

Arpilleras: Their Trail of Context in Everyday Life

This background paper is intended to prepare for, and give some insights into the exhibition “Stitching Resistance: Narratives of Daily Life in Chilean Arpilleras”. It is not intended to be read as a definitive statement by the curator, but it sets the tone, raises issues and perspectives for further reflection and makes connections to disciplines and scholars that would allow additional insights and research into the power of arpilleras when studying social movements.

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Curator, August 2010

Introduction

This exhibition of Chilean arpilleras (pronounced “ar-pee-air-ahs”) is one of many that have been shown globally from Derry, Northern Ireland, to New York. From rural villages and urban workshops in Chile’s Pinochet era these deceptively simple textiles on rough hessian cloth have travelled worldwide and carry with them a ‘trail of context’ from their creation to their viewing. In their journey they create bonds between the artisan artist and the audience, growing in magnitude of meaning and public, linking the viewer to the resistance in which they were born. The humble nature of the beginnings of these pieces reflects some of the audacity of this exhibit. They represent what might be considered a ‘folksiness’ or lesser genre of art and yet they are exhibited, without apology, in art galleries and embassies. In every step of their journey the arpilleras have demonstrated resistance: resistance against poverty by creating a grassroots export; resistance against the regime by telling the story of daily life under Pinochet; resistance against the very idea of resistance by making sewing an act of subversion; and resistance against the expectations of the art world by being exhibited as if they are works of classical art.

This paper will look at three core aspects of the exhibition: the ‘trail of context’, the individual and the universal, and the aspect of resistance. These focal elements will be considered in terms of the journey of the arpilleras and their impact on the audience. The first section will give a brief historical background to the arpilleras and the broader context of ‘war tapestries’. The next section considers the dichotomy of the individual and the universal which is evident across all the arpilleras exhibited here. Connected to this is the concept of the ‘trail of context’. The following section looks at the evolution of the arpillera movement as a testifier/witness. How do all these elements configure to reflect a narrative of resistance in the daily life of the arpilleristas? Finally let us conclude by reflecting on how the arpilleras might be approached by the audience.

Historical Context

During the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, the tradition of arpilleras developed to give voice to the repressed and disenfranchised of Chilean society. They were used during this period to tell the stories of the Disappeared, the poor and the imprisoned when these experiences could not be testified. In the words of Isabel Allende:

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. (Agosín, 2008)

In 1970, in spite of a USA-led campaign against him, Salvador Allende was democratically elected as the first Marxist president in the Americas. Three years later, a USA backed coup by General Augusto Pinochet ousted Allende's government replacing it with a repressive dictatorship under Pinochet (Kornbluh, 2004). Pinochet set about from the early days of the coup in crushing any pro-Allende dissent. In the seventeen years of Pinochet's regime this resulted in 3197 people being shot, tortured to death, or 'disappeared' by his military in order to protect this 'common good'(ibid. p.162). In addition thousands more suffered exile, imprisonment and torture¹. It was within this brutal context that the arpilleras created the textile images, that you have the privilege to see today, which reflect their daily experience of the regime and their resistance to it.

The Arpilleras that were provoked into existence by the Pinochet regime were not the first, nor indeed the last tapestries to be born out of violence. The Hmong people produced story clothes, Afghans produce detailed rugs, and the Zulu created memory cloths all of which "do slightly different things, and bring different meaning to events and how we live with their memory afterwards" (James E. Young in Cooke & MacDowell, 2005, p.33). Jon Thompson cited by Zeitlin Cooke (ibid. p.15) reflects on the purpose of the tapestries; "traditional and sacred patterns are woven into the rugs, making them part of the very fabric of tribal life and identity, and the borders protect and enclose a space decorated with devices for the promotion of good fortune, fertility and for warding off evil influences". What draws each of these traditions together, as noted by Thompson (ibid. pp.14-15), is that "all these patterns charged with significance [...] represent a tradition maintained exclusively by women". Young takes up a similar thread writing of the war tapestry makers: "They [the tapestries] have a common maternity: most are done by women whose roles in these conflicts were remarkably similar – often caught in the crossfire of advancing and retreating armies, often innocent bystanders and victims, and only occasionally war combatants themselves" (ibid. p.34). In the case of the Chilean arpilleras of this exhibition, the trend was no different. It was the mothers and the grandmothers, the partners and the lovers, the sisters and the daughters, who created the arpilleras to "speak against the silence and the shadow" (Agosín, 2008, dedication) of the regime.

¹ There is further context background information available on request (in English)

Individual and Universal

A striking element of the arpilleras is the dichotomy of the individual/universal throughout. This binary relationship works on a number of levels across the pieces. There is the individual experience of the arpillera and of the audience that then views her work; the individual experience of the person who lost someone to the regime and the universal experience of all of those men and women who lost their loved ones; and the individuality of the Chilean case of torture and poverty and the universal experience of these same issues.

For the individual arpillera, the making of arpilleras provided both an economic outlet and a medium through which they could bear witness to the atrocities of the regime and the hardships and joys of daily life during it. Agosin (2008, p.9) writes that, the arpillera “process of creation” came from “desperate economic necessity and a virtually hopeless quest for justice for the many women who had lost husbands, sons, and daughters at the hands of the regime”. The work of the *arpilleristas* thus display a dual purpose, it tells a history of the regime, but it also provides for the economically disadvantaged, many of whom are doubtlessly suffering the absence of the income of their ‘disappeared’ loved ones. The workshops, where the arpilleras were created, provided a space of creativity and camaraderie, as demonstrated in the arpillera “Arpilleras y cartoneros” (Arpillera women and cardboard collectors) where the creative chaos of the arpillera’s workshop is colourfully conveyed in all its busyness. Zeitlin Cooke discusses the makeup of these groups and the cohesion of the groups, saying “these women do not belong to any ethnic minority; they are simply working class women, living in the capital city of Santiago, who were radicalised and galvanised by the mass disappearances of citizens during the military dictatorship that followed” (op. cit., 2005, p.18). In brief, it is an art of poverty.

The *arpilleristas* did not work using bought rolls of cloth; their material was drawn from what they could lay their hands on. Necessity, so they say, breeds invention, and the busy hands and minds of these women gave no exception to this. From their origins in the pre-radicalised past, the arpilleras were created from scraps of material. The women delved into the resources known to them and created something new from what they already knew. Workshops of women, who previously had produced images of rural Chile, of hills and sunshine and farm scenes, displayed vigour for change and captured the new situation in their later work.

This was the context of the creation of the arpillera, the context of their eventual audience was rather different. The majority of arpilleras found their way into the world via NGOs and church-run charities to be sold to raise vital funds for the communities that made them, as well as to raise awareness of the oppressive acts of the Pinochet regime. Many of those women who bought the arpilleras were middle-class, some with an interest in Latin America, others perhaps simply drawn to the craft’s style, or eager to involve themselves in some kind of charitable effort. Even

now, the audience – such as ourselves - though far removed from the humble beginnings of the arpilleras, somehow have a natural bond to them. However, as we will discuss later when considering the ‘trail of context’, the arpillera has managed to traverse the gulf between their individual creation by the arpillerista and the universal experience of their many audiences and the response of present day arpilleristas from other parts of the world, a few of which are included in this exhibition.

The second individual/universal binary is the individual experience of daily life under the regime as translated into the arpilleras, and the way in which these same pieces then reflect the greater universal experience of the suffering at the time by many other Chileans. For many of the arpilleristas, the stitching of their stories of resistance offered a medium through which they had an opportunity to channel their individual stories of suffering. A most poignant fact of the evolution of the arpilleras, is that it was often the scraps of clothing from the ‘disappeared’ which were sewn into the images, for example “Paz, justicia, libertad” (Peace, justice, freedom). Thus, the women used not only their material resources, but something deeper than that, they sewed their lives and their loss into the tapestries.

The use of materials immediately connected to the ‘disappeared’ brings us to an important aspect of this discussion, the importance of the actual process of the making of the arpilleras. The art of the arpillerista is one of dedication, precision and time, sometimes painful. It was driven, not only by economic necessity, but also by a need to relate a story. André Jacques in his work *Chili: Un Peuple brode sa vie et ses lutes* (Chile: A People that embroiders its life and its struggles) (no citation available), speaks of meeting one arpillerista whom he asks, ‘how did you learn to make such beautiful arpilleras?’ (*Comment as-tu appris a faire de si belles arpilleras?*). The woman, he writes, stopped in front of him and took his neck in both hands and replied “it was hunger that taught me” (*C’est la faim qui me l’a appris*). This story can be imagined in two ways, the woman was perhaps driven by both her literal hunger and economic need, but also her appetite for justice and hunger to make herself heard. This need was then translated into hours of detailed work, and the time taken influences the process deeply. The process of creation cannot be done in a rush. The arpilleristas may have been expert seamstresses, and their hands could fly across the materials like a brush across a canvas, but their thought processes, individually and collectively, were profound and sometimes it was a painful and lengthy process to find the way to portray and share their story as in “La cueca sola” (Dancing *cueca* alone). Thus, in these communities of cloth, scissors and needles, the women poured their stories into the cloths. The miniature figures, that protested or screamed or danced or begged, moved from their fingers to the cloth and took with them their stories and pain. James E. Young writes, “every movement of the hand that pushed the needle in and pulled it out” is reflected in each stitch, and each shows “memory as a physical activity, a material process whereby artists make sense of events inwardly and outwardly in the same act” (op. cit., 2005, p.34). This sense of process, the transfer of the story from person to cloth

is beautifully described in the words of one arpillerista who described how the textile 'received her tears', with the arpillera soaking them up (Personal communication, c.1982). Here both, figuratively and literally the process of catharsis drew the arpillerista's story and pain from her.

The duality of this process is apparent in how the arpilleristas did not only tell their individual stories. By stitching the narratives onto pieces of hessian, the arpillerista threaded the stories to become everyone's story. Two particular arpilleras which mirror this individual/universal concept are "Aquí se tortura" (Here they torture) and "Sala de Torturas" (Chamber of torture). In the first, the arpillerista tells a very personal story of her experience as a victim/survivor of torture. We grasp the vulnerability and loneliness of her ordeal in how the place of her torture is in a place devoid of other houses and people. A significant element of this piece is that the arpillerista used silk (one of the very few arpilleras to use this material) in the tapestry, probably a way to soften the viciousness of her experience. In contrast, the second arpillera, made by a relative of a torture victim, represents torture in a more graphic fashion, each image reflecting a different form of torture. The arpillerista, Violeta Morales, recently deceased, studied the modes of torture used before making this piece, and thus provides a testimony of the torture techniques used on the survivors of torture that she talked with. The figures are featureless and apparently depersonalised but it remains the way in which one woman represents her subjective experience of her loved one's suffering. However, both pieces encapsulate the individual and the universal. For the victim of torture her story becomes one universally shared.

When a contemporary audience views a tapestry which tells an individual person or community's experience they can relate these to either their own experiences or consider them within the context of universal experiences of the same. This connotation of the individual/universal is particularly relevant to this next section – 'the trail of context'.

Trail of Context

The arpilleras link and relate to numerous contexts. The stitches transcribe stories of political unrest, personal and group trauma and suffering, and the working-class environment of those who produced them. This exhibition is but one example of how they have entered a very different context. From the clatter of the women's workshops of *La Vicaría de la Solidaridad* to Osaka, Japan they have travelled leaving a trail through the different contexts they have been attached to, and each time bringing something new with them. The late French hermeneutical philosopher Paul Ricoeur wrote of the way in which stories transgress the temporal, so that certain stories can be omnipresent across the generations. Imagine the example of a child who hears stories from her grandparent of the war he lived through, thus they both share this experience, it is both past and present. Thus, these two people live across generations bridged by memory and stories. Ricoeur describes this as being

part of a “threefold realm” where we are oriented “toward the remembered past, the lived present, and the anticipated future of other people’s behaviour” (1990, pp.112-113). These stories are linked by what Ricoeur called ‘the trace’. He likens this to the mark left by an animal which the hunter might use to track it. So these stories leave us traces to follow the trail back to its origins and forward to where it continues to move: “Hence the trace indicates ‘here’ (in space) and ‘now’ (in the present), the past passage of living beings. It orients the hunt, the quest, the search, the inquiry. “ All of these traces then point to “a passed past that nevertheless remains preserved in its vestiges” (Ricoeur, 1990, p.120). The arpilleras act as a trace in this manner carrying a narrative across generations. Their narratives have moved along the trail from rural communities and *población* to embassy exhibitions managing to fit from one context to the next without having to change and with the audience having to engage, to enjoy them. Their ability to transfer a story from one context to the next is an important feature of the arpilleras. They convey stories of unimaginable grief and suffering, poverty, and political repression to many people fortunate enough to have never come closer to these experiences than reading about them in books or newspapers – particularly the young around us. The arpilleras themselves relate traumas that other mediums of communication may not have managed to convey to an audience who cannot personally understand.

In cases of trauma, one defining aspect of them is that they represent the unknown in the midst of the known. Bernet, citing the theory of Lacan, writes that “The trauma is traumatic for the subject, specifically because it is at once proper and improper, because it touches the subject in its most singular intimacy and all the while remaining a foreign body”. (2000, pp.169-170). According to Lacan, the traumatised subject is then torn between attempting to appropriate this new foreign experience and trying to hold on to what they know is theirs, is normal (ibid). The work of the arpilleristas in conveying the often awful reality of their daily lives might be considered in this way as a process of reflecting and exorcising these experiences. Primo Levi writing of the experiences of the Holocaust survivors and their inability to convey these to the world wrote: “If we came back home and wanted to tell, we would be missing the words. Daily language is the description of daily experience but here it is another world, here one would need a language “of this other world”, a language born here” (cited by Zeitlin |Cooke, 2005, p.8). The medium of the arpillera has allowed, at least to some extent, these vastly different contexts to be bridged. The use of a traditional form of art with its bright colours and 3D dolls, previously used to reflect cosy images of idyllic rural life, has provided an unexpected pathway into the recognition of the horrors of the regime’s violence. In some of the pieces these doll-figures dance, play, cook, wash, and work, while in others, they lie bloody on pathways, or defiant against armed soldiers, or mournful in protest at their lost loved ones. Gimblett perfectly conveys this juxtaposition of innocence and horror when she writes that their ‘folksiness’:

“lends them an innocence that makes the sense of victimhood absolutely unbearable. They make war seem like infanticide because the figures are so miniaturised, so

sweet, so non threatening. In fact it's extremely difficult to convey such extraordinary pain in such a sweet medium" (op cit. 2005, p.51).

Thus portrayed in this striking manner, the doll-like figures inhabit a world where universal contexts of poverty, torture, etc. can be imposed onto them. Their simplicity also means that they open up the possibility for reappropriating them for new contexts. They allow anyone willing to take the time and pick up a needle and thread to relate their own stories through cloth and stitches - a reality visible in the continuation of the arpillera tradition into other Latin countries and more recently to the UK and Ireland. Women who have or have not been sewing or using other textile traditions have equally adopted this resource that allows them to tell their own stories.

The arpilleras: Stitching Narratives of Resistance

With little fanfare the arpillera tradition has carried its message of resistance from Chile to much further afield. Every step, every stitch, of the arpillera's journey can be described in terms of resistance. In the very first place, the groups of women which met to create them were resistant in more ways than one. Marjorie Agosín, speaking of her first meeting with a group of arpilleras, describes them carrying bread bags full of scraps of cloth with determination in their faces, "as if their lives were carried in those bags whose purpose was to find out about the fate of their loved ones. They were there with their lives, memories, and families, all braided together and united through a scrap of cloth" (Agosín, 2008, p.77). The apparently innocuous thus became an act of radical subversion. Vivienne Barry's striking 2004 short film about the arpilleras ("Como Alitas de Chincol"²) shows how the arpillera workshops became genuine acts of resistance against the regime. However, it took about five years for the government to become aware of their subversive nature, simply because they used such a mundane daily activity to express their resistance. In addition, the arpilleras were acts of resistance in the way in which they broke with traditions. Firstly, the arpilleras resisted the traditional format of rural idyll by depicting images of political oppression and more urban reflections of daily life. Secondly, they allowed women to resist traditional roles making them economically more empowered –something that was especially relevant when many of the traditional breadwinners had 'disappeared' or were imprisoned. Violeta Morales, the sister of the 'disappeared' Newton Morales, said of her work

"With the money from the arpilleras I pay the light and the water bills, and buy the notebooks and pencils the children need for school. Sometimes there is something for food, too. When we get a bigger order, on pay day I buy a hot dog for each person in our family. It's such a lovely celebration." (Agosín, 2008, p. 43).

All of the motivating factors of their daily lives, of poverty, grief, resistance, joy were stitched in as acts of resistance and in turn produced something which could spread

² "Like the little wings of a small bird"

that message of resistance worldwide. This brings us to their next act of resistance. The arpilleras resisted the confines of being simply pieces of traditional art being sold to raise funds and awareness, they have additionally become ambassadors. They bring a particular history of Chile, the darkness and the light of the time, and carry it across the world. They represent the living who created them, and the dead that they were made to memorialise. In their ambassadorial role they bring aspects of Chilean culture with these stories wrapped inside. And in this role they in turn inspire and bring out empathy and impulse to respond with their own narratives. Cooke and MacDowell (2005, p.9) write of war tapestries that: "In their use of domestic art to convey their war experiences, the artists- refugees also evoke for us, the audience, the routine of peaceful everyday life, exactly what the bereaved, have lost in war". The arpilleras, then, act as a reminder to us of what we have and startle us into seeing what others have lost. And in their startling simplicity the arpilleras compel us to do something, to in turn bear witness for the suffering of those in the tapestries. Isabel Allende in her introduction to *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love* (2008) describes how these "tapestries of infamy", as the dictatorship labelled them, smuggled out from her native Chile to the USA came to gain fame as they were exhibited. And with each exhibition they gained more support, their stories demanding to be heard.

James E. Young has written of war tapestries, "What does it mean to live with these visual narratives of war, displacement, and suffering created for others? How do we make these stories – of others, by others—part of our own life stories?" (op cit. 2005 p.32). For some they made the stories their own by listening and acting in terms of raising awareness and advocating for reform in the Pinochet regime. But they also inspired further movements of women across South America and beyond to also tell their stories. The art form of the arpillera spread to women's' groups in Peru, and is now enjoying a massive wave of creative popularity in the UK and Ireland where needles stitch stories of anti-war protests, national histories, climate change worries, and so on. And so the arpilleras have continued to promote a message of resistance and have inspired other groups to stage their own acts of resistance. In each context that these arpilleras are shown (churches, community halls, embassies) their versatility shines through.

This paper has considered the arpilleras under three main concepts: the binary of individual and universal, the 'trail of context', and the arpilleras as an act of resistance. I will conclude with a note to the viewers of the exhibition on how they might approach the works.

How could the person who pauses in front of one of these colourful tapestries respond? The arpilleras of this exhibition can be considered on a number of levels. They might be considered as merely colourful craftwork exercises, examples of a tradition began in Chile which has now stretched and evolved across other Latin American countries and into Europe. They may be read as symbols of sisterhood, created by groups of women working together and producing a product which they

could then sell to help provide for themselves, their families, and communities. They may be also seen as missals from campaigners whose message was otherwise stifled from being heard in any other way, traces of a context which no longer exists except in these tapestries and peoples' memories. The pieces are indeed, one and all of these things, and reflect as a whole an arpillera in themselves; a collision of styles, histories, experiences, and messages which provide us with an overarching message of the continuity of daily life yesterday and today, and its stories of loss, grief, anger, joy, frustration and hope.

At first glance these pieces are simply pretty textiles. However, if one looks closer at the apparently innocuous brightly coloured three-dimensional dolls dancing across some of these pieces, you see that they are not simply puppets but protesting campaigners; the impoverished seeking food, shelter, and employment. Brightly coloured houses at closer inspection reveal themselves to be over-crowded shanty towns, layers of daily life which are sewn onto these rags and strips of cloth, scraps of material which themselves carry stories of former lives and histories, now reinvented as stories for us. Whatever strikes one first glancing across these beautiful works of art, be sure to look again, and then again, and even again, for each piece carries layer upon layer of meaning, symbolism, and stories, which can be related to our own daily lives, stories which we can live.

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