

Federico Solmi

THE GREAT SATIRICAL
ORGYART

In conversation with Salvatore Russo



I - You are an artist who surely uses very strong language and themes. George Washington, the founding fathers, Christopher Columbus, Mussolini, the Pope, are the real protagonists of your videos and your paintings. Why is your research aimed at them?

First of all, I would say that my anti-con-

ventional and self-taught artistic/cultural training has had a strong impact on the decisions and artistic choices that I have undertaken since the beginning. The lack of having attended courses at Academies or Universities has certainly encouraged my strong sense of independence from the art system, from any current or fashion of the moment. Consequently, the unusual

choice of themes, characters, and means and the language that I use in my works, fully reflects my innate desire to express

1. Personal photo

2. His Excellency the Tyrant of the World 1000\$ Bill, Federico Solmi 2014, acrylic paint, gold and silver leaf on a wood panel LCD screens, video loop 28 x 51 inches, 71 x 130 cm - private collection Brussels, Belgium

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myself always without compromise, in full freedom, not accepting any type of rule imposed by academies, professors, society, the market, or censorship. Through the careful study of the great artists of the past, I have learned that art can still be used as an effective vehicle for the communication of ideals, and the artist can become a lethal weapon for social commentary, to fight injustices, to show outspokenly what's been obscured from the heroes and rascals that fill our history books. These are the reasons why I chose to do this job, so fascinating, stimulating, but also so hard. The artist is fully aware that art still has a great power of persuasion towards the public and the masses, and this is very important to me, it is a great comfort, it keeps me anchored upon sincere values and makes me think that in all these years I have not worked in vain. Just at a time when marketing and speculation in art have reached such extreme levels, it becomes even more important for me to insist on the content

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and the work of art, and on the message that it seeks to emanate.

2 - The world has changed its ideals. I remember when at school they made us read the stories of the Brothers Grimm or Dumas, or talked to us about Charlemagne, Caesar, Napoleon. Today, however, future generations prefer reading reinterpretations of history in a satirical way. In other words, they prefer to read history through the satire of your works. Why do you think this is happening?

The main problem is that in becoming adults, we realized that often the history



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they taught us in the classrooms of our schools was extremely fictional, inaccurate, manipulated, controlled by the propaganda of our country. No nation inserts in the history books intended for adolescents the great historical faults of our national heroes, of our country, and therefore when we become adults and we want to look for the truth to clarify, to clear up our conscience we realize that what we have been taught in school often doesn't seem so different from the contents of the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm or Dumas, and when the truth is discovered once school is over, there is a great disappointment. It's a bit like becoming a teenager; it turns out that Santa Claus doesn't exist, it's a huge frustration. Believing in fairy tales is a fantastic thing... but on the contrary, learning through

3. Iron Cage, Federico Solmi, 2013, acrylic, gold leaf, mixed media with LCD screens on wood panel, cm 59x98 inches, 150x249 cm. Private Collection, Turin, Italy

4. Image courtesy: Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Washington DC

5. His Majesty the Emperor of the Universe, Federico Solmi, 2013, acrylic, gold and silver leaf, mixed media with LCD screens on wood panel, Private Collection Brussels, Belgium

6. Douche Bag City, Federico Solmi 2010 Multi-channel video installation: 15 LCD Screens, artist frame, color, sound, running Time: 2 minutes each video. Image Courtesy: Carl & Marilyn Thoma Art Foundation, Chicago Illinois and Santa Fe, New Mexico



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one's own research that American founding fathers, great heroes of US history books had hundreds of owned slaves is not fun; or to discover at 25 years of age, through the deepening of a Biography of Picasso, that on the terrible morning of April 26, 1937 in the skies of Spain together with the Nazis there were also Italian planes to bomb Guernica and its population, it is a very large disappointment, and leaves a mark... at least to me. What I want to convey in my works to the public is a strictly personal, artificial, invented truth, which often has nothing to do with the historical event or the character I want to interpret, but despite this, the public manages to decipher the metaphors present in my works and connect them to the contradictions of the historical context in which we live today, and manages to recognize the indulgence and perversion of the leaders that I represent in my works and connect them to the hypocrisy and cynicism that characterizes our current ruling class and the present

international political situation.

3 - You have been living in New York for many years now. What does this city have that Italy can never give to you?

New York still remains for me the only place where I feel comfortable, where I feel completely free to express myself and where I can create works without feeling conditioned or hindered by anyone. For me it is an incredible place for those who have talent and who want to get involved and for those who love great challenges, it is a city where you have to work very hard to make it. If you are not afraid and you know how to seize the opportunities, in my opinion there is no better place, it offers infinite possibilities. For an artist like me, full of adrenaline, curiosity and with a great desire to learn and discover and get involved, the ideal place remains a promised land, where you can see incredible exhibitions.

This city never ceases to amaze me, it is a magical place; certainly not for everyone, because it is an extremely stressful, chaotic and expensive city to live in, but I could never work in a relaxing, calm, slow and friendly city, because I believe that precisely this effervescence, this constant danger of sinking into the nothingness of the metropolis... this threat that is constantly felt by the city, gives you strength



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and always gives you the best of ourselves, allowing us to overcome our limits.

4- As you know, Andy Warhol created the Empire State Building film, the longest feature film in the world, staring at the camera with a fixed frame to see what was happening in that building. You yourself created a short film. So in America is there this real need to observe and then tell? You are certainly an atypical narrator. What is the message you want to convey?

I believe that to be a great storyteller; you must first of all be a very careful observer; as Andy Warhol or John Steinbeck have taught us. It certainly took me much longer than I originally thought to have a deep knowledge of American society, their customs and habits, their culture so apparently similar to ours, but in reality, so different, so difficult to decipher in its infinite nuances. The greatest difficulty I encountered was not, in reality, the study of

American history, what we can find in books, but it was try to clarify the continuous contradictions and inaccuracies that I often encountered in my research and reflections. I had a lot of difficulty distinguishing the reality of historical facts, unequivocal, from the government propaganda told in the books. I strongly believed that only if I had been able to understand the origins of this nation, in its roots, would I one day understand the society in which I had chosen to live, and only thus one day, would I have been able to have my say. It is only through my research and insights into the tragedy of the extermination of Native Americans, slavery, racism and their inveterate nationalism that I have been able to understand the society in which I live and where I work. Only in the year 2010 and after having been a resident of NY for over 11 years did I feel for the first time ready to treat a completely American subject in my works. Today, about 20 years after my arrival in NY, I see America as a large Luna Park, a large circus, a large theater; where an infinite series of contradictions coexist in fabulous harmony, an incredible and perverse place, where altruism and

selfishness live in great harmony and where unbridled wealth, extreme poverty and injustice live in complete conformity. In this orgy of extreme consumerism, creator of false myths and economic crises, in this so sinister and dysfunctional place, I found, as if by magic, the ideal world to build and find the perfect subjects for my works. This is the America that I internalized, and which inevitably shines almost unconsciously in all my works, but perhaps it is an inaccurate portrait, imprecise precisely because it is

7. "American Circus", Federico Solmi 2019
Midnight Moment Times Square New York
Image courtesy: Ronald Feldman Gallery, NY and Luis De Jesus, Los Angeles

8. The Golden Gift, 2019, acrylic paint, gold leaf, on shaped plexiglass, LED screen, video loop, 45x69 Inches, 114x175 cm, Image Courtesy Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

9. The Golden Gift, Federico Solmi 2019
Acrylic paint, gold leaf, on shaped plexiglass, LED screen, video loop, 45x69 Inches, 114x175 cm
Image Courtesy Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

10. Rocco Never Dies, 2005
Mixed media, acrylic paint, pen and ink on paper
8.5 x 11 inches, 31.5 x 28 cm
Private Collection, New York

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too personalized for the purpose of my artistic goals, but still sincere.

5- Your videos are works of months if not years. You have come to draw 1000 drawings to make some of your videos. What importance do you give to drawing in your works?

Drawing remains for me the center of everything, it is a direct means that allows me to express myself without hesitation and without compromise. Many of my ideas start right here, the study of the characters and scenes of my videos start from here. My drawings are used by my collaborators and assistants to create the scenes of my videos. One day I would like to do a large exhibition only of drawings, I often think about it. In fact, recently, I am making more and more elaborate and ambitious projects because when this exhibition will take place I want to be ready.

6- Today Federico Solmi is considered one of the most interesting under 50 artists in the world. You

have just turned 47. What advice would you give to young artists?

I don't know if I'm the right person to give advice to a young artist, simply because unlike my colleagues, I come from a very unusual and self-taught artistic background. From 2013 to 2019 I was invited to teach and prepare lectures and workshops at Yale University School of Art as a visiting professor. What I immediately felt in the typical academic training of young artists, is that in its systematic rigidity and homogeneity, the professors leave no room for students to listen to their instincts, their intuitions, at the expense of an inevitably conservative, mediocre and routine. It would be more important for a young artist to travel and see retrospective exhibitions of the artists who admire each other to try to capture their secrets through the works of the great artists who preceded us. I would suggest studying the biographies and understanding the cultural/historical context in which these works were created. We must always try to go to the source, and not just read an essay written by a critic

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or a journalist on an artist; you need to find interviews of the artist who describes his works on YouTube or in specialized sites or libraries; it is essential to listen to their words as they describe their work, without filters. Often in my teaching experience I found a huge lack of knowledge and curiosity from the students, and too often among the school desks I heard of the usual five to six fashionable or commercial artists of the moment. This is a serious mistake. Instead, I suggest that the young artist seek where no one is

looking; to rediscover artists of great value, but forgotten by the fashion of the moment. One of the most important weapons for a young artist is to aspire to have a broad knowledge of the artistic panorama that preceded us, a great determination, and if you really believe in yourself, to listen to your instinct even when you are all against it. I think that my greatest advantage was certainly not my talent, but rather my perseverance and stubbornness, which allowed me to make extremely risky and difficult decisions, but

which in the end helped me to develop a distinct language and work, and one of a kind.

7- The exhibition in Times Square has consecrated you. Finally everyone has realized the power of your messages. In that orgy of advertising messages we finally saw an artist who makes culture and allows us to reflect on our way of life. Tell us how the opportunity to exhibit in the most controversial and best known square in the world was born.

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"American Circus" was the title of my video installation for Times Square in NY for the month of July 2019. It was by no means an easy project to implement, not so much for the complexity of the installation, but for the continuous censorship problems that blocked the development of my project by the commission of the Times Square Arts Foundation. It took 3 years to convince the commission to overcome the censorship problem, but it was worth it because being able to present such an installation in the most important square in America was a great satisfaction, an indescribable feeling to have been part of such an important public project alongside artists of the caliber of William Kentridge, Marina Abramovic, Kehinde Wiley, Nick Cave, Tracey Emin, Ed Atkins. I was spotted by Times Square Arts curator Andrew Dinwiddie at a New York fair in 2016, who immediately told me that he would really like me to do a project in Times Square, but he warned me that although he admired my work, censorship was really a problem, he was right, but I didn't give up!

8- Your video-paintings are now part of some truly prestigious col-

11. The Loving Despots, 2018 - Drawing: Mixed media, acrylic paint, pen and ink on wood panel, 33 1/2 x 42 1/4 x 2 in, 85x108x5 cm

12. Particular - The Loving Despot, 2018, Video Painting: Acrylic paint, gold leaf, and silver leaf on shaped plexiglass, LCD screen, video loop. 16.75 x 19.25 x 4 inches, 42.5x49x10 cm
Image Courtesy, Serlachius Museum Mänttä, Finland

13. The Gracious Patriot, 2018, acrylic paint, gold leaf, and silver leaf on shaped plexiglass, LCD screen, video loop, 72x48x5 inches, 183x122x13 cm



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lections. Why are always great collectors choosing you and never ordinary people? It is only an economic question, given that it already costs a lot, or cultural: cannot your research be understood by everyone?

The great collectors are defined as such not only for their financial disposition, but also for their vast knowledge of the international artistic panorama, for their experience in recognizing an original research compared to a fashionable or derivative work. For those who have approached the world of art recently, it is much more complicated to make these distinctions. It is absolutely not an economic question, but I would say a mental approach. I remember with great pleasure the efforts made by some not very wealthy collectors who bought my works. There are many examples of large collections built with great intuitions and few means. In my specific case, I think that seven or eight

years ago the radical nature of some of my works frightened some more conservative collectors, while large private American collections often recognized themselves in my nonconformist and bizarre messages.

9- Can you tell us a preview of your next exhibitions?

In these days I am finalizing 2 projects that I care about, planned for September 2020. These are personal exhibitions at two American museums that are very important to me: The Block Museum of Northwestern University in Chicago, and the Tucson Museum of Art in Arizona. There will be two completely different exhibitions that require a large number of works given the size of the spaces. I was at a good point, but now with this coronavirus problem I am a little worried about being late. In addition, I can't wait for the museums to reopen as soon as possible because among the news that I

would like to point out to you there is a traveling museum exhibition that I care so much about, entitled "The Outwin 2019: American Portraiture Today", which was inaugurated at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. and to be mounted in several American museums over the next two years.

10- As you know, you and I have known each other for many years now, do you want to tell me something about your life that you have never told anyone?

It's true! You're right! Our remote dialogue has been going on for several years... who knows that one day we will be able to stop and have a nice chat as old friends in person? Emh... oops let me think... I could give you an anticipation that I haven't told anyone yet ... including my gallery owners, and that there seems to be a really great possibility I could tell you that I am in discussion with a large American Museum to make my personal exhibition composed of new works produced by the museum itself, but I cannot tell you the name, because I have not yet signed any contract,(laughter), but I can tell you that in their rooms is held one of the most important collections in the world of modern and contemporary art! Fingers crossed!



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14. King Kong and the End of The World, 2006
Acrylic, mixed media on wood panel
32 x 50 inches, 82 x 127cm
Private Collection, Rome, Italy

15. The Jubilant Hosts, Federico Solmi 2019
Acrylic paint, gold leaf, silver leaf, pen and ink, and mixed media on wood panel with shaped wood relief
36 x 60 x 3 inches, 91 x 152 x 8 cm
Image courtesy: Ronald Feldman Gallery, NY

16. Chinese Democracy and the Last Day on Earth, Federico Solmi 2012
single channel video, color + sound running time: 10:09 minute
Edition box 4/10, acrylic, gold leaf, mixed media, 16.5 x 20.5 x 4 inches / 42 x 52 x 14 cm
Private collection, Milan, Italy

