

Presentation Accounts of the Conflict:
Digitally Archiving Stories for Peacebuilding

Textile Accounts of Conflicts

You might wonder why is this textile exhibition present at this conference on Digitally Archiving Stories for Peacebuilding.

Well, in this exhibition *Textile Accounts of Conflicts*, which has been made possible with the support from the Psychology Research Institute at Ulster University, first hand testimony of the destructive and multi-layered impact of conflict and human rights abuse, in various corners of the globe, is narrated in textile form and is accompanied by associated memorabilia.

Let us take three quotes that sustain our case.

Ariel Zeitlin Cooke and Marsha MacDowell express in *WEAVINGS OF WAR, Fabric of Memories* **War textiles are born from this urge to find a new language with which to tell a story**

Primo Levi, in his book *IS THIS A MAN?* states: **for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man/human being.**

Isabel Allende in the foreword to *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile*, by Marjorie Agosin, states: **With leftovers of fabric and simple stitches, the women embroidered what could not be told in words...**

As you have or will see, most pieces speak for themselves.

Using mostly only the humble needle, thread and scraps of fabric, women, and a few men, worked individually or in groups, often in a clandestine manner at odd hours, in their burning quest to present to the world their lived experiences of conflict. Their finished pieces bring to life stories of disappearances, forced execution, torture, resistance, denouncement, displacement, forced exile and loss of their loved ones. In the midst of that, solidarity, resistance, resilience and return emerge.

This collection of *arpilleras* (the term originally referred to three dimensional textiles from Latin America, which originated in Chile), quilts, wall hangings, memory cloths and story cloths is drawn from Northern Ireland, England, Spain, Chile, Peru, Argentina, Afghanistan, Palestine, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Germany, Brazil, Canada and Colombia.

The memorabilia which form part of this exhibition are at first glance ordinary everyday objects: a headscarf, a ribbon, a rug, a napkin, a towel and a photograph. Yet the stories they embody; the tangible, tactile memories they store in their folds, of the people who wore them, or used them in time of war, conflict, or human rights violations transform them into extraordinary objects. The keeping, safeguarding and bequeathing of these objects of witness, is a reminder of the stories that refuse to be silenced and forgotten.

Textile Accounts of Conflicts in bringing forth what cannot be told in words allows these sewer story tellers to articulate their own story, engage with and challenge you, the viewer, to reflect on their chilling testimonies and connect them to your work and struggles.

The textiles here exhibited have a multiple layers of stories to tell, and as the curator could share dozens of stories that go beyond what you see here exhibited. They relate to the process of communication with makers, owners, collectors of these pieces who generously make them available for us to have on display. As we will be only able to see them as part of this conference at this time, arrangements have been made to have it open to the public at the prestigious Linen Hall Library in Belfast where this exhibition will be on display from 6th February to 7th March 2015. Breege Doherty the assistant curator could expand on the process of documenting each of these narratives and then there are the journeys, the travels and the hidden stories that take place from creation of the exhibition to the day they come down and go back to their homes.

We should also take into account the story of the impact they have on the viewers and the ways in which those impressions are taken away and affect future thinking, attitudes and behaviour. Reflect on this as you view them and as you think about them later. The significance of the *arpilleras* is not only in their making but also in the way they are received, speak to and bring out connection to these stitched narratives. There is something in the textiles which makes them very accessible. They draw us in with their bright colours and cute little figures and then we see the oppression and atrocities that they document and commemorate. Viewers seem to be able to absorb the stories and messages without judgement, because they seem so close to lived experience. At the same time I have often been able to show contrasting stories side by side (and indeed do so here) and they are appreciated as a whole – one does not detract from the other. Let us follow Primo Levi again when he says: our **language lacks words to express the offence**, we add here **it also lacks words to hear the offence**. This is one reason why I think *arpilleras* and other conflict textiles play an important part in documenting and archiving accounts of conflict and oppression.

The process of documenting conflict narratives through textiles started in the Heritage and Museum Service in Derry City Council in late 2007. It was made public in an exhibition that took place across 9 public exhibition places of the city which are documented and hosted in the CAIN web site thanks to the steady work of Martin Melaugh. My colleague Breege Doherty will share with you where we stand with the documentation of the 63 exhibitions and associated activities we have had so far.

In the coming months a process will start by which the actual textiles, mainly arpilleras, which belong to my personal collection and others that have been donated or entrusted to me will be passed on to the Heritage Museum Service in Derry City Council so that they are available and accessible to local, national and international people who are interested in researching and exhibiting them.

I value the interest of all of you in this exhibition, there are many to be grateful for to make it possible to have them here. Will now let Breege Doherty explain the electronic archive we have on the CAIN web.

Thanks,

Roberta Bacic
Curator
17th November 2014
www.cain.ulst.ac.uk/quilts