

Keeping Memory Alive – Arpillera Doll Workshop with Roberta Bacic

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Report and photos by Jimena Pardo

Following a visit to Northern Ireland, I had invited Roberta Bacic to deliver a workshop for 'Bordando por la Memoria-Embroidering for Memory'. She has been working as a curator for the Conflict Textiles collection in Northern Ireland for the last 12 years, researching, collecting and archiving Arpilleras from Chile and around the world.

We were very humbled to have Roberta Bacic visit us on the 24th May 2019, at Unite the Union in London. Not only to hear the stories behind the Arpilleras and the women who had created them but also because we had around 20 people attend the workshop, some who were coming for the very first time.



I gave a brief introduction about the London based project 'Bordando por la Memoria', a group that has been meeting for around a year and a half to embroider the names of men, women and children who were disappeared and executed during the military dictatorship in Chile between 1973-1989. Many people in the group are first and second generation Chilean exiles but there are also participants from Mexico, Bolivia and Venezuela.



Roberta presented her work to the group, showing how to use the Conflict Textiles website to search for arpilleras in the collection and shared some of the archive methodology with the group to progress the work we are currently doing.



We watched clips from the film 'Scraps of life' which documents the search of the mothers for their loved ones. The words from one of the arpilleristas 'It is painful to stitch' was sobering and brought home the immediacy of the arpilleras and the reason for making them.

Roberta presented several pieces from different periods such as '81 días de Mapuche en huelga de hambre / 81 Days of Mapuche people on hunger strike'. This is a replica of an arpillera made by the same arpillerista who made the earlier piece depicting a hunger strike and also showing how past events are just as relevant today, especially in the case of the repression of the Mapuche people. We looked at a piece made during 1978 recording the activities of the Vicaría de la Solidaridad, a church-based



solidarity group. The piece titled 'Al Servicio de la vida / Servicing life', visually narrates the activities that took place in the Vicariate, a place where many of the first Arpilleras were made.

Looking at the arpilleras really prompted new themes we would like to record, including exile from Chile that many of our families went through to other defining moments, such as the pickets outside 'The Clinic' whilst Pinochet's was detained in the UK in late 1998.

In the second half of the 'Taller' Roberta and I showed the group how to start making arpillera dolls. Some made dolls that represented a significant person to them and many people were able to talk individually with Roberta sharing their experiences and recalling past events.



It was thought provoking for many people in the group and gave us an insight into the many layers of meaning that exist within the arpilleras. The participants fed back that they had enjoyed learning about the arpilleras history, as well as a new technique of making the dolls.

Action points that were highlighted were to begin building an archive. Working on smaller pieces so it is easier to transport and display the embroideries. Also, to consider developing new pieces that talk of the exile experience. We hope to continue building on this connection with Roberta and Conflict Textiles and were very grateful for the time and consideration that went into the preparation for the workshop.

Outcome from the workshop - Dolls created by workshop participants

