

Sol Calero
La Escuela del Sur

*I have said School of the South; because in reality, our North is the South. There should be no North for us, except in opposition to our South. That is why we now turn the map upside down, and now we know what our true position is, and it is not the way the rest of the world would like to have it.*¹—Joaquín Torres-García

La Escuela del Sur was an immersive installation set at Studio Voltaire, inspired by the gallery's history as a mission hall and Sunday school in the late 1800s. Merging its Victorian features with her visual iconography, Calero transformed the space into a *heterotopia*, setting the school within the Caribbean community of Los Roques—a Venezuelan archipelago composed of hundreds of small islands and sandbars, all contained by a barrier reef. New architectural features were fused to the installation walls, which were lined with façade paintings resembling the houses of Los Roques. The paintings mirrored the islands in their convergence of European, Indigenous, and Afro-Caribbean influences. A series of tiered boardwalks and balconies designated a painting workshop area populated by pastel-coloured easels. The ceiling, too, was segmented by monochrome panels arching over a makeshift pavilion where the school's pedagogical component was reflected in rows of bespoke school desks which faced a series of blackboard paintings. The standard, rote classroom lesson is replaced by lusciously overflowing chalk sketches of fruits and plants. Herein lies one of the connections to Torres-García's concept of Constructive Universalism: just as he proposed the integration of pictograms as metaphysical signifiers which communicate beyond language and time, Calero positions her stylised fruits and flora as central carriers of meaning in her work. This immemorial freedom of interpretation, which lives on through oral histories and continues to saturate so many aspects of Latin American culture, cuts across art history as well—from pre-Columbian examples up through modern abstraction and more recent expansions into myriad contemporary practices.

The exhibition borrows its title from Joaquín Torres-García, who, in his later years, wrote a course-cum-manifesto of that name in 1934. Born in Montevideo, Uruguay, Torres-García lived in Spain and France between the ages of 17 and 59, only returning in his later years to develop his concept of “La Escuela del Sur” through his Taller

¹ María Carmen Ramírez, ed., *El Taller Torres-García: the School of the South and its legacy* (Austin: University of Texas Press), p. 53.

Torres-García (Workshop Torres-García). He is perhaps best known for his iconic, iconoclastic drawing of an inverted South America (*América Invertida*) and his desire to define and disseminate an emphatically Latin American approach to art, which was also an alternative to the dominant style of social realism fostered by nationalist movements of the era.

Much like Torres-García's, Calero's *La Escuela de Sur* is both propositional and playful, imagining a space for reexamining Latin American art history itself. The space regularly hosted painting classes for school children from the area, as well as a conference on "Latin American art" delving into all of the complications and contradictions the term engenders, in addition to art historical trajectories. At the human scale, a continental blanket term can seem preposterous—why would a coastal Brazilian speaking Portuguese have anything more in common with an Andean Peruvian speaking Spanish (let alone Quechua) than with someone from any other world culture? The vast size of South America coupled with its often impassable geography and the exorbitant cost of air travel between countries further directs each country's gaze inward.

It can therefore be helpful to think of the term "Latin American Art" as a lens. In this respect, it is a practical tool for analysing, understanding, and classifying. Useful as it may prove, it remains a construction—a generalisation imposed from the outside, used to sum up, package, and market. Convened by Calero and Isobel Whitelegg, the conference invited visitors to reconsider notions of appropriation, cultural anthropophagy, and histories of self-representation. It featured presentations by musicians Bruno Verner & Eliete Mejorado (Tetine), and artists Juan-Pedro Fabra Guemberena, Lucia Pizzani and Jaime Gili. The conference also delved into the uses of the term "Latin American art" on the European institutional level in a conversation between curators Alessio Antonioli, Tanya Barson and Kiki Mazzucchelli, who discussed its effect on programming, museum acquisitions, and fundraising.