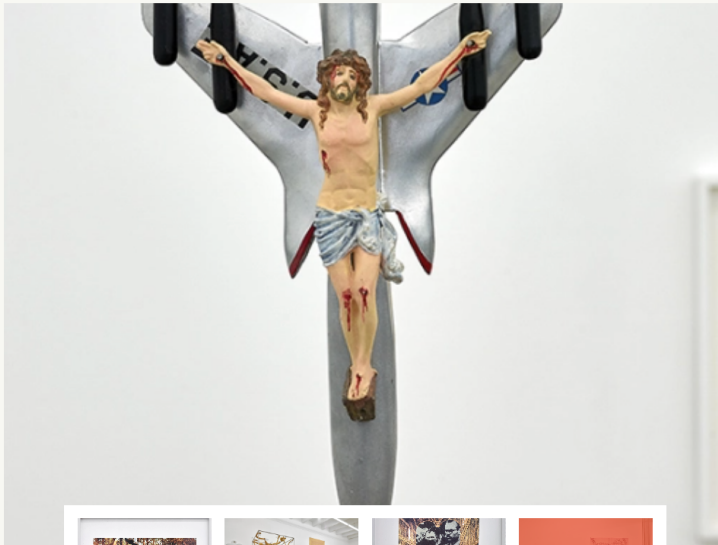


# León Ferrari's Iconoclastic Work Proved That Only a Theist Can Be a Sinner

By [Ara H. Merjian](#) March 11, 2020 2:27pm

[f](#) [t](#) [p](#) [+](#)



Generally considered a conceptual artist, León Ferrari (1920–2013) might just as aptly be described as an activist. His collages and assemblages eschew allusive subtlety for unambiguously anticlerical and anti-imperialist imagery and brazen juxtapositions. For his notorious 1965 piece *La Civilización Occidental y Cristiana* (Western and Christian Civilization)—presented here in a 2010 miniature version—Ferrari appended a figure of the crucified Christ to a 6½-foot plastic model of an American fighter jet, which he hung nose-down, as if the plane were in free fall. The foreign policy of the United States was a consistent target of the Buenos Aires–born artist's political and aesthetic ire throughout the 1960s and '70s, as was the abidingly Catholic culture of his native country and its complicity with an increasingly repressive military regime. This exhibition provided a substantial survey of his work.

## Related Articles



**Christian Group Sues Reina Sofia Director, Claiming That León Ferrari Show Mocks the Gospel**

Henrike Naumann

Originally trained as an engineer, Ferrari began his artistic career working with ceramics in Italy. Having settled back in Buenos Aires by 1955, he pursued sculpture in a variety of materials before experimenting with the ink drawings and collages that would define his oeuvre and its ever more ideological preoccupations. Ferrari's work is not often nuanced. For a series he began in 1985, Ferrari had caged pigeons shit on reproductions of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* fresco from the Sistine Chapel. In the collage *Final Judgment* (2005), he covered the apse of a church with an image of Jews wearing Star of David patches during the Holocaust so that a crowd of seated cardinals appears to be gazing raptly at a horrific spectacle—turned—Catholic rite.

To be sure, the events to which Ferrari's work

reacted hardly called for understated responses. Between the 1960s and '80s, Argentina was rocked by coups d'état, currency devaluation, and student and labor unrest. The metaphorical transgressions in his work paled in comparison to Argentina's actual political violence. With his safety increasingly at risk, Ferrari fled to São Paulo in 1976, returning to Buenos Aires only in 1991. Some of his later efforts lack the proverbial teeth of his early work. His 2004 model fighter jet adorned with feathers and his 2002 blender filled with Virgin Mary figurines, for instance, reprise the impudence of *La Civilización Occidental y Cristiana* to repetitive and even gimmicky effect.

Ferrari's critiques of Christianity (and of Catholicism more particularly) are not mere caprice, however. They form part of a larger assault on deeply ingrained origin stories and founding narratives that have served both nationalist hegemony and political repression. The irreverence of a collage like *Angels* (1986)—in which images of ceramic putti hover beside a camouflaged tank—draws on the legacy of Dada. In turn, Ferrari's assemblages echo (however obliquely) in a range of contemporary practices. The works in Rachel Harrison's recent retrospective at the Whitney Museum in New York, for instance, brought to mind many of Ferrari's pieces and their wry humor.

Perhaps more important, his provocations take on new inflections in the current political atmosphere, in which polemics, self-righteousness, and tribal allegiances reign supreme. Ferrari is widely known as an "iconoclastic" artist. Yet he obsessively invokes Christian icons in his work, calling to mind the old adage that only a theist can be a sinner. His work shows that to transgress the propriety of Christian iconography, one must possess a degree of aesthetic respect for that canon, even while channeling its images into new, less repressive meanings.



View of León Ferrari's exhibition "Toasted Angels, Sounds of Steel," 2020, at KOW.

ADVERTISEMENT

## Most-Read Stories

- Archaeologists Discovered 7,000-Year-Old Structure Older...
- Remnants of Nearly 2,000-Year-Old Hercules Statue Unearthed...
- After the Crypto Crash, NFT Collectors Are Digging in Their...
- One of Poland's Top Collectors Will Auction 200 Works to...



## Get the Magazine

The World's Premier Art Magazine since 1913. Subscribe today and save up to 33%!

Or, give the gift of Art in America.

[Subscribe](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

This article appears under the title "León Ferrari" in the April 2020 issue, p. 89.

Read More About:

KOW | [leon-ferrari](#)