

Sol Calero
Pica Pica

Long ago on the outskirts of Valle de la Pascua, along the grassland roads of Venezuela, a man named José Zambrano was found dead at the foot of a pica pica tree. The legend varies as to the details of who he was: sometimes a shepherd, sometimes a postal worker, sometimes a wounded soldier, sometimes a wanderer of humble means who had fallen ill. His body was discovered by a passerby who had lost his herd of cattle. The passerby gave Zambrano a Christian burial and asked the *ánima* (spirit) to help him find his herd. If the wish was granted, he promised to return and build a chapel at the burial site. The shrine exists today, with many expansions and improvements, which means the cattle were found safe and sound. The story has been passed down many generations, often in the form of folk songs.

Passing travelers still stop with offerings for el *Ánima Pica Pica*, lighting candles and praying for the lost soul of José Zambrano, who has become a saint-like figure of devotion that grants wishes. People bring so-called *milagritos* (Spanish for ‘little miracles’) in return: small, often handmade object-like representations of their wishes and prayers, taking the form of whatever they desire or ails them: a leg, a heart, a house, a car. Some say that failing to pay your respects as you pass will soon lead to a flat tire on your journey.

With her exhibition *Pica Pica*, Calero revisited her personal memories of the chapel and its miracles as seeds for a new body of work. Her family always stopped to light a candle for Pica Pica on their route to her grandmother’s farm deeper in the plains. Her grandmother had assembled a collection of *milagritos* she’d taken from the chapel over many years, especially those in the shape of houses. During one visit, a woman from the village who was cleaning the chapel saw her taking one and fell to her knees, shouting with her arms to the sky, “¡Milagro! ¡Encontré al ladrón!” (Miracle! I found the thief!). This episode resulted in her informal banishment from the chapel, and inspired Calero’s ongoing engagement with vernacular iconographies, as well as institutional and social architectures.

Her exhibition *Pica Pica* contained a series of Calero’s own *Milagrillo* sculptures—oversized wood cut-outs routed with designs and ornamented with mosaics, metalwork and hand-painted motifs—depicting common objects of desire in

Venezuela. Unlike the miniature charms common in chapels, Calero's are larger than life, magnifiers of necessity and possibility reflecting the enlarged, daunting miracle necessary for a sustainable life in Venezuela. Created during a particularly harsh year when basic necessities were hard to come by there, the sculptures don't depict wishes for luxury items but rather the very basics: Harina P.A.N. (the corn flour to make arepas), a modest shelter, a means of transport, toilet paper, a slice of watermelon. Alongside body parts such as hands, feet, eyes and hearts, which represent prayers for healing and health, these talismans become portraits of a dream, a hope too large to carry alone, and a level of desperation in which reaching out to supernatural powers can be the last resort.

Wall colors and vernacular materials were used to convert the gallery into a contemplative, sacred space. The show's centerpiece was a hanging work cascading from the ceiling, holding milagritos amidst a bespoke composition of ribbons, ropes, hoses and domestic construction materials. Here the amulets are left floating, suspended as an unrealized dream in wait. The space was flanked by two additional zones demarcated by wall paintings with silhouettes of popular milagritos. These walls, extended by make-shift wooden stanchions stuck in buckets of poured concrete, denoted the entry to two propositional chapels. The walls were dotted with small nails which acted as depositories for the wishes of visitors who could hang their own milagritos, cut from soft metal and engraved at work tables at either end of the space. These new tokens accumulated over the course of the show reflected the plethora and variety of collective longing.

Thinking back to the objects Calero's grandmother collected (some would say stole) from la Capilla de Pica Pica in Los Llanos, the question arises of what happens to these talismans after they are put up as offerings. Do they stay on their altars indefinitely? How long is the wish embodied within them? Calero's grandmother wanted to collect them as objects, as specimens of folk art and testaments to the link between craftsmanship and cultural belief. Yet a superstitious element lingered, and she also treated them as holy objects, venerated by the family at home with candles and wishes. Similarly, Calero's *Milagritos* were designed to live on within this gray zone, proposing that the sculptures remain imbued with the essence of the hopes and desires which begot them.