

# The Guardian

Art

## ‘A triumph of freedom of expression’: censored art museum opens in Spain

**Barcelona gallery will feature works on religion, politics and consumerism that have been denounced, removed or attacked**

Stephen Burgen *in Barcelona*

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Silence Rouge et Bleu by the French-Algerian artist Zoulikha Bouabdellah. Photograph: Museu de l'Art Prohibit

Work by artists as diverse as Pablo Picasso, Ai Weiwei and the American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe will be brought together under one roof this week in what curators say is the world's only museum devoted to art that has been censored.

The Museu de l'Art Prohibit (Museum of Forbidden Art) in Barcelona consists of about 200 works that have been denounced, attacked or removed from exhibition.

Tatxo Benet, a journalist and businessman, began the collection five years ago and is financing the museum, which opens on Thursday, out of his own pocket.

“This is the only museum in the world dedicated to art that has been censored,” he said. While artistic and aesthetic merit had played a part in the selection, the main factor for inclusion had been censorship, he added.

“There are works that perhaps don’t have great artistic merit but their story merits them a place in the museum. That’s what these works have in common and it shows that censorship has failed, because here you can see them. It’s a triumph of freedom of expression.”

Benet cites a collection of drawings by former prisoners in the Guantánamo Bay internment camp as an example of his philosophy. When an exhibition of freed prisoners’ work was mounted in New York in 2017, a member of the 9/11 Memorial and Museum Board described it as a “travesty”.



Western Christian Civilisation by the Argentinian artist León Ferrari. Photograph: Museu de l'Art Prohibit

The exhibition continued but the US government decreed that from then on a Guantánamo inmate's art would have to be destroyed upon their release. "Although they don't have great artistic merit, their story is important," says Benet. "Exhibiting them here means they have, in effect, been liberated."

There are works by artists from the US, [Europe](#), Africa and Asia, and they cover a wide variety of topics. Many are commentaries on religion, primarily Christianity and Islam, and are often amusing, although perhaps not to clerics. At first glance, *Con Flores a María* by the Spanish artist Charo Corrales conforms to the iconography of the Virgin Mary surrounded by angels – except that she has one hand between her legs and it is clear her ecstasy is more corporeal than divine.

Equally blasphemous are the Argentinian León Ferrari's image of Christ crucified on the wings of a US fighter plane and the American Andres Serrano's infamous *Piss Christ*, a blood-red photograph of the crucifixion immersed in the artist's urine.

Also featured is [Terry O'Neill's photograph of Raquel Welch on the cross](#) after the actor commented that she was being "crucified" by the press for her scantily clad role in *One Million Years BC*. O'Neill said he was too scared to publish the picture of Welch in a leather bikini on the cross until he came across it in his portfolio 30 years later.

The French-Algerian artist Zoulikha Bouabdellah and the Kazakhstani Zoya Falkova make powerful statements about the status of women in their respective countries. Bouabdellah's *Silence Rouge et Blue* consists of 30 prayer mats, each adorned with a pair of sequined stilettoes.

In a comment on male violence, [Falkova's Evermust](#) consists of a black leather boxer's punchbag, except her version is in the shape of a woman's torso. *Evermust* was exhibited at the first "Feminnale" of contemporary art at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, but was among several works the government ordered to be taken down after the exhibition caused controversy.

Many works satirise politicians, such as Illma Gore's portrayal of a naked Donald Trump with a tiny penis in *Make America Great Again*, Fabián Cháirez's portrait of the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata in a pink sombrero and high heels or Eugenio Merino's irresistibly hilarious portrayal of the dictator Francisco Franco dressed in full military uniform inside a vending machine.



Always Franco by Eugenio Merino. Photograph: Museu de l'Art Prohibit

Some works are critiques of consumer society, such as Yoshua Okón's video loop *Freedom Fries: Still Life*. The viewer looks out from inside a McDonald's restaurant across a table on which lies an obese, naked person, while outside someone is cleaning the windows.

The work was withdrawn from an exhibition at the Tin Tabernacle gallery in London in 2014 because the museum felt it was not "suitable for the space".

In Ai Weiwei's case, the offended party was Lego. Ai used Lego bricks to create portraits of four famous Italians who had been imprisoned or exiled for their beliefs: Filippo Strozzi, Dante Alighieri, Girolamo Savonarola and Galileo Galilei. The portraits were exhibited in Florence in 2016, along with balloons symbolising 21st-century migrants and refugees.

In 2015, [Ai publicly criticised Lego](#) for refusing a bulk order of Lego bricks on the grounds that their policy on the use of Lego in artworks was that "the motive(s) cannot contain any political ... statements".

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