

## El Patio - Sol Calero

Sensory Spaces 15

Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Netherlands

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Curated by Saskia van Kampen

“Which works of art made the most impression?” This is what I asked the Venezuelan artist who lives in Berlin, Sol Calero (Caracas 1982), after a tour round Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen. She answered: “Those dating from the baroque era”. Calero told me that she had been fascinated for years by both the renaissance and the baroque movement, and the influence they had on Latin-American art. Therefore the Rotterdam museum with its extensive collection of old masters, including masterpieces by baroque artists such as Peter Paul Rubens, was the right context for her to explore this subject in a solo exhibition.

The influence of the baroque period on Latin-American art was based to an important extent on prints. During the pre-modern era the Spanish shipped countless prints of works by European artists such as Rubens to the ‘New World’, with the idea that they would be able to play an important role in missionary work. Indigenous artists were actually expected to copy the prints and introduce European art and culture in their own environment in this way. The artists did use the composition and Christian iconography from the black and white prints, but had to interpret the palette of colors and brushwork in their own way. After all, they did not know the original paintings. This often meant that the works acquired a different significance. In addition, so many copies were sometimes made of the prints that they become completely divorced from the originals.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the indigenous artists were encouraged to incorporate symbols and other more formal elements in their painted copies, which dated back to the pre-colonial period. This was part of a strategy based on the following key concepts: “reinterpretation, appropriation, eradication and lastly, conversion”.<sup>2</sup>

Calero is fascinated by the way in which one culture can assimilate another, either forcefully or otherwise. In her work, ranging from paintings and graphic works to large-scale spatial installations, she tries to unravel cultural clichés. This also applies to the installation ‘El Patio’ which she made for Sensory Spaces. The work looks like a colorful patio that serves as a meeting place for visitors to the museum. In Latin-American countries patios are part of the social structure: they are places where people come together, exchange ideas and live their lives. Because the patio has such a central place in

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron M. Hyman, “Rubens in a New World: Prints, Authorship, and Transatlantic Intertextuality”, Members Research Reports, 2011-2017 ([www.nga.gov/research/casva/research-projects/research-reports-archive/hyman-2016-2017.html](http://www.nga.gov/research/casva/research-projects/research-reports-archive/hyman-2016-2017.html), consulted on 10 September 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Sira Pizà, ‘Tente en el aire’, Kunsthalle Lissabon, 2018 ([www.kunsthalle-lissabon.org/exhibit/tente-en-el-aire-2](http://www.kunsthalle-lissabon.org/exhibit/tente-en-el-aire-2), consulted on 7 September 2018)

daily life, Calero believes that it is easy to forget that it is *the* icon of colonial architecture.<sup>3</sup> After all, it was the Spanish who introduced the patio in the ‘New World’. In fact, in Spain the patio had been greatly influenced by the Arab world, amongst others.

‘El Patio’ has a symmetrical structure consisting of arched walls you can walk through, surrounding a square courtyard with a wishing well. The walls are partly covered by wallpaper designed by the artist, incorporating floral and geometrical patterns. With this wallpaper Calero is referring to the Catholic churches which she visited during one of her last trips to the Andes region. During the pre-modern era the walls, arches and columns of these churches were painted by hand by local craftsmen. They imitated the valuable materials, such as marble, which were used in European churches but which were not available in their own environment.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, these ‘faux marbles’ were also often applied in European churches and public buildings. In the renaissance one could learn the technique of faux stone painting both in Italy and France. In Calero’s presentation the motifs on the wallpaper are executed in black and white on one side of the wall, while they appear in color on the other side. This can be considered as a contemporary version of the interpretation of European prints by the indigenous artists of the ‘New World’. Calero examines, translates and interprets the Latin-American history of art and adds her own elements in her installations and other works of art. For the palette of colors used in ‘El Patio’ she was inspired by Rubens, particularly by his famous oil sketches. The museum has several of these, currently being shown in the ‘Pure Rubens’ exhibition in another part of the museum. Numerous exhibitions have been devoted to the influence Rubens had on European art, but in recent years academics have devoted increasing attention to his influence on Latin-American art. In this way Calero’s presentation meets the current demand for a broader and more pluriform canon of art history.

#### Email conversation with the artist

1. Earlier this year you created an installation in the Kunsthalle Lissabon entitled ‘Tente en el aire’, in which your fascination with baroque art in relation to Latin-American art also had a central place. In this presentation you particularly explored the Escuela Cuzqueña in Peru. What sort of school was this, and how did that subject recur in your work? The two exhibitions look very different, but they are closely related in terms of content. Should they be seen as a diptych?

‘Escuela Cuzqueña’ is the body of painting made in the city of Cuzco in Peru during the political period and geographical territory named ‘Virreinato del Perú’ between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, which comprised most of the South American

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<sup>3</sup> Calero in an e-mail to the author, 7 September 2018

<sup>4</sup> Information given by Sira Pizà from the Sol Calero research team

continent under one legislative and spiritual regime ruled by the representative of the Spanish King in the 'New World'. The teachings of painting and writing were used to enforce the evangelization process inherent in colonization. I encountered many amazing pieces of this period in my recent trip to the country, and I began to pay close attention to the phenomenon of syncretism. In this case, religious syncretism is the imposition, juxtaposition, and fusion of Catholicism and pre-Columbian belief systems, which is reflected in painting and in the aesthetics surrounding popular spiritual practices. But the definition extends to everything: social structures, art, language, urbanism. We could even speak of biological syncretism: the introduction of new vegetable and animal species in a new territory results in a whole new ecosystem, including humans and their genetics. In both exhibitions, I look at the relationship established between one imported source used as a model, and the pre-existing cultural base.

2. In Lisbon you experimented for the first time with many different shades of brown. In your current installation 'El Patio', color and content are also related. What was the significance of the shades of brown and how did you select the current palette of colors?

In my work, I am always talking about the difference between projected images - like in the process of exoticization of places and identities - and the complex realities of inherited sets of problems. This dichotomy is what I wanted to introduce with the contrasted colorful and emblematic shapes against the undefined, seemingly dirty quality of a brown palette. The show in Lisbon also referred to the 'Casta Paintings' of the Cuzco School, which depicted racial classifications according to shades of skin color, parallel to the socio-economical positions of different communities in the 'New World'. In the context of this new show, color plays a role in the process of cultural translation. European painting is presented to the indigenous artist as a model of form and content, but the gaps need to be filled in: the artist then reproduces it with their own available color palette and according to their interpretation. This also happens with the introduction of indigenous symbolism, all together a product of juxtaposition that we call colonial painting.

3. I ended my introductory text by noting that your work complements the search for an alternative canon. Is that how you see it yourself, and is it one of the motivating forces behind your work?

Yes, absolutely. Contextually, I have always seen my practice as a vehicle to reclaim non-westernized ways of understanding art. I have done that by drawing attention to folklore, craftsmanship, self-construction and decoration as sources of aesthetic interest and knowledge.

4. Up to now the focus has mainly been on your current installation and your research of the influence of baroque art on Latin-American art. Can you broadly outline what preceded this and how you arrived at an examination of cultural clichés in the first place?

In the last years, I have looked at how the Latin American identity is imagined and represented. I have re-created colorful, welcoming and almost idyllic icons of this. All the questions raised below this “tropical” surface pointed at the expectations that we collectively create about others as homogenized entities. I continue to explore this, but my current work is moving away from the recognizable commonplaces - such as the dance studio and the hair salon - and into a more abstract approach, which observes architecture and painting as a historical process of forces and influences.