

FEDERICO SOLMI

American, born Bologna, Italy, 1973

The Great Farce Portable Theater, 2019

Acrylic paint, mixed-media, and gold leaf on laser cut MDF, Plexiglas, nine-channel digital video, color, sound, 8:11 minutes, loop, 60 x 30 x 5 inches

Gift of the artist, 2019.25.2

Since 2004 Federico Solmi has created increasingly complex animation-based works in which he employs extreme satire to critique the corrupting influence of power across cultural, financial, governmental, and religious institutions. *The Great Farce* (2017–19), an immersive nine-channel video installation, is Solmi’s most ambitious work to date in its technical complexity, physical scale, and scope of content. It was originally commissioned for the 2017 B3 Biennial of the Moving Image in Frankfurt, Germany, where it was presented on the facade of the Schauspielhaus opera theater and later adapted into a gallery-based installation. For each edition of the work Solmi creates a unique painted handmade box—a portable theater—that represents the “content, spirit, and aesthetic” of the installation.¹ These echo the form of his “video paintings” and are self-contained works that can be hung on the wall, with a video-loop presenting the same nine channels of video as the larger installation.

With *The Great Farce*, Solmi demonstrates his innovation as a producer of media art. Handmade paintings, drawings, and motion-capture images are stitched together using digital gaming technology to create a surreal universe. The installation presents a sprawling send-up of empire building as an enterprise and a scathing commentary on contemporary culture—where spectacle and celebrity serve as distractions from sinister machinations and where the speed of things contributes to the blurring of myth and truth. The action is driven by a cast of characters based on world leaders culled from ancient Egypt to present-day United States. In Solmi’s rendition of history, Alexander the Great, Marie Antoinette, and Donald Trump occupy the same milieu. Acts of political aggression meld into decadent parties and ceremonies fueled by a feverish energy and unbridled quest for power. The aesthetic—marked by exaggerated facial features, a garish color palette, and a dissonant amusement park-influenced soundtrack—underscores the frenzied narrative. The work invokes multiple meanings of the word “farce”—as a literary form where it denotes a satirical comedy that relies upon extreme exaggeration and extravagance to create an improbable, often complex, plot—but also as a situation that has gone terribly wrong.

—Janet Dees

Steven and Lisa Munster Tananbaum Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art

1 Federico Solmi, email correspondence with the author, June 1, 2019. Detail below, opposite is a still from the nine-channel video.