

Monasterio Santa Maria de Bujedo de Juarros.

Simon Callery, Susana Solano, Francisco de Zurbarán.
June – September 2022.

Sand, stone and cloth.

This exhibition brings together one site-specific work by the Spanish sculptor Susana Solano, two paintings by the British artist Simon Callery, and a single work by the master painter of 17th century Spanish monastic life, Francisco de Zurbarán. To this list we should add the name of the unknown architect or architects of this 12th century vaulted stone church, which provides an extraordinary physical context for the exhibition.

This is not a show with a religious theme. There is, however, an important religious image in the exhibition. It is not hanging in the place where we would expect to find it. Zurbarán's 'Veil of Veronica' - a depiction of the face of Christ with a crown of thorns - has been hung on the left hand side of the chancel next to an arched recess in the wall. This unusual placement establishes a strong relationship between the painting and the architectural features of the wall it hangs on. This is a clue that leads us to recognize that it is materiality that connects the works in the exhibition, rather than an image or a narrative.

Zurbarán painted an image of Christ on an image of a cloth on actual cloth (the canvas). There is a play with illusion and with the reality of the artist's materials and how they interact. In the works of Simon Callery, the cloth is the painting. The canvas has been impregnated with dark red distemper (iron oxide pigment with rabbit skin glue) rendering one of the paintings almost identical in tone and colour to the wall it is hanging on. These works originate from a group of paintings the artist made in North Wales when working alongside field archaeologists. Sheets of canvas were laid out on the excavation site. Crawling over the fabric the artist pierced and cut into it with a knife where it came into contact with the features of the surface underneath. Back in the studio these canvas elements were stitched together to form paintings with a deep and open interior space. They are a record of contact with landscape rather than a representation of it and they were made for the attention of the body as much as for the eye.

With the doors closed the church is dark and we encounter the art works in low light. The only light introduced into this environment is the flickering yellow light thrown by the candle flames in Susana Solano's 10-metre floor-based work. The candles stand in clusters in a sequence of slightly raised galvanized iron troughs filled with red sand. Passing her hand directly through the sand, the artist has left a trail of marks, ridges and touches that establish a visual relationship with the detail of the stone floor of the church. One end of this work sits in darkness whilst the other reaches a point in the nave where a passage of natural light enters through a glass door. The candles are symbols of the religious rites we expect to encounter in a Catholic church but the flames they produce now function as a material for the sculptor. The candlelight illuminates the red sand which is echoed in the other reds and oranges in the stones of the church, in the two paintings by Simon Callery and in the traces of blood on the forehead of Christ in the Zurbarán painting.

Sand, stone and cloth are the primary materials that unify the artists and the architecture in this exhibition. They have been used for very different reasons but if we are sensitive to materiality we make the connections that reveal the underlying shared concerns and common ground.