

from: Studio International, Sol Calero: 'It's important that the aesthetics don't eat the concept',
by Anna McNay
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Beneath the colourful painted surfaces of Sol Calero's immersive installations, there are deeper, politically informed concepts for those who take the time to unpick the layers



Born in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1982, Sol Calero left Latin America to study in Europe and is based in Berlin, where, alongside her practice, she co-runs a project space, Kinderhook & Caracas. Trained as a painter, her work now tends to take the form of immersive installations with elements of social interaction, such as a hairdresser with salsa lessons, or a travel agency with real agents selling real plane tickets. Most recently, she held workshops at the music festival Womad World of Art, getting participants to create decorative elements for a tropical pavilion, which is now being reassembled on the harbour arm in Folkestone, ahead of the triennial.

Calero is the recipient of several international awards and this year has been nominated for the Preis der Nationalgalerie in association with Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin.

She spoke to Studio International about the political concepts beneath her colourful aesthetics and the influence of salsa on her practice.

*Anna McNay: The majority of your projects take the form of large-scale installations, turning the gallery space into another place – such as a hairdresser for *Bienvenidos a Nuevo Estilo* at Laura Bartlett Gallery, London, in 2014, where you also hosted salsa lessons, or a currency exchange station for Art Basel 2014 – all with a Latin American vibe. You trained, however, as a painter. How did you find your way into producing work of this immersive nature?*

Sol Calero: It was a very organic process. Whenever I make an installation, I am also organising the space or composing as if I were making a painting. I was mostly doing abstract paintings before I started this body of work. The language I developed as an abstract painter became stuck. But I was also interested in conceptual art, so, in a way, the work I'm making now combines both things. But, in a formal sense, I nearly always take a painterly approach. I really like painting as a medium because, for me, it's the most abstract process I can do. What happens in your brain when you're painting is pretty unique. I'm fascinated by how your brain can think 10 or 100 colours ahead, as you're mixing them on the palette. In a way, I try to translate that process into space. But I often have a conceptual or a research background for these projects, so it's combining both things at the same time.



Sol Calero. Casa Anacaona at WOMAD music festival, 2017. Photograph: Jamie Woodley.

AMc: When you are painting, or painting for one of your installations, have you worked out what colours are going to go where, or does it develop as you're producing the work?

SC: I have a selected palette. I'm getting better at planning ahead, which is hard. I work with a 3D model on my computer. Then I have an idea of how it will look because sometimes you have two weeks to install, which is very tight for a large installation, so it's easier that way. But I always change things on site, too, because, as with painting, sometimes you plan something but then it doesn't work out how you expect. I come with an idea and a palette, for sure, but then I just mix them in the space.

AMc: What kind of paint do you work with?

SC: For the walls, it's acrylic. I used to use oil, but, for the way I paint, which is pretty fast, it's much easier and better to use acrylic because it dries as it goes.

AMc: Moritz Scheper in Frieze (24 May 2017) described your work as a "three-dimensional, walk-in painting". Do you think that's an apt description?

SC: Yes, because it was an article about *Interiores*, a show I did specifically with that idea. It's not always meant to be like that, although you could think of it in that way. But *Interiores*, the show I did in Dortmund, was a more formal show, not really with a social space, just to develop a few more steps in my formal language. Last year, I did a painting show at Laura Bartlett Gallery just to focus on the paintings. This time I wanted to create more of a sculptural show, bringing the paintings into a 3D dimension. So, yes, it was supposed to feel like that.

The composition was one point of view: if you stood in front of a work you saw it as a flat painting, but then, of course, when you walked around, you could see all these wood panels that were freestanding, so you got the feeling of a stage set, too. It was great fun to do. It was an experiment for me. I was very happy with it in the end. Actually, in Casa Anacaona, you can see the cut-outs, all the decorative elements, and the furniture have come from ideas from Interiores. I used the same techniques and ideas and some of the creative elements, too.



Sol Calero. Casa Anacaona at WOMAD music festival, 2017. Photograph: Jamie Woodley.

AMc: Do you often find that one piece of work or installation leads into the next?

SC: Yes, for this body of work, one theme runs throughout. Paintings sometimes become walls in other shows. Those walls or architectural elements then become elements for another painting. Some sculptures have references from the paintings, and the furniture takes its textile patterns and motifs from the paintings. It's all connected, but, like I say, it's very organic. Some things happen very naturally, and then I'm like: "Oh, I didn't realise, but I'm just using this shape here which I used three shows previously."

AMc: You mentioned cut-outs. Is it wrong to see influences of, for example, Matisse in your work?

SC: No, it's not wrong, although it's not intentional. I think it's because he's the most popular artist that we know of who used the technique, and also the colours are similar. But I make reference in my work to Latin American artists that people here might not know. So, in that sense, if you see Matisse, that's great, but someone else might see someone else, and that's not wrong either. Matisse is a great painter. When I was studying, I paid a lot of attention to him. But it's not like I'm using his cut-out books for inspiration when I'm working now.

AMc: You've spoken before about how few Latin American – and especially Venezuelan – artists are represented in the art world. Do you think this is improving?

SC: Yes, it is improving, especially as there are a few curators and thinkers out there now doing a good job. It's slow, but it's improving. I guess also, the more I research, the more I find out. There are far more Latin American artists than I thought. When I studied in Europe, I was never given these references. Any I had came out of my own curiosity.

But it's also like when you're making art, if you suddenly start painting balls, or some specific object, then you suddenly start to discover just how many artists are painting the same thing that you're painting.



Sol Calero. Casa Anacaona at WOMAD music festival, 2017. Photograph: Jamie Woodley.

AMc: Are you specifically trying to fit into a Latin American genre?

SC: No, really I don't think there's any genre that I could fit into. I moved here when I was 17, so I like to say that my position is more that of an immigrant who has lost her identity and is looking for it. You move to a new place, you adapt to a new country and a new language, but you still always feel like you're not quite there, no matter how much you do. For me, I feel like a floating element between Europe and Latin America. When I go to Latin America, and I talk to Latin American artists, we don't know each other and we're probably not talking about the same things. And when I'm here, it's the same. I was born in Venezuela and I am Latin American, of course, but my position is like the position of those who had to leave Latin America, which is quite tricky, I have to say. I'm going to Mexico City for four months in the autumn to do a residency and I'll be interested to see how I see my work from that perspective. I'm really excited. I'm going with my partner Chris artist Christopher Kline , and we're doing the residency together with our project space. We curate shows in our project space here in Berlin, so we're going to do that in Mexico, too, but it will also give us both some time to research.

AMc: Do you see your non-profit project space, Kinderhook & Caracas, as a part of your practice, or does it extend beyond that?

SC: It's a really important part of my practice – almost 50 , in a way – because the space is connected to my apartment in Kreuzberg, so it's really part of my life, more than my practice. We opened six years ago and what we have learned running the space is so different from what you can learn in the institutional, gallery-led art world. I really appreciate it. This element of my practice keeps my feet on the ground because we have to become the people that support the artist in developing an idea. We learn a lot from that, and it becomes a very collaborative process, which is something that we both like in our practices. When you run your own project space, you do it how you really believe things should be done. I feel like it's a way of supporting other artists and, for me, that's important.

AMc: How do you decide who is going to work in your space?

SC: It changes. Right at the moment, we have a two-year programme with a collective called Conglomerate. Five artists are running an online TV channel. When we started, we were just inviting artists we really liked – mostly young artists who hadn't yet had a show in Berlin. Now they don't need to show in our project space any more. Probably next year we'll start another new programme. We'll try to work with even younger artists, those coming out of school, perhaps. We're still young at 35, but we feel the difference now there's a bigger age gap, and the energy and the information is very different. It's very exciting to work with very young artists – they are like sponges. They want to do so much, and they're not so worried about the money or anything, they just want to create things. We're in a period of also trying to put out shows that are not just about art. In the past, we've had shows about music, too, or different topics. We don't know yet quite what we want to do, but that's the idea.



Sol Calero. Casa Anacaona at WOMAD music festival, 2017. Photograph: Jamie Woodley.

AMc: What was it that took you to Berlin in the first place? You initially studied in Tenerife and then in Madrid?

SC: I also studied in Manchester for a semester, and then in Barcelona. I was living on Spanish socialism, which means getting any grants you can get, because I just didn't have the money to pay any rent or stuff like that. So, when I finished my master's, I applied for an internship grant in Berlin, to come and work here for three months for an artist. Then I stayed, because, at that time in Spain, the idea of opening a space, or even just being an artist, was a dream. We were all thinking more of becoming designers or doing something that would earn some money. But when I arrived in Berlin, I realised that you can actually be an artist – and that was amazing.

AMc: Obviously the situation is somewhat complicated at the moment, but do you have any desire to return to Venezuela?

SC: I would love to live in Venezuela if it wasn't as problematic as it is. But I'm also really into living in different places, so we'll probably keep a base in Berlin, no matter what, because it's really great to live here, but we're always thinking of living somewhere else for six months. Maybe in the Canary Islands, which are a very similar culture to Venezuela, so I always love to go there.

My father is from there, so that's why I have the connection also. Let's see – maybe we'll go after Mexico! I miss being in a Latin culture after eight years in Germany. It's a very different culture – and the weather especially! I really like many things about living in such an organised culture; it's very nice, but the winter is like eight months without seeing the sun. It has its negative things, too. I'm looking at the sun out of my window right now and every day when the sun is out in the summer, you're terrified because the winter is coming. It's so depressing.

AMc: You currently have an exhibition in the Kunstpalais in Erlangen, Bavaria, called Agencia Viajes Paraíso. The immersive installation, with a mock travel agency containing mini-airplanes, hammocks and clocks with different time zones, takes visitors through the various stages and implications of travelling for leisure.

SC: Yes, in this logic of recreating social spaces for the subjects I work with, I thought a travel agency would be a good idea, because if there is one place that is almost responsible for exoticising places, it is the travel agency. It's also like this space that doesn't really exist any more: people don't go to travel agencies now; they book everything online. But this whole idea of selling a package to paradise – or to a very exotic place – really interested me. How do you present that? How do you design a magazine to present it to people? These are the things that affect our perception, too – the way we promote and portray, in this case the Caribbean, but it could be Asia, it could be anywhere else, even the US.

It is quite a big exhibition: it has five rooms. The idea is that when you enter the show, it is almost like travelling. You come in and there's a feeling of a little town with my house paintings hanging on the wall. Then you go into a waiting room in the office, and here I'm presenting some work in collaboration with other artists, who are dealing with the same subjects as me. Then you go on to the office itself, where you can buy tickets. We invited a travel agency from town to be part of the project, so it has some employees there each week with their computers and they're selling real tickets. Apparently, in the small towns in Germany, people still like going to travel agencies. They feel safer when they can talk to someone and change their tickets if necessary. There are two other rooms: one room contains a sculpture that looks like a travel magazine. The other room is supposed to be the last room where your journey finishes and you can relax. It is a sort of tropical terrace with paintings and plants and you can read or use the space for whatever you want.

AMc: How do visitors usually respond to your work? Do they spend a long time there? Do they interact in the way that you hope they will?

SC: This is something that is always surprising. There are those who walk in and they really like the colours and they just think it's really fun and beautiful. Then there are those who spend a little bit more time and perceive that there are other layers to the work beyond the fun and colourful aesthetics. Those are the layers that I always provide for people who pay more attention. For example, in the Casa de Cambio – the currency exchange office – you're sitting there and you're wondering what this colourful place with fruit paintings is, and stuff like that. But it's not until you see the videos by other Venezuelan artists I invited, or read the press release, that you realise what the work is about. The other artists' projects are about the situation in Venezuela, related to hyperinflation. My work is often research-driven and based on a political situation. There is always something else behind the beautiful place. But I'm happy to create spaces that feel welcoming to people. I don't think that to bring political issues or more complicated concepts to an artwork it necessarily has to be really harsh or direct to get to the audience. Going to, in my case Venezuela, and taking photos of what's happening now and putting them in my installation would be too much of an obstacle for the first-time viewer, it would be too in-your-face. If you come in and you just enjoy the colours and the formal build of the work, that's totally fine.

But if you actually get the point that I'm making and you can read the things under that colourful skin, that's also great. I'm into creating an open space for reflection and everyone can have their own ideas and responses.

AMc: Are there any political issues that you're especially concerned with in your work?

SC: I like to see what I'm doing as a sort of thesis. Everything I read somehow becomes a chapter. I research a little bit and these projects come out of the research. Sometimes it's about hyperinflation and other times it's about how salsa music reflects an identity. I'm still in the hypothesis, in a way. I don't think I have reached a conclusion yet.

AMc: To come to your other current project, Casa Anacaona: what was the research that led you to that and is there a specific idea behind it?

SC: No, this project was not so deeply tied to any concept in particular. I was invited to do something in two very different places: Womad is a music festival that is not set within any particular art context, while the Folkestone Triennial is totally within the art context. I wanted to put into practice more of the social aspect of my installations, because I do these shows to have some sort of social interaction. Some of them are more successful than others because it always depends on the space or the organisation as to whether you have any social activity. For Casa Anacaona, I thought it would be interesting to do some sort of exchange between the venues. My idea was to bring the art to the festival and the music to the triennial. I wanted to establish a collaboration with people in Folkestone that would travel with me to Womad, to continue this work at Womad, and then to go back to the final position of the installation in Folkestone for three months – and it worked out very well, I have to say. Things obviously changed in ways I didn't expect, because we were working with so many people. I worked with a group of young creatives – aged between 23 and 25 – in Folkestone. The town has the classic problem of all small towns everywhere, in the UK or any other country, where young people are leaving to go to the city. But these guys are still there, and they're willing to live in Folkestone, they're figuring out what they want to do. Some of them study art, and a couple of them were young carpenters, but some of them didn't even know how to use a saw. We all worked together for a month in Folkestone to build the house. I designed the whole project before going there, of course. Then we had some professional carpenters in to build more of the heavy parts of the structure because it obviously had to be safe. We built the furniture and the decorative elements of the structure. Then the team travelled to Womad and we built it again there. During the festival, we held painting workshops. We had saved all the leftover wood from the construction and we cut it into different shapes. I tried to do some marine-like sea motifs, because the installation in Folkestone is going to be next to the sea, but they are so abstract that they don't look like anything, really! The people at the festival made small paintings using the cut-outs, and I screwed them to the structure. They helped us finish decorating the pavilion.

Now it's back in Folkestone where we're still programming a series of events or activities as part of the triennial. One of the main things, which we know for sure is going to happen, are salsa classes in the pavilion. We're trying to gather together groups of people that may want to use the pavilion. It's free and you can use it however you want. So maybe we'll end up having yoga classes or holding a food market even – I don't know yet.

AMc: How big is the pavilion?

SC: It is 100 metres square, so it's quite big. It's interesting because when you see it in Folkestone, it looks huge, but when we saw it at Womad, it was next to these really tall trees and it looked small.

Actually, my apartment is that size and so I couldn't believe we were holding workshops with 30 people painting at the same time in the space. And there will definitely be space for dancing, too.

AMc: Will people be able to go along just to see the pavilion, or would they have to be taking part in one of the events?

SC: No, the pavilion is open to the public. That's a big part of the work. I built this pavilion for people to go and hang out in at any time. It's quite nice because it's right in front of the sea in a new part of the town on the harbour arm. They're currently building a boardwalk across the beach, which will give access to the pavilion. We had a lot of issues when I was designing it because it gets so windy there. The engineers kept saying: "We can't do this because of the wind." It was very annoying, but it really can be quite windy. It will all be fine though; people there are used to the wind!

AMc: Does the title of the pavilion, Casa Anacaona, carry a meaning?

SC: Not particularly connected to the project. I just sometimes title things – paintings, works or even installations – with titles of salsa songs. Anacaona is the title of a salsa song by Panamanian singer Rubén Blades. It's about an indigenous princess from the 15th century who was immortalised as a symbol of rebellion against the Spanish conquerors because she refused to marry a conquistador and was killed. But I really just took the name because I like the song and the idea behind the song. In Latin America, people name things to personalise them in a way. They put the name of a person to their house, like Casa Luisa, for example. They don't have numbers; they have names.

AMc: How integral is music to your work overall?

SC: I often think that music is so powerful that it does something that art can't do – for example, the power you feel when you're at a concert and you have a 1,000 people in front of a band. I want to make art as music that can give you some sort of feeling, that sort of feeling. In a more general sense, when it comes to salsa, which is the reference I use most in my work, it's because I was really interested and amazed when I found out through my research that salsa was actually created in the United States, in New York. I thought it was interesting how a type of music that represents the identity of a place, of a whole continent, or half of a continent, was not made in the place of origin. Not only that, but I really like salsa from the 70s, especially Blades. He was doing something very special in that moment in time; he was bringing political issues into the lyrics of his salsa music. I was listening to this song one day in my studio, and it's a song that I've known since I was a little kid, and you just know the lyrics and you just dance. It wasn't until I was an adult that I realised: "Oh, my God, this song is really political." It's talking about a prostitute who was killed by a homeless guy. There was a whole political issue within the lyrics that I'd never picked up on. I thought it was so amazing that Blades could do this; that you can be dancing to salsa – music that has such a party feeling – and be talking about so many serious things. It became a big reference for me because that's how I feel my work somehow functions as well. You get to these very colourful places and you're in the mood of the rhythm of the song but, if you read the lyrics, it's talking about something else. So that's the connection: I use that as a reference, as a working method, in a way. For me, it's important that the aesthetics don't eat the concept. There is always this thin line in my work, which somehow I have been lucky to maintain. All the time I have these ideas for building these places and creating this confrontation of aesthetics and concept. It's always a pleasure when people actually see it, and they're like: "OK, I get it." It's not just colourful stuff; there's a big statement too.