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Los Carpinteros; Christina Mackie: The Filters – review

Parasol Unit; Tate Britain, London

Cuba's Los Carpinteros unleash their acute wit and craftsmanship to exhilarating effect using Lego, carnival and a lot of tomatoes



'Juice turns to blood': Tomatoes, 2013 by Los Carpinteros. Photograph: Jason Wyche; courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery, New York and Ivorypress, Madrid © Los Carpinteros

The suits stretch away into the distance, 200 black jackets, dark ties and white shirts massed on a rack – a funeral march of identical men, timeless and hollow. They could be generic bureaucrats. But shot through the whole assembly from one end to the other is a gaping five-point hole in the chest. You can see right through these identical men. Each has a Cuban star for a heart.

It is a formidable piece of visual theatre, macabre and yet comic, its politics beautifully agile. For when you peer into the dark heart of officialdom – the state, the Cuban Communist party, the body politic, the secret police, however you choose to interpret it – you still see a bright shining star, a hopeful light at the end of the tunnel.



Robotica, 2013 (wood, metal, Lego) by Los Carpinteros. Photograph: Jason Wyche; courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery, New York © Los Carpinteros

The two men who made this piece, Marco Antonio Castillo Valdés (b1971) and Dagoberto Rodríguez Sánchez (b1969), collectively known as Los Carpinteros, are among Cuba's best-known artists. Their work is in public museums across Europe and America. More to the point, their subtly satirical sculptures are also on display in the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in the centre of Havana, which is where they are principally based. Unlike many Cuban artists before them, Los Carpinteros are not living in exile.

Acute wit and exquisite craftsmanship characterise everything they make. At the Parasol Unit, in their first big London show, the two artists have filled one gallery full of fervently burning flames conjured out of cheap bulbs and fretworked driftwood (not for nothing are they called the Carpenters). The combination ought to be going up in smoke, but this is a fire that no one can put out.

In another gallery they have built a soaring replica of a triumphant Soviet monument out of Lego – an anti-memorial to a historic moment worked up in bathetic children's bricks.

Western sentimentality towards Cuba is gleefully mocked. Here is Manuel Copado's much-loved Solimar apartment building, a beacon of 1940s modernism, reprised as a heavy black acoustic box streaming the sounds of the real Cuban tenants who live there, their voices so often ignored. On the floor nearby, a set of conga drums appears to have melted into rigid white pools. Cuba – land of dance, sizzling hot and yet frozen in time. All three tourist clichés skewered at once.

Over the years, Los Carpinteros have created a fantastical world of utopian models. In the upper galleries you can see the brown-brick island of Urbanización floating on nothing but thin air, and the great glass *Croissant* that doubles as a preposterous pastry of a prison. Rusting cast-iron sputniks, octagons and star-shaped stadiums evoke the real communist structures that stand empty and ruined in Cuba today.



Cuarteto Rebelde, 2012. Photograph: Private collection; courtesy of Ivorypress, Madrid © Los Carpinteros

And delicate watercolours, the size of billboards, show a landscape of half-built concrete pylons receding into the distance – a forest of dreams – and a skyscape of floating trams. Each is passing through space, empty of passengers, on its way to absolutely nowhere.

Los Carpinteros have a gift for collapsing (or suspending) time, their pieces often referring as much to the distant past as the present or future. The walls of the Parasol Unit, for instance, look as if they've been pelted with rotten tomatoes by a mob of medieval villagers, gobbets of red pith sticking to the surface, scarlet juice spattering and staining the pristine whiteness. But there is a brilliant gleam to these tomatoes, which turn out to be cast – captured – in porcelain.

So the carnival protest freezes into something more permanent and sinister. Juice turns to blood. The overtones of political suppression, of civil wars and firing squads are impossible to ignore.



The most pungent work in the show, though, turns out to be a foray into film. In *Conga Irreversible*, a cast of dancers dressed in black and white dance their way straight down Havana's Paseo del Prado –

backwards. An excitable crowd tails them in forward motion; so you are already looking at something quite hard to follow – a frantic performance against the grain. As the dancing gets wilder, the film itself turns carnivalesque – cutting from bird’s-eye view to street level and gutter, peering into a trumpet’s horn, staring up skirts, whirling through the crowd, all the time trying to keep up with the backward-flowing rumba and cha-cha-cha. Whipping faster and faster, the dance – and the film – become almost impossible to follow, spiralling into confusion and madness. The music moves forwards, the dancers move backwards: how will it all end? The work dramatises Cuban politics with dazzling speed and panache.



Christina Mackie's *The Filters* at Tate Britain. Photograph: Graeme Robertson

Los Carpinteros would make a terrific show for the Duveen Galleries at Tate Britain, but alas those days are long gone; the museum must fill its marble canyons with nothing but homegrown talent each season. And anyone might think this pretty thin on the ground to judge from Christina Mackie's current display, an assembly of wan thoughts in the form of half-hearted objects that won't detain you for more than a moment.

Silk nets dangle from the ceiling, flaccid and stained pink, mauve and yellow like gigantic used condoms. Beneath each is a pan, something like a large dog bowl, full of semi-crystallised dye. Perhaps the nets have leached the colour from the pans? But no, they don't touch the liquid. The sense of blank and pointless disconnection is only aggravated by a second object, an assembly of industrial tubes and filters that might be doing something with some coloured pigment – except that it isn't.

Some chunks of coloured glass, like gigantic sweets, are all that remain of this disastrously dull and underpowered exhibition, described as a meditation on colour. If she has any thoughts on this subject, or any other, Mackie is once again keeping them entirely to herself.

- *Los Carpinteros* are at the Parasol Unit, London N1 until 24 May