

LA PUERTA: NOTES ON THE FORMATION OF SYNCRETIC CANONS IN THE ART OF THE COLONIAL AMERICAS

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Sol Calero's *La puerta* is a gateway reproducing the form of an arch, one of the most fundamental architectural elements at the base of temples and domes, the repetitive dividing design of a monastery's cloister, or the key decorative feature of the Latin patio. A doorway always communicates two sides of a divided space, split by a wall. In Calero's project, one side is black and white; on the other, across the threshold, patterns, surfaces and floral shapes burst into colour. An exposed substratum of the wall reveals the layered complexity of the relationship between these two sides. Calero uses this binary structure in reference to the underlying duality inherent in processes of *translation* – from black-and-white to colour, from a model to a reproduction, from the original to the copy, from the self to the other, and from empire to colony.

Furthering her recent explorations towards abstraction with *La puerta*, Calero moves past earlier recreations of specific places of identity-making by creating larger structures that also refer to larger systemic issues. Throughout her practice, she has approached the aesthetics, craftwork, and architecture of Latin American countries as a dual-faceted subject. On the surface, her work appears as a celebration of un-canonised modes of art-making outside of the Western narrative. At the same time, she has observed the very same imagery as a cliché, formed in the eyes of the Western outsider, which homogenises and exoticises a tumultuous actuality into a series of pleasant, bright and *understandable* icons.



Artist and date unknown, *The presentation in the temple*, mural painting in the Celda del Padre Francisco de Salamanca (1660-1737), Convento de la Merced, Cuzco, Peru. Image source: Project for the Engraved Sources of Spanish Colonial Art (PESSCA), colonialart.org/artworks/50B, reproduced from Jorge A. Flores Ochoa, et al., *Pintura Mural en el Sur Andino*, Banco de Crédito del Perú, Lima, 1993, p.170f.

Paulus Pontius, *The presentation in the temple* 1638, engraving (after Peter Paul Rubens, Descent from the Cross 1612), 64.3 x 49.0 cm, collection of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, acquired 1816. Image source: Rijksmuseum online archive, www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/collectie/RP-P-OB-70.041.

Calero has also turned her gaze further back to the foundational moments that inform the diversity and mixture of influences that make up Latin American cultures and their self-definition. The clues of this still conflicted and agitated syncretism are vividly manifest in the art created during colonial times. With *La puerta*, Calero reflects on the way a new historical canon was created in the Americas, as religiously indoctrinated indigenous painters reimagined European paintings known only through black-and-white reproductions.

The conquest and establishment of the Viceroyalty of Perú – which extended from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries and comprised most of South America,¹ and New Spain, taking all of Central and a great part of North America² – meant that all these territories were under the rule of the King of Spain through his representatives in the *New World*. The monarchy had gained *Patronato Regio*, or a series of privileges and faculties bestowed by the Catholic Church, which allowed the King to act in place of the Pope in the Americas, thus consolidating the monarchy into one unit of political and moral authority in the quest for both the conversion and the possession of the *Indies*. Native populations were considered subjects of the King – with obligations and rights – through the acceptance of the new religion and its rule. The strategies of forceful imposition were military and enslaving in nature, and also led to long-lasting effects of this immersion and incorporation.

Christianity as a belief system was very permeable to syncretic processes of absorption: Jesus called for sinners to redeem, which implies a pre-existing justice system based on morals. The bishop of Chiapas and the missionaries in Perú used the metaphor of Saint Paul preaching to the Athenians to show that the God he was bringing to them was the same one they already venerated; shifting the Inca's cult of the sun towards the Christian God. This vision of a universal truth allowed for a synthesising cultures. Painting and writing were key to providing access to the scriptures and the understanding of biblical imagery, and to the solidification of this knowledge in order for it to be passed on. In monasteries and missionary organisations, indigenous and creole populations were involved in the production of large bodies of religious art that would decorate the proliferating buildings erected for the same purposes.

The adoption of Baroque painting in the Americas, both formally and as a vivid depiction of the subjects in religious teachings, coincided with the birth of the printing press. Engraved reproductions were a popular and accessible form of collecting, archiving and disseminating European art, but these prints were not colourful images. Latin American painters interpreted colour and brushstroke, in turn creating a whole new Baroque palette and style. In many instances, the colonial versions are direct copies of a European original, however in many others the engravings saw composition and motive adapted to the narrative of colonial events, mixing biblical episodes with regional battles or indigenous historical characters; pre-hispanic elements were even integrated into this contemporaneous art production. European mythology and art history thus became the reference points to revisit and explain an existing world from the colonial perspective. The method of including indigenous signs could have easily turned into a claim of a lost heritage for native communities, but keeping a careful balance allowed instead for a successful appropriation.

The re-writing of the religious history of the *New World* was framed as a retroactive narrative of a truth *misinterpreted* (by the natives but always there to be unveiled, discovered by the conquerors). Formally maintaining indigenous rituals, while simultaneously changing their meaning or ascribing Christian significance to pre-existing cultural symbols, resulted in a religious syncretism that is present in all artistic production of the time. Through the recognition of a cultural substratum, the presence of the new cultural network is presented as *continuity*: paintings of royal genealogies show, for example, Inca kings recognised as a legitimate monarchical and political establishment, to which the Spanish appear as heirs; and depictions of the marriages between Inca princesses and Spanish Jesuits both acknowledge the position of the indigenous monarchy and ensure the religion's bequest of power. The presence of traditional garments, icons and references to vernacular nature and culture³ are manifestations of this appearance of continuity.



Artist unknown, Cuadro de Castas 18th century, oil on canvas, 150 x 106 cm, collection of the Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepotzotlán. Image source: INAH Mediateca, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico, mediateca.inah.gob.mx/islandora_74/islandora/object/pintura%3A2123.

One of the most important bodies of work from this era came from the School of Cuzco, the most prolific and influential of the Andean Baroque painters, and in which the subject of colour is further sociologically and politically charged. As a paradigmatic precedent of exemplary and generative models – which both cultivate and illustrate a view of the world at once – the *Pinturas de Castas* or Caste Paintings present a descending hierarchy of racial combinations in apparent *costumbrist* scenes that illustrate and promote a racial taxonomy of socioeconomic equivalence. Starting with the whitest-skinned, pure Spanish-blooded on top, the strata degenerates down a chain of designations based on pigment-ranks (given names like *morisco*, *indio*, *torna atrás*, *lobo* or *coyote*). Here the act of naming creates a new reality based on the difference between terms that didn't exist before, where biological criteria is used as an imaginary structure. This taxonomical enterprise can be paired with the introduction of *exotic* fruits into paintings, which are presented and named in the same way as the subjects, as translated items.

Such processes of translation are rooted in the concept that the colonising

country or empire is an *original*, to which the colony is a *copy*. This occurs on a biological and environmental level, with the introduction of new diseases, animals and technologies, which change modes of production, agricultural systems, diets, and plants that alter the native landscape. Translation also happens by classifying and organising a society's hierarchies and power structures, while exporting its economies and altering racial and class definitions. Not only does the colony forcefully become a re-creation of the culture that is imposed upon it, but its subjects and its elements need to be translated into *understandable* terms; made equivalent with a familiar language and the paradigm that it encapsulates. In this way, Christianity equals civilisation and paganism equals savagery,⁴ in a fabricated measurement of a world that solidifies as reality over time. As a result, exoticism appears as the diluted form of translating Otherness, which survives and thrives in contemporary Western imagery of the non-Western world.

In Calero's *La puerta*, one single arch opens up a wall that stretches out with patterned and floral decorations, hand-painted and imitating precious materials like marble and gold, as they do in the Andean Baroque churches. *La puerta* is not only a reference to perhaps the longest standing evidence of colonialism in the architectural landscape of the Americas, but also relates to the contemporary movement of passage: travelling in the form of expectation and projection, and encountering a constructed world prepared for the necessities of global citizens. Manifesting the gaze of those who hold the privilege of free mobility, for whom there's always a dignified entryway, this ever-polarising balance appears as the foundation of planetary distribution today, but it is hidden under layers of appeasing perceptions of exotic places. In the game of appearances, tropicalia is now the disguise under which convulsion can travel back to the world stage.

- 1 Modern Perú, Bolivia, Chile, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, Colombia, Ecuador and Panamá, plus some regions of Brazil and Venezuela.
- 2 All of modern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, Tobago and Guadalupe, and the states of California, Nevada, Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, Oregon, Washington, Florida and parts of Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Kansas, Oklahoma and Louisiana.
- 3 Ramón Mujica Pinilla studies these artistic manifestations in *La imagen transgredida: estudios de iconografía peruana y sus políticas de representación simbólica*, Fondo Editorial del Congreso del Perú, Lima, 2016.
- 4 See Aimée Césaire, *Discurso sobre el colonialismo*, Akal, Madrid, 2006.