

TRANSCRIPT

Hear, Now
Episode 9

Desde el Salón
(From the
Living Room)

A Podcast from Whitechapel Gallery

JS: Hello, and welcome to Hear, Now, a Whitechapel Gallery podcast that delves into the stories behind the exhibitions on view at the gallery here in the heart of East London.

Each episode invites a curator to be in conversation with artists, collaborators, and other thinkers, about the works and themes explored in the displays, giving you special access to the ideas that shape the artworks. My name is Jane Scarth, Curator of Public Programmes, introducing you to today's episode featuring Whitechapel Gallery curator, Laura Smith, in conversation with Whitney Hintz, curator of the Hiscox Collection, about a new display of work selected by the artist, Sol Calero. They consider Calero's immersive installation, comprising a brightly coloured, densely hung environment, celebrating the natural world, featuring artist including Pio Abad, John Baldessari, Yto Barrada, Annie Leibovitz, Pablo Picasso and more.

The exhibition is free to view in Gallery 7, and is on display from 19th May until 15th August 2021.

LS: Hello, everyone, I am Laura Smith, and I'm a curator here at Whitechapel Gallery, and I was really excited to curate, along with Whitney Hintz, the selection of works from the Hiscox Collection, for two exhibitions here at Whitechapel.

As Whitechapel doesn't have its own collection, each year we invite different collections, usually those that are not easily viewable in the UK, to be kind of a

collection in residence, and we'll curate two or three displays from that collection, over the course of a year.

This year, the collection we are delighted to be hosting belongs to the Hiscox Insurance Group, which has a very interesting story. It was begun in 1970 by Robert Hiscox, who wanted to introduce art to his offices, as a way of offering his employees something to stimulate, excite, interest, or distract them, and the collection has grown since then. It now, 50 years on, consists of almost 1,000 works of art, by international contemporary artists, and with no work ever in storage, it's a very hard-working collection. It appears in offices around the world, above photocopiers or on meeting room walls, enlivening the working environment of Hiscox employees at all levels of the company.

So, for the two displays at Whitechapel, we were thrilled to bring these works, that are never seen outside of the Hiscox offices, to public view. And we thought it would be great to invite two artists who have work in the collection, to curate the two displays. The first of these artists was the British painter Gary Hume, whose exhibition ran towards the end of last year, and whose print series, *The Sister Troupe*, is in the collection, and the second artist whose exhibition is opening soon, is the Venezuelan born, Berlin based installation artist and painter, Sol Calero, whose painting, *Solo Pintura*, is in the collection.

For her exhibition, Calero has created a unique environment, one that celebrates both the natural and the domestic realms as it explores ideas around collecting, and the objects that we choose to surround ourselves with. Calero's own work takes the form of large scale, brightly coloured installations that investigate themes of representation, identity and migration, informed by her own perspective as a migrant. She employs a number of visual stereotypes related to the popular imagery of Latin America, such as the colourful patterns and tropical motifs that the painting and murals brim with.

In her exhibition at Whitechapel, Calero has selected from the Hiscox collection luscious images of trees, flowers and seed heads, vast ocean and mountainscapes, verdantly coloured maps, and depictions of contested lands. She presents these alongside paintings of bright brick walls, open windows, sculpted chairs, tufted rugs and ceramic jugs and vases. Her display examines the differences between our relationship with nature and the home, and the structures that we build to live inside.

Envisioning her exhibition as a total installation, Calero has created the architecture of a house within the gallery. In this new space, she creates the feeling that we are in someone unknown's private collection, exploring their highly personal environment. Calero has arranged her selection of works into three areas, which expand on this theme. The areas are, architecture, landscape and interior, and they're signalled by three differently coloured walls.

The yellow walls of the installation represent the outer walls of the house, or its façade. They contain works of art with architectural references that welcome us into the space. Christo and Jean-Claude's *Wrapped Reichstag* is just waiting to be revealed, while the bold geometric structures in Sarah Morris' large abstract painting, and the intimate origami forms of Abigail Reynold's collages both seem to unfold the notion of architecture and open up the walls of the house. Meanwhile, views of doors and window from Tal R, Howard Hodgkin and Nancy Milner remind us that we are still outside, persuading us to venture a step within.

Richard Hamilton and John Riddy hint at the notion of what we may find inside. As Hamilton explains, 'any interior is a set of anachronisms, a museum with the lingering residues of decorative styles that an inhabited space collects. Banal or beautiful, exquisite or sordid, each says a lot about its owner, and something about humanity in general. They can be dreary or warm and touching, on occasion inspiring, all tell a story and the narrative can be enthralling. Some even give us a little lesson in art appreciation.'

The two long, green walls of the existing gallery, represent for Calero the outdoors and nature. They present depictions of landscapes as though we are looking out of the house, through a series of windows. John Baldesarri's work signifies the line between the architectural area and the images of landscapes, offering a poetic approach to

humankind's relationship with nature. Andrew Cranston, Polly Apfelbaum and Gil Heitor Cortesao present luscious and joyous celebrations of the natural world. Yto Barrada and Richard Moss similarly present beautiful photographs of nature that are, in fact, created in complex territories with tumultuous histories. Barrada's photographic practice documents her native Tangiers and explored the impact of unchecked urban development on nature as well as the subtle, local forms of resistance against it. Moss uses obsolete military surveillance technology, a type of infrared colour film called Kodak Aerochrome to investigate ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Originally created to detect targets for aerial bombing, Kodak Aerochrome film registers a spectrum of light beyond what the human eye can see, rendering foliage in vivid hues of lavender, crimson and hot pink.

The pink walls of the installation create the interior of a house, generating a very domestic feeling. Together, the works inside form a personal collection of objects, a home. This may be an unfinished home, a home under construction, or one that has recently been abandoned, as several of the works appear to be placed provisionally, and the paintwork is deliberately unfinished.

Here, the selection of works is more intuitive. Joan Miró's exuberant tapestries become blankets or rugs. Picasso's vases are almost given back their functionality as vases, and intimate portraits by Noah Davis, Chris Ofili and Annie Leibovitz could be personal snapshots of friends and family members.

Marc Camille Chaimowicz's exquisite collages celebrate both the politics and the playfulness of personal interior décor, and this quote from him became a guiding principle for Calero in her organisation of the exhibition. He said, 'I organise space to deal with questions related to identity, to gender, masculine, feminine, and to politics. The 70s were deeply politicised. My select political position was summarised in the formula, Personal is Political, I subscribe to that idea that our internal behaviour can have a political dimension.'

I'm now joined by Witney Hintz, curator of the Hiscox Collection.

And I thought we could start with asking you, how you go about curating a growing collection of over 1,000 works?

WH: It changes over time, but we've always had a very informal approach to curating the collection, and when Robert was still buying for the collection, it would be very much led by him and his eye and his interests, and I would spend a lot of time looking at work on my own, and then presenting it to him, and we would eventually, one out of ten suggestions, would get past him. And so, it was very much steered by him.

And now that he's not involved, I have more input in what gets acquired, but I think we really look at where we're buying the work for, which office, which location. And we buy works for each office that

reflect the office in some way. So, in Germany we have a beautiful Candida Höfer, who's a German photographer, it sits in our Munich office. Equally, the photograph is of the Louvre, so it could easily go to our Paris office as well, so we try to have some ties to the office in some way, by buying work by artists who are from the country the office is in.

LS: And how do the employees in the various offices around the world respond to the works, and how often do you change them and move them from office to office?

WH: I'd say around once a year, I move things in each office. But it's again very fluid, it depends on what's happening within the company. If we're opening up a new office, it will then lead me to move other works around. If we're loaning works, I'll move things around, or I'll take a view each year, and look at which works haven't moved in a long time. But, everyone likes change, everyone seems to appreciate a turnover. They want new things to look at. But then, there's also people who just don't want to let go of certain works. I know I'd be met with resistance if I moved certain things around, like the Candida Höfer, for example, that I mentioned earlier, Munich does not want to let go of that.

So, yeah, I try to move things often because it helps create a more stimulating environment, and it's good to refresh things, and people appreciate it.

LS: Let's talk a little bit about the two exhibitions. I guess, first, how do you feel about them. They're very

different, Gary Hume's exhibition is very different to Sol Calero's. Just a bit about Gary's, Gary's exhibition was called Accelerate your Escape, and it took its title from one of the works in his collection, which was a print by Haim Steinbach that said the words 'accelerate your escape' and for him it was a very poetic and elegant, quite calm installation of 27 works that offered, for Gary, moments of escape from the everyday, either through melancholy or through excitement, or through beauty. And for him, he sees art as a means of escape. On the flip side Calero's exhibition is very densely hung, very brightly coloured, it contains nearly 60 works, and so I wonder how you feel about the two exhibitions and their differences?

WH: I love their differences, and I'm really pleased by how different they are, and I think that's what I was hoping for, when we invited both Gary and Sol to do it. I think, you know, with Gary and his practice I expected it to be very elegant and restrained and it was, it was minimal, but he had this way of choosing works which had been in the collection for years, were necessarily not, kind of, the show-stopping pieces in the collection, humble works, he was able to sort of elevate them and create these connections, which I hadn't noticed before. So, that was really exciting to see, and I really enjoyed that, and I love the way he spoke about the works, and why he chose them. And he was very elegant, and offered really great insight into his choices.

So, I thought that was a really beautiful presentation. And with Sol, having just seen it, I am really excited

by it, because it's what I wanted. I wanted something very playful, very colourful and vibrant, and it's eclectic, and it's sort of shown the breadth of our collection. The variety and the density of our collection too.

And it's quite bonkers, and I love it for that. I think it's really fun and playful, and it also reflects the collection well in that sense.

LS: Yeah, I think she's definitely, for me, both of them have created really clever exhibitions. And there was a moment when we were bringing in the 70 works that Sol had selected for that one gallery, and I had some anxiety about how they would all hang together, but she's been really, really smart in the visual connections between works as well as the metaphorical and political connections, and I think the density, it doesn't feel over-hung, it doesn't feel too dense, it somehow all sits alongside each other, and tells the story that she wants it to tell.

WH: No, definitely, and again, I felt your anxiety as well, shipping all these works over, and I just thought, there was no way that they were going to fit. Seeing how full Gary's felt, you know, Gary's felt like a complete show, it didn't feel like it was lacking in anything, it felt very complete. And, you know, she has four times as many works, so, and I wanted that to be really busy and in contrast to Gary's, but it really again doesn't feel overwhelming, it doesn't feel like it's too much. And you're right, the connections that she's found between works, that have never hung side by side, is really exciting to see, and very

clever and very subtle, and it's just a very interesting way of presenting the works, and showing the works, that I wouldn't have expected.

LS: Have either of the exhibitions or both of the exhibitions made you see the works differently, have they revealed new things to you about the works?

WH: Yeah, completely. With Sol's, I have to spend more time looking at it, but certainly with Gary's, as I said, he was able to elevate certain works that I think were in the collection for a long time, and had been overlooked, or didn't get as much attention. And one of them, the star of the show for me, was the small Alison Wilding sculpture, because it had been in the collection well before I started, I think we bought it sometime in the 90s. And it's a very unusual piece, it's sort of abstract, architectural. It's cast resin. It's very unusual looking, and it had been sitting for a long time, in a meeting room, on a sideboard which often gets used for teas and coffees, and it wasn't on a plinth, it didn't have a lot of space. It was largely ignored, for many, many years. And then Gary chose it, and he put it in the show, and he put it on this plinth, and it sort of sat standalone, it just transformed for me. It just became this sort of beguiling, seductive, curious object.

LS: I remember when we were installing, all of us with Gary, said it felt like something from Indiana Jones, it felt like...

WH: The Kryptonite?

LS: Yeah, or like if you touched it, the walls of the gallery would start moving on in you, it felt like it had some kind of magical power.

WH: It's so unusual. So, Alison Wilding, for me, was a real surprise to see it out of context, given the space it needed, and it transformed.

LS: Yeah, I think, it's one of the things that I find really interesting about your collection is when we came to see the works in the London office, they're surrounded by people and computers, and snacks and movement. And then we brought them into the gallery setting, which has a lot less visual noise, and actual noise, and it really made some of the works, I think, sing or shout even, like the Wilding became a much more powerful work, and I think, it's interesting then, what Sol has done, in that she's created a very different environment. She's created a domestic environment. So, Gary embraced the gallery environment, and we kept all the walls a very pale grey, and everything was very white cube. But, with Sol, she's then created a home for the works, so it again pulls them into a different context and I wonder if that, again, changes your reception of any of the works, like, when we saw the Miró tapestries, when we saw them in the Hiscox offices, they were hanging on the walls, like tapestries often do, but in Sol's exhibition she has transformed them into, one is a bedspread, almost, on a kind of bed-size and level plinth, and the other is a rug on the floor. And I wonder if that gives those works a different dimension to you, or the way that she's used Jeni

Spota's sculpture, which resembles a book, on her bedside table, to be an actual book?

WH: It's very clever, I would never have thought she would do it that way, and actually when we talked about the show, she had the works on the floor, and I thought that was interesting, but I didn't realise she was going to use one of the tapestries as a bed covering. I think that's very clever, and it does change the way that you look at it. The book on the bedside table is just brilliant. I mean, you know, the work is flat, we're peering over it, and it looks like a book, open on a bedside table. I walked in the room, and just saw all these objects that were so familiar to me, and in a totally new environment, hanging next to different pieces. But, I was sort of taken aback by that, and then I sort of settled in and started to see, oh yes, this is the layout of a bed, this is a bedside table, this is the décor behind it, or the arrangement of ornaments, I guess, behind it.

So, it became much more, I got the picture of it being a room.

LS: So, there are three Chris Ofili portraits and a big photograph of Louise Bourgeois by Annie Leibovitz, and when we were speaking to her she was saying it was as if they are family snapshots, so it's potentially the home of somebody related to the people in the Chris Ofili portraits and maybe Louise Bourgeois is the grandmother, which is a terrifying thought.

But it's a very playful approach to the idea of portraiture, and to kind of reclaiming the people in the images.

WH: Yeah, and it works, it's very successful in that sense, I again never looked at those works in that way, so seeing that on a wall in a home, it makes sense. I think one of the brilliant hangs, or choice she made, was to hang the Ali Zitouni piece, the collage that's made of cut up Alpen cereal boxes, and it looks like a rosette window, but I just think it's very clever, it feels...

LS: And it allows her to really use the height of the gallery to...

WH: Yes.

LS: ...which I think is why the room doesn't feel so dense, is that putting the Zitouni so high, like a stained glass window, then allows her to use the height elsewhere, and to hang other works higher than we would ordinarily.

WH: Yeah, and you're looking up, you're looking down. I mean there's work everywhere. It's not obvious right away, you know, once you're in the room you see more and more pieces. They're on the ground, they're towards the ceiling. She used the space really well. Everything is there for a reason, it's been really thought through.

LS: Yeah, careful.

WH: Yes.

LS: Outside of the exhibitions, I've always wanted to ask you, whether you have favourite works in the collection? Not one, 'cause that would seem unfair, but are there any works, maybe, that you wish Gary or Sol had selected and didn't, or are there any works that they did select and you wish they hadn't?

WH: Oh, I can't answer that one, that would be horrible. I have a lot of works that I love and they change every year for some reason, not like I fall out of love with them, but there's a new work that kind of takes its place maybe. But, I was really happy that there were certain pieces that did get chosen, that I am very fond of. One is the Jim Lambie Seat Belt chair, which is just such a brilliant piece, it's so fun, it's so clever, it's playful. And I'm really glad that made it in.

The other one was in Gary's show the Nan Goldin self-portrait, which is on the other end of the spectrum, which is very, it's sort of introverted, it's quite poignant, it's evocative. I'm really glad that made it in too, and that was a more recent purchase.

So, I don't know, I don't regret that certain works didn't make it in, I think it was very much, I feel like Gary justified every choice he made, and I liked that the choices he made were unexpected, and weren't the well-known most expensive pieces. They were each selected for a very good reason. They all fit in together. And I feel again with Sol Calero, she has more range in the choice of work. I look at Gary's selection and say, oh, yeah, I understand why he

chose that, I think I get it why, you know, like, I can see why he'd be into that work. Whereas with Sol, I think it was much more open-ended, like, it could have been anything. But then they all now, seeing them together in the room, I'm like, oh yes, I see this interior, exterior idea, it comes through in a lot of the works.

Actually, another work I didn't mention, which I've loved for years, is the John Riddy photograph, Utrecht, it's just such a gorgeous photograph, it's just beautifully composed. It's of the Utrecht house, there's no figure in it, it's empty and still and it reflects the design and style of De Stijl architecture beautifully. And I love how she's put that with Richard Hamilton's print. Again, they'd never been shown together, and I think it was just a really clever pairing.

LS: When I asked about works that are included that you wish weren't, I didn't mean you to be mean. I was more, I was thinking of the Bermuda Map, which Sol has included, and I know, well you told me that some of the staff in the Bermuda office where it was were really reluctant to see it go.

WH: Oh, yeah, I think, and I was really reluctant to ship that over, 'cause it was a pain, and I had never seen that before, so I didn't know much about that map and its origins. I was surprised when that work was selected, and I approached the office to have it shipped over, and they were, yeah, there was resistance.

And in a way, I think that's great, that they feel that strongly about certain things, and that people do not want to let go of it, it shows that they like it. And there are also, it happened with a couple of other offices too, they were like, well when are we getting it back? And, how long for? So there's a possessive aspect to it, which is, I didn't realise and I'm glad to know about.

LS: Yeah, I think with the map, I love it because it kind of situates Sol's house, the house that she's created, geographically, so we can imagine that that house is in Bermuda, and I think that's why she chose it, that's why it was important to her, but sorry to the Bermuda office.

JS: Thanks for listening to this episode of Hear, Now. You can find all of our other episodes online at www.whitechapelgallery.org, on the Bloomberg Connects app as well as iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher and SoundCloud. Don't forget to visit the exhibition, Desde el Salón, Sol Calero selects from the Hiscox Collection, on display from 19th May until 15th August 2021. Bye for now.

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