

INTERIORS

FJORD FIESTA

When festival programmers in the Norwegian port of Bergen commissioned the Venezuelan artist Sol Calero to transform a grey care-home cafeteria, the concept went way beyond this initial north/south cultural hybrid. Bursting into colour, the eatery would become a celebration of, and support for, the city's migrant population, serving everything from Syrian tabbouleh to Eritrean flatbreads

By Pablo Larios

Photography by Julie Hrnčířová and Jan Khur

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When the artist Sol Calero, who is known for her emphatically tropical, room-filling installations, was invited to devise an entire restaurant in the Norwegian city of Bergen, she didn't hesitate. 'I've always fantasised about opening a Venezuelan restaurant,' Calero admits. But by March 2021, she had changed tack to work with an existing café whose profile was, well, not what you'd call mouthwatering... Invited to participate in the 2022 edition of the arts triennial Bergen Assembly by the French artist Saâdane Afif, the pair were shown the cafeteria in question. It was in a state-run care home and hospice. Gazing at the grey linoleum floors and drop-ceiling tiles, Afif said: 'Are you sure?'

Calero and I are on the phone – two expats from lush, complicated Caribbean nations – speaking in Spanish-punctuated English about Berlin's sub-zero winters, which neither of us can get used to despite having lived there for years. Our respective home towns – hers, Caracas in Venezuela; and mine, San Pedro Sula in Honduras – share a dubious accolade: each has, in the recent past, jostled for the title of world's most dangerous city. Still, a part of us misses home.

Today's age of migration, spurred by violence, war, political instability and economic collapse, is felt everywhere, albeit by different people unevenly. This past January, Gallup estimated that nearly one in every five people in the world wanted to leave their country permanently. Adding to the influx of Ukrainians, Syrians, Kurds and East Africans, nowadays I meet other Hondurans in Berlin (previously, a rarity) or Venezuelans in Madrid. Among many other benefits, like bringing much-needed soul (and a workforce) to Europe, you can now also find crispy *arepas* and beaoozing *baleadas* in Madrid or Milan – and now Bergen.

Inside and outside trade places as you wander through the 'Cantina de la Touriste'. From within the space, cobalt-blue shutters open above the kitchen and the cafeteria's countertop – a nod to outdoor snack or fruit stands in warmer regions where you can perch for a coffee or a coconut. In chilly Norway, this gives an air of cheer as you select snacks, cakes or pastries made by a rotating cast of participants in a migrant training programme. During the Bergen Assembly triennial arts festival in 2022, guest chefs produced three-course menus at a reasonable NOK300 (about £24) – think ox cheek, monkfish and tofu – including 'arepas', the Venezuelan cornmeal pancakes

When immigrants miss home, they cook. That's one of the key intuitions behind Bergen's ingenious migrant work-training and qualification programme run by Ny Sjanse (New Chance) at Kafé Mat and Prat. Each day, the rotating, affordable lunchtime menu is prepared by one of the project's participants. This means, for you and me, that we can dip into *injera* (the sour fermented flatbread from Ethiopia and Eritrea), or zesty tabbouleh and home-rolled köfte; for someone else it means wages, health insurance, workplace training and, not least, a decent shot at learning Norwegian. Downstairs, in the café's kitchen, the appliances are tagged with their names in the home language, so that chefs can practise their *Norsk* on the job.

Kafé Mat and Prat (the Food and Chat Café) is located in the centre of Bergen, a grey, coffee-loving city that's a gateway to the fjords and hence tourism, fishing and also luxury yachts. Here on Teatergaten, you can just about make out the beaks of the enormous ships in the harbour, a ten-minute walk away. As mentioned, the café lies on the ground floor of a city-run care home and end-of-life facility. It's this mixed-use, pleasantly incongruous setting that inspired Calero to produce her *Cantina de la Touriste* (2022) in what is, she tells me, 'a café that doesn't look like it belongs there'.

The ceramics on the edge of the wooden booth dividers have an unusual provenance: a participatory art exhibition devised by Sol Calero in Copenhagen in 2020–2021. For that show, she invited the audience to try their hand sculpting and glazing on site, firing up ceramics in a specially purchased kiln with the knowledge that their resulting creations – baguettes, ashtrays, fish and a cartoonish hand among them – would end up in a café in Bergen

I noticed three things when I stepped in, one morning on a rainy Friday in February. First was Calero's magnificent tile installation on the back wall, which radiates into the space with a fizzy, almost pixelated fever of colour. Second was a lightly wafting institutional smell of early-day catering. What struck me most, though, was the warmth of the people working, cooking and gearing up for the lunchtime rush, smiling, talking and laughing; the hum of the kitchen fan.

Norway's current refugee population mostly consists of Syrians, Eritreans, Ethiopians and Turks (a demographic that may change with the war in Ukraine). When I meet Ingrid Haug Erstad, the director of the Bergen Assembly, I see she's a much-loved regular, speaking and joking chummily with the cooks and service workers. When I look down at the menu, she steers me to the lamb köfte, made by Sulaman, from Turkey, which will also feature in a forthcoming cookbook.

In realising *Cantina de la Touriste* and its near-total overhaul of the existing interiors, Calero and Erstad stress that it wouldn't have been possible without the enthusiasm of the existing organisation and staff. In summer 2022, while the café was on summer break, they worked speedily ('like in one of those home renovation shows', says Calero, laughing), hauling out the leather easy chairs and room dividers and bringing in tiles, ceramics, hand-painted walls, and benches and chairs fabricated by her studio in Berlin. They took only a week to incorporate, plus another for the tile installation. The plants? 'They're potted by a programme participant and her daughter.' The benches are unprimed wood, coloured in washes of blue and yellow; I can confirm that simple cushions provide just enough plush to keep one comfortable across hours of laptop use.

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The chipper secondary colours and funky, deconstructed shapes recall the Memphis Group, but Calero tells me that she was specifically drawn to Gio Ponti. Ponti, she says, was fascinated by Caracas, where he spent some of the mid-1950s realising two villas, the Blanca Arreaza Villa and the Villa Planchart (*WoI* June 2006). In an article in *Domus*, he called the latter 'an abstract sculpture on a massive scale'. The geometric tessellations in the café are a clue to Ponti's influence.

'How can spaces help people?' Calero asks. In the jet-setting commercial art world, this could be an empty fundraising slogan, and 'socially orientated' art projects are too often well intentioned but ineffectual. But having seen first hand the café in use by multiple communities, I can vouch for its success feeling undeniable.

As Erstad and I finish lunch, around midday, the café begins to fill up. There's a nurse with a badge, eating hurriedly while looking at her phone, and a man in a wheelchair met by his spouse for a visit. Erstad tells me that the café ties into an existing institution, Norway's Senior Cafés, where the elderly (anywhere) can sign up to be driven to an eatery to meet with other pensioners.

Each Tuesday, members from Bergen's Løperen chess club invite players from all levels for informal games at the cantina. The chess meet-ups that take place here feed into the café's purpose as an inter-cultural and inter-generational meeting point. No shared language is required to play

When Pablo Larios visited the permanent installation (shown empty here), he spotted a couple from the upstairs care home, construction workers, a nurse and a smart, MacBook-typing young woman

Then she tells me about immigrants' contributions to her society: Norway's envy-inducing sovereign wealth fund was the genius idea of Farouk al-Kasim, an Iraqi immigrant who worked as a geologist around the time oil was discovered here. It was his concept that the nation, instead of squandering its billions, invest its profits in its own public fund. It's thanks to al-Kasim that Norwegians now have a \$1.1 trillion pile of cash (\$250,000 per citizen) to cushion future generations, one that helps fund projects such as this.

There's a chessboard near the foyer. Once a week, Erstad tells me, the café hosts a public chess club, where anyone can come. As we leave, I think to order some homemade samosas for the plane back. As I gesture my order with Rasha, I'm not even sure what language we're speaking, but somehow, with a smile and a laugh, it just works.

Kafé Mat and Prat, 43 Teatergaten, 5010 Bergen (00 47 409 12 580). Sol Calero. Details: solcalero.com

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