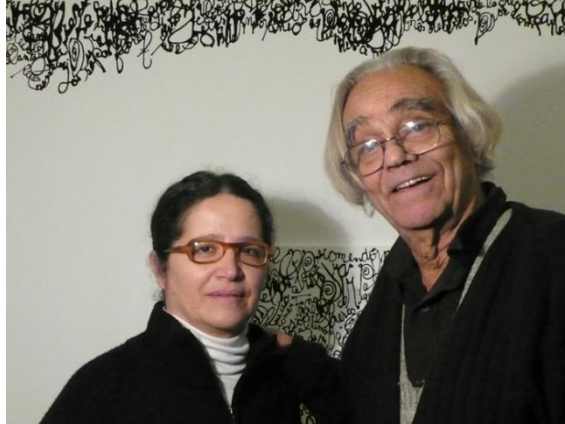


"I think it was a clean line..."
Essay by Victoria Verlichak



León Ferrari's vibrant and challenging work is conversant with poetry, explores enigmas and metaphors, comments on space and form, creates music, can depict improbable cities and impugn religious and military institutions that monopolize "the revealed truth."

He was appreciated by a few colleagues, writers, and prescient art critics when in the mid-1950s he exhibited his work, first in Milan and Rome and then in Buenos Aires in the early 1960s. Ferrari's reputation and international recognition began less than ten years ago when his work was included in the 2000 survey exhibition, "Heterotopias," at the Centro Reina Sofía in Madrid, and after his solo exhibition in Britain at the Essex University Gallery in 2002.

The national scandal brought on by attempts to censure his retrospective exhibition at the Centro Cultural Recoleta in Buenos Aires in 2004, brought him unexpected international popular recognition. But in fact, it was in Brazil, where from 1976 to 1991 he lived in self-exile, that he was first widely appreciated.

Today, his ink drawings, collages, sculptures, heliographies, Braille-embossed photographs, objects and installations are all critically acclaimed and in worldwide demand. Ferrari at 87 is active, sharp, working daily and enjoying a fertile creative period as well as experiencing great personal success.

This notable artist makes use of intellectual provocation, demanding of us to ponder politics, culture, and social issues as he engages us with visual puns made with objects of popular consumption, creating works that are poetic, combative, caustic, and playful, and that affect human and divine concerns.

Ferrari has a complex and restless personality; he is an abstractionist whose art is sensitively and intimately related to music. The metal sculptures and writings in this exhibition reflect the aesthetic dimension in his work; while his literally symbolic political oeuvre reflects his ethical engagement with the present, echoing the artist's belief that "anything is raw material for art-making, even politics."

Parallel lines, written lines

The parallel lines made of wire and the lines of writing, with their shifting letters and words, assembled or disassembled, have a special place in Ferrari's rich artistic syllabus.

In 1959, he began making metal sculptures that didn't direct homage to anyone; like nomads, these works are not intended to be affixed to any specific site. Like a magic rain of lines, they are serenely perfect, tightly bound or set free, they delve into enigma because they avow to not having "any ethical intention."

Thereafter Ferrari made "aerial drawings" with steel, bronze or copper wire, or with wood strips, hung or placed inside boxes, where he added all types of ingredients. The vertical wire sculptures have a grid-like support, or are barely attached with silver solder to an outline of metal rods, later came the "artifacts to draw sound" that are like instruments that create musical, visual and tactile action.

"I made my first written drawings or abstract writings in 1962 for L'Avanguardia Intenazionale" (International Anthology of the Avant-Garde), an anthology of etchings edited by Arturo Schwarz in Milan, Ferrari says, referring to the legendary collector of Dada and Surrealist art. From then on, this early preference for writing allowed him exquisite experimentation.

Ferrari maintains that his drawings are "in even lines that mimic traditional handwriting." He draws on paper, canvas, and on unconventional supports such as newsprint, female manikins, and acrylic; Ferrari embosses Braille type onto erotic prints and photographs. He draws over reproductions of religious paintings by the great masters of Western art, on iconic images of the 20th Century, and on superimposed glass panels; even the Plexiglas covers of playful boxed assemblages that enclose flowers, butterflies, toy airplanes, feathers or cotton wool, are inscribed all over with unintelligible texts. The wriggling letters and words evoke memory, make us ponder on the recent past, target the powerful, illustrate poems by Borges, Breton, or inspired by Rafael Alberti, transcribe texts from Deuteronomy - or the Song of Songs, mulling over decadence and double standards.

Sometimes, flowing lines twirl on the paper or canvas, displaying graphisms that are poetic as well as acerbic, corresponding to incidents in the artist's private life and to important and usually tragic world events. It is not by chance that the artist chose particular images to intervene, or the words he risked inscribing. Ferrari's fonts insinuate themselves and take flight, signs and symbols dance, and for a fleeting moment they repeat themselves infinitely. Without any respite or offering a clue, they play tricks on the viewer's eye.

"Serie de errores"

This group of drawings in China ink, on paper and on flexible high-impact polystyrene sheet, are vibrant abstractions that were created in the early 1990s using sinusoid curves. Ferrari although frail and with a kindly smile, is of firm spirit and convictions. The generous and lucid artist talked about the "Serie de errores" during a recent visit in his large Buenos Aires studio.

Ferrari, who is an engineer by training, stated that the point of departure was "a mathematical curve called a sinusoid which is the Cartesian representation of an angle's sine - it is a function of an acute angle in a right triangle, equal to the ratio of the opposite leg to the hypotenuse. Perhaps starting from such a dry concept points to the contrast between science and people: by drawing the curve by hand it loses its precision; it's messy and becomes human. The obsessive repetition of the curve in its apparently boring uniformity is, maybe, a drawing rich in images and contrast."

"I think it was a clean line," he adds, "meandering freely although it actually isn't - it is free only to make mistakes, lithely wriggling on the paper as it ignores even as it knows that it will never be able to catch up, that it will never attain the perfection of the leg of the hypotenuse. A drawing then can be the sum of infinite, persevering errors that the pen makes as it caresses the paper leaving its black ink trail."

Ferrari spoke of mathematics and his early engineering studies (he graduated from Buenos Aires University in 1947), as the background to his consideration of employing the mathematical curve. "There is a relation between art and science, although it is particularly apparent to those who practice both disciplines. In art you search for new forms of expression, and in science unknown frontiers are explored. Money shouldn't be the motivation for either artists or scientists. The joy is in searching and finding. Perhaps having to analyze demonstrable theories when I was a student has served me in my art," he concluded.

Pure musical tonalities generate sinusoid waves that measure our pulse and transmit it to an electrocardiogram, as well as they convey the electromagnetic energy that is generated by color. This theory is apparently simple: "in general all wave graphics are called sinusoids." When he draws wave-like lines on paper or on a sheet of polystyrene, the artist assumes that he is only certain of the "error" in his composition, so he doesn't attempt to impose any other meaning.

Left on his own, the viewer will perhaps see in these drawings enthrallment and depression, intonations and reserve, enlightenment and abysses as they are mediated by these ups and downs, in graphics of infinite waves that when they stumble, open the doors of the imagination. These oscillations that vary in intensity and grades of imperfection, suggest the possibility of a commotion of opposites, a confrontation between life and death, the disruption of an order, the acceleration of the creative chaos where perhaps revolutionary codes originated.

New works

Like a teenager filled with enthusiasm, Ferrari guides the visitor through the two floors and garden of the old house he converted into his studio.

Proudly, he shows his latest sculptures made of polyurethane, a porous foam that as it expands grows into unexpected organic forms -like nuclear mushrooms, habitats, or figures- to which he attaches multiple objects of different sizes: plastic toy mice, cats, birds, and palm trees, musical instruments, glass eyes, or he sits them on chairs. In another room, he works on his writings, copying texts from the gospels employing his latest discovery, a runny textile ink that blurs the words making them incomprehensible.

Placed in the studio's backyard are his new "artifacts to draw sounds," where an invading wisteria is allowed to grow all over them. On the patio, an assistant is finishing painting a new polyurethane sculpture in mauve, and hanging from the ceiling of the former living room, works that are part of a recent series made of polyurethane bones and wire, seem to be denouncing scandalous poverty. These unhinged skeletons, are to be displayed hanging like the abstract sculptures that decorate the entrance hall of corporate buildings. The artist explains that these polyurethanes are part of a series he calls "tied up by wire," which is what holds together these hallucinogenic images.

Ferrari is also intrigued by the possibilities of "Acrilex," an acrylic medium with volume. For texture effects he applies it with a spatula. On glass panels and on canvas he has transcribed descriptions of Hell according to the Saints; and in another work he reiterates a letter he wrote to the Pope asking him to abolish Hell.

The Lion (León) can't be tamed. As he did sixty years ago, he still believes that "*our greatly admired culture is at the root of many falsehoods,*" and is from where today's violence originates. Ferrari is amused when he hears opinions about his work, which undoubtedly has a spiritual dimension. "*People come up with explanations and reasons about my work, but nobody responds to what I say.*"

Every morning, Ferrari goes to his studio where he works on multiple projects in any number of mediums. In the afternoon, he sketches at home, bathed by the warm sunlight of this unusually cold August winter that brought Buenos Aires its first snowfall in 82 years.