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Federico Solmi walks through his multiscreen installation “The Great Farce” which is on exhibit at Northwestern University’s Block Museum of Art. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

By Christopher Borrelli | Chicago Tribune
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There’s no shortage of art this fall that’ll remind you of famous people running for the most powerful offices in the world. And then there’s Federico Solmi’s “The Great Farce,” which recently opened at the Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University. It’s like all of the election year art, all at once, magnified, multiplied and crammed inside eight minutes of chaos. It’s vast yet crowded; meditative yet exhausting. It is a single sprawling work that chews up the Block’s largest room, but not entirely painting, and not really film. It’s categorized as a video installation, yet it’s mostly painting being shown on nine projectors simultaneously. Every image in it was painted initially, then scanned and reanimated in a video-game engine — allowing “The Great Farce” to live up to its title and cobble together centuries of leaders and atrocities, rubbing shoulders.

Some of the obvious faces in “The Great Farce” — marching, firing rifles, waltzing, greeting Native Americans in pre-colonial wilderness — include Donald Trump and Julius Caesar. I spotted Napoleon in there. And Marie Antoinette, George Washington, Idi Amin. They have the ghostly, gliding marionette aura we associate with motion-captured digital bodies. And also, the crazed, undead faces of children’s drawings.

LUIS DE JESUS LOS ANGELES

1110 Mateo Street, Los Angeles CA 90021
213 395 0762 | gallery@luisdejesus.com
luisdejesus.com

All of it is shown against a backdrop so kinetic, stuffed and saturated with color, it's as if we are seeing it from behind a kaleidoscopic downpour of ticker tape in Times Square.

Also Times Square is in there, too. And the Atlantic Ocean. Outer space. Did I mention carousel music plays nonstop? But it's wobbly and fading — as if the carousel were breaking down. I asked a gallery security guard if he was OK with “The Great Farce” on a nonstop loop, exploding out 34 hours a week. The guard pointed to his earbuds.

As the kids say, it's a lot. It's metaphor writ very large. It's also unmissable.

Solmi, a youthful 51, was in town recently. He stood in the gallery, watching his images burst and collapse and merge and flow seamlessly, then turned away to explain himself: “I want to punch people in the face, you know?”



Artist Federico Solmi's multiscreen installation “The Great Farce” is on exhibit at Northwestern University's Block Museum of Art. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

I do know. Anyone who enters the Block now through Dec. 1 will know. (Walking into the gallery, feeling swallowed by the scope of “The Great Farce,” I gasped: “Holy crap.”) Solmi is a native of Bologna, Italy, and a New Yorker since 1999. He began “The Great Farce” just before the 2016 presidential election and gifted it a few years later to the Block. The museum had plans to exhibit it then and were derailed by the pandemic.

But that's kismet.

“The Great Farce” plays a piece with the hypocrisy and confusion and excesses of living in the ongoing circus of the 21st century. Even if Solmi wasn’t Italian, the influence of Federico Fellini would be clear. Fittingly, it’s not subtle or eager to strike any notes of quiet nuance. Stepping outside the installation, Solmi said: “Everyone is so well behaved in art. Everyone doing their thing, listening to professors, following directions. I want to unleash fire. When I look at the history of art that excites me, its artists were not well behaved. Fire is important. My art, it’s hard to classify, yet ... *who cares?*”

“When I go to a museum, the things I love the most are the ones hardest to classify. Bring your own style, and your vision and be different — the vastness of art is the point.”

I told him, softly: One of the first things that came to mind about “The Great Farce” was the gloriously nuts Trey Parker and Matt Stone puppet farce “Team America: World Police.” I lowered my voice because it’s a gallery, Solmi is an internationally acclaimed satirist, the subject of exhibitions at the Venice Biennale. I don’t want to sound ... *jejune*.

Solmi blurted: “I love that movie — yes, yes!”

Then quieter himself: “Remember the scene where the puppets make love? It is porn! The best scene! Blew my mind! It is what we are supposed to do in art. One of the first things that I ever made? About an Italian porn actor. Society, we are too well behaved.”

If you watch the whole eight minutes of “The Great Farce,” you’ll notice even as the images and juxtapositions grow unsettling — Native Americans ride on horseback into Times Square beside conquistadors, Civil War soldiers, flanked by the Mayflower as a parade float helmed by Trump wearing Mussolini garb — there are no frowning figures, and no outward acts of violence; there is only colonization as triumph, minus the tears. “The Great Farce,” in its assaultive way, satirizes the ugliness beneath smiles.

At the same time, it’s not totally disgusted with the hugeness and spectacle of America.



A portion of “The Great Farce” which is on exhibit at Northwestern University’s Block Museum of Art. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

Solmi said when he moved to the United States 25 years ago, he partly came for the spectacle, the scale. “I cannot lie,” he said. “I came for that! I came for *that!*”

He pointed to the screen, showing a street, jammed like a cheering New Year’s Eve party, and at the center, a carousel; behind it, billboards for Rolex and McDonald’s. Depending where you are looking — the installation wraps around you, playing on three walls at once, each wall about 40 feet long and 10 feet high — the camera seems to glide across the parade and into a White House-like building and a state dinner.

“Contemporary art in Italy — so conservative! There was no hope for me,” Solmi said.

“What attracted me here was the extreme, exaggerated aspects of society, but, of course, the longer you live in America and learn, the negative side of that lens is clear.”

Solmi, the son of a butcher with no formal art training, took excess as his grand theme, and specifically, the ongoing tensions between national identity, consumerism and questionable historical narratives; indeed, outside the gallery, Solmi left a small library of authors who shaped his study of history, from the usual revisionists like Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn Cervantes’ “Don Quixote.” He adopted a distinct approach to art: traditional technique paired with, for lack of a better way of explaining, a metaverse, collapsing history into one ongoing bacchanal. Oprah Winfrey and Elon Musk show up. Warren Buffet and Kim Kardashian, too. Bathhouses and ballrooms.

He learned how to create 3-D textures inside a gaming engine; he liked the way it rendered world leaders like puppets, stiffly waving their arms. But he didn’t like the coldness of the technology, or its inevitable obsolescence. He didn’t want it to date his work. So he painted everything, then scanned it and draped it onto digital skeletons of sorts. He said when he started working this way 25 years ago, no one in the art world wanted to talk history — never mind rethink it. An epic like “The Great Farce” — partly, it was made on commission for the city of Frankfurt, Germany (which debuted it in 2017, as a very long single banner stretching across a theater facade). Partly, he paid for it.

“A piece like this not make big money for anyone,” he said. “It needs a museum, a university — an institution to host debate. It is not a pleasing story it tells. Financially? It’s a suicide mission. And yet you do it anyway if you are reckless enough to try.”

Federico Solmi: The Great Farce runs through Dec. 1 at The Block Museum of Art, 40 Arts Circle Drive, Evanston; www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu