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**A SCANDALOUS EXERCISE:
THE POLEMICS OF RAFAEL FERRER'S AVANT-GARDE ART
IN PRINTED MEDIA, 1961–1966**

Summary:

During the early 1960s in Puerto Rico, it was customary for the printed media to publish general information about exhibitions: a brief biographical note on the artist and the amount, size, and medium of the exhibited pieces. These publications were carried out by journalists, there were no art critics working in local newspapers at the beginning of the decade. The lack of cultural journalism at the time could be the reason why there are countless inconsistencies in the historiographical texts, which have greatly hindered an orderly and contrasted record of the basic facts. Nonetheless, the scarcity of cultural journalism, provoked the emergence of the ‘amateur voice’ of the public, enunciating their perception of art in the columns in local newspapers. This article examines Rafael Ferrer’s (1933) avant-garde works during the first half of the 1960s, the polemics they incited in Puerto Rican printed media, and its repercussions in the construction of the Puerto Rican art canon.

Key words:

Avant-garde art, Puerto Rico, Rafael Ferrer, printed media, reception study

During the early 1960s in Puerto Rico, it was customary for the printed media to publish general information about exhibitions: a brief biographical note on the artist and the amount, size, and medium of the exhibited pieces. These publications were carried out by journalists, there were no art critics working in local newspapers at the beginning of the decade¹. The lack of cultural journalism at the time could be the reason why there are countless inconsistencies in the historiographical texts, which have greatly hindered an orderly and contrasted record of the basic facts. Nonetheless, the scarcity of cultural journalism, provoked the emergence of the ‘amateur voice’ of the public, enunciating their perception of art in the columns in local newspapers. This article examines Rafael Ferrer’s (1933) avant-garde works during the first half of the 1960s, the polemics they incited in Puerto Rican printed media, and its repercussions in the construction of the Puerto Rican art canon.

Puerto Rican artists and art historians coincide that Rafael Ferrer was the pioneer avant-garde artist on the island. He had a cosmopolitan upbringing, living for periods between New York and San Juan. Educated in a Catholic school in San Juan, in 1948 Ferrer transferred to the Staunton Military Academy in the state of Virginia, where he was reunited with his childhood friend, Rafael “Chafó” Villamil². In Staunton, Ferrer learned to play percussion, a profession that he practiced parallel to his artistic career. In 1951, Ferrer enrolled in Syracuse University as a liberal arts major. While studying at Syracuse, he formed a Latin music band with music students from Crouse College. Although his time in Syracuse was short, Ferrer had contact with the beginnings of the American counterculture, which shared the spirit of rebellion so present in Ferrer’s life and work. After a three-month stay in California with his brother, Ferrer returned to Puerto Rico and enrolled in the Río Piedras campus of the University of Puerto Rico (UPRRP, by its Spanish initials).

During his short stay at the UPRRP, Ferrer established a close relationship with Spanish surrealist Eugenio Granell³. In 1954 he traveled to Paris, where he met up with Granell who introduced him to André Breton, Benjamin Péret, and Wilfredo Lam. Ferrer lived in Puerto Rico until 1955, when he began to spend long periods between New York and San Juan, working as a percussionist. He returned

1 *The San Juan Star*, an English language newspaper, in 1964 hired US artist William W. Overbey, and in 1967 Puerto Rican Ernesto Jaime Ruiz de la Mata as the newspaper’s art critic. In the fifties and sixties, *El Mundo* newspaper published short articles about exhibitions in its entertainment section. In 1968, Antonio J. Molina, a Cuban artist living in Puerto Rico, was employed as an art critic.

2 Villamil is a self-taught artist trained as an architect in the Georgia Institute of Technology.

3 Puerto Rican avant-garde art genesis is traced to exiled Spanish intellectual Eugenio Granell who taught in the Department of Fine Arts at UPRRP. The surrealist approach to all aspects of life that Granell instilled in his disciples marked a change in artistic production promoted by the artists of the Fifties Generation.

to Puerto Rico in 1960, and had various exhibitions in local museums and galleries, until his departure to Philadelphia in 1966.

Along other of Granell's students, Ferrer broke with the artistic tradition established by the artists of the previous generation, known as Fifties Generation⁴ [*Generación del 50*] -works with clear reference to Mexican muralism and social realism- and submitted to his own exploration of the different modalities of international contemporary art, as varied as those of Julio González and John Chamberlain. This consideration was reaffirmed by artist turned art critic Ernesto Jaime Ruiz de la Mata⁵ who stated: "[Ferrer] works without sheltering under the protective canopy of official patronage nor does he protect himself from the ridiculous and cheesy pseudo-Moorish, rococo or plateresque facades of Athenaeums, Institutes, Academies or Universities". (Ruiz de la Mata, *Esculturas de Rafael Ferrer en el Museo de la Universidad* 1964, 12)⁶ De la Mata argued that Ferrer's artistic production did not respond to institutional agendas, since he was not an employee of cultural institutions on the island, as were the artists of the Fifties Generation and some of their disciples, who worked for División de la Educación de la Comunidad (DivEdCo, by its Spanish acronym) or in the workshops of the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña (ICP, by its Spanish initials)⁷.

In the words of Rafael Ferrer:

The whole period was characterized by feverish activities, polemics against the official 'Puerto Rican Art Establishment,' and fierce competition with each other as we developed our individual ideas. The climax of these activities came in 1961 when Chafo and I organized and presented at the Museum of the University of Puerto Rico a two-man show of our works [...] The result of the exhibition was a scandal of a nature unknown to that peaceful island. The aggressive nature of the works, the explicit eroticism in many of our paintings, the presentation and the handling of space and even our choice of a quote from Antonin Artaud as a preface for the catalogue brought demands that the show be closed from religious groups and most local artists either concurred or remained silent. *Needless to say we were overjoyed.* (Ferrer, *Autobiography* 1973, 50)

4 *Generación del 50* was a group of artists with a populist agenda who created images of Puerto Rican national affirmation, showcasing the autochthonous: its people, landscape, popular festivals, as well as the explicit condemnation of the US regime over Puerto Rico.

5 Rafael Ferrer and Ernesto Jaime Ruiz de la Mata met at Granell's classes. Ruiz de la Mata was one of the first critics and academics to defend Ferrer's work in Puerto Rico.

6 This and all Spanish language reference quotes were translated by the author.

7 DivEdCo (1949-1990) was an island-wide government education program aimed to help the rural communities make the transition to modernity. The ICP was founded in 1955 with a mission to conserve, promote, enrich, and disseminate the cultural values of the people of Puerto Rico. In 1957, it founded art studio workshops where students learned various art techniques.

In May 1961, the exhibition *2 Painters* [*2 Pintores*] by Rafael Ferrer and Rafael “Chafó” Villamil was inaugurated at the University Museum¹. Villamil transformed the exhibition hall into a labyrinth, using construction *formaletas*². Their pieces were identified with numbers: the evens were by Ferrer, the odds by Villamil.

The artists exhibited early paintings and collages/assemblages that incorporated metals, wood, and other materials into their compositions. Ferrer exhibited some three-dimensional pieces of welded metal. The mixture of images of erotic content, discarded materials, and the crudeness of their execution managed to create an anti-academic and anti-bourgeois aesthetic, an interest that he shared with Villamil. For example, Ferrer’s painting *Figure* [*Figure*, 1953] presents an anthropomorphic form, in shades of black, gray, and white, floating on a white background. It alludes to the female body and the male phallus. Whereas Villamil’s *The King and his 7 Queens* [*El Rey y sus 7 Reinas*, 1959] painting “[...] contained ‘lascivious’ elements, in addition to pieces of wood, sand in plastic resins, parts of ornamental iron railings, automobile paint, etc.” (Villamil 1994). Those ‘lascivious’ elements Villamil refers to are collaged images cutout from adult entertainment publications.

What is clear is that, beyond the appearance of the pieces, it was the erotic content that displeased the public:

The exhibition of Rafael Villamil and Ferrer scared our society. A lethargic, provincial, ‘equalized’ society (a society that lives, if we can call it that, immersed in the false ataraxia produced by the chemical artifice of tranquilizers). Most of the public that witnessed it said the exhibition was nothing more than a shameless exhibition deliberately loaded with pornographic and obscene ingredients. Others argued that they were mere confessional statements of an extra-artistic nature. Precisely, the premeditated manifestation of the exhibitors consisted of the mockery towards that hesitant, timorous, and hypocritical society as well as the anguished awareness of an inescapable reality. The way everything related to sex was highlighted repelled the prudish public. (Ruiz de la Mata, Esculturas 1964, 12)

One week after opening night, *The Island Times* newspaper published a letter to the editor entitled *Controversial Art*³ penned by artist and then interim director of the MHAA, Rafael Rivera García (1929 – 2014). This text set off a

1 Located at the UPRRP, now Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte (MHAA, by its Spanish initials).

2 Construction-grade wood panels molds which are used for poured concrete.

3 The original title of the text is *The Brave Ones* [*Los Bravos*], as it appears in the typed carbon copy of the letter preserved in the Centro de Documentación de Arte Puertorriqueño of the MHAA, UPRRP.

polemic whose cynical tone and writing style would accompany Ferrer's exhibitions in Puerto Rico well into mid-decade. He commented:

The 'paintings' by Rafael Villamil and Rafael Ferrer are without a doubt the most shocking and personal statements of any artists having exhibited before in Puerto Rico. Comments while mounting the paintings have been to the effect that this is not ART! This is pornographic! If this is art...? These comments say much better than I could ever say the attitude with which these two painters will be received. I have no doubt people will be repulsed and want to insult these young men. [...] They are 'Brave' because they say what they want, do what they want and are intent on moving the unmoving. These two men possibly will be much hated and abused, always they will stand up to people and say 'these are our statements'. One cannot just look at these paintings, one 'feels' them they are statements crude and pornographic and much to the point. The being life is crude, life is everything. (Rivera García, *Controversial Art* 1961, 9)

Were Rivera García's comments sincere or were they backhanded compliments to Ferrer and Villamil? The use of single quotation marks in the words *painting* and *brave* highlights them, but also implies that they are not used with their intended meaning, proving the latter.

Days before the exhibition closed, a two-part episode composed by César Andreu Iglesias⁴ was published in the *El Imparcial* newspaper. In the first part, Andreu Iglesias describes the meeting he had with a painter named Silvio at a bar in Old San Juan, which the author described as a challenge to human patience. Andreu Iglesias's writing style is sarcastic and is critical of Silvio's stance of scouring artworks of nationalistic tones. The author mocked and ridiculed Silvio and his art style –*tataism*. Did Andreu Iglesias make an honest mistake and misspell Dadaism or was he using a play on words to further ridicule the artist? The text ends with the author's begrudging acceptance to visit the Silvio's studio. (Iglesias Abreu, Silvio, *el pintor* 1961, 18)

The second part, *Chabacanerías*⁵, was published the next day. In it, the author narrated the contents of the artist's atelier. An extensive quote from the text is made for its value in understanding the author's impression of avant-garde art:

I refuse to describe the alleged masterpiece. In addition to the paint plasters, a swarm of objects was stuck in their natural form: a dozen

4 An award-winning novelist who wrote the column *Things from here* [*Cosas de aquí*] at *El Imparcial*, a newspaper known for its pro-independence editorial line.

5 Can be translated as vulgar, gaudy, tasteless or tawdry.

mousetraps of various sizes, an old washboard, several broken bottles, a piece of sackcloth, and a wooden toilet seat. ... What was that? Nothing at all. Quite simply, an insolent display of vulgarity [...]

‘The University Museum wants to present my works,’ he said, and added, showing me a letter: ‘Listen to what the person in charge of the museum tells me in this letter: ‘I am sure that people will repudiate and insult you, young painter. They will say that your art is pornographic and a thousand other things. But I say: ‘Bravo! *One cannot look at the paintings; one feels them.* Magnificent judgment... Don’t you think so? Naturally, I refrained from expressing my judgment about judgment and even less so about the artwork. If I felt anything, it was the desire to laugh. But, on the other hand, how to laugh at a man who is forty years old and is still in his teens? He cannot even be considered ridiculous, let alone his work. However, it is good to remember that vulgarity is not the heritage of any school. The same can occur in traditional art or in supposedly avant-garde art. And that is the only thing evident in Silvio’s work. Precisely, *the only thing that does not have the right to, is to pass it off as art.* (Iglesias Andreu 1961b, 18, emphasis added)

Once again, the text’s tone was cynical and sarcastic. It can be inferred that the author used the fictitious name Silvio to indirectly criticize Rafael Ferrer’s work and that the author referenced the letter written by Rivera García published a couple of days before. Andreu Iglesias’ stance as an intellectual of the island’s conservative pro-independence left, reveals this group’s distaste for Ferrer’s work, which, in turn, could be interpreted as a direct comment on the intertwined relationship between art, national identity, and colonial politics of the island. Despite the public’s reception, Ferrer exhibited in Puerto Rico several times during the 1960s, each time triggering debates about the very concept of art.

Ferrer’s first solo show at the MHAA provoked new controversies. On January 22, 1964, *Ferrer Sculptures* [*Ferrer Esculturas*] opened; an exhibition of twelve large format welded metal sculptures and an installation. The amorphous sculptures were made from industrial metals, rusty metals, and automobile scrap. His fascination with the material, according to Ferrer, was its availability and price. To him, scrap metal represented the metaphor of contemporaneity: “There’s something about the personality of an auto wreck that appeals to me. So much is written about the automobile in recent years... the ‘mass killer,’ the ‘upholstered love boat,’ the ‘insolent chariot.’ The automobile is so contemporary”. (Ruiz de la Mata, *The ‘Grotesque Art’ of Rafael Ferrer* 1965, 10)

Two of the exhibited pieces make direct commentary on the charged political environment of the decade. Both *Birmingham* and *Gene Bull* allude to the struggle for civil rights by the African American population in the southern United States. The sculptures referred the violence of the events that occurred in the city

of Birmingham.⁶ As Ruiz de la Mata commented: “Ferrer magically transmutes that junk, those visceral residues of the fateful symbolism of our time, the machine, into humanized constructions of rare beauty and traumatic expressiveness”. (Ruiz de la Mata, *Esculturas* 1964, 12)

According to local newspapers, the exhibition was well received and extended for two weeks.⁷ As part of the activities that accompanied the exhibition, on February 12, Ruiz de la Mata gave a conference about Rafael Ferrer and modern sculpture, possibly to counteract the controversy created by Rafael Rivera García, who had organized a three-hour protest in front of the MHAA. Rivera García held a sign that read: “I protest the buying of junk in the museum when funding for programs is lacking”. (Cabrera, *Monta piquete en Universidad profesor UPR compre escultura en acero de Ferrer* 1964, 7) The interview by the reporter Alba Raquel Cabrera, made evident that Rivera García was the voice of the public’s taste at the time. He tried to defend his position by arguing that the money from the purchase of *Birmingham* (1963) should be invested in programs or scholarships for the university, particularly architecture students and programs. In Rivera García’s words:

[...] it is a pity that funds are earmarked for the purchase of ‘junk art’ which is commercially worth eighteen cents for approximately one hundred pounds and the University paid no less than \$2,600 for ‘*Birmingham* 1963’. This is completely absurd and tells us that we are losing the serious meaning of art [...] I believe that the young Rafael Ferrer is a sculptor in training and that we do not know if next year his vocation will move to another field, leaving the University with a work by an author who has no continuity. I also consider that in art there must be an intention on the man’s part and I do not believe that one can take the lid of a garbage can and capriciously call it ‘Something’. No, in art, intention must prevail over whim, because art cannot be accidental and only exists when it is made by man. I question scrap art because in it there is an accident to the fullest degree. *Although it seems that we are willing to follow everything that is fashionable outside of Puerto Rico.* (Cabrera 1964, 7, emphasis added)

It is worth mentioning that Rivera García is just four years older than Ferrer and that he had contributed to the modernization of the exhibition program

6 Birmingham, Alabama was known as a notoriously racist city, protected by Theophilus Eugene Connor (Bull Connor), the openly segregationist police chief. On September 15, 1963, a bomb detonated before a Sunday service at the 16th Street Baptist Church. Four people lost their lives and 22 were injured.

7 As reported in Eddie Figueroa, “Darán charla UPR hoy sobre Rafael Ferrer,” *El Mundo*, February 12, 1964, 25.

of the MHAA during his position as Assistant Director (1959-1961). He promoted abstraction on the island by organizing exhibitions of abstract expressionists from the United States at the MHAA. If Rivera García promoted contemporary painting during his tenure as museum director, why those conservative words about Ferrer's work? Furthermore, Rivera García himself produced works clearly influenced by abstract expressionism during the early 1950s, so why does he condemn Ferrer for following "everything that is fashionable outside of Puerto Rico"?

Cabrera concluded her article by noting that another section of the newspaper reviewed Ferrer's 'sculptures' -with the word *sculpture* in single quotation marks, as did Rivera García in his 1961. To understand what was considered 'sculpture' at the time, it is fitting to compare Ferrer to one of his contemporaries: Rafael López del Campo⁸. Lopez del Campos' small-format work, *Girl with cemí* [*Niña con cemí*, 1964] presents a girl with clear references to modern sculpture, but not detached from figuration. Employing bronze and marble, López del Campo maintains the traditional values of sculpture, while the references to Taíno heritage reaffirms a national identity, a discourse inherited from his teachers of the Fifties Generation. Ferrer's avant-garde work challenged the limits of artistic creation using discarded materials: it broke the modernist tradition that the art object should be a vehicle for aesthetic contemplation, which created problems for certain audiences. Ferrer commented:

My only beef is to be put down or criticized because I'm not somebody's idea of what a Puerto Rican artist is supposed to be — or produce. Too much art here is enjoyed only in terms of what fits nicely into the category of Puerto Rican art. I believe my ultimate aim, or the ultimate aim of any art, is to transcend the local ideas [...] *Therefore I don't want to do what has already been done repeatedly... or what is considered very quaint and very Puerto Rican.* (Dinhofer 1964a, 26, added emphasis)

Reporter Al Dinhofer published an article contextualizing Ferrer's work in relation with the art scene in Puerto Rico at the time. One of the three photographs that accompany the text shows him looking for material for his sculptures in a mountain of discarded metals. Dinhofer's text presents Ferrer's frustration with the art scene in Puerto Rico. As Ferrer states:

The shape of the future is nothing more than the preparation of the present. Therefore, I do not want to do [in sculpture] what has already been done repeatedly... or what is considered very quaint and very Puerto Rican. I believe I'm moving forward in terms of what is

8 López del Campo (1936-2009) studied at the ICP art workshops. The ICP awarded him a scholarship to study at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome from 1962 to 1965.

happening in art on a world-wide level. If I can't get anywhere with my work on this island, so what. I look elsewhere for a place to exhibit my sculpture. (Dinhofer, *Free Forms from Fenders* 1964, 5)

Rafael Ferrer's second solo exhibition in Puerto Rico, *26 Sculptures* [26 *esculturas*] was at La Casa del Arte gallery in March 1965. It marked a shift in Ferrer's sculptures: they were intervened with thick layers of industrial paint in bright, flat colors. Even though it has been rarely discussed in Puerto Rican art historiography, this exhibition unleashed a significant debate in the pages of *El Mundo* about the very definition of art. In it, columnist Pedro de Acarón, artist Jaime Carrero, J.J. and Vivian Vilá discussed their concerns with Ferrer's work.

The debate begins with a column by Pedro de Acarón that questioned the validity of Ferrer's sculptures as art: "Yesterday we went to an exhibition. We expected to see sculptures". (de Acarón, *El Mundo* 1965a, 7) De Acarón began his article by citing Duchamp and the role of the viewer before a work of art, where the artist does not know what he is doing, but it is the viewer who deciphers the work and completes the creative process. Using the argument that the viewer is equal to, or more important than the artist, the author proceeds to describe his experience in deciphering Ferrer's works. According to de Acarón:

What we found were some masses made up of *parachoques*, which in Castilla la Vieja are called bumpers, some riddles that looked like scrap metal nightmares and an old typewriter, painted black. It gave the impression of being the first one that Mr. Royal tried to make and who, not being satisfied with the result, hit it repeatedly with a mallet. (de Acarón, *El Mundo* 1965a, 7)

Self-proclaimed as a philistine and square, the reporter declared his inability to interpret Ferrer's work. He concluded his text by narrating what he had witnessed on opening night: a couple walking around the room, and, between whispers and laughter, he heard the woman say: "The only thing that I know is that the artist has a brother who is a great actor⁹. Period." (de Acarón, *El Mundo* 1965a, 7) The text included a photograph of one typewriter piece with the following caption: "'this' is worth \$300" (de Acarón 1965a, 7, added emphasis), the word *this* in single quotation marks.

In a letter published in the *Voz del Lector* section, Jaime Carrero¹⁰ reacted to de Acarón's column and begged de Acarón: "not to enlighten us with his ideas and comments about art that seem more like free ridicule than constructive

9 Ferrer's brother was Academy Award winner José Ferrer.

10 Carrero (1931-2013) was also a professor in the Department of Fine Arts at the Interamerican University, San Germán Campus until 1995.

remarks.” (Carrero 1965, 6) More than defending Ferrer, Carrero called de Acarón irresponsible because of his disdainful commentaries about Ferrer’s work, particularly in view of de Acarón’s lack of knowledge about art. De Acarón replied to Carrero, protecting himself under the constitutional right of freedom of expression. Nevertheless, he concluded his text with the question: “But do you have to be an ART critic to comment on Rafael Ferrer’s sculptures?” (de Acarón, El Mundo 1965b, 7)

The attacks on Ferrer did not end there, the same newspaper published a letter signed by J.J. The missive, which once again recurred to a cynic tone of previously critiques of Ferrer’s work, began as follows: “The fact that I have dedicated myself to art I owe to Telephone Company. Yes, to the Telephone Company. I, like so many people, scribble on a piece of paper while I wait for the communication. An ‘expert’ in modern ‘art’ suggested I exhibit them in a gallery in the capital. I got the first prize. That is how art goes these days.” (J.J. 1965, 6) Again, the use of single quotation marks implies a sarcastic tone. According to J.J., the sculptures lacked technique and the materials used were discarded waste that had no place in art:

It is important that you be a rebel [...] Cultural and artistic centers will magically open and ‘critics’ will prostrate themselves at your feet. What about the works of art? Man, that’s the least of it. Do like me. Devote yourself fully to modern sculpture. Buy a four-pound mallet, an essential tool for modern ‘sculptors’, and as raw material use barbed wire, rope, an old mattress, [...] Mix all this well and beat it with the mallet. May lightning strike me if what comes out leaves Michelangelo insignificant. (J.J. 1965, 6)

Vivian Vilá’s response J.J.’s text, references the story *The Emperor’s New Clothes* by Hans Christian Andersen as an analogy to comprehend Ferrer’s success: Ferrer becomes the roguish tailors while the art critics are the townsfolk who went along with the pretense. Vilá remarked “I have read many times that art is a reflection of the people, but I have kept the hope that the twisted irons that lately try to become fashionable are nothing more than the reflection of those who make them.” (Vilá 1965, 6) She congratulated J.J. who, as the child who blurted out that the king was parading naked through the town streets, was not convinced that the twisted irons were sculptures. Vilá concludes her letter: “I consider that the future of our culture is not in the person who can combine a frying pan with a bicycle handle, and say it is a sculpture, but in the acceptance of the so-called responsible, knowledgeable art critics who are tasked with the responsibility of correctly guiding the majority and especially the new generation.” (Vilá 1965, 6) Was she implying that Ferrer’s validation as an artist was conjured up by ‘irresponsible’ art critics?

Those critics might be the contributors to *The San Juan Star* and *San Juan Review* who advocated Ferrer's work. Artist Domingo García¹¹ interpreted Ferrer's sculptures as an extension of Dadaist aesthetic philosophy that, in turn, incorporated an indigenous element with the international (Reality, Intellect -- And Art 1965, 6). Although García praised Ferrer, he concluded with a cautionary tone: "Finally, he who would venture forth to Rafael Ferrer's show should be forearmed with the admonition that the vital is not always polite." (García 1965, 6)

Ruiz de la Mata, the art critic of *San Juan Review* magazine, published an interview with Ferrer. The artist commented on the relationship between music and art, the influence of Granell, his stay in Paris in 1954, the 1961 exhibition controversy, the development of his three-dimensional work, and his creative process until his recent work which he exhibited at La Casa del Arte. Ferrer was aware of in the controversies his work were unearthing:

SJR: Don't you find a piece of an auto wreck rather grotesque?

Ferrer: Yes, and the more grotesque it is, the more I like it. Also, I get a certain satisfaction from taking a useless thing —an old auto bumper—and, you might say, breathing new life into it. [...] I prefer the arc welder —it burns the steel and is more brutal; it results in a more powerful looking work, in my opinion.

[...]

SJR: What sort of impression do you strive to create in a spectator's mind?

Ferrer: I never set out with a premeditated idea. The various interpretations given by people who see my works is never of a serious consequence to me [...] (Ruiz de la Mata, 'The 'Grotesque Art' 1965, 10; 31)

Despite the controversy caused by his second solo exhibition, Ferrer participated in a portrait collective exhibition at the ICP headquarters. The exhibition's review published in *The San Juan Star*, William W. Overbey dedicated the second paragraph to Ferrer's piece: "Rafael Ferrer's witty sculpture of art critic Ernesto Jaime Ruiz de la Mata surprisingly comes closer than most of the works to true interpretive portraiture. Ferrer captured the nature of the clever commentator whose predilection is toward the avant-garde with a motorcycle gas tank welded atop a pipe and sprayed with rustproof enamels." (Fascinating Potpourri of Portraits 1965, 6) Overbey concluded his review by motivating the ICP to continue the trend of this type of exhibition, where a variety of artistic styles were presented.

11 García (1932 – 2022) was an avant-garde artist, a student William Lock at the National Academy of Fine Arts, NY. He was a professor at Escuela de Artes Plásticas in Old San Juan.

Ferrer: Sculptures [*Ferrer: Esculturas*], his third one-man show in Puerto Rico, was exhibited at the ICP headquarters in early 1966. Ferrer exhibited the *HOMOBILI* sculptural series, the Ernesto Jaime Ruiz de la Mata portrait, and four large-format polychrome sculptures, which marked the beginning of a new series¹². The ICP magazine published a short text of the exhibition, accompanied by four photographs that captured the appearance of the exhibition room. The review stated: “Among the young sculptors of Puerto Rico, Rafael Ferrer is distinguished by his radical iconoclast.” (Exposición de obras de Rafael Ferrer 1966, 38) Ferrer’s pieces were displayed on pedestals dispersed around the room. The assemblages alluded to the proletariat due in part to the materials used: discarded metals, cardboard, wood, and plastics. The crudeness of the three-dimensional pieces was dissonant with the pomposity of the exhibition space, a building in the *Beaux-Arts* architectural style.

Ferrer’s inclusion in the ICP exhibition calendar would be a great victory for avant-garde art. Two years earlier, Ferrer wrote a letter addressed to the founder and director of the ICP, Ricardo Alegría. It was published in *The San Juan Star*. Entitled *The Ostrich*, Ferrer reacted to a remark by Alegría where he described Puerto Ricans as shy, uncertain, and insecure.¹³ Comparing Alegría to an ostrich with its head buried in the ground and isolated from its surroundings, Ferrer expressed his frustrations with the ICP’s definition of Puerto Rican culture. According to Ferrer, the institution’s programming promoted an isolated culture, fossilized and immune to foreign events, and, therefore, rejected any artistic expression that corrupted the foundations of that cultural identity. Ferrer commented:

I for one, and there are others of my generation, who, although involved in work which should move us near the I.P.C. and its programs cannot help but feel that this is an impossibility. The reasons are obvious and well known. A rigid dogmatism, prehistoric concepts as to the development of art history, and what perhaps is most disturbing: this almost pathological obsession where folklore native handcrafts, and

12 Some of the pieces were used as scenery for a happening the couple Ernesto Jaime Ruiz de la Mata and his wife, Beatriz de la Torre, organized at the Student Center of the UPRRP. This exhibition would later travel to the Pan American Union in Washington DC in June 1966, see: “Escultor boricua exhibe obras en Washington,” *El Mundo*, July 14, 1966.

13 The headline on the front page of *The San Juan Star* on December 23, 1963, read: “ ‘Inferiority Complex’ Prevails in Puerto Rico, Says Alegría.” In the article, Alegría described the Puerto Rican from an anthropological perspective and commented: “If you ask me to define the Puerto Rican character as an anthropologist, I would do it in two words: inferiority complex [...] Because Puerto Rico has been a colony so long, there has been very little opportunity for our people to learn their own heritage”.

quaint customs are passed for a high cultural tradition—Our Puerto Rican Tradition. I dare to say, and obviously I speak for myself, that anyone seriously at work in any form of expression in the tradition of the advances achieved by vanguard artists in this century must find a route independent from the programs of the I.P.C. This is neither bad nor good—merely a reality. As a Puerto Rican intent on changing this reality I feel free from Dr. Alegria's [sic] self-imposed inferiority complex. (The Ostrich 1964, 16)

These public criticisms directed at the ICP had positive consequences, the institution ended up supporting avant-garde artists, providing financial support for traveling shows, purchasing advertisements in art magazines and acquiring avant-garde works for its permanent collection. Before Ferrer's letter, Alegria had already been criticized for the cultural position that the ICP was enforcing. In 1962, *The Island Times* published two letters to the editor following the publication of the article *Cultural Debate* by Earl Parker Hanson¹⁴, where the author discussed the anti-American undercurrent in Puerto Rico. The reactions were written by the artists Rafael Rivera García and Frances del Valle. Rivera García's concern lay with the Puerto Rican cultural identity promoted by the ICP and the institution's monopoly on culture:

All of these decisions as regards the arts have been limited to fabrication arbitrarily a manner of working which obeys his regional interpretation of culture. In their desperate attempt to objectivize culture the regionalists exclude from the local scene abstract paintings, sculpture in its contemporary phase, and other 'strange' and mystifying (to them) forms of expression. (Rivera García, *The Island Times* 1962, 5)

They were strong words for a man who, in 1964, protested in front of the MHAA for the purchase of 'scrap'. Frances del Valle reacted to Rivera García's letter and made it clear that: "It is true that certain official agencies, prominent intellectuals, and art-fanciers encourage and stimulate an art that leans towards a growing national cultural purism." (del Valle 1962) This cultural purism was the consensus of what art should be: figurative and national.

The exhibition achieved scarce media coverage, only one review in *The San Juan Star* in which the author, Overbey, commented on Ferrer's references to Dadaism, but stressed that, at the same time, they were works that critically commented on contemporary wealthy society by using discarded materials. He added that, contrary to the Dadaists who incorporated a political element into his

14 Earl Parker Hanson arrived in Puerto Rico in 1935 to serve as Secretary of the Planning Division of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration. He published several books about arrival of modernity in Puerto Rico and was a columnist for *The Island Times*.

work, Ferrer avoided a moralistic message, highlighting the Puerto Rican artist's beauty, craftsmanship, and imagination. Overbey pointed out that, above all, Ferrer's work stood out for its ironic, mocking, and honest content: "Many of Ferrer's pieces wear garish coats of shiny bright enamel screaming for the passerby's attention, gaining a minute for a glossy pitch and that's what it's like OUT THERE. Out on the neon streets of the new illusion and Rafi Ferrer's reality." (An Eye for the Absurd 1966, 6)

Days before the ICP exhibition ended in 1966, Ferrer presented his fourth one-man exhibition at *La Casa del Arte* where he showed drawings, collages, and engravings. Its only review, penned by Alba Raquel Cabrera, revealed that 90% of Ferrer's sales were to foreigners, reinforcing the fact that the local audience was reluctant toward avant-garde works. The rift was further emphasized by Cabrera who stated:

[...] painter Sánchez Felipe¹⁵, who stated that he did not understand much of this phase of painting, but that it must be seen as decorative

art. On the other hand, Dr. José Alonso was so excited with Ferrer's works, that he could not conceive the idea that journalists and photographers would stop for a moment to exchange views with each other. (Inauguran exposición obras Rafael Ferrer 1966).

A few months after his *La Casa del Arte* exhibition, Ferrer relocated to Philadelphia, even though he stated that his art was starting to be accepted (Cabrera, Inauguran 1966). Ferrer entered a kind of self-exile and did not participate in exhibitions in Puerto Rico until 1975.¹⁶

It has been established that Rafael Ferrer's exhibitions during the first half of the 1960s ignited fervent discussions in printed media in Puerto Rico. The public's and some artists' voices were defiant towards avant-garde art, employing sarcasm and ridicule to undervalue Ferrer's work. Avant-garde art in Puerto Rico was in fact a scandalous exercise since it generated heated debates about art's appearance: figurative and technically masterful, not 'grotesque' and 'unskilled'. A disparity between English language news outlets vis-à-vis newspapers in Spanish is palpable. Articles in English publications were more acceptant of avant-garde, whereas those in Spanish language publications coincided with the values promoted by the ICP. These discussions by the first chroniclers of art on the island set the groundwork for the foundation of the Puerto Rican art canon: figurative art was a reaffirmation of a national cultural independence, whereas avant-garde was conceived as an act of national alienation or dismissal. Moreover, Puerto Rican art historians habitually

15 Alejandro Sánchez Felipe (1888 –1971) was an academic painter trained at the Academia de San Fernando in Madrid. He arrived in Puerto Rico in 1933 and taught at the UPRR.

16 Ferrer exhibited the series *Mapas y caras* at the Museo de Grabado Latinoamericano of the ICP.

reference Spanish newspapers, not English language publications, notoriously omitting avant-garde's presence in Puerto Rico.

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**SKANDALOZNA VEŽBA:
POLEMIKA O AVANGARDNOJ UMETNOSTI
RAFAELA FERERA U PERIODICI, 1961–1966**

Apstrakt:

Tokom 1960-ih godina je u Portoriku bilo uobičajeno da se u štampanim medijima objavljuju osnovne informacije o izložbama: kratka biografija umetnika, broj, veličina i tehnika izloženih umetničkih dela. Tekstove su pisali novinari jer u ovom periodu likovni kritičari nisu bili angažovani da pišu u periodici. Nedostatak novinarstva u kulturi mogao bi biti razlog za mnogobrojne nedoslednosti u istoriografskim tekstovima, što je u velikoj meri doprinelo oprečnim zapisima o osnovnim činjenicama. Međutim, nedostatak novinarskih izveštavanja o kulturi je izazvalo pojavu „amaterskih glasova” u javnosti, koji su percepciju o umetnosti iznosili u kolumnama lokalnih novina. Ovaj članak razmatra avangardni opus umetnika Rafaela Ferera (1933), koji je nastao tokom prve polovine 1960-ih godina, polemiku koju je pokrenuo u portorikanskoj štampi i njene reperkusije u kreiranju umetničkog kanona u Portoriku.

Ključne reči:

avangarda, Portoriko, Rafael Ferer, periodika, studije recepcije

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