

Welcome by the curator

A warm welcome to you all to the opening of this very special exhibition that celebrates 25 + year quilts of Irene. This collection brings together people from different walks of life and today we have the privilege of having all her close family with us celebrating Irene's life and work.

Anne Montgomery has already referred to the richness and skilfulness of Irene's work and we thank her for doing the research and interviews that gave birth to what we have just heard.

I'd like to refer to Irene's contribution to memory by documenting in these 26 quilts events that explicitly show natural and human made disasters. Sitting diligently at her sewing machine while listening to the radio or watching TV, making compost, looking after the garden, sharing with family, running workshops, editing a quilt magazine - none of these activities have separated her from being a woman aware of what goes on in and around herself and the world beyond. She leaves through her work an account of those events that are there for ever.

I met Irene in the context of preparing for the 2008 International Women's Day exhibition ***The Art of Survival: International and Irish Quilts***, which featured textiles with a story of survival in the midst of conflict. In partnership with Heritage and Museum Services we designed an exhibition that distributed these textiles around the city in 9 different venues. All of this is archived and kept alive in the digital CAIN website of the University of Ulster. The textiles that we exhibited spanned 22 different countries and Irene's ***Common Loss: 3000+ dead***, that refers directly to Northern Ireland, was at the heart of the exhibition. I chose it as the cover of the catalogue we produced and copies are on the table for you to look at. Her quilt was on display at the Verbal Arts Centre where the launch of that exhibition took place.

Since then she has not stopped her collaboration and any of the exhibitions I curate, be that in the UK or beyond, has a piece of hers. Some textiles are from her collection; others were made by invitation and in resonance with the content and concept of the exhibition. She has engaged with the art of the Chilean and other Latin American arpilleristas and has made some pieces similar in scale to arpilleras and speaking out her concerns for the environments, children caught in war or other contemporary and universal issues.

It is in this context that I have brought into this collection the panel of Chilean arpilleras made by 9 Chilean women in 1979 in the midst of a brutal dictatorship. They worked together in a workshop and shared and stitched the events that affected their lives and the consequences of them in their daily lives. The women speak out and, with just a needle, scraps of mostly discarded materials and some wool, they articulated, denounced, cried out and acted with regards to what was happening in their lives. In 1982 the arpilleristas gave the panel to the WCC in gratitude for its support to their humanitarian and political causes. This is the first time that these arpilleras have ever been exhibited and I thought it would be a way to pay tribute to Irene and her work.

The 1998 year quilt has been placed in a prominent position at the beginning of the exhibition to enable and trigger debates, as it features the signing of the Good Friday agreement. On Tuesday 21st February here at the Tower Museum a seminar will be held that starts from the square Irene made for this event. It is entitled "From the Signing of the Good Friday Agreement to a possible Truth Commission for Northern Ireland".

So, women from all over the world use the tradition of the needle to sew but also to leave testimony of their stand in the world. I invite you to enjoy the exhibition and let yourself be transported by each square or piece that speaks out to you. They will speak to you and will bring out in you feelings and concerns that might shape actions that could contribute to a better world.

I finish with a quote from Professor James Young, director of The Institute of the Holocaust, Genocide and Memory Studies of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA which suits this whole collection. In one of the chapters of the catalogue to the 2005 exhibition Weavings of War he says:

“They show memory as a physical activity, a material process whereby artists have made sense of events inwardly and outwardly in the same act. What those women saw matters to us not because their versions correspond to some kind of normative historical record, but because they don’t. Part of what happened is how these events are remembered to us after the fact.”

Thanks for coming.