

Clearly Fake: Zurbarán's Uncanny Realism

By Jackson Arn July 8, 2026

The TikTok in question, posted by Donald Trump last summer, shows Barack Obama being wrestled to the floor, handcuffed, and held in a jail cell. The camera moves, or “moves,” too smoothly, and everything has a melted-plastic glow that screams AI-generated, at least for the time being. The first few bars of “Y.M.C.A.” are playing. So, yes: when the *New York Times* published an article about videos like this and deemed them *clearly fake*, it was stating what anybody with functioning eyeballs already knew. Then again, if the comment section is any guide, there appear to be sentient American adults who think the forty-fourth president is currently in prison.

Lately I’ve wondered why people believe things, or if they really do. Often it appears they can’t remember whether they do or not. Nobody seems to know why this is the case, except that the internet is involved somehow, or MAGA, or wokeness, or AI. I had been thinking about the usual explanations, and getting tired of them, the same week I went to the National Gallery in London to look at the paintings of Francisco de Zurbarán. This turned out to be less of a digression than I’m making it sound.

Zurbarán, which runs in London through August before traveling to Paris and Chicago, celebrates a star of what must be the world’s longest, boldest, most successful PR campaign: the one waged by the Catholic Church to make its book more believable. No offense intended; it’s just a matter of art-historical fact that for centuries Europe’s most promising young picture makers were schooled in perspective and modeling and then sent out to bring the Bible to life. Only a few decades before Zurbarán’s birth in 1598, the Council of Trent had doubled down on art as a tool of religious education. Paintings, per the council’s 1563 decree on sacred images, should be tastefully bare, never “adorned with a beauty exciting to lust.” Crowd scenes had to be policed for unsavory characters and gaudy objects, or else the picture’s lesson in piety could be “perverted into revellings and drunkenness.” But if done right, art would help teach Christendom to be Christian.



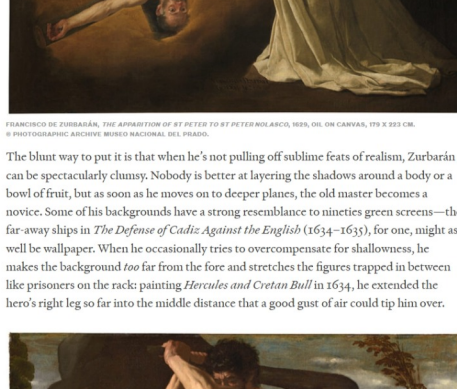
By the late 1620s, Zurbarán had become the leading religious painter of Seville, the richest city in Spain. Saint Francis was one of his favorite subjects. The Lamb of God, trussed and halloed, was another. His compositions were somber and shadowy enough to please all but the nitpickiest Tridentine councilman. In a 1627 *Crucifixion*, his breakthrough work, the play of light and darkness on naked skin is mapped almost pore by pore—Zurbarán is sometimes called the Spanish Caravaggio, but here he makes his Italian elder look like a Zurbarán wannabe. Christ’s loincloth has more liveliness than other artists get from his whole body; the fabric around the holy crotch looks as intricately squinched as a brain, a flesh covering that is plenty fleshy in its own right. But the details don’t show off too much, never forget that their deepest purpose is to report. This is exactly the way things happened, the painting assures us. We can trust it.

By many accounts, Sevillians did. As legend has it, some of the first people to see this *Crucifixion* assumed they were looking at a sculpture, and so far some reviews of the National Gallery exhibition have printed the legend as a settled fact. I’m not necessarily saying that it’s false—only that these kinds of perfect, spit-take anecdotes turn up suspiciously often whenever there is a revolution in visual technology. The tale of moviegoers running from *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* in 1896 has been debunked more times than that of the Loch Ness Monster, but a hundred and thirty years later, we’re still smirking. It’s a neat way of scolding our ancestors for their gullibility and complimenting ourselves for being harder to fool. In a century or two, I have to assume, people will talk about how my generation once ran screaming from those early deepfakes of Bill Hader becoming Arnold Schwarzenegger.

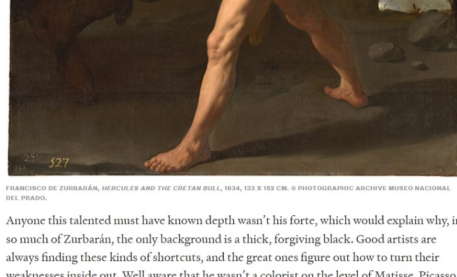
By now, you may have noticed the paradox. Zurbarán makes paintings that are at once exquisitely lifelike and completely implausible. He has time to hunker down with the little details because he neglects everything else. There is no crowd of onlookers in that 1627 *Crucifixion*. There isn’t even sky or ground or a horizon line; the Cross, hovering in blackness, is depicted with a realism that doubles as a trippy, zero-gravity surrealism (Dali was a fan). Three years later, for *The Vision of Alonso Rodríguez*, Zurbarán painted Christ and Mary squirting jets of light out of the pink, plastic hearts in their fists; that each of them is also sitting on a pile of baby heads seems comparatively humdrum. The avant-garde has been trying for the past century and a half to match the calm insanity of Baroque religious art and still hasn’t succeeded. A surrealist painting says, Here is a strange scene—enjoy. A Zurbarán insists, Here is a strange scene—believe.



Most of the people in these images seem afraid to obey. In *Apparition of Saint Peter to Saint Peter Nolasco* (1629), the living, breathing Peter kneels before the crucified Peter, who hangs upside down in brownish murk. To the extent that this is a work about faith, it’s also one about paranoia: Breathing Peter reaches out as if to confirm he’s not hallucinating. Yet the presence of Upside-Down Peter inches away from his hands isn’t even the most perplexing part of his vision. Ask yourself: Where is Upside-Down Peter? He’s on a cross, obviously, but depending on where your eyes land, the wooden beams could be half embedded in solid rock or huddled in a cave or floating in fog. Things get less, not more, coherent the longer you stare—while I was trying to make sense of the space, I noticed that Upside-Down Peter’s right arm is a few inches shorter than his left, unless it’s actually longer and tilting off into the distant dark.



The blunt way to put it is that when he’s not pulling off sublime feats of realism, Zurbarán can be spectacularly clumsy. Nobody is better at layering the shadows around a body or a bowl of fruit, but as soon as he moves on to deeper planes, the old master becomes a novice. Some of his backgrounds have a strong resemblance to nineties green screens—the far-away ships in *The Defense of Cadiz Against the English* (1634–1635), for one, might as well be wallpaper. When he occasionally tries to overcompensate for shallowness, he makes the background *too* far from the fore and stretches the figures trapped in between like prisoners on the rack: painting *Hercules and Cretan Bull* in 1634, he extended the hero’s right leg so far into the middle distance that a good gust of air could tip him over.



Anyone this talented must have known depth wasn’t his forte, which would explain why, in so much of Zurbarán, the only background is a thick, forgiving black. Good artists are always finding these kinds of shortcuts, and the great ones figure out how to turn their weaknesses inside out. Well aware that he wasn’t a colorist as the great ones like to pretend, which he built *Guernica* out of bleak grays that proved to be the painting’s greatest strength. I’m not the first person to compare the two Spaniards: Picasso experts from John Richardson to William Rubin have interpreted Zurbarán as an ur-Cubist, an eccentric handler of perspective whose gawkiness may or may not have been wholly intentional but looks modern either way.

Exhibit A for Zurbarán-as-Picasso will always be *Christ and the Virgin in the House at Nazareth*, which he finished around 1640, when there was no painter in Seville more in demand. As with most Zurbaráns from this period, the canvas is largely black, so that it seems at once flat and cavernously deep. A tearful Mary looks on while the young Jesus pricks his finger on the crown of thorns portending his death. It might be the most vivid thing Zurbarán ever painted, but there are no stories of people mistaking it for sculpture. Everything is slightly, teasingly off; each fruit and book and vessel appears to have been observed from a different vantage point, so that viewers could almost be looking down and across at the same time. A table casts a shadow at one angle; the bowl in the corner casts one at another; Christ casts no shadow at all, and so on. It really is like a Cubist still life, with the obvious, pedantic difference that Zurbarán isn’t out to glorify the flatness of the picture plane. He is out to glorify Christ.



So far, have I been conflating the belief in the three-dimensional reality of these paintings with the belief in Christianity? Absolutely. So does *Christ and the Virgin in the House at Nazareth*. (So do all of Zurbarán’s religious paintings, but this one especially.) You buy into its strange evocations of space the same way you’re asked to buy into its lessons about Christianity. Let Mary be your guide: she knows her son is destined for greatness. She has been told he will grow up to be a king, and that his destiny will “pierce [her] own soul,” in much the way the thorn has just pierced his finger. Mary has been given a kind of picture of the future: a few glimpses of information with ample darkness in between. These fragments never cohere into a perfect, panoramic view, but she trusts them anyway. If she could see everything, she might not.

We’ve arrived at another paradox, the big one: somehow, the spatial awkwardness of Zurbarán’s paintings intensifies their power as tools of religious persuasion. This isn’t a case of art looking better in hindsight—in its own day, *Christ and the Virgin in the House at Nazareth* was copied by ten painters (and these are just the ones historians know about). It was a hit. There may have been more realistic paintings in Seville at the time—but maybe perfect realism isn’t enough, doesn’t dig its hooks into viewers and pull them in. It is a hard to name a first-rate Zurbarán without this faint wrongness, even something as innocent as a still life. At a glance, you’re looking at a quartet of vessels in a row; two glances, and you realize that the master of shadows has declined to paint them. If you think of Zurbarán as a crafty magician who tricked his viewers into confusing painting with sculpture, this might look like an embarrassing misstep. Though the real magic, you could also say, is to misstep with a purpose and convince people anyway. I’ve been wondering about belief, but I’m not sure I know what the word means.

Zurbarán may have been born four hundred years before anyone used the term, but I left the National Gallery thinking about the uncanny valley. When animators refer to it, they mean the sworn enemy of believability: any image falling into the zone just shy of realism has failed to persuade viewers to suspend their disbelief. We demand perfect lifelikeness and won’t settle for a pixel less. Zurbarán makes me suspect this isn’t just slightly but rather exactly wrong—that in fact belief takes place *only* in the uncanny valley. Perfect plausibility trashes off too easily. People are less rational than they’d like to pretend, which is why all truly haunting images, like all truly powerful ideologies, like all truly magnetic leaders good and bad, share a slight, nagging offness. They don’t add up; they go 90 percent of the way toward making sense and command the believer to take care of the rest.

I don’t mean to make Zurbarán sound too much like a psychologist or a politician. I only want him to sound like what he was: a demonically talented artist who spent much of his life trying to inspire great surges of conviction, and who must have had thoughts about the job, not all of them positive. Because I love him most when he’s feeling self-aware, I was happy to see the exhibition conclude with *Veil of Veronica*, completed in 1638. It wasn’t a happy time. He was on to his third marriage—the second and favorite wife having died in 1639—and a plague had killed off half the population of Seville, including his son Juan. Murillo, his younger, gaudier rival, had replaced him as Spain’s hottest religious painter. The same year, Zurbarán left Seville and never returned. Six more years and he was dead.



Like his other variations on the subject, this late *Veil of Veronica* consists of a cloth with a head on it. Per the legend, the Veronica wiped Christ’s sweaty cheeks and later found a perfect photocopy of his face floating in the fabric. Zurbarán typically painted a detailed Savior, but in this case he gave us a blur: reddish hair, an ear, something like a nose. The face, if you could call it one, doesn’t have eyes—a nasty punishment for an artist to inflict on one of his figures, though this is roughly what the genuine article looks like (assuming there’s anything genuine about the smudgy relic held in the Vatican). You could interpret the painting as a private grumble, courtesy of a man who’d devoted his life to realism and still ended up on the margins. Or else this was Zurbarán, in the dusk of his life, grasping something that his peers had missed about the veil of Veronica—Veronica, who in 1298 was voted the patron saint of photographers, which also makes her the unofficial saint of deepfakes, fake news, Fox News, Claude, and all the insanities they’ve encouraged without actually creating. There is almost a face, and this is what keeps us squinting into the cloth. Our eyes make it real.

Jackson Arn is a writer whose work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *the New York Times*, *The Drift*, and various other places. His first novel, *In the Velvet Garage*, is forthcoming from Coffee House Press.