



© Courtesy of Ulster Museum

# PATCHWORK IS POLITICAL

A Chilean human rights advocate and researcher living in Northern Ireland, **Roberta Bacic** is the curator of the Conflict Textiles collection, a selection of which are showcased in a new exhibition at Ulster Museum. She discusses her family's experience as refugees, life under the Pinochet dictatorship, how arpillera textiles became a form of resistance against the regime, and why being in nature makes her content.

## Early life

My parents emigrated to Chile after the second world war. They met in a refugee camp in what is now part of Italy. People were sent wherever governments opened their doors.

They were very welcome in Chile. When I see how people treat refugees today, I think of my parents.

## What did your family teach you?

My father had no education but encouraged me to work hard and respect the teachers.

My parents demanded I be a loyal,

‘They would use materials with a lot of emotional attachment - clothes of a ‘disappeared’ person, their shirt, their pajamas’

dedicated person who, having no other family, could fend for herself.

## Living under General Augusto Pinochet's brutal dictatorship...

We could not see the dangers. When the dictatorship came around we were not prepared, we had no strategies of how to escape, and people were arrested en masse.

From my class in school there were four who were ‘disappeared’, three who were executed and many who had to go into exile.

# LAST WORD



## PHOTO LEFT

A Chilean arpillera depicting a group of women who have chained themselves in front of the Congress in protest against the actions of the Pinochet regime  
Photo Martin Melaugh © Conflict Textiles

## PHOTO RIGHT

Ana Zlatkes' representation of Conflict Textiles curator Roberta Bacic, who, with Mapuche poet Jaime Huenún Villa, co-produced the 2023 book *Arpilleras Poéticas*. Photo Martin Melaugh © Conflict Textiles



## What is an arpillera?

In English terms you would say it is a patchwork. It's all made by hand. Mainly women but also a few men decided to voice what was happening to them through arpilleras.

They would use materials with a lot of emotional attachment – clothes of a 'disappeared' person, their shirt, their pyjamas. And in the process of creation they could relate to the absent person.

## How did Chile's arpilleras become such a powerful form of resistance against the Pinochet regime?

Between 1975 and 1979 churches and organisations such as Amnesty acquired them and brought them to the world – they became a way of spreading news. But then the government realised they were very powerful and they were

proscribed. But women continued to produce them and the solidarity movement had to look for new ways to transport them.

## What makes you angry?

I am less angry than when I was younger. It takes too much time to get out of the anger.

## And happy?

I live by the sea in Northern Ireland and have a lot of nature that gives me the space to see that one can connect to simple things, which gives you courage to face the rest of life.

## Best advice?

Don't rely on hope, thinking that hope will solve something. Take action.

► **Roberta Bacic** curates the Conflict Textiles collection. A selection of arpilleras from the collection is currently on display at Ulster Museum. Amnesty UK partners with Conflict Textiles on its events, including one to mark International Human Rights Day. [ulstermuseum.org/stories/conflict-textiles](http://ulstermuseum.org/stories/conflict-textiles)

► Find out more about Conflict Textiles at [cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles](http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles)