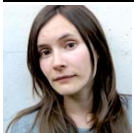


Artist of the week 196: Amalia Pica

This London-based Argentine's work speaks to us of the missed chances and misunderstandings in both art and life



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Is the party over? ... Amalia Pica, 2012, at the Chisenhale Gallery, London. Photograph: Andy Keate

There may be strings of lights, bunting and music in Amalia Pica's first UK show, but the festive mood comes with a pang. The bright garlands of rainbow bulbs that illuminate the front door and lobby turn plain inside the gallery. In a gigantic poster made from collaged Xeroxes of a blown-up photo, bunting stretched between two people in a lonely field is the only hit of colour in an otherwise black and white landscape. Somewhere out back, the 1990s tune Fiesta is playing. Perhaps you arrived too late, or maybe the party always seems to be happening elsewhere.

For the London-based Argentine, art and life are characterised by gaps and missed signals. What interests Pica is the distance between sender and receiver, the ways we

misunderstand or misremember. She addresses the problem of art speaking to people – like the time she used Semaphore flag code to broadcast gobbledygook in the middle of nowhere. And she questions whether art can possibly measure up to what's already out there in the world – as when she faced-off a mountain, holding up a white sheet of paper to its craggy mass. Was she attempting to channel the landscape's power, or offering a white flag of artistic surrender?

Switchboard, a screen-like wall in the middle of her current show that's studded with tin-can telephones, turns a children's game into an allegory of our attempts to communicate. The cans are randomly connected by a cat's cradle of strings hidden inside the wall, so finding the corresponding mouth and earpiece is a halting hit-and-miss process, with most messages going nowhere.

Pica frequently alludes to communal experience, be that a schoolroom or a party. In her recent twist on public art, I am Tower of Hamlets ..., a pink marble sculpture of the popular South American Echevaria houseplant has spent the last year travelling through the homes of East End locals. When it returns to the gallery in July, the hardy little statue will conjure fantasies of unknown encounters. Like the lights outside the show, what we remember or imagine is always more colourful than the here and now.

Why we like her: Childhood is important for Pica. In a key early work, Hora Catedra (School Period) from 2002, she drew attention to a cultural confusion rooted in infancy. Most Argentinians believe The House of Tucuman, the site of the declaration of the country's independence, to be yellow, as it's depicted in children's books, when it's actually white. Making the most of this, she flooded the real house with yellow light, for 40 minutes, the duration of a lesson.

School's out: Teaching art classes at primary school sparked Pica's interest in what shapes our preconceptions and limits our imagination. Why, she wondered, did children always draw a house the same way?

Where can I see her? At Chisenhale Gallery, London to 15 July.