

# Carlo Zinelli

by Paolo Colombo



*If you're not an idiot, use your eyes!*

**Carlo Zinelli**, speaking to a critic who enquired what his drawings meant.

As a young man, **Carlo Zinelli** worked on a farm and in a slaughterhouse in Verona. By 1939 he had been drafted into the Italian army to fight with General Franco against the Republicans. The Italians promised not to send him to war, but it was a trick to make him volunteer. Two months at the front proved too much, even for a slaughterhouse veteran.

**Zinelli** returned from Spain shell-shocked. This

term, first published by Charles Myers in 1915, *reflects an assumed link between the symptoms and effects of explosions from artillery shells*. Today we would refer to it as combat stress disorder. But back then it was shells, not drones - shells and trenches and downpours of bullets, with howitzers, cannons, incessant rumbling sounds, and the dead bodies of human and equine victims littering the Iberian landscape. Inspired by the war between Turkey and Bulgaria, Marinetti's 1914 poem *Zang Tumb Tumb* describes the sound of the battle. And *Zang Tumb Tumb* is surely how it was for **Zinelli** - not on a page, or in a salon, or at his publisher's home, but out there on the battlefield, a deafening repetition of explosions amidst the silhouettes of men, mules, tools and weaponry. Which brings us to **Zinelli's** work and the holes which became his trademark. For they are everywhere, rendering shapes as light as Henry Moore sculptures, where negative space defines the solid volume. Artists know what to say. Artists know white space is not amorphous. The holes may be the marks of bullets. They may also represent the white, circular objects he was administered daily in between his shock therapy sessions. Pills are harder than bullets; and for **Zinelli**, as penetrating and transformative.

**Zinelli's** work was first brought to the public's attention by the Scottish former spy and sculptor, Michael Noble, himself a part-time resident of the hospital in Verona. With his wife Ida Borletti, he initiated the atelier, where the painter worked until his death in

1974. By that time, **Zinelli** had created over 2,000 works, each of them extremely intuitive and sophisticated: from simple forms reminiscent of late Matisse, to two-dimensional shadow theatres of narrative representation, to lettering and sounds which fill his work with all its urgency. Throughout his 18-year practice, barely a day went by when **Carlo Zinelli** did not make art.

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