

The *politics* of Chilean arpilleras II

These arpilleras placed at the Irish School of Ecumenics are a sampler of a major exhibition which is being curated for 2010

Curated by Roberta Bacic
Belfast, March 2009

Arpilleras (pronounced "ar-pee-air-ahs") are three-dimensional appliqué textiles of Latin America. "Arpilleras" is actually from the Chilean tradition, an old regional pictorial appliqué technique from Isla Negra on the coast of Chile, whereby rags were used to create images and then embroidered on large pieces of cloth. Initially hessian, or in Spanish "arpillera", was used as their backing, and that then became the name for this particular type of quilt. Generally they are known as quilts or wall hangings. They are considered contemporary craft. Sometimes small dolls were made and added to make the three dimensional effect.

Most of them were done in especially hard political times, in a particular context, and they reveal to us now what the experience has meant since then. It is our task, at this time, to approach the situations portrayed and also work/act for a present/future where those things do not happen.

"The Arpilleras are story tellers, for it is through them that these women have recorded and preserved the memory of a period of Chilean history that many others have chosen to forget"

This quote comes from Marjorie Agosín's book: ["Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love, The Arpillera movement in Chile 1974-1994"](#) with a foreword by Isabel Allende, 2nd edition, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, USA, 2008

"Las arpilleras son como canciones que se pintan" "The arpilleras are like songs that one paints", said Violeta Parra, wellknown folk singer from Chile

http://www.nuestro.cl/notas/noticias/violeta_arpilleras.htm

For comprehensive references visit University of Ulster's archive <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/quilts/>

http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/quilts/exhibit/chilean_arpilleras.html

Demandamos DEMOCRACIA / We want DEMOCRACY

This Chilean arpillera was made in the late 1980's in one of the workshops supported by the Catholic Vicariate of Solidarity in Santiago de Chile. The women have come together to protest the lack of democratic participation and have decided to make public their demand. They display a banner – held by three young people – which says “Democracy”. You can see that the women are holding onto each other with linked arms and have formed three rows. The small, crowded houses indicate a poor neighbourhood.

The police car shown does not seem to intimidate them and they carry on with their action. They seem sure that their claim is a valid one and that its achievement could help to improve their social conditions.

This group of grassroots Chilean people feel and think that they have not been consulted and have come together to demand democracy, which they believe will allow them to participate. In the time of the dictatorship, democracy, as a right to participate, was something you had to struggle for. Previously, Chile was a country used to taking part in political decisions and voting as an entitlement.

You can still get arpilleras from www.fundacionsolidaridad.cl and other groups.

Courtesy of Sean Carroll, USA / Spain



Verdad y justicia para los desaparecidos / Truth and justice for the disappeared

This Chilean arpillera was made by one of the workshops of the Association of Detained and Disappeared and acquired in Santiago in 1991. It was probably made in the late 1980s, shortly before the end of the dictatorship.

This arpillera follows the classical pattern of mountains, sun and action. Women have taken to the streets to denounce the disappearance of their dear ones. Directly affected women carry banners with pictures of their missing ones. Others have joined their struggle demanding **Justice and truth**. In the centre of the piece you see women carrying a big banner which reads: **Where are the disappeared?** Passers by are looking at their action. It seems to suggest that they are paying attention to the topic of the protest and not to the protestors themselves.

Chilean's Truth Commission and follow-up bodies had as their core mission to find out what happened to each disappeared person and to try to find the remains of the bodies when possible, or at least be able to tell their next of kin what happened to the missing person. Reparations have been put in place for directly related relatives of the acknowledged victims.

Courtesy of Gaby Franger & Rainer Huhle, Germany



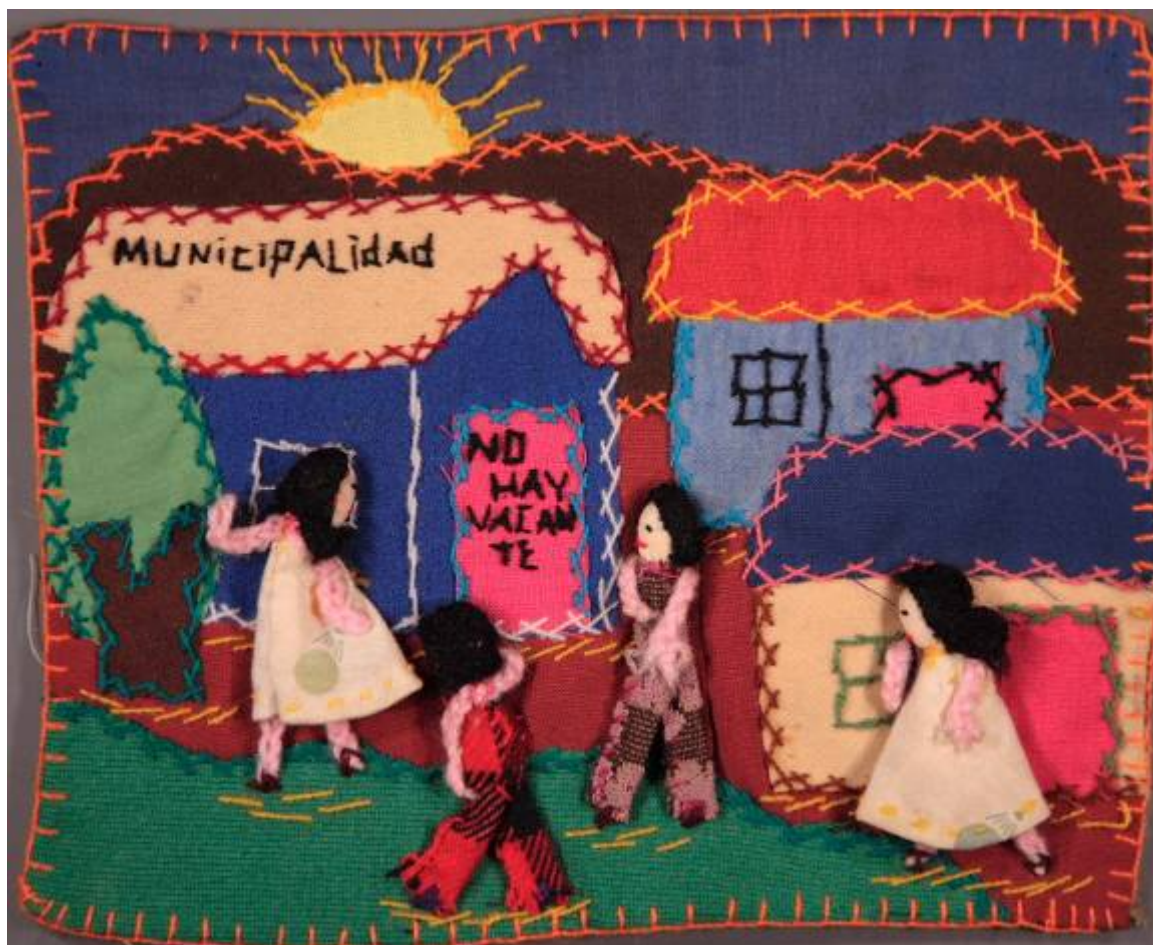
La gente necesita trabajar / People need work

This very small Chilean arpillera was made as far back as 1975. There is no record as to which woman or workshop did it. The only available information is that it was brought to Spain by a priest who got it from another priest in Chile. The Spanish priest gave it to his sister who engaged in solidarity activity with women groups in Chile and acquired other pieces in the late 1970s.

The action in this arpillera takes place in the open air. Two women and two men are standing in front of their little homes. They seem to be talking about their present working situation. The fact is that the Municipality has a sign stuck on its main door that reads: **NO HAY VACANCIAS.**

As in most arpilleras, it shows the mountains of Chile and a strikingly bright sun coming out.

Courtesy of Rosario Miralles, Spain



No tenemos acceso a los servicios públicos / We have no access to public services

This Chilean arpillera was made by a community workshop set up by a Protestant Church in the shanty towns of Santiago. It was done in the late 1970s and acquired by a Swiss couple involved in solidarity work with Chile. They also bought other pieces which they brought to Europe and gave as presents to friends. In this way they also created awareness of what was going on.

We can also date it by the direct reference to Monica Madariaga, Justice Minister from April 1977 to February 1983, who personally drafted the Amnesty Law. It exculpated from criminal responsibility all persons who committed crimes, were accomplices in crimes or covered up crimes committed between the day of the military coup, September 11, 1973 and March 10, 1978, when the state of siege was lifted.

Though it does not refer to the amnesty law as such, it clearly shows the day to day situation of disadvantaged people and also makes direct references to the causes of the situation. The crosses stitched on the doors of health facilities, university, the Supreme Court, building sites, and others show that ordinary people do not have access to these services. The woman minister is shown at her desk, next to it the words: **Minister of Education, betrayal to the fatherland**. It also says: **What is this?** The only other characters are people having to dig with their spades to survive.

Courtesy of Heidi and Peter Gessler, Switzerland



¡ Adiós Pinochet! / Good bye Pinochet!

Women have gathered in the streets of a modest neighbourhood to express their opinion and confront the situation that they see is keeping them, and their community, from having a better life. We can see that they are impoverished as they have to no electricity supply in their little houses and have to steal it by attaching electrical cables to the source. In spite of this they depict their homes with bright colours and the classical mountains and sun are there.

They are divided into two groups, each carrying a banner. One says: **OUT PINOCHET!** The other reads: **Good bye Pinochet!**

This arpillera says that the impediment to fulfil challenge VIII, **Initiate a process to encourage the creation of a shared vision of society**, resides in the government and requires that Pinochet leaves so that the country can heal itself.

This arpillera was made by one of the workshops run and supported by Vicaría de la Solidaridad. It was acquired in the context of international solidarity to end Pinochet's dictatorship.

You can still get arpilleras from www.fundacionsolidaridad.cl and other groups

Courtesy of Heidi and Peter Gessler, Switzerland



Bailamos solas pues han desaparecido a nuestros hombres / *We dance alone! Our men have been taken*

This Chilean arpillera was made by one of the workshops of the Association of Detained and Disappeared and acquired in Santiago in 1991. It was probably made in the late 1980s, shortly before the end of the dictatorship.

In this arpillera we can see women dancing “Cueca” the traditional Chilean dance. Cueca, is danced in pairs - an important fact considering the dance is meant to represent the different emotions and stages of romance.

Here the women dance alone as their husbands, sons, brothers, or lovers have been disappeared or exiled, so they continue the dance, wearing the image of their loved ones over their hearts. “The dance represents a denunciation of a society that makes the bodies of victims of political violence disappear, denying them a proper burial and silencing their mourners. Through *la cueca sola*, the dancers tell a story with their solitary feet, the story of the mutilated body of a loved one. Through their movements and the guitar music, the women also recreate the pleasure of dancing with the missing person.” Their courage and determination has inspired people all over the world, including musician Sting, whose song has been taken up by many other artists including Joan Baez and Holly Near.

This arpillera exposes a situation where people were pushed to the limit. Specifically this piece shows what happened to people who had different political views.

Courtesy of Gaby Franger & Rainer Huhle, Germany



Vida bajo llaves / We have to live behind doors

This Chilean arpillera was made by a community workshop set up by a Protestant Church in the shanty towns of Santiago. It was done in the late 1970s and acquired by a Swiss couple involved in solidarity work with Chile.

Campamento San Jeronimo was one of the many squalid settlements established by poor families in the outskirts of Santiago. This arpillera shows the mountains, but not the sun.

This arpillera shows graphically how people in these poor neighbourhoods had to deal with their problems and it also exposes those problems. Everything had to be borne in silence, discussed behind doors. To find out what is going on, we have to open the doors that cover different episodes. So, we see three ill children having to share one bed; a couple discussing where they could find work; two women worried as many children are awaiting a bowl of soup from their soup kitchen and they are worried it will not be enough for all of them. The woman who is washing clothes is saying how much she is missing her husband.

This arpillera exposes a situation where people were pushed to the limit, which was a common experience in Chile during the dictatorship. Specifically, this piece shows what happened to poor people who had different political and social views and could not express them publicly without being persecuted.

Courtesy of Heidi and Peter Gessler, Switzerland



No a la tortura / No to torture

This is one of the most visually startling pieces in the collection. Set against a simple black background, this arpillera speaks unapologetically about Chile's history of torture. It was made by Violeta Morales, sister of Newton Morales who disappeared. She passed away in 2006 without knowing where her brother's remains are.

Torture is a difficult subject. According to the Valech Report, thousands of people were subjected to some form of torture during Pinochet's regime and 35,868 approached the Commission. The majority, 27,255 people, were officially registered as victims of torture.

This arpillera, made by survivors graphically depicts their experience of being tortured. It shows these people in a dehumanized way, their features not recognizable and signals that this inhuman experience was not only lived by single individuals, but by significant groups of people. It is striking that the woman who made this arpillera willingly talks about the past.

Courtesy of Marjorie Agosin Chile / USA



La armonía entre la vida y el medio ambiente nos hace felices / *Harmony between life and environment makes us happy*

This Chilean wall hanging was made in one of the workshops of Isla Negra in Chile. It belongs to a traditional craft that dates much back before the political arpilleras that grew from this folk tradition. It was acquired in a crafts shop in Edinburgh, Scotland in 2000.

This very colourful wall hanging shows busy day to day life. Everyone seems active, happy and intense. Human beings are together with natural elements such as domestic animals, trees and birds. One can also see small homes, the church, a children's playground, some narrow streets with cars and fences separating the houses. The sky is bright blue, the mountains just a silhouette and the sun is depicted red.

It depicts a view of how happy life is envisioned by ordinary people. It wants it to add joy to the home that will have it on one of its walls.

Courtesy of Roberta Bacic & Clem McCartney, Chile / Ireland

