

## After Process, A Return to the Tropics

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An installation view of “Retro/Active: The Work of Rafael Ferrer” at El Museo del Barrio.

Thanks to El Museo del Barrio the artist Rafael Ferrer, at 77, is finally having his moment. “Retro/Active: The Work of Rafael Ferrer,” his first large museum survey, spans more than five decades, with nearly 200 works in just about every late-20th-century medium except film and video.

The show has an immediate allure thanks to Mr. Ferrer’s instinctive facility for color and materials of all kinds. The general impression is of someone who would figure out how to make art if confined to a nearly empty room. Calabash gourds appear in several sculptures. Paper bags — a preferred drawing surface for decades — have occasioned an exploration of the human face as mask that is almost encyclopedic in its cultural and emotional allusions. Small, wood-framed slate tablets provide an ideal surface for a series of appropriately grisaille paintings from 2005 and 2006. At El Museo enormous groupings of these works face each other across a gallery, to electrifying effect.

So it is odd that Mr. Ferrer has so far been best known for the markedly ephemeral and temporary Process Art installations he made in the late 1960s and into the '70s and exhibited alongside the efforts of artists like Alan Saret, Richard Serra and Robert Morris. Documented here in a small gallery lined with photographs, these pieces were sometimes made of materials as slight and transitory as grease, straw, dried leaves and blocks of ice. They did their bit for the dematerialization of the art object, and then Mr. Ferrer moved on.

Mr. Ferrer treated Process Art — the next big thing of the time — as a building block, a way back to his first love in art. That was painting, not to be confused with his first creative love and first profession, jazz drums.

After the early '70s Mr. Ferrer proceeded to rematerialize his art, working through a succession of mediums, among them assemblages that hang from the ceiling. Especially good is the puppetlike “Marvelous Woman,” whose face is painted on a flattened garbage-can lid and whose feet are a pair of improbably riveting, paint-splattered pumps. It is straight out of Dada, yet somehow fresh. Appropriate to his music background, one of his earliest post-Process oil-on-canvas efforts is the jubilantly toxic “Quartet” from 1980, which depicts Latin musicians, midsong, on a field of hot pinks, oranges and yellows.

By the late 1980s Mr. Ferrer was making what could be his strongest works: visually and emotionally fraught paintings depicting radiant, shadow-pocked scenes of makeshift tropical dwellings and their inhabitants. These update modernism's calculated faux-primitivism with a vaguely photographic angularity. Image and paint collude uncannily, and the play of light and dark can be almost hallucinatory. Every form has a double life and nature intrudes from all sides. “Conquering Solitude,” for example, shows four figures — a man on one side and three boys in a clump on the other — almost immobilized by their environment. The ground roils with an aggressive network of ridges that suggest a trap but may only be shadows. On the wall of the cream-colored cabin behind the figures another shadow looms, more solid but wildly irregular, a spectral pelt or Rorschach screech. It is a calm, sunny, disturbing image.

“Retro/Active” has been meticulously assembled by Deborah Cullen, El Museo's director of curatorial programs. The title telegraphs Mr. Ferrer's flair for nonconformity with a soupçon of tendentiousness, not to mention his unceasing restlessness. The subtext? He has been and still is working continuously, even if our attention has been focused elsewhere. Also, the past is always up for grabs. Just look back actively, with curiosity.

This show is almost criminally overdue. What was Mr. Ferrer's sin? Maybe his sometimes bristly personality or his background as a privileged outsider. He was born in Puerto Rico in 1933 to a family that could afford to educate its children on the American mainland. He spent his first summer in college living in Hollywood with his much older half-brother, the actor José Ferrer, and sister-in-law Rosemary Clooney; during his second, he met André Breton and Wifredo Lam in Paris. For years Rafael Ferrer divided his time between Philadelphia, where he taught, and his vacation home-studios in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. And as he drew closer to his Caribbean roots, it was without joining the “identity art” bandwagon.

In any case, Mr. Ferrer's art lends credence to Barnett Newman's often-quoted declaration, “We are making it out of ourselves.” As seen here, Mr. Ferrer's work bespeaks an artist working from a complex, imperfect, driven self — a self that is a cultural sponge, an opportunistic sieve and a tightly wound synthesizer all in one. Grist for this creative mill has included the modernisms of Europe and both Americas; the vocabularies of various forms of folk and so-called primitive art;

and an impressive range of art history, music and the literature of two tongues, English and Spanish.

Mr. Ferrer's career is one of peripatetic consistency in which ideas, motifs and even materials continually circulate among different mediums or phases. He stumbled on art almost by chance in the early 1950s, while studying at Syracuse University and heading, he thought, for a life in music. A friend showed him a book on modern art and he decided to try his hand, covering pieces of cardboard with shards of waxy color. Tucked away in a vitrine along with some early sketchbooks and drawings, these little works exude promise. Hanging nearby are several of his map drawings from the late 1970s, in which the same colors expand into wandering concentric lines whose fuzziness brings to mind the feathered textiles of pre-conquest Peru.

In a similar way the Process Art works haunt some of the paintings, a point Ms. Cullen makes by pairing images in the catalog. Even in the show the photograph of "Niche," an especially appealing, relatively substantial Process piece, can remind you of the shanties and sheds and campsite-like arrangements in the paintings. It consists of a large sheet of corrugated galvanized steel, functioning as flooring for assorted strands of neon tubing, sheets of glass, buckets and logs. Behind these a vertical sheet of the steel implies a wall; a canvas tarp is stretched overhead, like a roof. Other paintings feature piles of leaves, scattered logs and tarps.

The show's main weakness is that it is installed thematically rather than chronologically, which obscures the fact that Mr. Ferrer's evolution has a fascinating logic. It has centered on a rebuilding of form and narrative that has gained speed and complexity as it has gone along. Seeing its progress would be more illuminating than having to piece it together. The piecing is helped by reading Mr. Ferrer's brisk, opinionated if sometimes self-serving account of his life and artistic development that is a marvelous self-portrait of a young artist finding himself. It takes the form of an e-mail interview with the poet and writer Vincent Katz. Mr. Ferrer began thinking about taking up painting again while watching Vincent's father, Alex Katz, paint on the beach, when the Katzes visited the Ferrer family in Puerto Rico in the mid-1970s.

Mr. Ferrer is not a paragon of originality who has changed the history of art, but something almost as good, and maybe in the end more inspirational: an artist driven by curiosity, passion and instinct who has worked flat-out for more than half a century. The parting impression of this show is that Mr. Ferrer has used everything within him and also around him to the fullest. His art is a picture of efficiency that could not have been made by anyone else. That is no small achievement.