

Sol Calero

Notes on the Formation of Syncretic Canons in the Americas

Text by Sira Pizà Airas

Sol Calero's work first became recognizable for its colorful, welcoming and almost idyllic recreations of iconic social spaces from Latin America and its diaspora. Throughout her artistic trajectory, she has observed Latin American identity as a projected commonplace, a conglomerate of clichés, and an emblem. Her works present vernacular vocabularies within a broader, shared *tropicália* while her gestures point to the expectations imposed on Otherness.

Between 2018 and 2019, Calero began to move away from recreating specific places of social interaction and aesthetic identification—such as the dance studio, the cyber café and the hair salon—and into a more abstract approach, observing architecture and painting as historical processes of conflicting forces and influences. In this new phase marked by the experience of traveling through Peru, Ecuador and Mexico, her formal explorations revealed a commonality: the omnipresence of syncretism. Defined as the merging or assimilation of divergent traditions or belief systems, syncretism is irrevocably present in art and crafts across the Americas, as well as in its social rituals and customs to this day.

The Viceroyalty of Perú was a territory established as a result of the Spanish conquest in the 16th century, incorporating most of South America under the rule of the King of Spain through his representatives in the New World. The monarchy had gained *Patronato Regio*, or a series of privileges and faculties bestowed by the Catholic Church, which allowed the King to act in place of the Pope in the Americas, thus consolidating the monarchy into one unit of political and moral authority on the quest for both the conversion and the exploitation of the Indies. Native populations were considered subjects of the King, with obligations and rights—on the condition of their acceptance of the new religion and its rule. Strategies of forceful imposition were various, including military occupation, enslavement, torture and cultural indoctrination. The latter form of coercion assured the long-lasting co-optation of Indigenous ways of life into the Christian doctrine.

The rewriting of religious history in the New World was framed as an offering of spiritual truths presented to the Natives by the Spanish crown, an unveiling of religious virtue to

save fallen populations. It was in fact the spiritual and collective resistance of Native peoples that enabled them to maintain Indigenous rituals while simultaneously altering their appearance or applying Christian significance to pre-existing cultural symbols. This process of spiritual survival in the face of violent powers of conquest resulted in religious syncretism.

While some of the myriad Indigenous cultures of the region were violently erased by the Spanish conquest, others such as the Incas, who had established an empire of their own, required a different strategy for domination. In this case, alongside the customarily brutal military and political campaigns in which they sought to ally with Indigenous rivals of the Incas, the Spanish invaders portrayed themselves not as a replacement, but a *continuity* of authority. Paintings of royal genealogies show, for example, Inca kings recognized as part of a legitimate monarchical and political establishment to which the Spanish appear as heirs. Depictions of marriages between Inca princesses and Spanish Jesuits both acknowledge the position of the Indigenous monarchy and ensure the bequest of power to the Catholics. The presence of traditional garments, icons and references to regional nature and culture in the paintings are manifestations of this veneration of continuity. As a belief system, Christianity was well amenable to syncretism. For instance, the bishop of Chiapas and missionaries in Perú used the metaphor of Saint Paul preaching to the Athenians in order to show that the God he was bringing to them was the God they already venerated, shifting the Inca cult of the sun towards the Christian God. This vision of a universal truth allowed for a synthesizing of cultures.

In this colonization process, the concepts of translation and replication emerge as linchpins: the very mission that the colonizing country or empire is operating upon is rooted in the idea that they are the *original*, of which the colony is but a *copy*. This translation occurs even on a biological and environmental level, with the introduction of new diseases, species and technologies that alter and often deteriorate endemic agricultural systems, diets, and modes of production, as well as the overall balance of the native landscape.

In architecture, religious buildings show a similar syncretic nature where the abundant Baroque churches of the Andes are decorated to imitate precious materials used in European churches, such as marble or granite. These imitations are hand-painted and stand alongside trompe-l'œil architectural details and representations of nature and

floral patterns, showcasing a blending of the traditional Indigenous colors and themes, once again a copy within the frame of Catholicism as an authority.

Not only does the colony become an imposed recreation of a foreign culture, but its subjects are also translated into legible terms for the colonizer: Christian, man, slave, subject. Under this paradigm, Christianity equaled civilization and paganism equaled savagery. Foreign hierarchies were superimposed upon existing ones in terms of social and political power, but also in terms of aesthetics. Exoticism appears today as a result of this diluted translation of Otherness, which survives and thrives in the contemporary Western imaginary of the non-Western world. Among the strategies used by the colonial missionaries, painting and writing were central in providing access to scripture and disseminating biblical imagery. In monasteries and missionary organizations, Indigenous and Creole populations were involved in the production of large bodies of didactic religious art that would decorate the rapidly proliferating buildings erected for Christian worship and indoctrination.

One of the most important artistic legacies from this era came in the form of La Escuela Cuzqueña (The School of Cuzco), a prolific Andean movement of painting which began in the late 16th century, initially influenced by Jesuit Italian painters who came to the region to work on altar piece commissions. The early style was inspired by Mannerism and shifted contemporaneously into a more Baroque style featuring the dramatic illumination of its subjects. As the school developed and more Quechua and Mestizo painters began painting, a unique style evolved which differentiated it from European works of the time.

This adoption of Baroque painting, both formally and as a method of vividly depicting the subjects of religious teachings, coincided with the birth of the printing press. Engraved reproductions of European paintings became a popular and accessible form of archiving and disseminating European art. These copies, however, were not fabricated in color, leaving the local painters who used them for reference to interpret their palettes and brushstrokes from the black-and-white prints. Cuzco School paintings are recognizable for their moody palette, favoring deep reds, rich yellows, and skies of an often ominous, darker tone of blue. In many instances, the colonial versions were direct copies of a European original composition, however, an increasing number of

works saw their motifs subtly adapted to the narrative of colonial events and Indigenous collective memory.

Anachronisms in biblical art were common across Renaissance and Baroque painting, and the inclusion of contemporaneous or otherwise out-of-place architecture, clothing and objects was standard in Catholic art. For example, Jan van Eyck's *Annunciation* features the wildly inaccurate portrayal of a pale white Mary reading a book in a Gothic church while being visited by an angel wearing lavish European robes. Of course these adaptations weren't accidents, but intentionally used to communicate symbolic meaning to the viewer and enhance the artist's chosen narrative, or for sociopolitical gains by positioning the paintings' patrons within the work.

This space for artistic liberty was utilized by the Cuzco School in unprecedented ways as their approach to perspective and composition subtly joined influences from pre-Columbian and traditional art forms of the region, and included native flora and endemic species such as Amazonian parrots, rich with significance, in the classic Christian religious scenes. Sometimes mixing biblical episodes with regional battles, a popular theme of warrior angels called *Ángeles arcabuceros* also arose, who were characterized as winged, white-skinned men in aristocratic dress carrying guns. Painters such as the influential Diego Quispe Tito adapted the zodiac into their murals, consciously linking episodes in the life of Christ with the sun, moon, stars and planets in order to proselytize Andeans whose pre-Columbian beliefs had a heavy focus on celestial bodies. This method of inscribing Indigenous symbolism within Western mythology and adapting it to the colonial situation represented the complex overlay of two civilizations: one adapting to violent colonization, and the other pushing for legitimacy.

In both Nueva España (Mexico) and the Virreinato del Perú, a genre of painting called *La pintura de castas*, or caste paintings, became popular in the 18th century. These paintings are didactic ranked indexes of ethnic combinations in costumbrist scenes that illustrate and promote a pseudoscientific racial taxonomy. Here, phenotypes become a social imaginary. Starting with the palest, "pure-blooded" Spanish at the top, the strata degenerates into a chain of pigment ranks with names like *morisco*, *indio*, *torna atrás*, or *lobo* (*Moorish*, *Indian*, *turn back*, *coyote*). The act of naming aimed to bolster a stratified, racialized class system, inventing differences through new terms that did not exist

before. Some paintings depict small families labeled with generational results when the invented castes are combined, designated with increasingly bewildering terms. For example, the child of a *morisco* and an *española* is labeled as a “*chino*” (Chinese), while the child of a *tente en el aire* (hold yourself in midair) with a *mulata* (African-European) is called a “*no te entiendo*” (I don't understand you). This genre of painting as a cultural phenomenon evidences the strategies carried out by ruling classes to pursue hegemony and control, making it an example of how those become entrenched in language and society over time.

Identifying the logic behind aesthetic manifestations in the present reveals a series of ramifications of the past. This intricacy is always rooted in the way access, mobility and privilege are distributed in the world. From 2018 to 2019, Sol Calero made a series of exhibitions directly referencing the Cuzco School and its legacy, especially focused on its relationship with fabricated hierarchies of color. The body of work that stemmed from her research into syncretism in Latin America is imbued with the contradictions and complexities of this past, and uses color, pattern and volume to create new, non-specific spaces that are open for reflection. The three exhibitions were *Tente en el aire* at Kunsthalle Lissabon, *El Patio* at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, and *La Puerta* at The Australian Center of Contemporary Arts.

Tente en el aire

Sol Calero's painting practice up to this point had developed a pictorial language that operated in a similar way to souvenirs: an idealized representation of a place concentrating multiple layers of self-projected identity. Cultural traits, traditions, landmarks, historical milestones, are all neutralized and displayed in leisurely forms for consumable purposes. The souvenir is not an object taken out of context, but an object created to encapsulate a context and disseminate it as an abstracted interpretation.

Calero recreates the context of the painting as a souvenir in her installations, in the same way identities are exported and reified: they are at once self-performative while also made up in the eyes of the outsider. The use of identity as commodity has many faces, and it constantly manifests as a self-promoting or self-exculpatory strategy for political entities in the present. But it stems from depictions of the Same and the Other that have a place in the classificatory undertakings resulting from early imperialist human mobilizations. These endeavors aimed to exponentially proliferate

their expansive systems in the world as a means of possession through both force and appropriation, as much as continuity and dependence. Distribution of access, mobility, and privilege in today's global structure are closely linked to colonial projects and their description of the world, where subjects are continuously objectified and translated into the outsider's terms.

For her exhibition at Kunsthalle Lissabon, Calero referenced La Escuela Cuzqueña as a paradigmatic precedent of exemplary and generative models that both cultivate and illustrate a view of the world. Her new series of paintings were displayed in ornate, raw wood-carved frames, handmade in the Cuzco region and acquired during her trip there. These literal souvenirs were brought back to Berlin to be painted. They frame a new pictorial direction that expands her signature emblematic patterns and designs, marking a departure into explorations of the non-represented, the non-iconic. In the amalgam of shades, we find the in-between, manifold, ambiguous, and muddy nature of reality.

Tente en el aire (Hold yourself in midair) is a direct reference to the Casta paintings—it is the name of an invented racial classification denoting the descendant of a *Campulato* and a *Cambujo*. This designation, referring to someone literally floating between identities, incapable of claiming their roots, reflects the chastising nature of these definitions. While the frames are painted in bright, vibrant colors, the paintings they contain—and the walls they were installed on—reflect Calero's extensive color research into the shades and tones of brown, a color range which became much more prevalent in her practice in the aftermath of this project. This new palette was in itself an exploration of pigment as an example of classificatory narratives that define hierarchies, voices and positionalities. Here the subject appears in an abstraction of the portrait genre that shifts the notion of personal representation towards the narrative of collective identities and the layered nature of their constructs.

El Patio

El Patio is a symmetrical structure consisting of concentric walls perforated by archways which surround a courtyard and wishing well, a reference to the archetypical Spanish courtyard incorporated in Latin American monasteries and houses. The installation plays with this inside-outside dichotomy in several ways.

Calero created a series of faux surface paintings on paper with the idea that they would be photographed and converted into mass-produced posters, to be wheat-pasted as wallpaper. Half of the designs were printed in grayscale while the other half were made in full color, a nod to the process of translation present in the Cuzco School's adaptation of black-and-white engravings into full-color paintings. The audience first encountered the outer walled structure covered in black-and-white patterns, then passed through arched portals to the inner realm to discover a universe of color. The tonalities and compositions covering the walls were reminiscent of those found in the hand-painted ornamentations of Latin American churches, as well as the amalgam of faux-painted materials such as tile and marble typically imitated by local craftsmen. Utilizing the presence and absence of color through configurations of wallpaper in the constructed, mirrored architecture raised questions of authenticity. Which was the original and which was the copy? Steeped in the contradictions and complexities of this past, Calero uses color, pattern and architectural volumes to create new, non-specific spaces that are open for reflection.

La Puerta

La Puerta, shown in ACCA Melbourne, is an arched gateway which, like *El Patio*, appears in grayscale from the outside, but whose patterns and surfaces burst into color and floral shapes beyond the threshold. This time, an exposed substratum of the wall revealed the layered complexity of the relationship between these two sides. Calero uses this deconstructed binary structure in reference to the underlying duality inherent in processes of translation—from black-and-white to color, from a model to a reproduction, from the original to the copy, from the self to the other, and from empire to colony.

The artist was unable to travel to Melbourne for the fabrication of the installation, which led to an added layer of translation: In an updated metaphor reminiscent of the reproduction of Baroque paintings by The Cuzco School adapted from black-and-white engravings, *La Puerta* was completely produced by Australian carpenters and artists who interpreted the images Calero sent them from Berlin. Punctured walls, theatrical cut-out shapes, and architectural lookalikes were assembled according to sketches and plans made in the “Old World.”

Continuing the conceptual approach of *El Patio*, which featured hand-painted imitations of precious materials such as marble typical of Andean Baroque churches, *La Puerta* is not only a reference to perhaps the longest-standing evidence of colonialism in the architectural landscape of the Americas, but also relates to the contemporary movement of passage: traveling in the form of expectation and projection, and encountering a constructed world prepared for the necessities of global citizens. Manifesting the gaze of those who hold the privilege of free mobility, for whom a dignified entryway is always accessible, this ever-polarizing imbalance appears as the foundation of planetary distribution of wealth, access and mobility today, but is hidden under layers of appeasing perceptions of exotic places. In the game of appearances, *tropicália* becomes a disguise under which such convulsions can travel back to the world stage.