Rafael Ferrer

The idea of a Museum as a repository of things and a guardian of history becomes more real as I begin to create my personal museum with its objects. If this seems confusing, I would advise the viewer to approach it with calm and perhaps a bit of wonder remembering that for an artist his work is very natural. This is my Natural History.

—Rafael Ferrer

Rafael Ferrer (American, b. Puerto Rico, 1933) fashions charming and compelling objects from materials including corrugated metal, bones, paper bags, repurposed fabric, coins, wire, and beads. The MCA first showed his work in a solo exhibition in 1972, *Tierra del Fuego*, for which the artist created personal and expressive items using various everyday materials such as boats, masks, maps, and flags. *Tierra del Fuego* translates as "land of fire," and refers to an archipelago at the far southern tip of South America.

Several of the works from *Tierra del Fuego* subsequently entered the MCA Collection, and they are shown together for the first time since 1972. This exhibition also highlights other important bodies of Ferrer's work, including his cycle of paintings illustrating scenes from *Cien Años de Soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*), the Nobel Prize-winning writer Gabriel García Márquez's extraordinary novel, and his tribute to musician Rafael Cortijo. Although much of this work is from the early decades of his career, Ferrer's deep and continuing commitment to exploring his heritage and personal experience especially resonates with artists working today.

MCA DNA

MCA DNA: Rafael Ferrer is organized by MCA Curator Lynne Warren, and is part of an ongoing exhibition series featuring iconic works from the MCA Collection.

TIERRA DEL FUEGO

Ferrer approached his first museum solo exhibition, which was shown in the MCA's former facility on Ontario Street, as a personal voyage of discovery. He likened his birth country of Puerto Rico, which he described as "a very close and very foreign island—more physical than emotional but more fantastic than real," to far-off places with evocative and poetical names such as Madagascar.

He further explained:

> Then to push south to the furthest region: Patagonia, the Straits of Magellan and Tierra del Fuego—the land of fire given its name by [sixteenth-century explorer Ferdinand] Magellan and a place where Charles Darwin became a poet:
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> *In the strait of Magellan, looking due southward from Port Famine, the distant channels between the mountains appeared from their gloominess to lead beyond the confines of this world. The entangled mass of the thriving and the fallen reminded me of the forests within the tropics—yet there was a difference; for in these solitudes, Death instead of Life, seemed the predominant spirit.*

Ferrer fashioned objects that spoke of travel, such as boats and maps; and of history, such as flags and masks. The works from this earlier exhibition are *Kayak #2: Norte, A Flag for the Straits of Magellan, Portrait of Charles Darwin as a Fuegian Ceremonial Mask* (all from 1972), and a number of paper bag faces. These paper bag works are installed in a row at the top of the wall of the gallery, as they were in the 1972 show.

MCA Poster from *Rafael Ferrer: Tierra del Fuego*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 1972

Installation view, *Rafael Ferrer: Tierra del Fuego*, MCA Chicago
December 16, 1972—January 28, 1973
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