

Sol Calero

Isla

Text by Carla Donauer

Isla is a site-specific, autonomous sculptural pavilion developed in response to the post-industrial interior of Kunsthal Extra City in Antwerp. The installation combines Calero's affinity for painting with earlier aspects of her architectural and spatial interventions. In previous pavilion projects, Calero situated these structures outdoors, focusing mainly on the community-building aspect of her work and carving out open, yet sheltered meeting places loosely confined by their roofs and decks, surrounded by the natural landscape. Here she takes a different approach, placing the colourful pavilion indoors to produce a stark contrast to the Kunsthal, which is located in a former industrial laundry. The historical remnants of the space—an encircling mezzanine, a spiral staircase, and high ceilings—allow for multiple viewpoints of *Isla* surrounded by a sea of worn, grey flooring. Through Calero's intervention, an on-site history of labour remains present in the space, and yet *Isla*—which welcomes viewers with benches and chairs to sit on, as well as a platform to climb—also hints at a site for leisure.

The deconstructed pavilion can be recognised here as a “building” with architectural allusions, such as its height, a balcony, doors, passages, floors and a ceiling. But its foundational shape creates a cross of two intertwining axes, dividing the space into four sections. This form calls to mind a nautical compass pointing in four different directions; multifaceted layers and perspectives offering ever-changing views of the installation's overlapping sections.

Calero often references archetypical forms such as the arch; a fundamental element in cloisters and churches developed as a strategy to disperse the weight of large, dome-shaped roofs. The open pavilion imitates these conventions, creating structural echoes without an explicit purpose. The resulting framework evokes an abandoned space, reminiscent of partially collapsed houses or unfinished constructions. Vernacular materials—mainly wood, ribbed plastic roofs, Venetian blinds and plastic chairs—create an improvised feeling of domesticity and shelter through simple gestures.

The title *Isla* may be read in multiple ways. It might evoke a tropical destination surrounded by the ocean or a friendly place of rest, or precisely the opposite—a place

one cannot escape, with the ocean as a boundary. The water may become a harsh barrier between oneself and an imaginary “other side”. In our recent history, an island can be associated with migration and its various implications of escape and rescue. Metaphorically speaking, the island can stand for isolation and limited possibilities in terms of one’s wishes, desires, and resources.

The exhibition space was unheated, creating a dissonance with Calero’s warm and colourful palette. As a whole, the structure is a template for various clichés concerning exoticised imagery of the South American continent in Western narratives. Heat, or its absence, becomes palpable, taking on a spatial dimension. The exhibition climate claims sensorial attention and gains the captivating and seductive quality of sculpture.

With *Isla*, Calero further develops her ideas on the formal aspects of painting, colour and architectural investigation. The tropical visual impact of the work creates a contrast to its surroundings, setting the colour temperatures inside and outside of the pavilion at odds. *Isla* offers visitors an inviting space by creating images through readable gestures. Everything that you might find on an island is present: water, heat, shadow, places to rest, and nature. It is a space that symbolises wishes and creates a visual echo in the viewer’s mind. Yet Calero’s offering is an illusion, as these aspects of the tropical are present only in a symbolic reality. Representation and presentation are thus twisted in an uncanny way: the highlighted environment’s artificiality is precisely where its seductive power lies.

The rough textures invoke an abandoned home, as well as a story by Gabriel García Márquez from an early speech, “How I Began To Write.”¹ The writer recounts the story of a village which was abandoned following a premonition of evil received by an elder. The inhabitants fled and set their homes on fire to protect themselves from what was said to come, only to find that their own actions had fulfilled the prophecy of misfortune. The superstition, and the response it provoked, were powerful enough to destroy a whole village in one day, leaving nothing but a shell. The absurdity of this fate elucidates the power of fiction and unveils the parallelism of house and home, as well as its fragility.

¹ Gabriel García Márquez, *I’m Not Here to Give a Speech* (New York: Vintage Books, 2019).

Similarly, *Is/a* abstracts connections between architecture, community, and socio-cultural structures. In doing so, it calls their utopian and dystopian notions into question—how does architecture symbolise the state of a community?

The references to ruin and its haunting beauty allude to the use of artificial architecture in European Romanticism—as seen in the follies and sham ruins of nineteenth-century English landscape gardening and paintings—thought to instil a sense of the sublime and emphasise the frailty and loneliness of humanity. Such edifices were built to depict different stages of decay, thus creating dramatic scenes and evoking higher emotional states. Calero creates a contemporary interpretation of architectural repetitions, as well as their meanings and misreadings in a globalised world. *Is/a* moves the classical and historical motif of the outdoor pavilion indoors so as to reconnect it with the institution and its context as a place of critique.

The conception of beauty found in decay has changed throughout history, alongside societal developments. Architecturally speaking, this contemporary ruin harkens back to its predecessors of the Romantic era, but its imagery also connects it to the hut,² a common structure for temporary dwelling which was constructed quickly, utilised, and later deserted. This aspect of abandonment and disintegration inherent to the hut also recalls the “broken windows theory” developed in 1982 by Wilson and Kelling in relation to socio-psychological experiments.³ In essence, the study describes a connection between existing decay—a product of dissolving social ties—and subsequent vandalism, resulting in spiralling destruction. This rather negative connotation of decay painted the repercussions of social change and criminality opposite the aesthetic concept of Romanticism. One could adapt this interpretation to Calero’s symbolised spaces, which mirror the viewer’s expectations of society in stereotypical imagery and call into question the symptoms and parallelisms of social dissolution and architectural decay.

² See also *The Primitive Hut* as described in: Marc Antoine Laugier, “Essai sur l’architecture” (Paris: Nabu Press, 1755).

³ George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson, “Broken Windows: The police and neighborhood safety,” *The Atlantic*, March 1982.