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Short Fuse: Of virgins and in blenders and rats that sing
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Of Virgins in Blenders and Rats that Sing

by Alberto Gomez and Dot Tuer

In December 2004, as the Pope lay dying and cardinals whispered in the cloisters of the Vatican, a retrospective for artist León Ferrari was taking place in another kind of cloister, La Recoleta, a convent converted into a cultural centre in downtown Buenos Aires. Ferrari, one of Argentina's most important political artists, has long used Christian iconography to critique the complicity of the Catholic Church in a history of genocide and intolerance ranging from the conquest of the Americas and the Inquisition to the Nazi Holocaust and Argentina's Dirty War. From his emblematic 1960 artwork "Western Civilization and Christianity," in which he placed a metre-high Christ on the wing of a model American fighter plane, to his more recent sculptures of crucifixes popping out of toasters, virgins in blenders and saints sizzling in frying pans, Ferrari's acid humour inverts divine punishment for heresy into the torture and hell of Christian imagery on earth. While his retrospective brought together a selection of works that ranged widely in style from abstraction to agit-prop and spanned fifty years of artistic practice from 1954–2004, Ferrari's repudiation of the institutional hierarchy of the Catholic Church for its entanglement of religion, ideology and repression that struck at the heart of their own nation. In a series of works produced for the newspaper Pagina 12 in the style of John Heartfield, photographs of Argentine Generals from the military dictatorship of the Dirty War (1976–83) were juxtaposed with Nazi symbols; and Christian imaginaries of the inferno with the material hell of clandestine concentration camps used to disappear 30,000 Argentinians. In another series of recent works, George Bush Junior had become the Grim Reaper. A photographic collage repeated his image in the orifices of a cadaver. Twirling globes were swarmed by dozens of plastic cockroaches, used by Ferrari as symbols of the ubiquity of American forces. A small architectural model of the White House was overrun by cockroaches and rats. In essence, Ferrari had recast Bush's imperialist regime as a purgatory of doom and destruction.

Perhaps it is no surprise in a country where a neo-liberal pact with the devil in the 1990s produced the first meltdown casualty of globalization in December 2001, and a bishop can publicly condemn the Minister of Health's campaign to legalize abortion by calling for him to be thrown in the river with a stone around his neck, that the Catholic right-wing was successful in its campaign to close the exhibition. According to the judge (Liberatore, ironically enough, was her name) who issued the injunction to have the exhibition closed. It was not only the desecration of the great propagandists of the Church such as Michelangelo or the diabolical recasting of Christian suffering that troubled Argentina's bishops and their followers. Equally disturbing was Ferrari's use of agit-prop collage to remind an Argentine public of the religious violence of the last five decades. In a series of works produced for the newspaper Pagina 12 in the style of John Heartfield, photographs of Argentine Generals from the military dictatorship of the Dirty War (1976–83) were juxtaposed with Nazi symbols; and Christian imaginaries of the inferno with the material hell of clandestine concentration camps used to disappear 30,000 Argentinians. In another series of recent works, George Bush Junior had become the Grim Reaper. A photographic collage repeated his image in the orifices of a cadaver. Twirling globes were swarmed by dozens of plastic cockroaches, used by Ferrari as symbols of the ubiquity of American forces. A small architectural model of the White House was overrun by cockroaches and rats. In essence, Ferrari had recast Bush's imperialist regime as a purgatory of doom and destruction.

Leon Ferrari's work can be viewed at: www.leonferrari.com.ar
www.arteuna.com/RRF/a-Ferrai.htm