

The Art of Resistance, Memory and Testimony in Political Arpilleras

This exhibition which is rooted in Chilean arpilleras is one of many that have been shown from Derry, Northern Ireland, to New York, Osaka, Dublin, Letterkenny, London, Cambridge, Sao Paulo, Berlin Nuremberg, and in this trip they are coming to the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and George Washington University in Washington. 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. They represent what might be considered a 'folksiness' or lesser genre of art and yet they are exhibited, without apology, in art galleries, universities 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 non-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.

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 tortured, 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, on the 11th September 1973, a USA backed coup by General Augusto Pinochet ousted Allende's government replacing it with a repressive dictatorship (Kornbluh, 2004). According to last official statistics published in August 2011 there are 3216 officially disappeared and executed people and 38254 survivors of political imprisonment and torture. <http://www.icsoc.cl/observatorio-derechos-humanos/>

The Arpilleras that were provoked into existence by the Pinochet regime were not the first, nor indeed the last textiles with a story, 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). Young adds when 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 first arpilleras to “speak against the silence and the shadow” (Agosín, 2008, dedication) of the regime.

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 arpillerista 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 and loose 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 arpillerista, 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. Agosín (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 *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. 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, find a natural bond to them. 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 arpillera followers from other parts of the world, a few of which are included in this exhibition.

There is also 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 the actual process of the making of the arpilleras. The art of the arpillera 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. The process of creation cannot be done in a rush. The arpilleras 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 them. 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 arpillera 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 arpillera’s story and pain from her.

The duality of this process is apparent in how the arpilleras did not only tell their individual stories. By stitching the narratives unto pieces of hessian, the arpillera threaded the stories to become everyone’s story.

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 UMass, USA, 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). The arpilleras themselves relate traumas that other mediums of communication may not have managed to convey.

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 far beyond. 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 many ways. 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 Chicol"¹) shows how the arpillera workshops became genuine acts of resistance against the regime. 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 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 that 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. 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.

The art form of the arpillera spread to women's groups in Peru, and is now enjoying a massive wave of creative popularity in Barcelona, Brazil, the UK and Ireland where needles stitch stories of anti-war protests, national histories, climate change worries, and so on. We can also find emerging workshops in Zimbabwe, Colombia, Nicaragua. And so the arpilleras have continued to promote a message of resistance and have inspired other groups to stage their own acts of resistance.

How could the person who pauses in front of one of these colourful tapestries respond? The arpilleras and textiles of this exhibition can be considered on a number of levels. They might be considered as merely colourful craftwork exercises, examples of a tradition which began in Chile and which has now stretched and evolved across other Latin American countries and into Europe. They may be read as symbols of camaraderie, 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 manuals 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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27th February 2012