



Art Review: Rafael Ferrer's Calor

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by Esperanza Leon

“Rafael Ferrer: Calor” at Adam Baumgold Gallery, 60 East 66th Street, New York, NY 10065

The formal aptitude in color and line, ease of invention, and ability for pun and punditry of Rafael Ferrer do not cease to amaze me. The small, primarily works on paper show at Adam Baumgold Gallery follows on the heels of an exhibition devoted to works on paper at the Lancaster Museum of Art. The latter revealed the scope and breadth of the artist's drawing genius, stylistic versatility and pointed commentary.

In the Manhattan show, which closes this weekend, a brief but representative selection of works on paper dating as early as the late 70s is accompanied by two of his iconic calabash constructions, a hanging assemblage and a ceramic plate. Altogether, they demonstrate the artist's impartiality with mediums and facility for two- and three- dimensional work.



“Homar” by Rafael Ferrer, 1995. Mixed media, 36 x 24 x 24 inches. Courtesy Adam Baumgold Gallery.

The far room, intimate in size, lends itself to a display of small works, none exceeding 12 inches, except for a boldly-glazed 15-inch ceramic plate—a unique piece from 2005 strikingly depicting a pineapple in deep green and orange—and the precarious *Homar*, one of two calabash works included.

Homar echoes the iconography of several works here, including an *Untitled* watercolor series framed in vertical groups of three. Like the assemblage, which has an insular shape wrapping around the gourd's circumference, these diminutive watercolors portray ‘la isla’, the island of Puerto Rico, one of many recurring motifs in Ferrer's work.

It appears again in the mixed media triptych *Tres Islas Veces*, 2005. Notable here is the use of a grid, another element used time and again by Ferrer: in the maps from the 70s and into cartographic works like *True-he-yo*, 2005. In this acerbic cartography of Haiti and Dominican Republic, the imagery and text (the title is a phonetic play on the last name of the former Dominican dictator, Rafael Trujillo) question the troubled and troubling social, political, economic, and military past and present of this grossly divided island.

Two 10 x 14-inch watercolors from 1988 stand out for their brevity: a thin strip of undulating

landscape covered by an expansive, rolling sky. These quiet yet forceful images are indicative of the expressive intensity Ferrer achieves by little means and through a variety of styles, subjects, and mediums. This resonates all the more as one appreciates the range of the works nearby, dating from the artist's return to figurative painting in the 80s to the condensed works of the 2000s.

The oil stick works on paper from the early 90s, displayed in the front of the gallery, are a revelation. In *La Gallina*, the blue-black hen floats on an abstracted background of three fields of color. Similarly simplified into areas of intense color, *Sombrero de Palma* portrays a man, his back turned, sporting a yellow and green palm fiber hat. The brown profile and white shirt set off the bright blue background of light sky and deep sea. In these, the colors are more flat and uniformly applied than in a slightly earlier work *Dos Piñas Secas*, where the background is dynamically rendered in frond-like strokes that repeat the form of the dry pineapple tops. Overall, the vibrant hues and luxuriant texture are absolutely breathtaking.



“Lam y Hohja” by Rafael Ferrer, 1996. Oil stick on paper, 42 x 29 1/2 inches. Courtesy Adam Baumgold Gallery.

Wifredo Lam, an important influence –and artistic starting point—for Ferrer, appears here in yet another large, brightly colored oil stick work titled *Lam y Hoja* from 1996.

In all of his homages to the Cuban artist, Ferrer is adept at interpreting and adapting the former's modern idiom, concentrated here in the background as a direct tribute to a relevant figure in art history. The huge green leaf that Lam holds at his side calls to mind the lushness of the Caribbean islands that gave birth to each artist.

The second calabash piece in the show is *Lam*, from the same year as the work on paper. It has a musical aspect relevant to both Ferrer's background as a professional percussionist and the admiration for Afro-Cuban music and culture that tied him to Lam from the time they met in Paris in 1954. The spindly steel frame that holds three painted and carved gourds has the appearance of a percussionist, mid-beat, the right 'hand' shaped like a güiro.

My visit during the last week of the show's run afforded the opportunity to reencounter the installation of small blackboards, *Contraband*, a powerful master work that lent its title to the Guild Hall Museum exhibition that I guest-curated in 2011-2012, where it was first shown publicly. While this revision of the show removed *El Golfo*, one of Ferrer's recognizable large-scale maps, *La Luna y La Palma* (oil stick, paper, Mylar, 1979) was on view still. Neither did I get to see a small selection of the darkly whimsical *Traitor* series (1980) that formed part of the Lancaster show, like many of the works here.

Nonetheless, I happily revisited these 60 blackboards (incidentally, a grid) that, as I wrote in 2011 “encapsulate[s] Ferrer's bilingual nature, his diversity of thought and style, and the humor and perspicacity of the underground economics from which he creates.” In light of Ferrer's recent exhibitions, where we have had occasion to view and reevaluate his work, *Contraband* would

appear to summarize the artist's career as a whole.

Esperanza León

BASIC FACTS: “Rafael Ferrer: Calor” is presented from Feb 8 to March 16, 2013 at Adam Baumgold Gallery, 60 East 66th Street, New York, NY 10065. The final day of the exhibition is tomorrow. adambaumgoldgallery.com

Rafael Ferrer lives on the North Fork of Long Island.

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