

FACUNDO

DE ZUVIRÍA

IMAGES OF BUENOS AIRES

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**I**n 1960, the six-year-old Facundo de Zuviría was gifted a basic Eho camera, a simple black box with a tiny 1 × 1,5 cm lens through which he began to “see the world and make it fit into a rectangle”, in his own words. This was his first contact with photography and from that point onwards he would cross and recross his native city of Buenos Aires, tirelessly capturing its façades and shop windows.

In October 1983, during the period after the fall of the dictatorship, Facundo de Zuviría was involved in the municipal project for the creation of photographic archives of the city. This allowed him to wander through a Buenos Aires filled with signs and symbols in a state of extreme readiness and with his senses constantly on the alert. Rather than the city itself, Zuviría’s rambles and his resulting photographs above all chart a second, dreamlike map; what it showed still existed but by then referred to the past. The history – or rather the melody – of Buenos Aires glitters with a “fleeting, almost posthumous brightness, which envelops the city a second before it disappears forever”, to quote Alan Pauls in his his book *Factor Borges*.

The quantity and richness of the signage photographed by Zuviría during those years – painted advertisements, wax mannequins – belongs to a past era or one in decline, comparable to the symmetrical 8.66 metre-wide façades of the small local shops that lie at the heart of his *Siesta argentina*, in which human presence is absent and which concluded in 2003 as a subtle metaphor of the *corralito* [the isolation of the country resulting from the economic crisis]. “I always photographed the façades frontally”, Zuviría explained in the introduction to his book *Frontalismo*, “looking for the defining features of their essence in those simple, austere lines; a sort of ‘Argentinianness’ evident in urban façades.”

The ultimate metaphor in Zuviría’s work is perhaps the one to be found in a photograph of 1987: an empty office at night, the typewriters located in front of a window that looks onto a landscape of gaunt buildings, an inaugural image of the eternal “absent city”.

Alexis Fabry  
Curator

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# FRONTALISMO

“In one of his texts Rothko refers to the concept of ‘frontality’ in pictorial representation and says that flat planes ‘reveal the truth and destroy illusion [...]’. Photographing different urban façades from a perpendicular viewpoint, at half height and focused on the inclusion of certain details which are more like documentary information than clues, seemed to me an ‘objective’ way of representing them. In the photographic plane all the elements acquire a certain degree of equivalence, in turn confronting us with the geometry of the image and its texture.”

“I always photographed the façades frontally, looking for the defining features of their essence in those simple, austere lines; a sort of ‘Argentinianness’ evident in urban façades. With this idea [for ‘Frontality’] I set out to create a type of personal catalogue of urban façades, middle-class houses in the different barrios, modest shops and others of a meaning that seems difficult to define.”

Facundo de Zuviría

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# SIESTA ARGENTINA

The year 2001 was crucial for Argentina and for Facundo de Zuviría in particular. The country was experiencing an unprecedented economic crisis, the State was bankrupt and people could not access their own bank accounts, an episode Argentines call the *corralito*.

Zuviría's frontal shots of old-fashioned local shops, all built with a door framed by two display windows and photographed with their shutters down during the sweltering midday heat, symbolise that tragic situation with delicacy and melancholy. The artist explained the title of the series, "Argentinian Siesta": "I didn't think it was the end, I thought it was just a difficult moment we had to live through, not something permanent and that we'd get through it and it would be left behind: hardly even a siesta."





*Gaicho pop, afiche en Monserrat, 1985*

Vintage gelatin silver print

Charlotte and Marc Perelman Collection

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**F**acundo de Zuviría pays tribute here to his favourite author, Jorge Luis Borges, to the gaucho and the knife fighter who are key figures in that author's tales and poems. The former is a mythical motif of Pampa culture, creole, noble and austere: "the rider, the man who sees the world from his horse and who rules it", in Borges's words. The latter is a knife-wielding thug from the Buenos Aires underworld of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Here the two figures come together at street level.





*Grill Oriente, Avenida de Mayo, 1982*

Vintage gelatin silver print

Collection of the artist, courtesy Toluca Fine Art

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**F**acundo de Zuviría discovered the work of Walker Evans in the early 1980s and has admired him ever since. The two photographers share a fascination with popular culture and urban settings, advertising posters, hand-written gold lettering on glass shop doors and windows, and the use of serialism. Like Evans, Zuviría is a keen collector of ephemeral, everyday objects: calendars of saints' days, hand-coloured postcards, photo comics, pencil stubs, bottle tops, wine corks and cigarette packet wrappers.





*Mercadito Gerardo, Buenos Aires, ca. 1985*

Vintage gelatin silver print

Leticia and Stanislas Poniatowski Collection

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**F**acundo de Zuviría took full advantage of his visits to bookshops in Buenos Aires in search of first editions of his favourite authors (Jorge Luis Borges, César Aira, Ricardo Puglia, Juan Rulfo and many others) in order to photograph the windows of these small city-centre shops and thus record the sobriety of their tripartite structure: a central door with two flanking windows. With total and instinctive naturalness he shifts from that austere frontality to the exuberance of urban signage, moving between these two approaches depending on the inspiration of the moment.





*El ciudadano, Alem y Viamonte*, 1988

Vintage gelatin silver print

Leticia and Stanislas Poniatowski Collection

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This is a strange image of unusual complexity in Zuzanna Żwirka's work due to its sequence of diagonals, interconnecting sloping planes and reflections in the mirror. There is a clearly evident influence of Rodchenko; the first photographer to influence Zuzanna Żwirka, who was dazzled by his virtuosity, inventiveness and readiness to experiment, which freed up his own artistic practice. The great Russian master's faith in photography, which he considered to possess the "necessary virtues for being the art of the time", as he himself proclaimed, probably influenced the young Zuzanna Żwirka's decision to abandon his law studies and devote himself entirely to photography at whatever cost.





*Bar en Defensa y Cochabamba*, ca. 1985

Vintage gelatin silver print

Leticia and Stanislas Poniatowski Collection

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**T**he café-bar occupies a significant place in Argentinian literature. In Buenos Aires, particularly in the 1920s, it was the setting for numerous literary gatherings. Every Saturday, the avant-garde author Macedonio Fernández assembled his friends at the La Perla bar, among them the young Jorge Luis Borges who was dazzled by the writer's conversation. The café-bar has also been a key place for Facundo de Zuviría, as it is here that his memories of his own reading come together: Ernesto Sábato's La Helvética bar; Julio Cortázar's London City bar, and the recollection of the informal literary debates organised by his grandmother, Marta Molina Gowland, which were attended by leading authors of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The café-bar is located at the intersection between the public and the private; at street level but protected from it, sheltered by the subtle and familiar glow of its warm wooden interior.