

## Arpilleras: Community Action and Empowerment through Narrative Textile Art

An exhibition curated specially for The George Washington University Art Therapy Program and Art & Remembrance  
Roberta Bacic, curator, January 2012

Arpilleras (pronounced "ar-pee-**air**-ahs") are three-dimensional appliqué tapestries of Latin America. Arpilleras are actually from the Chilean tradition, an old regional pictorial appliqué technique from Isla Negra on the coast of Chile, whereby rags were used to create images and then embroidered on large pieces of cloth. Initially hessian, arpillera in Spanish, was used as their backing, and that then became the name for this particular type of work. Sometimes small dolls were added for three dimensional effects.

After the military coup in 1973, which introduced the Pinochet regime, the Association of Relatives of the Disappeared in Chile began to make arpilleras. They were handcrafted, using scraps of materials collected by women or donated by the churches. They tell their stories and became a means of supporting the makers' families. They were also made by women political prisoners, either while inside prisons or when released. They used them to smuggle out notes to people who would denounce what was happening at national or international levels or people who might assist them in their different needs or would be able to pass on messages to their dear ones.

Even the most suspicious guards in jails did not think to check the arpilleras for messages, since sewing was seen as inconsequential women's work. Nor did other people in power and ordinary people recognise the power they could have in pictorially denouncing what was really happening and was otherwise denied by the government and ignored by most of society.

Many Chilean women found refuge in the Vicariate of Solidarity organized by the Catholic Church. In dark basements and other secret meeting rooms provided by supporters, mothers, wives, lovers, friends, daughters and sisters began to design and sew together in order to express their common tales of torture, of pain and love and save them from oblivion. Part of the church and a network of solidarity people smuggled arpilleras out of Chile and so the world – and the ones who listened - came to know more about the oppressive, unjust and bloody life under the dictatorship. They were often bought as a way to support the struggle, including some of the ones you see in this display.

In the arpilleras are elements such as photos, images, and names of the missing and sewn words and expressions such as "**¿Dónde están?**" (Where are they?). The scrap material and stitching that ultimately create the simple and clear lines and forms of the figures and motifs depicted on these arpilleras allow the viewer to perceive the determination of the creators. These arpilleras have served as testimony to the tenacity and strength of these Chilean women in their brave struggle for truth and justice and to break the code of silence imposed upon them and upon the country.

At the time they were done, the arpilleras depicted what was actually happening under the dictatorship. Today they are witnesses to what can not be forgotten and is part of our present past that needs to be dealt with.

From Chile, the stitching of peace through the arpillera was adopted by other Latin American countries. The influence of such stitching is now seen through quilts and arpilleras produced in Africa and Europe, all of which are represented in this exhibition.

## Corte de agua en una población / Water cut in a población

Unknown workshop, c.1979, Chile, courtesy of Kinderhilfe Chile-Bonn



This is a traditional arpillera with the mountains of Chile and the sky and sun colorfully depicted in the background. It is from the first decade of the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile and it depicts the hardship of the people in a poor community. Is this an indication of the arpilleras' sense of courage and empowerment that underlies many of the messages in these tapestries. The community has had their water cut off, forcing them to go some distance to collect buckets of water for domestic and personal needs. It is a reminder that the poor were much oppressed. In spite of this, the community is pulling together and boys are helping the women fill their buckets. This community in solidarity has found ways to cope with their difficult circumstances.

Such situations recurred often during the regime and poor women were forced to find their voice. They realized that it was not enough to write complaints to the local newspapers, which were censored in any case. Rather, they learned they must find different outlets, different ways to make their voices heard.

## La gente necesita trabajar/ People need work

Unknown workshop, c.1975, Chile, courtesy of Rosario Miralles, Spain



In this small political arpillera we can see how an important element of daily life is being portrayed: the shortage of work. The men and women depicted appear to be discussing their worries about unemployment, perhaps having come to the municipality building to seek work and have seen the no vacancies sign hung on its door. In keeping with the arpillera tradition, the sun still shines from behind the mountains, reflecting, perhaps, that there is still hope.

This arpillera has had an adventurous history. Made in Chile c.1975, then brought to Ireland by a Spanish priest who had received it from a priest in Chile; the priest bestowed it to his sister, an activist with Chilean women's solidarity groups, thence to the curator.

## Carabineros tumbando olla común / Police tumbling soup kitchen

Unknown workshop, c.1978, Chile, courtesy of Kinderhilfe Chile-Bonn



In this sombre traditional arpillera there is no sun in the sky and the hills are made in one flat red color. In the background, poor villagers use wires to tap into the main power supply. Racked with poverty, these villagers cannot afford to pay for their electricity. The community has decided to prepare a soup kitchen. It is distressing to see that the scene depicts an armed policeman tumbling the whole soup pot onto the ground and the young people approaching the place with their soup plates in their hands will have no food today. A police car is standing by, further intimidating the local people.

## Lavandería ▪ Santa María ▪ / Santa Maria Laundrette

Unknown workshop, c. 1975, Chile courtesy of Lala & Austin Winkley



The colorful images of this arpillera from an unknown Chilean workshop belies the fact that it was created in the mid-1970s, in the relatively recent aftermath of the Pinochet dictatorship that came to power in 1973. While demonstrating the physically hard life of the women who must scrub and wash and beat the dust from the clothes that are brought there, it also reflects on the continuity of life in the midst of chaos. In this work there is a kind of peace, shown in the daily routine acts of cleaning, even when peace is unattainable in the bigger picture.

The creating of the arpilleras could also be therapeutic. As Violeta Morales wrote: *"I put all my energy into the arpillera workshop; it was sometimes the only thing that kept me balanced emotionally. There I found people who were suffering from the same thing and trying to help them sometimes helped me with my own tragedy."* (Violeta Morales, quoted by Marjorie Agosín)

## Vamos a la playa en micro / Lets go to the beach by bus

Unknown workshop, c.1977, Chile, courtesy of Kinderhilfe Chile—Bonn



Made in an unknown arpillera workshop, most likely in Santiago, during some of the worst years of the Pinochet dictatorship, this piece depicts a scene so far from the violence of disappearances and torture of the time that it seems like another world. By continuing to find pleasure in the midst of repression and fear, the trips to the beach are a form of peaceful protest against the regime and suggest hope for better days in the future. Ovalle Negrete is the route of a popular bus that conveys memories of a day journey to the beach of working class families, when holidays are not financially possible, and at a time when to keep alive warm memories from good times lived with the missing ones seems crucial.

## Violencia en las calles de Santiago de Chile / Violence in the streets of Santiago de Chile

Unknown workshop, c. 1979, Chile, courtesy of the curator



This is a traditional arpillera with the Andes Mountains of Chile and the moon and stars depicted in the background, placing the scene at night, probably under curfew. The word retén means police station. We can see an injured person in a puddle of blood and the police walking away. The scene does not make it clear who is responsible for the wounded person, though we certainly see that the police are not fulfilling their duty to look after the citizens. It is the people from the neighbourhood who are assisting the person. This arpillera is from the first decade of the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile and it depicts, as many others, the hardship of the people in a poor community.

From the sewing and crochet borders of the arpillera, we recognize that the woman who made it is not a skilled sewer, but she engages us nonetheless in portraying a distressing personal experience to avoid it being forgotten and to tell the world what is going on.

## No going back

Sonia Copeland, Northern Ireland, 2009, courtesy of the artist



More than ten years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement that paved the way to peace after 30 years of conflict, civil society continued to hope that the problems of the past would never return. But, early in 2009, two incidents caused three deaths and people took to the streets to protest about them.

Sonia Copeland has made quilts for a long time but this is her first arpillera. She said: “My piece of work shows the Belfast City Hall, and in the foreground a representation of one of the cross-community demonstrations which followed the murders of Constable Stephen Carroll and Sappers Mark Quinsy and Patrick Asimkar by alleged Republican terrorists.

“This demonstration of support and solidarity for the victims and their families was important to me personally, as I had served in the Royal Ulster Constabulary during the worst years of The Troubles, and had suffered as a result of terrorist attacks on four occasions. It seemed to me that the peace won as a result of so much pain and suffering was once again to be snatched away. At the demonstration, I resolved that nothing and no-one would steal from my children the right to a peaceful life, which was stolen from me and my generation.”

## Play today, pay tomorrow

Irene MacWilliam, Northern Ireland, 2010, courtesy of the artist



This arpillera style piece made by a well known quilt maker places her personal concerns about the environment and the different aspects that we have to look at when dealing with this subject. She sets it in the first person by having children carry the balloons of the things we have badly affected in nature and all around us. It also shows the footprints of carbon we have left all over the world and the sand watch is showing us that time is starting to run out to repair this.

It seems particularly poignant that it is a child who carries the huge sand watch, a legacy we adults are leaving them to deal with. Irene MacWilliam’s machine sewing skills are very present in her textiles. In her own words: “I am certainly not an arpillera, though voice my concerns and recognize the power of this kind of textile narrative through my pieces that respond to the powerful arpilleras. I adopt the size, format and concerns, though I acknowledge I have not had such hard experiences as these women have, and sympathize with them and admire them.”

## **Will there be poppies, daisies and apples when I grow up?**

Irene MacWilliam, Northern Ireland, 2009, courtesy of the artist



Irene MacWilliam's work includes a quilt made up of 3161 different pieces of red material from around the world, representing all of those killed between 1969 and 1994 in the Northern Irish conflict. This piece expresses the maker's own worries for her grandchildren and the burden of anxiety and responsibility of her generation for climate change and an ever changing environment. In this arpillera, she reflects, in first person, the concerns affecting us globally via the language and world of a child: "Will there still be flowers and apples in the future?"

Irene MacWilliam's detailed stitching symbols of passing time and carbon footprints all over the world make this piece vivid and hard-to forget. Irene's expertise in the use of machine sewing and appropriate use of fabrics is prominent in this piece she made especially for an exhibition at the Chilean Embassy in London and Consulate General in New York.

## **Overdue, Overdrawn, Overextended: Rural Poverty in Ireland**

Deborah Stockdale, Ireland, 2009 made for Arpilleras That Cry Out, exhibition, courtesy of the artist



This piece reflects the terrible pressure being felt by members of the rural farming community in Ireland since the recession. In these cases, families and homes are disrupted by the violence of poverty and gnawing despair. Speaking on the theme that inspired her work, Deborah Stockdale has said: "Many of us are living lives of quiet desperation, with foreclosures and bankruptcies more and more common. Many farming families see no way forward".



### **Any time and everywhere - Anna Frank's universality**

Heidi Drahota, German textile teacher and artist, 2011, courtesy of the artist



Heidi Drahota works in a secondary school with refugee children from different parts of the world and besides the textile craft, she works with them on issues and concerns that affect their lives and routines. This is her first arpillera as before she has always worked in bigger pieces. This has been her personal response to being part of exhibitions that included quilts and arpilleras. It is also her personal expression as a German profoundly affected by the Second World War, created after attending an arpillera workshop as part of the program that ran alongside the exhibition **The Human Cost of War** that took place at the Imperial War Museum in London, the Whitechapel Art Gallery, Saint Ethelburgah's Peace and Reconciliation Centre in 2009 and then Tower Museum, Derry, Northern Ireland in 2010. This piece has been on display with three other new pieces from around the world during the exhibition **Arpilleras of Chilean political resistance** at the Memorial da Resistência de São Paulo / Pinacoteca do Estado, Brazil, 2011.

### **No to the dam**

Linda Adams, from Ely, England, 2011



This arpillera was made by Linda Adams at the time the University of Cambridge hosted a solo exhibition of her work and which was accompanied by poetry reading from Chile. **The poetry of arpilleras** was hosted by the Centre of Latin American Studies which was the place where Linda Adams saw her first collection of arpilleras in 2008. **The banners** sewn into this arpillera read: **This dam was not necessary** and **How much more land are we to lose?**

Linda Adams made four new pieces for the occasion and studied the history of the Mapuche people for over a year to prepare for it. The one depicted refers specifically to the Mapuche people's 81-day hunger strike in 2010, though it also connects to struggles in her own community to stop the building of a dam when she was a child. She also links this to other struggles on this issue in other countries.

## My evacuation from Berlin

Mara Loytved - Hardegg, German artist residing in Berlin



This is Mara Loytved's first and only arpillera. It is the outcome of an arpillera workshop on the topic of evacuation, running alongside the exhibition *The Human Cost of War* that took place in November 2010 in the Tower Museum, Derry, Northern Ireland. As a recognized artist she had a piece on display as part of the exhibition. After a guided tour by the curator around the exhibition, she joined the workshop focused on evacuation. Each participant connected it to their own experience. The arpillera very much revives her experience of having to leave Berlin with mother preparing a suitcase and her teddy bear to carry with them. She lost the suitcase during the travels and only got it back after the end of the war as, luckily, her mother had written the name and address they had at the time they fled and someone responded to it. Her attentive focus, her promptness to bring this memory to the present, her creative energy when patching it together and her donating the piece to the collection adds to the experience and speaks by itself.

## Peruvian arpillera book

Manos que Cuentan, Lima, 2009, courtesy of the curator

This arpillera book was acquired for me as gift in Peru. The women creators are mostly indigenous women and schoolteachers. They are trying to depict stories traditionally told orally and passed on through generations in this different form, so passing on important elements from their native culture to children displaced by the war between Shining Path and the government. The book speaks for itself.

