Se empeñaban en tapar las grietas, pero las paredes seguían sudando
[They insisted on covering the fissures, but the walls still perspired]

Sol Calero

Curator: Éric Mangion

14.02. - 03.05.2020
The practice of **Sol Calero** (born in Venezuela, 1982, lives and works in Berlin) blends painting and sculpture to create a unique syncretism inspired by her own migration.

The singularity of her approach lies in its total immersion in the space, architecture and context in which she works. Her paintings of exotic plants and fruit, sculptures and murals, are a way of exploring how one’s origins affects one’s view of the world. In response to the Villa Arson exhibition space, Sol Calero is integrating different aspects of the art school inside of the galleries, creating an immersive installation that includes a reading room with books about Latin American Art, a new series of paintings and ceramics inspired by the architecture, and a selection of works from recent exhibitions.
Sol Calero was born in Venezuela where she grew up until the age of 17. Her paintings featuring plant motifs mixed with vernacular architecture create a vibrant festive effect proper to the tropical iconography of her origins and South American culture. They are often devised as more or less accurate childhood memories, based on personal or family ‘archives’. Strongly influenced by the work of indigenous artists in Peru (including Inca tradition) after the Spanish conquest — votive paintings by La Escuela Cuzqueña (16th to 18th centuries), in particular — her work cannot be reduced to a colourful territorial cliché; an entire continent cannot be summed up in a postcard. Her conception of art is totally syncretic, at the crossroads of several cultures, identities and experiences. Thus, her painting can also be perceived by the Western eye, in particular through the prism of Matisse who, in his day, was one of the first Europeans to free colour from its codes and stereotyped juxtapositions.

Beyond painting and its eternal references, the singularity of Sol Calero’s work is also totally immersed in the places and contexts in which she works. At Villa Arson, she developed her project during her residency, when the region was struck by almost tropical rainfall last November and December (a situation referred to in the title she chose for this exhibition).

The artist built a walkway to avoid stepping in puddles of water and the areas most affected by seepage. She also took apart waterlogged partitions and used rubble as material for making sculptures. She plays on the light flooding in through the gallery’s large windows, to deflect it in the rooms, just as she duplicates the red-ochre colour of the Centre d’Art’s central patio to bring it from the outside into the exhibition areas, along with the natural vegetation.

Her installations often appear as interiors: living room or hair salon, waiting room, travel agency, café or snack bar, bureau de change and even a bus made of painted wood, recently displayed at the Tate Liverpool. After realising the Villa Arson library had very few books on South American art, she ordered some thirty of them to create a small library with two sofas and an eccentric bed. The books will later go to the School’s library to enrich its collections. The artist wished for students and visitors to occupy this reading room to bring it alive — a place in which to reflect, a school within a school — extending its immersive processes to the places where she lives and works.

Éric Mangion

This exhibition was conceived during the artist’s residency at the Centre d'Art from November 2019 to February 2020.
Works featured in the exhibition

*Passaje de olvido*, 2019
Acrylic and oil on canvas
150x130x4,5 cm
Courtesy: Barbara Gross Gallery, Munich (Germany)

*Paisaje, Villa Arson I*, 2020
Acrylic and oil on canvas
180x97,5 cm
Courtesy: Sol Calero
Production Villa Arson Nice

*La noche de los murciélagos*, 2019
Acrylic and oil on canvas
180x97,5 cm
Courtesy: Barbara Gross Gallery, Munich (Germany)

*Frutas en la Villa Arson II*, 2020
Acrylic and oil on canvas
180x97,5 cm
Courtesy: Sol Calero
Production Villa Arson Nice
SCVAC1BS, 2020
Painted wooden shelf
Courtesy: Sol Calero
Production Villa Arson Nice

SCVA01, 2020
Bench with wooden panel
Courtesy: Sol Calero
Production Villa Arson

SCVA02 et SCVA03, 2020
Bench seats (furniture made by the artist)
Courtesy: Sol Calero
Production Villa Arson Nice

Se empeñaban en tapar las grietas, pero las paredes seguían sudando, 2020
Ceramic wall (50 pieces of ceramic)
Variable dimensions
Courtesy: Sol Calero
Production Villa Arson Nice
**Frutas en la Villa Arson I**, 2020
Acrylic and oil on canvas
180x97,5 cm
Courtesy: Sol Calero
Production Villa Arson Nice

**Paisaje, Villa Arson II**, 2020
Acrylic and oil on canvas
170x150x4,5 cm
Courtesy: Sol Calero
Production Villa Arson Nice

**Solo pintura II**, 2018
Acrylic on canvas
150x120 cm
Courtesy: Barbara Gross Gallery, Munich (Germany)

**Corre que se quema**, 2019
Acrylic and oil on canvas
100x80x4,5 cm
Courtesy: Barbara Gross Gallery, Munich (Germany)
La abuela fantasma, 2019
Acrylic and oil on canvas
100x80 x4,5 cm
Courtesy: Barbara Gross Gallery, Munich (Germany)

Escondete que viene Abuli, 2019
Acrylic and oil on canvas
100x80x4,5 cm
Courtesy: Barbara Gross Gallery, Munich (Germany)

Miren siempre dentro de sus botas, 2019
Acrylic and oil on canvas
100x80x4,5 cm
Courtesy: Barbara Gross Gallery, Munich (Germany)

La triste visita, 2019
Acrylic and oil on canvas
100x80x4,5 cm
 Courtesy: Barbara Gross Gallery, Munich (Germany)
Espaguetti de culebra, 2019
Acrylic and oil on canvas
100x80x4,5 cm
Courtesy: Barbara Gross Gallery, Munich (Germany)
Pasaje del olvido presents a continuation of Sol Calero’s recent body of work, immersed in the notion of memory and its place in the act of painting. In her trajectory, Calero has questioned the idea of projection in many different ways: how do cultures imagine and present themselves? How do we see and describe others? What expectations do we have of places and societies labelled as exotic? Memories are not just recollections of the past, but also projections of what we have built that past to be. It may be idealized, it may be exaggerated, maybe suppressed; but it is always an abstraction. Sometimes memory fails us, and our reminiscence isn’t linear and complete, but fragmented and contrasted in intensity. Personal memory is anchored in sensorial experiences, impactful events, and emotional magnitude, so the images that result in the narrative of that memory have the same kind of texture. In Calero’s new paintings, this tonality has taken over: the elements coexist in different kinds of scale and hierarchy, while backgrounds, figures and patterns are juxtaposed in a sort of irrational harmony. Amongst snakes, dominoes, landscape bubbles, floral wallpaper and pieces of furniture, her images appear as blurry but detailed accounts of a dream.

Both personal and collective memories tend towards a narrative of self-explanation that creates identity; in the case of common pasts, it turns into historical narrative. In the Latin American context, memory is a key element in the understanding and the articulation of colonial legacies. For many cultures, oral transmission has been the only channel for passing on traditions and practices that have been left out of the canonized version of History. In rapidly changing environments with violent and volatile situations like Venezuela, personal history and collective memory become the only alternative to mainstream discourses driven by political agendas. In this way, the personal memories that are inherited within a family and live on through people represent a way of telling stories that defy institutionalized and mediatized narratives. Throughout her paintings and installations, Calero has created a visual
vocabulary that isn't representing one particular experience, but embodying how collective thought turns complex realities into cleanly outlined icons. In her work, paintings are like souvenirs, an abstract memory of a larger environment encapsulated in an object. In this new period, Calero circles back to familiar documents and personal archives to rescue memories from oblivion and present a domestic yet oneiric universe of exuberant semblance and diffused boundaries.

Sira Pizà
Éric Mangion: Westerners tend to consider Latin-american culture as something uniform. But that’s not the case. How does this cultural mix springing from an entire continent take shape in your work?

Sol Calero: There is a general idea about Latin America being one big culture, but the differences between countries can be very big. For example, the Andes region with countries like Peru and Bolivia has nothing to do with the Caribbean. Both the landscapes and the people are extremely different. In many countries we still have a very colonial influence and there’s a huge misrepresentation of their own identities. The white minorities still oppress the indigenous population, which is the majority in many countries. For example, it’s really painful to see how on television most people on screen are white, but then you go out in the streets and this is really not what you see. There is a lot to be done towards education in this region and outside Latin America. But even though there are many different cultural aspects between countries, having Latin American art as a unity might be helpful to create a space for solidarity and a united force for artists that come from the region.

In relation to my work, at the beginning I was looking for answers that could help me figure out aspects of my own identity. I moved to Europe when I was 17 years old so I was a bit lost. Studying art in Europe is, of course, very Eurocentric, so I was looking for references that I could identify with. I discovered really amazing artists and art from Latin American countries after I was done with my studies in university and I couldn’t believe no one ever talked about them in school. For example, Helio Oiticica, who is more known today, I was so excited when I saw and read about his work. For the first time I saw myself represented in some way.

So I’ve learned how to appreciate many aspects of Latin cultures. For example, the use of color, the improvisation with architecture and the music opened my eyes again to places I had blocked. So I kept those references but more and more, the work is becoming more blurry. And this is because lately I’ve been thinking more about immigration in general and both the problems and the fruitful aspects that come from being an immigrant.

For me is not so easy to claim certain aspects of a cultural heritage because I’m talking from the position of a person who has left a country that doesn’t exist anymore. And when this happens it’s very hard to nail down your references. Yes, I’m Venezuelan, but I’m from a Venezuela that is no longer there. And this is something that happens to millions of people today. It doesn’t matter where you are from, when you move to a new country you are confronted with who you were
and who you will become. It’s like you are forced to forget where you are coming from in order to “integrate”. So I’m interested in what happens then, how to collect your memories of the place you come from and how to keep them alive. And this is when it becomes complicated because this is when cliches get in between what’s real and what’s not. If after a long time you can’t come back to the place where you were born, the portrait of this place from the outside might also influence the way you see yourself.

É.M.: A few months ago you mentioned the history of the first religious paintings made in Latin America in the 16th century after the Spanish Conquest. The colonists used the talent and pictorial techniques of the native people to develop really singular ex-votos. Is syncretism part of your work?

S.C.: I was talking about La Escuela Cuzqueña which comprises the body of painting made in the city of Cusco during the political period named “Virreinato del Perú” between the 16th and the 19th centuries. The works were made by the hands of indigenous or mixed-race painters under the guidance of the Christian missionaries. European art was brought and used as a model, and both formal and symbolic elements of pre-hispanic cultures were integrated in painting as strategies of reinterpretation, appropriation, eradication, and lastly, conversion. This resulted in a religious syncretism that is present in all the artistic production of the time.

There are many aspects that interest me about this period of painting. At the moment I’m thinking about the translation of the colors that these painters had to do at that time. Most referential images to the European paintings that were brought to Latin America were black and white prints, so the painters had to translate the colors they thought these images would have. Of course this process brought a really rich and colorful aspect to the new images. The light and colors in that area were completely different than in Europe, so the new work looked different. I like to think of this translation as a very subtle rebellious move from the local artists, some sort of silent protest through color and symbolic elements. I’m fascinated by this idea although I know I might be idealizing it a bit. In a present which is influenced by a color blinded system, I like to borrow from this moment in history to believe in the use of color as a form of protest.

É.M.: To be honest, one of the reasons for inviting you to produce this exhibition was Matisse’s historical presence in Nice. So is it possible to also look at your work with a westerner’s eye?

S.C.: I have to say that I also accepted this invitation partly because I was very curious about Nice being the city where Matisse lived. I really wanted to see the
light and the colors he and other artists were influenced by and I’m quite impressed by it. It’s so beautiful here.

And yes, I think that if you had been educated in Europe, I’m sure you would see my work through a western eye. Like what you are suggesting, a lot of people think my work looks like Matisse. I might have references to his work because when I was studying I paid a lot of attention to it. But you might not see other references to the Latin American artists I’ve been influenced by like Tarsila do Amaral, Armando Reverón, Wilfredo Lam, Xul Solar, Amelia Peleaz, to name a few. I studied art in Europe so I’m trying to change my western education. We need to include more names to our list of artists that are not mostly white European men.

É.M.: For the last few years your painting has been edging out of the frame and becoming more and more immersive, like real installations in space. How did this need to free yourself from the painting format begin?

S.C.: It has been a very organic process. Whenever I make an installation, I am also organizing the space or composing as if I were making a painting. I was mostly doing abstract paintings before I started this body of work. And at the same time, I was also interested in conceptual art, so, in a way, the work I’m making now combines both things. In a formal sense, I nearly always take a painterly approach. I like to think of the space as a canvas. Painting has a very abstract process. What happens in your brain when you’re painting is pretty unique. I’m fascinated by how your brain can think 10 or 100 colors ahead, as you’re mixing them on the palette. In a way, I try to translate that process into space. I also often have a conceptual or a research background for these projects, so it’s combining both things at the same time.

É.M.: These installations often take on a domestic aspect: a private living room or a hair salon, a waiting room, a travel agency, a snack bar or a refreshment area, a foreign exchange counter, or even a nearly complete bus made of painted wood like the one you recently made for the Tate Liverpool. Why are you attracted to this kind of space? For the Villa Arson you were thinking of creating an installation after the terrible November and December rainstorms which caused leaks and humidity in the walls of the exhibition galleries. I know that for you this idea corresponds to a recurring way of adapting to the various contexts/constraints that confront you. It’s also a way of inventing singular forms.

S.C.: From the first moment I arrived at the Villa Arson I was completely captivated by the architecture of this building. Spending some time here made me think so much about architecture in general. How do you keep in mind the exterior with the interior, how do you build a
space that can support a roof. How do you protect yourself from the natural elements, the wind, the rain. And when you have the opportunity to live in a brutalist building like this you can’t ignore the material, the heaviness on the structures. This place is magical in that sense. The building feels so alive and I really wanted to pay attention to this. To listen to what the building has to say.

The water leaks and damp walls became something we couldn’t ignore, or what’s worse, fix. So I decided that instead of thinking of that as a problem I would embrace it and see how I could integrate the leaks in the show. This is why the title of this exhibition is “Se empeñaban en tapar las grietas, pero las paredes seguian sudando” (“They insisted on covering the cracks, but the walls were still sweating”).

For the last 6 years I’ve been working on many immersive installations that include a lot of planning and building. Most of the time things don’t come out how you expected and I’ve learned how to accommodate my projects to unexpected situations. In a way it’s a philosophy I try to keep alive in my work because it’s somehow the way I grew up in Venezuela. We had to think so much about the present and not really about the future because the economic situation there was and is always changing. You have to be alert all the time and be able to improvise. And when you learn how to improvise this becomes a very important tool which I think is fundamental for creativity. You learn how to be very fast at making decisions and you train yourself to look for alternatives. And by doing so you are becoming a more open person and can start understanding other perspectives, other spaces.

É.M.: You make paintings whose size and intricacy are sometimes impressive. But watching you work one is surprised by your dexterity in making them. Everything seems simple for you. Can you explain how you make them, and where your images and motifs come from?

S.C.: Things might look simple from the outside but it takes a lot of time to get comfortable making art and to have your own voice. In my case I feel really lucky because I have had a lot of people that supported me over the years and believed in my ideas. So I have had the opportunity of being able to try things out, to learn from my mistakes and try it again and again. Then it gets easier and I get more confident.

I have all kinds of references. I like to collect images from folk art, architecture, works by other artists, books, photos, interior design magazines, etc. But I’m especially interested in creating my own catalog of references. So when I build an installation or any project, the objects in the space also become the references for new images. Paintings sometimes become walls in other shows.
elements then become elements for another painting. Some sculptures have references from the paintings, and the furniture takes its textile patterns and motifs from the paintings. It’s all connected, and things happen very naturally.

For the Villa Arson I’m mixing some of the newer paintings I’ve made with some of the murals I did for Tate Liverpool. And because I’m trying to bring the outside of the building, nature, to the inside of the space, you will find a mix of plants and natural elements with landscapes. Some are references to plants that I found around the Villa. Also, we can’t forget the water leaks in the space, so some of the new paintings I’m making have waterfalls as a reference to the water damage of the walls where they are hanging. It’s as if the paintings themselves were leaking.

É.M.: You want part of the exhibition to be a place to live in, where one can read (with books provided), meet people (you invited speakers to come and participate). I know that you sometimes organize performances in the midst of your works. What do such moments represent? A way of introducing speech into the works for discursive purposes? Or is it just an animation? Whatever your answer, don’t you think that this kind of activity might seem artificial when contrasted with the formal and visual strength of your work?

S.C.: Art spaces and art galleries tend to be very unwelcoming spaces. Most of the time there’s an obstacle between the viewer and the artist. Heavy doors with unhappy low paid assistants in a lobby. Impossible building access to enter a prestigious gallery. Overwhelming architecture breathing dollar signs that kill the works of the artists. Expensive art fair and museum tickets that most people with a regular job can’t afford. Who are we working for? That’s what I keep asking myself.

When I’m working with immersive installations I want to work for and with the audience. I like to create a welcoming space, accessible to anyone that might come with their own prejudices. If you’d like to promote an idea you have to find the tools to communicate your thoughts and for me activating the space sometimes helps, depending on the project. For example, when I did installations like the hair salon or the exchange bureau, these works needed to be activated. It was a simple way to make people understand the idea behind the project. For the exchange bureau, we were selling an edition of bills whose value kept changing during the days of the fair. The project was to reflect on what hyperinflation means, but also to think about how the value of an art work also operates in the same way.
So, when activating a space what I’m doing is sending out an invitation to participate. I like to create a bridge between the formal aspects of the work and the thoughts behind them. It’s about art being accessible and being able to create a community and open a space for reflection. Of course, some projects are more successful than others when it comes to activating the space and this is why it’s so important that institutions are also willing to support projects like that. If you don’t have the right infrastructure to create spaces for participation it’s very hard to make things happen. Most of the time we are overwhelmed with schedules, production, budget, etc, and we tend to forget about the people that are actually going to visit the shows. So by programming during an exhibition this become an exercise not to forget about your community.

In more recent projects like El Autobús and my pavilions, Casa Anacaona, Isadora and Isla, I had created spaces that are self-activated, so there’s no need to create a parallel program. Just by being there or sitting in this installation you become part of them. I like to think of the audience as the performer for works like this.

For the Villa Arson, the books and the reading area that I’m designing will become the participatory but self activated part of this project. When I first arrived at the Villa Arson I wanted to spend the first month researching and reading so I started going to the library. Quickly I noticed that there were not many books about Latin American Art. This is a common situation in art school libraries in Europe, so I thought it could be interesting to work with the library to create a new section about “Latin American Art”. The same way you have sections for Greek or Roman art, I would love to see a new section for Latin America on the shelves of the library. This is why in the show people are invited to leaf through the books and after the exhibition they will be added to the school library.
Sol Calero (born in 1982 in Caracas, Venezuela) lives and works in Berlin where she codirects the Kinderhook & Caracas ‘project space’ with fellow artist Christopher Kline.

Her most recent solo exhibitions in Europe include: Tate Liverpool (2019); Chertlüdde, Berlin, (2019); Museum van Boijmans Beunigen, Rotterdam (2018); Brücke Museum, Berlin (2018); Galerie Crèvecoeur, Paris (2018); Düsseldorf Kunstverein (2018); Barbara Gross Galerie, Munich (2018); Kunsthalle Lissabon, Lisbon, (2018). She also participated in collective exhibitions at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne (2019); Preis der Nationalgalerie, Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin (2017); Casa Anacaona, Folkestone Triennial, Folkestone (2017).

Sol Calero is represented by the gallery Barbara Gross (Munich), gallery Chertlüdde (Berlin) and gallery Crèvecoeur (Paris).

+ information: http://chertluedde.com/artist/sol-calero
http://solcalero.com

Translation: Claire Bernstein

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«CARTES BLANCHES» IN EXHIBITIONS
TO THE STUDENTS OF THE NICE CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC
Thursday 26 March from 6.30 pm to 8.30 pm at Villa Arson
Musical stroll to discover the Sol Calero and Zora Mann's exhibitions.

During this late opening, the students and teachers of the music conservatory and the Villa Arson invite you to an unusual visit of the exhibitions of Sol Calero and Zora Mann. Artists and performers have designed a musical program, based on classical repertoire, Latino inspiration, jazz or contemporary creations, in resonance with the paintings on display. At various locations in the art centre, groups will perform at regular intervals, in the form of musical performances that visitors will be free to enjoy at their leisure.

An appointment open to all audiences, free admission.
PRACTICAL INFORMATION
Exhibition from February 14 to May 03.2020.
Open every day except Tuesday, from 2 to 6 PM.
Closed on May 01.
Free admission.

Meet the artist (in English):
19th February at 6 pm in amphitheater 1

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See information on previous page

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