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Arpilleras exhibition

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Arpilleras exhibition

The politics of Chilean “arpilleras”

In the context of the Art of Survival, International and Irish Quilts

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Exhibition held recently in Northern Ireland

**INTRODUCTORY
TALK AND OPENING
OF THE EXHIBITION
BY ROBERTA BACIC,
CURATOR**

**THURSDAY
OCTOBER 23RD
6PM**

**Refreshments & live
music ALL
WELCOME**

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.

After the military coup in 1973, which introduced the Pinochet regime, the Association of Relatives of the Disappeared in Chile began to make *arpilleras*. They were handcrafted, using scraps of materials collected by women or donated by the churches in Chile. They tell their stories and support their families. They were also made by women political prisoners, either while inside prisons or when released. They used them to camouflage notes sent to the world outside, to people who would denounce what was happening at national or international levels or people who could act on their behalf to either assist them in their

different needs or would be able to pass on messages to their dear ones. Even the most suspicious guards in jails did not think to check the appliquéd pictures for messages, since sewing was seen as inconsequential 'women's work'. Nor did other people recognise the power they could have when denouncing what was really happening and was otherwise denied by the government authorities and ignored by most of society.

Chilean women found refuge in the Vicariate of Solidarity organized by the Catholic Church. In dark basements and other secret meeting rooms in churches, NGOs and other solidarity places, mothers, wives, lovers, friends, daughters and sisters began to design and sew together in order to capture their common tales of torture, of pain and love and save them from oblivion. Part of the church and a network of solidarity people smuggled

arpilleras out of Chile and so the world – and the ones who listened - came to know more about the oppressive, unjust and bloody life under the dictatorship. They were often bought as a way to support the struggle, including some of the ones you see in this display.

In the *arpilleras* are elements such as photos, images, and names of the missing and sewn words and expressions such as "¿Dónde están?" (Where are they?) The tapestries often have a "relief" quality and are far from two-dimensional pictures. The scrap material and stitching that ultimately create the simple and clear lines and forms of the figures and motifs depicted on these *arpilleras* allow the viewer to perceive the determination of these Chilean craft women. These *arpilleras* have served as testimony to the tenacity and strength of these Chilean women in their determined struggle for truth and justice

and to break the code of
silence imposed upon them
and upon the country.

At the time they were done
they depicted what was
actually happening, today
they are witnesses to what can
not be forgotten and is part of
our present past that needs to
be dealt with.

Roberta Bacic, Chilean living
in Northern Ireland, collector
of this small collection
Guest Curator of the Art of
Survival, International and
Irish Quilts Exhibition
January 2008

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