

Arpilleras from Yesterday and Today

The Chilean cultural tradition of the arpillera is celebrated in this collection, in its traditional and later explicitly politicised form, and in its evolution beyond Chile to Peru, Zambia, Ireland and the UK, where, in the latter cases, traditional quilting styles have absorbed the arpillera style and made it into something fresh and unique.

Arpilleras (pronounced "ar-pee-air-ahs") are three-dimensional appliqué textiles of Latin America. *Arpilleras* are actually an old regional activity from Isla Negra on Chile's long west coast, where rags were used to create images and then embroidered on large pieces of cloth. Originally, hessian fabric (or '*arpillera*' in Spanish) was used as the backing and that word then became the name for this particular type of tapestry. Generally, arpilleras are known as quilts or wall hangings; however, they are now also considered to be a type of contemporary craft.

From their earliest incarnation the arpillera has been used to depict daily life. In its history, this traditional handicraft has thus moved from the reflection of peaceful pastoral Chilean life, towards women protesting at the 'disappearance' of their loved-ones, to calls for a more just society for the poor, and to campaigns for an unpolluted environment. Most keep to the tradition of depicting the ever-present Andes and bright Chilean sun at the top of a piece. They communicate to the viewer the 'politics of the mundane', representing a specifically female perspective on the world; voicing that feminist dictum – 'the personal is political'. Through their sewing, the voices of women are heard and reflect the politics of hunger, poverty, loss, environmental damage, community power, and family. The simplicity of the arpillera allows an avoidance of over-intellectualised symbolism, and provides a medium

which can be easily applied and reinterpreted across cultures, beautifully reflected here in most of the contemporary of arpilleras from Ireland, Northern Ireland, Catalonia and the UK.

In “Olla Común” we see children sent to the soup kitchen when their mothers cannot feed them, and in “Vamos a la Playa en Micro” we see the class differences in daily life where the poorer Chileans travel by the *Ovalle Negrete* bus to the beach. In the Chilean “No a las Alzas/No a la Dictadura/Basta de hambre” from the early 1980s, in the Peruvian “Los Precios Están en Las Nubes” from the late 1980s, and most recently in the Irish “Overdue, Overdrawn, Over-extended” the anxieties of managing economic crises and mounting debts in daily life are all laid bare. Thus, the arpillera is a mechanism to relate the quotidian; it acts like a journal entry reflecting snapshots of everyday life which are in themselves both mundane and strikingly political in the issues that underlie them.

The arpilleras of this exhibition can be considered on a number of levels. They might be considered as merely colourful handicraft, examples of a tradition begun 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 also be seen as missals from campaigners whose message was otherwise stifled from being heard in any other way. The pieces are, indeed, one and all of these things, and reflect the 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, looking at them closer, it becomes apparent that the brightly coloured three-dimensional dolls are not simply puppets but protesting campaigners. They are the impoverished seeking food, shelter, and employment. Brightly coloured houses at closer inspection reveal themselves to be overcrowded 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 on the first sight of these vibrant works, it pays to look again and then again and even again. For each piece carries layer upon layer of meaning, symbolism, and stories that can be related to our own daily lives.

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Curator

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Photographs by Martin Melaugh

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