

Callirrhoë is pleased to announce its participation in the *Opening* section of ARCO Madrid 2026 with a solo presentation by Janis Rafa. Echoing the ideas of her recent solo exhibition *We Betrayed the Horses* at EMST – National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens, Greece, she continues her long-term research into the entanglements between the human and non-human world and in particular the relationship between humans and horses.

Central to the presentation is her notion of the “performed horse,” a term she uses to describe the animal as a cultural construct, historically shaped to serve systems of power, discipline and desire, much like the parallel constructions of “woman” and “nature”. Rather than depicting the horse directly, Rafa foregrounds the objects and apparatuses that surround it: trophies, bridles, restraints and other instruments tied to competitive sport, taming and commodification. Through this displacement, the absent body becomes acutely present.

Humans have been ridden horses since approximately 3000 BCE, yet the saddle appear only around 700-400 BCE providing comfort and stability to the riders. It elevated the rider, both literally and symbolically, introducing a vantage point of command. The saddle becomes a diagram of power, an architecture of posture. In Rafa’s composition, the saddle is accompanied by inverted riding boots, a gesture that aims to destabilize orientation and authority in the long history of ‘domestication’. The question hovers: *Who rides whom?* Humans domesticated horses; yet in doing so, they also reorganized

themselves. The technologies devised to command the animal body inevitably model forms of command among humans as well, shaping social choreographies of dominance and submission.

The colorful rosettes, decorative awards made from pleated ribbons arranged in a circular, unfold in mural constellation. Placed to the bridle, rosettes commemorate the successful partnership between the rider and the horse and at the same time they are intertwined with the notion of protest and grieve about animal dignity, ethics and rights. Shaped like flower ornaments, they become symbols of joy and quiet mourning.

Extending this research, Rafa’s drawings focus on the bit, a metal mouthpiece resting in the horse’s bars. The bit operates through pressure and allows communication between the rider and the horse. By foregrounding the mouth as locus, Rafa touches the porous boundary between care and coercion. The cavity becomes a site of intimacy and submission, entangled with fantasies of mastery, orchestrating a choreography of desire.

Rafa approaches this terrain not as an outsider but as an equestrian herself. Her position is neither denunciatory nor romantic, it is ambivalent. Her work acknowledges complicity while sustaining critical distance, tracing the tensions between affection and control, intimacy and domination. The exhibition reflects on how desire for the animal body is intertwined with structures of subjugation, revealing how power operates through ritual, spectacle and reward.