

CLAUDIO ZULIAN (IT, 1960)

Hard Times & Animals – Cuerpo que (des)hace imagen

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Freijo Gallery presents for the first time in Madrid, Italian artist Claudio Zulian's exhibition *Hard Times & Animals – Cuerpo que (des)hace imagen*, in collaboration with Estrany-de la Mota Art Advisors.

Claudio Zulian is a multidisciplinary artist primarily known for his film works, although he has also held numerous video exhibitions in museums and art centres. Zulian's work is not only limited to artistic creation, having expanded his interests towards music or writing, as well as having developed an important pedagogical dimension. He has taught in various academic and cultural institutions, sharing his experience, knowledge and encouraging debate on the role of art in today's society.

Born in Campodasergo in 1960, Zulian has spent much of his career between Spain and France where he has been recognised for his artistic contributions. His work often explores social, political, and historical themes, using a variety of media to create complex and profound narratives.

From his earliest creations to his most recent works, Zulian has stood out for his ability to integrate different artistic disciplines, offering the public immersive and reflective experiences. In addition to his film work, Zulian has been involved in numerous collective projects and international exhibitions, establishing himself as a relevant figure in the contemporary art scene.

WARS THAT HAVE NOT TAKEN PLACE

A series consisting of five videos (of which three are presented in this exhibition). The video-installation proposes both a reflection on war, and on gaze and the image itself, understood as the result of a cultural history.

The title alludes to Jean Baudrillard's controversial essay, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, published in 1991.

Zulian's installation prompts a question about the validity of Baudrillard's essay more than thirty years after its publication and at a time when some of today's wars, such as those of Ukraine or Gaza, seem to take us back to the wars of the first half of the twentieth century.

On each of the screens we can see found-footage images from different conflicts that have taken place during 2023. In all of them we can recognise the typical shot that corresponds with most video games, reproducing the subjective gaze of the soldier showing the end of his weapon, the action of shooting and the space in front of him. In all the works in this installation, a red rectangle appears in the centre of the screen, covering a large part of the image and leaving only the lateral strips visible. In this way, we can neither know who is shooting nor what the target is.

In all the works in this series, the images have been stripped of any particular reference to the place or sides they are taking place. Therefore, images of plains, trenches, snowy forests, guns, gunfire and explosions remain isolated, in order to direct the question towards war itself, rather than towards a specific conflict.

Around these central questions, *Wars that have not taken place* develops a series of questions ranging from the status of the images that reach those who are far from the battlefields, doubt regarding the obscenity of the aestheticization of material that seems to point to reality, the possibility/impossibility of looking at these images and the background of contemporary subjectivity. As Freud notes in *Reflections Upon War and Death* (1915), "[the subject] is perhaps as ready to abandon himself to his lethal drives as his ancestors".

IL CIELO IN UNA STANZA (THE SKY IN A ROOM)

Moving from the first to the second part of the exhibition, there is a *vis a vis* relationship between the installations *Wars that have not taken place* and *Il cielo in una stanza* (*The sky in a room*), as the latter is a video installation that continues Claudio Zulian's research initiated with *Wars that have not taken place*. Again, the piece also deals with images of war, in this case that of warplanes. What is to be explored here, in particular, is the relationship between the real and the virtual (artificial) in current images of war conflicts.

Il cielo in una stanza mixes animated images with real images in various different ways: there are real planes, 3D models of these same planes, models of planes that do not exist...

The piece brings forward the concept of memory. Historical memory, by means of images which allude to the past through their black and white cinematic grains, which in fact are post-production effects, since several of the planes that can be seen in the piece are modern aircrafts. In other cases, however, there really are images from the past: there are real planes from the Vietnam War. But even so, several questions are raised, as there are also present-day models of aircraft from the Vietnam War. On the screens, history becomes imperceptible, smashed into an ever-present past-present. In this sense, its title ironically describes how the piece is set in the exhibition space, while being the title of a well-known Italian song from 1960. The same year as the beginning of the US intervention in Vietnam, of which some images are included in the work. The allusion to this popular theme underlines the idea of the impossibility of a History in the mass media, including social media.

The video installation is constructed in relatively short loops of about two minutes. However, the loops are not exactly the same, so that viewers have the feeling that they cannot be sure they have seen a repetition, although they do have that feeling. Our personal history and our perception of the world is also trapped in an ever-present media past/present, thus slipping into a new mythical time.

WOLF

The last work in the exhibition features an animal that has always played a predominant role in different cultures and mythologies: the wolf. Guardian of tombs and associated with life after death, the function of the wolf was to guide the souls of the deceased to the afterlife in Egyptian culture. For the Greeks, on the other hand, the wolf was a symbol for the solar god Apollo and his vigilance role. Additionally, in European mythologies, from the Mediterranean coast to northern Scandinavia, the wolf has always been linked to concepts such as fertility and protection, along with destruction and punishment. In Medieval Europe, the evil aspect of the wolf was associated with deceit, darkness, voracity and sin.

Here, the camera's path suggests the tracing of the terrain, placing the observer at the same height as the animal, which is also the place we occupy as the audience.

In this sense, *The Wolf* is the protagonist of a trajectory similar to the one shown by the soldiers in *Wars that have not taken place*. A parallelism that is propitiated by the position of the camera, which is the same that the soldier's phone would occupy in the first video-installation.

The colour of the blue and yellow image also originates from the animal's vision. Its colour perception is more limited than that of humans. Animals have dichromatism, which means that they only have two types of cone cells (as opposed to the three types that humans have). This allows them to distinguish some colours, particularly shades of blue and yellow, but they cannot see the full range of colours.

Conceived as a narrative journey, the exhibition culminates with this video installation, which is not far from becoming a metaphor for war conflicts, additionally integrating poetic dimensions linked to the cracks in subjectivity and nature.



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Patricia Ezpeleta, conceptual designer and entrepreneur, designs and supports exhibitions, collections and experiences with a focus on unique narratives and cultural connections. She has collaborated with Deloitte, Bvlgari, Universal Music, Venice Biennale, Art Dubai and Investec Cape Town, and with professionals such as Refik Anadol and Andrés Reisinger or the founder of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, Jérôme Sans. A pioneer in new technologies, she has taught at the European School of Economics and the American University of Dubai.