

Gerard Justin Ferrari's Political Clay

Article by Galadriel Chilton

WHILE EARLY SCULPTURES FROM GERARD JUSTIN Ferrari's Gizmology series were described as "political cartoons in the third dimension," three recent works – *Inch of Soul*, *Corporate Rape Simulator* and *Pawn* – embody raw anger rather than the satire of preceding pieces, and body parts rather than playful objects. Increased sophistication in this group of work is evident, as each of these three pieces contains multiple ideas ingeniously combined into poignant statements through which Ferrari illustrates a fragmented humanity brutalised by mega corporations and politics.

With *Inch of Soul*, Ferrari addresses how contemporary media affects spiritual, psychological and intellectual development. Created in 2000, this collage of figurative parts – a head, buttocks, spine, leg and foot – connected by technology, mimics how machines segment and then reconnect society. Central to the piece is the tribal/cyborg mask-head that suggests ritualising of TV and computer use, while the realistic woman's buttocks contrast stylised representation and abuse of the human body by popular media and fashion marketing.

Though modern imagery is present, the saggar-fired terracotta creates an archaic patina and prompts one to contemplate *Inch of Soul* as an ancient artifact. As a result, the viewer is encouraged to consider the piece like a future archaeologist might analyse social change, technology's influence, as well as societal practices and dominant machinery from an earlier era.

Ferrari's title responds to his question: "How much soul do we have left as a result of the technology we use, the lifestyle we live and the effects that everyday objects such as televisions, toasters, and cars have on us?" Ferrari answers this question with the piece's television set, which has an inverse pyramid ending in a square-inch void instead of a screen.

Like *Inch of Soul*, *Corporate Rape Simulator* is saggar-fired terra cotta and includes machinery and part of a woman's body. However, the mechanical elements depict physical violence rather than psychological impact, as this piece represents Ferrari's interpretation of the destructive actions and influence large corporations wield over humans and the environment.

Ferrari acknowledges that *Corporate Rape* is "extremely brutal," but that the sculpture was created

in response to companies hiding "their sweat shops, their low wages, and their treatment of the environment and people – particularly women, children, and minorities – all for the sake of the bottom line." Ferrari believes that with these actions, "companies are literally raping the world."

Abstracted parts from land and sea oil rigs characterises large corporations, while the woman's buttocks and legs signify women, humanity, and the earth's natural resources. A prominently placed joystick suggests the controlling device of a video game or military simulation machine. However, the figures incompleteness and integral connection to machines suggests people's reliance on large corporations for their living and the majority of the world's dependence on fossil fuels. *Corporate Rape Simulator* was completed in 2001.

Pawn is Ferrari's response to US actions after September 11, 2001, such as the 'War on Terror', and the war in Iraq. A work from 2003, this piece includes "several appendages and images designed to question the use of military force to settle humanity's disputes and greed"⁴ such as the US flag, a wheelchair, a golden phallus, a permanently wounded soldier and a chess pawn.

The tripod wheelchair, with prominent surface treatments of pastel blue and pink, characterises humanity's fragile and often childlike existence while the golden phallus as an exhaust pipe symbolises male domination, wealth and power. Ferrari notes that he often wonders if male-dominated societies have not led to the penis, thus masculinity, becoming a golden calf.

A US flag with 11 rather than 13 stripes, and 61 rather than 50 stars, suggests misinformation and lack of attention to detail perpetuated by political leaders and some major media outlets. With its position and bright colours, the US flag is clearly dominate regardless of its size, much as one powerful political leader often controls the masses and intimidates other nations. Additionally, Ferrari notes that recent rallies around the US flag have been about supporting war rather than independence, nationality and human dignity.

Pawn's injured soldier represents the common person's personal sacrifice for the mission of a govern-



Pawn. Terracotta. Low fire glazes. 35.5 x 33 x 20 cm.

ment; the soldier's lack of facial features suggests a being without a unique identity. Ferrari states, "Some of our leaders' decisions do not seem to have any more compassion than a chess player moving a pawn;" this piece could be a visual counterpart to Bob Dylan's song *Masters of War* where wealth can neither buy forgiveness nor "buy back [one's] soul."

As with earlier pieces in the *Gizmology* series, Ferrari continues to work with imagery from science fiction, popular culture and mechanical objects to create thought-provoking pieces. His careful and intricate treatment of clay reminds us of our fragile mortality as well as how machines, technology and politicians can fracture one's society and the world.

Historian Howard Zinn contends that the artist's job is "to think outside the boundaries of permissible thought and dare to say things that no one else will say." With these pieces, Ferrari succeeds in this role of an artist by presenting viewers with provocative and painful reflections on today's society. As art historian Nicholas Roukes writes, Ferrari's work repeatedly asks: "Will man's passive acquiescence and ongoing stupidity in matters regarding the proliferation of weaponry [in all forms] annihilate our hopes for future existence as a species?"

Utilising only parts of a human body in each of these pieces, the artist challenges viewers to recognise how mega corporations, media and politics can harm humanity. Like the works of Käthe Kollwitz, George

Grosz and Richard Notkin, the purpose of Ferrari's pieces are to create a visual representation of the world's dilemmas that is unsettling and provocative enough to rouse one's awareness and inspire a response. While the world's problems are often hard to grasp and easy to ignore, Ferrari's sculptures continually use familiar objects that enable viewers to personally interact with each piece, thus enabling comprehension of each sculpture's startling statement.

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