

SOL CALERO

*Isla*

Extra City, Antwerp

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by Carla Donauer

'ISLA' is Sol Calero's first institutional solo exhibition in Belgium. For Kunsthall Extra City, the artist developed a new, site-specific installation. This sculptural pavilion, an autonomous structure, has links to the eclectic architectural environment of the premises, a former industrial laundry. Evidence of the physical labour previously carried out on the site remains present in the space. 'ISLA' is a structure that can potentially be activated and 'used', with benches and chairs to sit on and a platform to climb on.

The installation combines previous aspects of Calero's site-specific spatial approach, her architectural interventions and her affinity with painting. But now, for the first time, the artist has realised a pavilion inside of an exhibition space. In earlier pavilion projects, Calero situated these architectures outside, focusing mainly on the community-creating aspect of her work: the pavilions had an inside area as a meeting point, confined by its walls. In this new project, Calero approached the subject differently: the pavilion is recognised as a 'building' with architectural allusions – such as its height, a balcony, doors, passages, floors and ceiling – but the basic shape draws a cross of two intertwining axes, dividing the space into four sections. This way, the form calls to mind the nautical orientation system of the compass, pointing into four directions, so that multifaceted layers and perspectives are created, offering ever-changing views on the overlapping sections.

Calero quotes archetypical forms like the arch, a fundamental architectural form that was used in cloisters and churches, developed as a result of a strategy to disperse the weight of big, dome-shaped roofs. Here, Calero imitates these architectural forms by creating simple echos without an implicate purpose.

Formally the structure creates a rough notion of the abandoned and is reminiscent of partially collapsed houses or unfinished constructions. Calero's abandoned space uses poor materials –mainly wood, ribbed plastic roofs, plastic chairs – and strategies of improvisation to create a feeling of shelter and home through simple gestures.

One could read the title 'ISLA' in multiple ways: it might evoke the image of tropical vacation destination, surrounded by the ocean, a friendly place to rest or precisely

the opposite: a place where one cannot escape, with the ocean as a boundary, the water as a deep barrier between oneself and the imaginary "other side". In the context of recent history an island also could be associated with migration and its various implications of escape and rescue. Metaphorically speaking, an island could stand for isolation and limited possibilities in terms of one's wishes, desires or resources.

The exhibition space is unheated, in contrast with Calero's warm and colourful palette; this juxtaposition lends subtext to the work's presentation of stereotypical Western ideas about the American continent. This way, the work functions as a template for the clichés of South American imagery that in turn reflects the exoticised Western narrative.

The aspect of heat is used as a material, which takes up its own space in another spatial dimension. In this way, heat (or its absence) gains the captivating and seductive quality of sculpture.

With 'ISLA', Calero further develops her ideas on the formal aspects of painting, on colour and architectural investigation. The tropical and colourful visual impact of the work contrasts with its surroundings and the opposite of colour temperatures between the outside and the inside. '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, spaces to rest, and nature. It is a space that symbolises wishes and creates a visual echo in the head of the viewer. Yet Calero offers an illusion, as these aspects of the tropical are present only in a symbolic reality. This twists the aspect of representation and presentation in an uncanny way: it is in the highlighted environment's artificiality that its seductive power lies.

The rough texture and composition of the work are reminiscent of the decay of a disused home, left abandoned for an unknown reason. It evokes the story described by Gabriel Garcia Marquez in his speech 'How I began to write' 1 of how a village was fled by its inhabitants following a mere premonition of evil. As the story goes, the inhabitants left their village due to the premonition of an old lady and finally set their homes on fire in order to protect themselves from what was said to come. That way their own actions turned into the misfortune itself. The superstition and the response with which it was met grew so powerful that the villagers' homes and community were destroyed. According to the story, within one day a well-functioning village turned into an empty, unused space, leaving nothing but a shell. The absurdity within questions through the power of fiction and unveils the parallelism of home and house and its fragile terms.

'ISLA' abstracts the connections between architecture, community and socio-cultural structures and in doing so calls their utopian and dystopian notions into question. How does architecture symbolise the state of a community?

The reference to ruin and its dark beauty allude to the use of artificial architecture in European Romanticism – seen in nineteenth-century English landscape gardening and as the subject of paintings–, which was used to create a sense of the sublime and the frailty and loneliness of man. Such edifices were built to depict different stages of decay, thus creating dramatic scenes and evoking higher emotional states. Calero creates a contemporary interpretation on architectural repetition and its meanings and misreadings in a globalised world. The conception of the beauty that there is to be found in decay has changed throughout history along with societal developments.

'ISLA' boldly 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. Through Calero's aesthetical choices, political expectations towards the artist – that they facilitate social structures – are thus returned to the institution and declared to be a matter of a Western institutional discourse.

This contemporary ruin does connect to its predecessors of the Romantic era, architecturally speaking, but its imagery connects it to the hut 2, a common structure for temporary dwelling. The aspect of abandonment also alludes to the 'Broken Window Theory' developed and described by Kelling and Willson in 1982<sup>3</sup> which was connected to socio-psychological experiments. In its essence, the study described a connection between existing decay and subsequent vandalism as a result of dissolving social ties, in turn resulting in spiralling destruction. This rather negative connotation of decay painted the repercussions of social change and criminality as being opposite to the aesthetic concept of Romanticism. This is an interpretation one could adapt to Calero's symbolised spaces, which mirror the viewer's expectations of society in stereotypical imagery.

'ISLA' calls into question the symptoms and parallelism of social dissolution and architectural decay. With her colourful yet positive imagery, Calero designates ruin as a symbol of fragility.

1 'I'm Not Here to Give a Speech', Gabriel García Márquez. Copyright © 2010 Gabriel García Márquez. Translation copyright ©2014 Edith Grossman. Reprinted with the permission of Vintage Books, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC

2 See also the concept of the Vitruvian "Hut" as described in 'Essai sur l'architecture', by Marc Antoine Laugier, 1755

3 George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson, 'The Atlantic Monthly', 1982