

Juan Zurita: Traffic

What is most striking about Zurita's recent series of work, *Traffic* (2016–present), is its ability to blend disparate narratives into a cohesive visual language seamlessly. Themes of landscape, digital culture, photography, the urban realm, surveillance, painterly facture and technology percolate through the ostensible abstraction of his compositions. At first glance, what appears to be diffused, non-descript backgrounds (which act as the substrate for his paintings) are actually blurred urban scenery captured by traffic cameras. These hazy backdrops hint at a form of representation, which adds a layer of visual ambiguity. Pastel-coloured, softened, and intriguingly out of focus, these landscapes are removed from reality just enough to suggest a subtle optical dissonance. Filtering this imagery through a digital lens, Zurita contrasts the soft glow of his urban backdrops, by layering hypersaturated grids of square colour: reds, greens and blues which allude to RGB and LED computer colour coding and screen technology, whilst bold white swathes of abstracted dots, dashes and lines mimic the chance procedure of computer-drawn marks, exemplifying a keen perception of the digitally-aware age within which Zurita operates.

Despite not being a “digital native” (a term which refers to the generation born after the Internet, c.1989), Zurita is a prime example of a “digital artisan.” This term describes those who have more easily embraced the situation of technology within their practice as a result of its immediate and ubiquitous presence within their lives. Like many digital artisans who make paintings that reflect our contemporary relationship to technology and its ever-encompassing presence within our lives, Zurita references the conventions of art history. Such references include the tradition of European easel painting and abstraction, which he updates to align with recent digital languages, to reflect the fast-paced, information culture which encapsulates 21st Century society. Specifically, he updates this discourse by referencing



the screen—a global entity, and a ubiquitous presence in the lives of most. His paintings, then, are arguably physical analogues of the computer screen used in the production of his painting compositions, and a statement on the nature of screen culture at large.

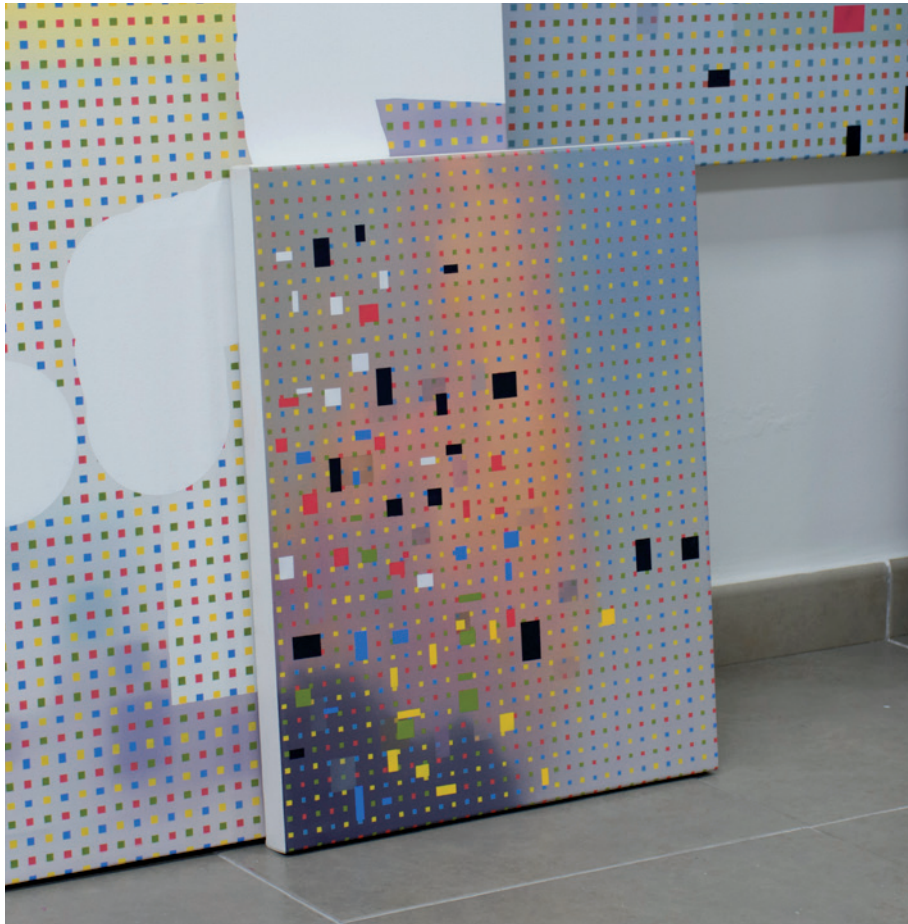
Operating within the framework of contemporary society, and the image culture of a world besotted with New Media, Zurita engages with the concept of what he calls “The Great City” as a paradigm of Western society, as both a container and context of a world that is continually changing. A fast-paced, never sleeping physical world which mirrors its digital counterpart, in a perpetual state of flux, that is subject to construction and deconstruction: concrete jungle meets the circuit board. Information Superhighways are re-

presented in his work by literal freeways (albeit in an abstracted form)—the hustle and bustle shared between both information and “in real life” (IRL) human activity tied to one another through clever visual metaphor.

Echoing the shifting topography of real-world cities, Zurita constructs and deconstructs imagery through digital image processing. Much like his digitally aware painting contemporaries, the construction of Zurita’s paintings relies on a hybrid working method. Specifically, he combines traditional painting techniques with forms of digital image manipulation and mark-making which come to form the initial “sketches” he later uses to inform his final works. By working in this way, the digital manipulation processes of the images he references are deliberately evident in his final compositions. These are represented through the translation of computer gestures into analogue painting surfaces via the practical handling of material, ultimately yielding a tangible, pictorial and optical experience based in reality. By interpolating layers of abstracted, fragmented and gestural visual information, a crisp, almost computer-rendered aesthetic is apparent in his final paintings; a precision which denotes a mastery of interdisciplinary painting.

Through this working process, Zurita links the digital world to painting, as he is interested in the codes of interpretation that he finds in new technologies, and how these can inform the continually evolving notion of paint[ing]. The “traffic” of images and visual information acts as a metaphor in his work, which represents contemporary society’s infatuation with online culture, which has begun to radically alter our perception of the world, modifying how we as humans experience reality. Zurita’s work, whilst functioning as a statement on the presence of technology in our lives, is also classifiable as an updated form of landscape painting which reflects the age of New Media. This assertion comes as no coincidence, as his work reviews the subject matter of the urban landscape, using it as a social metaphor, as a reflection of the image in today’s society and the transformation it has undergone with the advent of the digital world. Furthermore, his work relates to broader artistic and social themes, specifically, a Post-digital context of painting.





Coined by the composer Kim Cascone, the “Post-digital” aesthetic is summarised by him as: *‘The revolutionary period of the digital information age has surely passed. The tendrils of digital technology have in some way touched everyone.’*¹ As such, Zurita follows a long legacy of artists engaged with the use of technology. From its Paleolithic inception through to its digital intervention, painting has always shared a relationship with the technologies of its time. From the use of camera obscura during the High Renaissance, the Impressionists’ flirtation with early photography, the use of rudimentary

computers in mid-twentieth-century painting, to the plethora of proprietary digital software and mechanical fabrication methods that artists have access to today, painting is very much a technological medium. This observation resonates with the philosopher Nicolas Bourriaud’s statement: *‘Let’s face it: artists now have access to information, and they all use the same toolbox.’*² This “toolbox” of methods and techniques which Bourriaud refers to, is evident in Zurita’s interdisciplinary practice, as well as the concept of information and its contemporary manifestations as a networked, digital entity which serves to both unify and mystify. More specifically, Zurita’s approach to painting operates as *‘a hybridisation of the analogue and digital experience which emerges as something altogether different from constituent analogue and digital classifications.’*³ The ability to navigate between analogue and digital environments, via the manipulation of medium and New Media, is a vital attribute of the successful Post-digital artisan, and something that Zurita does effortlessly in his Traffic series.

As a testament to the transformative capacity of society, and of course, painting, Zurita believes that future technological innovation within artistic practices will evolve in parallel to the digital world. As such, he, along with his contemporary digital artisans, acts as a custodian of painting and its perennial vitality, continuing the historical discourse of painting’s response to the technologies of its time: innovation which is embodied by pioneering artists such as Zurita.

Words by James Frew

1 Kim Cascone, ‘The Aesthetics of Failure: ‘Post-Digital’ Tendencies’, in *Contemporary Computer Music*, (Computer Music Journal, vol. 24, no. 4, Winter 2000), p. 12.

2 Bartholomew Ryan & Nicolas Bourriaud, ‘Altermodern: A Conversation with Nicolas Bourriaud’, in *Art in America*, (Art in America Online, 2009).

3 James Frew, ‘Digital Factice: Painting After New Media Art’, in *PhotographyDigitalPainting: Expanding Medium Interconnectivity in Contemporary Visual Arts Practice*, ed., Carl Robinson, (Cambridge Scholars Publishing: United Kingdom, 2020), pp. 56 - 57.