

ARTWORLD INSIGHTS

SOL CALERO: POLITICAL FRUIT

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Sol Calero is a Venezuelan artist who currently lives and works in Berlin. She investigates themes of cultural representation and national identity throughout her work, motifs that have led to her inclusion in *B O R D E R S*. This insight will briefly investigate the trading history of the region where she grew up, the way in which the dichotomy between North and South America permeates her work, and the influence of the polarizing performer, Carmen Miranda.

The relationship between Latin America and its northerly neighbour has varied dramatically. At best they have been, in the words of President Roosevelt, 'good neighbours' — at worst they have been sparring partners. Somewhat strangely, a common thread linking examples of the latter has been fruit. Between 1898 and 1934, the series of American forays into the Caribbean, Central and Northern South America / designed to protect the commercial interests of American companies such as United Fruit - were collectively known as the 'Banana Wars'. Their conclusion marked the initiation of Roosevelt's 'Good Neighbour policy'. First mentioned by the President in his 1933 inaugural address, where he coined the phrase 'the only thing we have to fear is fear itself', the good neighbour was one who 'respects his obligations and respects the sanctity of his agreements in and with a world of neighbors'. Roosevelt, in short, attempted to assure his Latin American contemporaries that as long as there existed mutual respect and commercial reciprocity, Latin America would be left alone by the US.

Carmen Miranda, a Brazilian entertainer (real name Maria do Carmo Miranda da Cunha), became part of Roosevelt's policy. Roosevelt believed that Miranda's fame, both in Latin and Northern America, could be applied to cement positive relations between the two. Miranda was to become the epitome of the good neighbour, acting in productions designed to showcase the pizzazz of Latin America to an American audience, while demonstrating to her compatriots how one of their own could make it amidst the bright lights of Broadway. She came complete with a hat made of fruit, the quintessential depiction of abundance, colour and flavour that benefitted both geographical neighbours, as producers and buyers respectively. Miranda firmly believed in her role in promoting such economic links; she famously sang in one of her numbers, 'Bananas is my business'. It is interesting, and important, to note that the original inspiration for Miranda's fruit hat was the Bahia people, who would sell the fruit in order to try and earn a living. Often the Bahia people were destitute and living in poverty, so the adapted message of abundance and colour obfuscated the true situation.

The Latin American reaction to Miranda's shows was far more hostile than she, and her American colleagues, expected. Many Latin Americans railed against her depiction as the 'dumb latin bambino', which for many reached its apex in her interview with the *New York World Telegram* where she discussed her limited use of English: 'I say money, money, money. I say twenty words in English. I say money, money, money and I say hot dog!'. Those who saw past her 'dumb' presentation argued that she had surrendered her Latin American identity and become Americanised. Miranda herself responded to the latter criticisms by recording the Portuguese language song 'Disseram que Voltei Americanizada' (or 'They say I've come back Americanized'). Overall, her critics argued that her presentation in the US was simply a crass homogenisation of a culturally diverse continent. There was more to Latin America than generic samba and bountiful, flavoursome fruit.

However, at the end of the Cold War — a particularly fraught period in pan-American relations given the spectre of communist involvement in the region — recognition of Latin America's huge diversity was arguably not something Americans did particularly well. Indeed, the approach of the Washington Consensus was Americanisation-max; Western values of free market capitalism and democracy were imposed over many different countries and cultures, which has been criticised by many individuals including Joseph Stiglitz and Naomi Klein. Only by conceptualising Latin America as a single entity and ignoring its diversity, the argument goes, could such homogenising methods be undertaken.

It is this background that Sol Calero, as a Venezuelan, utilises in her practice. She has frequently cited Miranda as a source of inspiration, with her depictions of fruit illustrating one such example. Calero investigates the way in which everyday items can stand for something else. As Adam Carr, the curator of ARTUNER's *B O R D E R S* has commented, Calero 'plays with notions of representation, identity and marginalisation, informed by her South American Background and her own migration'. Each of the three works in *B O R D E R S* play on the depiction of fruit as a metaphor for Latin American life. While each share similar themes and subjects, they are all markedly different, from black contours to colour outlines to full-blown colourful, maybe even garish, depictions of fruit. Calero seems to be suggesting that such a subject can have different interpretations and be read in different ways; these issues surrounding representation are themes that thread her oeuvre. As Anna Frost, the curator for 'Modern Dowry', Calero's joint project with Christopher Kline, wrote, 'Puzzling together their own dowry Calero and Kline inject seemingly inanimate objects with character and tenderness to showcase close aesthetic and cultural relationships between the artifacts emphasizing distant narratives that linger through time'. Calero then brings the history of cultural homogenisation back up to date by forcing us to question the easy assumptions we make with everyday objects, and how these assumptions are constructed for us.