

LAURA BARTLETT GALLERY

from: *An Interview with Sol Calero*, Adam Carr, June 2014

A lot of your work seems to play into the hands of, and mine the borders between preconception and expectation, and specifically issues of identity. Could you speak more about this element in your practice?

There are all kinds of different expectations that one can have about what an artist should be doing or making. If you studied in a certain school, you are supposed to belong to a certain kind of methodology; if you had a certain professor, your work is going to enter into another certain categorization. The same goes for if you are from one place or another. This is something I've been thinking about lately. The more I learn about the art world, the more I notice how few Latin American (and especially Venezuelan) artists are represented in it...I started thinking about the reasons for this, and what exactly is 'Latin American Art' and how is it seen? How are we seen as Latin American artists? And how do we see ourselves?

To start understanding these questions (as a European-educated artist) one has to start looking backwards to try and figure out why Latin American artists haven't had greater exposure. And in doing that I started questioning where my own knowledge of art was coming from, or why it had made sense when I was 17 to decide to go to Europe to study art.

When you grow up in a country like Venezuela (or another '3rd world' country) everything seems to be happening out there... somewhere in the world, namely in the USA or Europe. You were practically born to wait for a better opportunity. And someday that time arrives and you are out there, somewhere in Europe finally living your 'dream'. But after all of this process of dreaming, what you actually become is an immigrant, which is always going to be reflected in anything you do or try to be. And this is how I started seeing myself as an artist too once I realized that, after all these years of following that 'dream', I was, and I still am, that immigrant that is trying to fit in someone else's society.

For a Latin American artist this becomes a big subject to think about because not only were you told in your daily life that things were better out there, but as far as art, that was something you had to study in Europe... where 'Art' supposedly comes from. All the great masters, the renaissance, modern art, all those 'isms'... You must go 'there'... And we've all been going 'there' for many generations of artists and writers

But the more I saw, the more I started wondering what Latin American Art would have been if we hadn't had such a big European influence, if we weren't so focused on what was out there and more thinking what could we do "here". Because there were many references already... Pre-Columbian art inspired many European artists to create new movements... the light of the Caribbean inspired Post-Impressionism... and of course, there were many Latino artists already dealing with this subject during modernism such as Joaquín Torres-García, or others within major movements like Tropicalia in Brazil, Mexican muralism, etc. These people started asking those questions many years ago, yet for Europeans the developments in Latin American Art are still seen as peripheral or tangential to the 'real' movements going on at the time. So this is why I started to become more and more interested in using it as a reference in my work... To propagate Latin American art history, and force my audience to actually do their homework alongside me on the people and movements who might be overlooked or under-appreciated.

Your recent show at Laura Bartlett Gallery – 10 Northington Street compounded most of these ideas that you've spoken about so astutely. What initially struck me when visiting the exhibition was the way in which you transposed the environment and function of the gallery into something 'foreign', where formal and aesthetic concerns connected with themes of the political and social. It became home to a hairdressing salon and salsa classroom among other things, and your paintings, walls drawings and sculptures played a part in this environment while simultaneously engaging in their own single roles. Could you speak about this exhibition further? Was it a reaction to the context and placement of the gallery?

Galleries are white, clean spaces because the original idea was to create a neutral environment where anything can be put into it and hold its own, a blank canvas where supposedly anything can happen. What usually happens, though, is quite predictable, works are tastefully installed according to the aesthetic vernacular of the era, and it looks like a gallery with artworks in it. My show at Laura Bartlett wasn't a rebellion against this, I just took the opportunity to use the space for its intended purpose: to make something happen... to take control of it. Instead of using the codes of the gallery, I focused on the codes of a Latin hair salon, because these are really flexible places with a lot of social dynamic, where truly anything can happen. In Venezuelan salons you of course have people doing nails, cutting and braiding hair, but you also have people exchanging goods that you can't find in the market. You can buy or sell dollars, clothing, food – you can find connections, jobs, and loopholes. On top of this micro-commerce you also have the social element, a place where women seem to be comfortable not only dealing with their self-esteem and identity but also opening themselves up to share their thoughts and experiences with each other in an almost therapeutic way.

On the one hand there is the superficiality of being so occupied with appearances, and on the other you have this place of deep bonding, understanding and empowerment amidst a society in so much chaos. This is a really great model for a flexible space, and a good metaphor for the flexibility that's inherent in Latin culture and people, this ability to adapt, to connect, to live in the present.

In Spanish, hair salons are often named with the word 'estetica' (for example "Estética María"), which just means 'aesthetic'. And so I was interested, not only in the social aspect of these places, but also that they're directly working and dealing with elements of "aesthetics" both in the way people take care of themselves, and in the way they want to be seen and presented in society. Since an art gallery is also a commercial space dealing largely in aesthetics, this simple transposition into a social space allowed me to introduce some questions regarding how I deal with my own identity as an artist. How do I want to be seen? How will I let myself be seen? I called the show 'Bienvenidos a Nuevo Estilo' (Welcome to New Style) as a funny, inclusive gesture where "New Style" can be seen simply as the name of this particular hair salon, or as a more general proclamation.

The interesting thing about the show in London was that it actually worked. I had taken a trip to London a few months before the exhibition to go out and meet people at Latin hair salons in South London and was lucky enough to meet Gloria, an Ecuadorian stylist. Through word of mouth at her salon I heard about some women who braid hair across the street. They were actually from Senegal, not Latin America, but this project obviously wasn't about being strict on people's origins! They were really great and I invited them to be a part of it. At the opening they were braiding hair for people, and Gloria and her niece were doing nails downstairs.

I made the nail table and tanning booth foldable so that at some point they could be put away to make space for salsa classes. We had an amazing dancer named Garcia to lead us, who was actually a replacement for the original teacher I had lined up who cancelled at the last minute. Luckily, he was incredible and the whole atmosphere consumed everyone, even the people from the gallery staff were salsa dancing with braids in their hair, drunk – there were no more rules once the music started. Paintings were covered with jackets, sculptures were pushed away, and we all forgot that we were at a gallery, letting ourselves enjoy what we would normally stereotype or categorize or intellectualize. It just felt great, the energy that everyone brought to it. I honestly didn't even expect it to be so infectious, to function as perfectly as it did.

For me, it captured this paradox I was trying to get across, this dark horrible military history, the manipulative ways Latin America was exoticised by Hollywood and which Latinos have internalized over time... the superficiality and concern with appearances, getting plastic surgery while people right around you don't even have basic necessities, but at the same time embracing this integral flexibility to also give in and just enjoy it all. In the end we all have to function in reality, in the present, not in theories, and I'm just utilizing the way I've learned all of my life to deal with reality... you struggle, you have your melancholy and problems, you have this crumbling world around you, but in the end you can somehow enjoy life. Maybe this is a part of being Latino.

This multifaceted approach to your practice is also at play elsewhere – you run a project space with your husband who is also an artist. It's interesting to think about the project space in relation to what you have said about building a community, or communities...

Yes, you are right, Kinderhook & Caracas is a very important part of our practices. My husband, Christopher Kline, and I share many of these ideas about the importance of building communities alongside the commercial art world, and three years ago we decided to start this space with the idea that it would become an extension of our vision about art.

We also wanted to develop projects outside of our practice. At our space we have to stop being artists that just think about their own projects, to become curators, organizers, art handlers, promoters. We wanted it to be a strictly non-commercial space, allowing us to develop a very direct relationship with the artists. Not having a commercial interest behind it lets artists work in a very different way, which makes our space function as an open field where artists don't feel the same kind of pressures, giving them freedom to present what they consider the best representation of their vision.

But our space not only helps artists to develop new projects, it also helps us to learn how to be more flexible about realizing ideas and understanding art in different ways. By becoming more understanding about other people's visions and more open about collaborations and engagement with these visions, the space becomes a big rotating project where everyone ends up learning from each other, exchanging ideas without room for hierarchies.

It is interesting to see how it is possible to work under these circumstances, with little to no budget, yet with highly talented people who are equally willing to realize something focused and serious. It's somehow the tool that keeps us grounded and helps us remember how important it is to be part of a community, to bring other people with you on your path, or to join them on theirs. And not just with other artists, but also with all kinds of people. As Kinderhook & Caracas develops and gains more resources we hope to present other types of projects, non-art practices, anthropological or social projects... ideas which are bigger than just a space. For now we're focusing on how to best use the resources we have at the moment and redistribute them.

