

Arpilleras: Evolution and Revolution

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Introduction

Arpilleras, from their humble origins in Chile, have traversed the globe, prompting much debate, resistance and action in their wake. In this brief address I will focus on the origins of arpilleras and how they evolved, the revolutionary nature of arpilleras and their universal journey.

The origins and evolution of arpilleras

What are arpilleras?

Arpilleras (pronounced "ar-pee-air-ahs") are three-dimensional appliquéd tapestries of Latin America that originated in Chile. The backing fabric of strong hessian, "arpillera" in Spanish became the name for these particular type of sewed pictures which came to mean the cloth of resistance. As empty potato or flour bags, materials at hand in any household, were also used for the backing, the typical arpillera size is a quarter or a sixth of a bag. At a later stage, the sewing of cloth figures and other small memorabilia onto these "cuadros" (pictures) evolved, giving them a special personalized quality and a three dimensional effect.

We believe that contemporary arpilleras originated in Isla Negra on the Chilean coastline. Around 1966 Leonor Sobrino, a long standing summer visitor to the area, prompted local women to use embroidery to depict scenes of their everyday lives. The group of women became *Las Bordadoras de Isla Negra* (the Embroiders of Isla Negra) and, mainly in the long

winter months, they embroidered bucolic scenes of their everyday rural lives. In 1970 they were exhibited for the first time in the National Museum of Art in Chile¹.

Another source and influence was the Chilean folk singer Violeta Parra. In her book about her mother, Isabel Parra² said that Violeta told a journalist in 1958 when she was too ill to sing, “*Arpilleras are like songs that one paints*”.

Their evolution

So, how did arpilleras evolve from the innocuous art of depicting comfortable rural scenes to graphically portraying the harsh reality of life under the Pinochet regime, 1973-1988? What prompted women, in the midst of severe repression, with scraps of material, needle and thread to recount collective and individual stories of disappearances, forced executions, torture, resistance, displacement and forced exile?

The historical context is well documented. In 1970, despite a USA-led campaign against him, Salvador Allende was democratically elected as the first Marxist president in the Americas. Three years later, on the 11 September 1973, a USA backed coup by General Augusto Pinochet ousted Allende’s government replacing it with a repressive dictatorship³.

During the dictatorship the tradition of arpilleras developed to give voice to the repressed and disenfranchised of Chilean society. The Vicaría de la Solidaridad, under the exclusive auspices of the Catholic Church, became a focal point for arpillera workshops as well as providing other forms of support. These new type of arpilleras were not the first textiles with a story to be born out of violence. The Hmong people produce story clothes, Afghanis weave detailed rugs, and the Zulu create memory cloths. James E Young⁴ reflects 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.”

¹ <http://www.culturalascondes.cl/home/bordadoras-de-isla-negra.html>

² Parra, 1985

³ Kornbluh, 2004

⁴ Young in Cooke & MacDowell, 2005

Similarly, in Chile, as Marjorie Agosín⁵ observes, 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*” of the regime.

The revolutionary role of arpilleras

Isabel Allende⁶ describes the impact of the military dictatorship on poor women in the shantytowns which changed their lives utterly and seeded the beginnings of the arpillera movement:

“Repression destroyed their families, extreme poverty paralysed them and fear condemned them to silence. In these hard circumstances, a unique form of protest was born: the arpilleras, small pieces of cloth sewn together, like primitive quilts.”



The arpilleras did not work using bought rolls of cloth; their material was drawn from what they could lay their hands on. Often it was the scraps of clothing from the ‘disappeared’ which were sewn into the images, for example ***Paz, Justicia, Libertad/ Peace, Justice, Freedom***. This arpillera, by an unknown arpillera dates from the late 1970s. It follows a classical pattern; the size corresponding to the equivalent to a fourth or sixth part of a flour bag, the Andes mountains defining the country – Chile - which is crossed by it from north to south becoming an element of identity and the sun in the centre, making the political statement that it shines for all. Another element present in this arpillera is the use of simple

⁵ Agosín, 2008

⁶ Allende in Agosín, 2008

blanket stitch bordered by crocheted red wool to resemble a frame, letting us know this is a picture, to hang in a room, to live with and not to be used as a practical domestic artefact.

In these communities of cloth, scissors and needles, the women poured their stories into the cloths. The miniature figures, that protested, denounced, screamed, danced or begged, moved from their fingers to the cloth and took with them their stories and pain. This sense of process, the transfer of the story from person to cloth is beautifully described in the words of one arpillerista⁷ who described how the textile “received her tears”, with the arpillera soaking them up. Here both, figuratively and literally the process of catharsis drew the arpillerista’s story and pain from her, which when stitched onto hessian, contested the official state narrative and became a powerful indictment of the regime.

Contesting women’s role in the domestic sphere/home

The process of creating arpilleras was driven not only by a need to bear witness to the atrocities of the regime but also out of economic necessity and making arpilleras became a vital source of income generation for women during this time. Marjorie Agosín⁸ details the impact of the economic and political policies of the Pinochet regime:

“They produced the conditions for economic growth on the backs of the underprivileged...poor women in the shantytowns were the main victims of the new regime. Thousands of them became the only providers in their homes, as their husbands, fathers and sons disappeared or roamed the country looking for menial jobs.”

Violeta Morales⁹, sister of the disappeared Newton Morales, chronicles the absolute poverty of this time:

“Our misery, that of the poor women in Chile was horrible...In many houses, they used their furniture to make bonfires to keep warm or cook food.. we arpilleristas not only wanted to denounce the disappearances of our loved ones but also wanted the people to know about the misery of our companeras living in the townships and the huge abuses that the military was committing in our country.”

For Violeta, making arpilleras and organising women’s workshops assumed a pivotal, all consuming role in her life as well as being a source of income:

⁷ Personal communication, c.1982

⁸ Agosín, 2008

⁹ Morales in Agosín, 2008

“When I arrived home at night, after my children were asleep, I began to make arpilleras...that helped me calm down a bit... and earn a little more money to feed my children...making arpilleras all night long, I could sell them through the Vicariate and earn money for my family.”



In the arpillera *Arpilleristas y cartoneros / Arpillerista women and cardboard collectors* by an unknown Chilean arpillerista (c1978) the cartoneros (people who collect cardboard to sell) struggling up the hill with their trailers full bring us face to face with the grinding poverty of the area. In the face of such repression and harsh circumstances, these women in their myriad of roles, ever resilient, not only found a way to survive but as arpilleristas found a way to narrate their stories to a global audience. Interestingly, this arpillera brings us into the work space of these women, absorbed in the process of creating a collective arpillera, narrating: *“what could not be told in words”*¹⁰.

As many women took on the role of breadwinner during this turbulent era, a shift in gender roles evolved which naturally impacted on their marriages and relationships at home. When asked about how their husbands reacted to their participation in arpillera workshops and their work as arpilleristas, women highlighted a variety of reactions ranging from initial opposition to practical support: *“When I am in a hurry to finish an arpillera, everybody in the house helps me, even my husband, when I catch him in a good mood”*. Maria Madariaga recounts the opposition which was sometimes violent:

¹⁰ Agosín, 2008

“Some husbands were opposed to the idea...Many of the women began rebelling against their husbands and defending their participation in the workshops...some of the other women had husbands that would hit them¹¹.”

The indomitable strength of women in the face of such repression, both domestic and political, is well described by Gala Torres, an active member of the Association of Detained and Disappeared (AFDD) and director of the *Folkloric Musical Ensemble of Relatives of the Detained-Disappeared*. For Gala, her activism stemmed from the arrest and disappearance of her brother, Ruperto Torres Aravena in 1973. She recalls¹²:

“We women used to have a secondary role in political activities. But after the coup, we realised that we could no longer be spectators, we would have to play a major role in the struggle for our disappeared relatives.”

Contesting women’s role in the public sphere

As the repression and human rights abuses deepened, women contested the actions of the dictatorship in the public sphere and immortalised these actions in their arpilleras. This public role for women emerged in part through men being the main targets for arrest, torture and disappearances. Marjorie Agosín observes how women challenged the dictatorship, contesting the limits of their role as mothers and carers:

“...the military dictatorship obligated these women to confront public life, to make their pain and grief visible. They not only created tapestries, but also initiated street protests, obtaining through their own initiative, a power that had been previously denied to women.¹³”

When asked how they found the strength to keep going, their replies emphasise not just the depth of their suffering but also their resilience:

“We’ve been hit by so many blows in life. We might as well be out on the frontlines now because many of us have nothing more to lose.¹⁴”

¹¹ Op. cit.

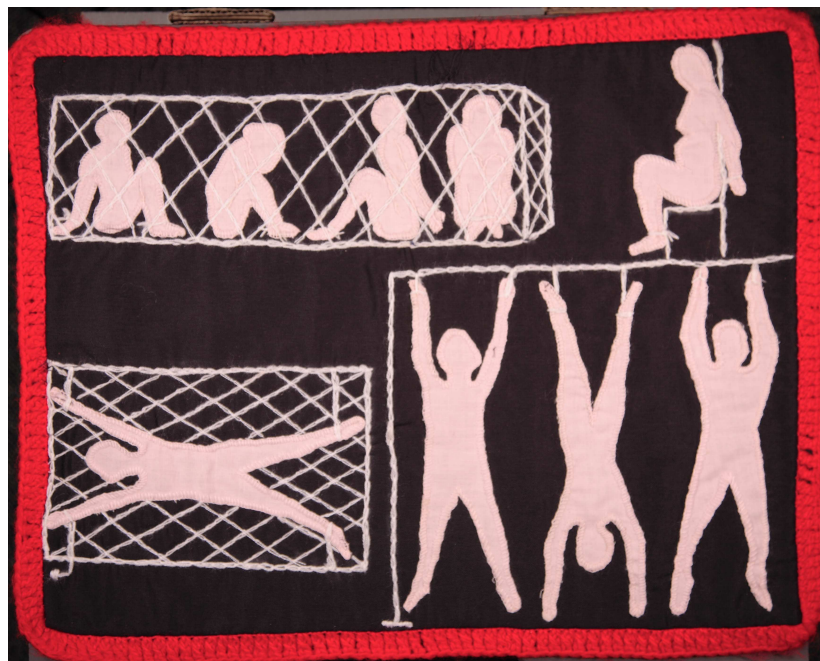
¹² Op. cit.

¹³ Op. cit.

¹⁴ Op. cit.



The anonymous arpillera *Encadenamiento / Women chained to parliament gates* (late 1980s) brilliantly illustrates how these women, with their lives in turmoil, persisted in demonstrating, challenging and contesting the actions of the Pinochet regime. In this arpillera, women have chained themselves to the gates in front of the congress in protest at the disappearance of their loved ones. For this act of civil disobedience, all of the women who took part in the protest were detained for five days.



Disappearances, forced executions and torture, which wreaked havoc in so many communities, soon became common themes in arpilleras. *Sala de torturas / Torture Chamber* by Violeta Morales (1996) is a most visually startling piece with its simple black

background and stark white figures. It graphically portrays people being tortured in various ways, portraying them in a dehumanised way with featureless faces, just as torture dehumanises individuals. Here Violeta is outspoken about Chile's infamous history of torture. As Co-ordinator of the group *Sabastián Acevedo Movement Against Torture (MCTSA)*, she actively contested the state narrative on torture and human rights abuses and was relentless in ensuring that people everywhere were informed of the widespread use of torture in Chile.



Music, song and dance became a medium for women to denounce the ongoing atrocities. In the arpillera *La cueca sola / Dancing cueca alone* by Gala Torres (1989) we see women solo dancing the traditional Cueca, Chile's national dance which represents the different emotions and stages of romance. It is meant to be danced in pairs wearing colourful clothing. Here the women dance alone and in severe black and white, wearing the image of their "disappeared" loved one over their heart. Performing the national dance in this manner was their way of denouncing the government's actions in a public space. The boldness, determination and creativity of the women depicted in this arpillera has inspired people all over the world. The Sting song "They dance alone" was based on it and has been performed by many other singers including Joan Baez and Holly Near.



As well as protesting against the ongoing atrocities of the regime, women also directed their energies towards the future, towards the type of society they wanted to shape and be part of. The arpillera, *Queremos Democracia* / *We want democracy* from a church community workshop (1988) depicts the “people’s power” in insisting on their rights to a peaceful, non violent society. Despite the hope conveyed by the bright colours, the presence of the police car is a reminder that overcoming the barriers to poverty and peace is not without challenge. In this difficult context they carry a banner that reads “democracy” hoping that if this is achieved, things will change.



And change did wind its way into the fabric of Chilean society. The arpillera ***Ganó la gente/People have won*** by an anonymous arpillerista in the early 1990s, depicts the outcome of the Chilean national plebiscite (referendum) held on October 5 1988, to determine whether or not dictator Augusto Pinochet would extend his rule for another eight-year term. Pinochet renounced office after the No vote was carried by 55.99%, putting an end to the almost 17 year military dictatorship. This arpillera announces that: "The people have won" and "Democracy has arrived." People are cheering excitedly at this new phase in Chilean politics, testimony to the political participation and resistance of grassroots people in the poor neighbourhoods of Chile and testimony also to the power of arpilleras in denouncing and contesting the atrocities of the regime.

The Universal journey of arpilleras

From the clatter of the women's workshops of *La Vicaría de la Solidaridad* in Chile, the art of making arpilleras has spread to women's groups in Peru and more recently to Spain, Brazil, the UK, Ireland, Germany, Zimbabwe, Colombia, Nicaragua and Ecuador. Across these varying contexts, in workshops primarily attended by women, the burning issues remain remarkably similar. As women reflect, discuss and caress the different textured fabrics, stories of political conflict, anti-war protests, repression, resistance, survival, denial, death, disappearances, displacement, national histories, environmental concerns, indigenous land struggles and transition to democracy are stitched.



In the Peruvian arpillera, *Marcha de las mujeres de los mineros / March of the miners' wives, daughters and sisters* (1985) María Herrera documents the struggles of the mining community and how they resisted and publicly highlighted their oppression. Here we see that María, like other arpilleristas from Peru has adopted much from the Chilean tradition. As Ariel Zeitlin Cooke and Marsha MacDowell¹⁵ observe:

“The Peruvian artists borrowed much from the Chilean arpilleristas: the idea of using pictorial patchwork as a vehicle for political activism,...They made an unfamiliar textile form their own...”

¹⁵ Cooke and MacDowell, 2005



A second Peruvian arpillera *Recuerdos de Guadalupe / Guadalupe's Longings* (1989) not only conveys the adoption of the Chilean arpillera tradition but also gives us a sense of the human connections and solidarity between Chilean and Peruvian women in trying times and their resourcefulness in procuring arpillera materials. As the title suggests, this arpillera poignantly illustrates the strong desire of human rights activist Guadalupe Ccallocunto to return to her homeland in Ayacucho, Peru and depicts an arpillera workshop she dreamed of creating on her return. Sadly, this workshop never materialised as a few months later, on 10 June 1990, she disappeared after being abducted from her home by the military in the presence of her children.



Many arpilleras have been produced depicting the oppression of indigenous communities and their struggles to resist oppression and exercise their rights - including their hunger strikes in protest at being treated as terrorists while defending their land and homes. Linda Adams, an English needle worker turned arpillera has focused on these themes. In *No a la represión/No to the dam* (2010) she links the current land struggles of the Mapuche people in Southern Chile and their resistance to the Ralco dam, to the impact of the Aswan Dam in Egypt constructed on the river Nile during the 1960s. Her depiction reveals their plight and makes their pleas universal.



Reflections on violence is a most challenging arpillera that brings out an immediate need to raise our voices thousands of miles from where flagrant human rights abuse is taking place. This arpillera, again by Linda Adams (2009), shows a scene in London when the Olympic torch arrived in the city, en route to China in 2008. The games were to show China as an outstandingly successful economic state. In contrast, by highlighting the Chinese suppression of Tibet, the arpillera is a protest against China as an oppressive political state.

It made the torch parade a contested space by supporting the right of the Tibetan people to self government. On show here in New Zealand, the arpillera again shouts for the world to heed Tibet's undaunted struggle for independence

Returning to Chile

It is fitting to return once more to Chile, this time in 2012 to illustrate how arpilleras, having journeyed globally, have come back, not unlike a returned exile, retaining the old traditions and introducing new influences.



Paro de los estudiantes chilenos 2/ Chilean students' strike 2 by Pamela Luque (2012) depicts the actions of the mass student movement in Chile, who since 2011 have initiated a series of mass marches and creative actions demanding free education as well as reform of the existing economic model.

Pamela, living in Ireland for 15 years, was moved to create this arpillera on seeing an arpillera exhibition in Donegal, Ireland in 2012. Purposely using only scraps of leftover and recycled fabric, techniques she had learnt as a young woman while living in Chile, this piece is reminiscent of the work of the early Chilean arpillera artists. The influences brought to bear in this arpillera, which depicts current student protests in a country where grassroots resistance was immortalised in arpilleras a few decades ago, is testimony to the enduring and global power of arpilleras.

Within every community, at every stage of their journey, from inception to exhibition, arpilleras challenge and contest. In connecting with their messages, pause, reflect and allow yourself to inhabit their contested spaces.

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In addition to these referenced books dozens of testimonies and interviews taken by the curator between 1975 and 1995 were reviewed. Also several journals and magazines were consulted, as well as ad-hoc and relevant web pages. Newspapers from the Chilean dictatorship were consulted during 2010/11 in the “Biblioteca Nacional de Santiago de Chile” and phone as well as e-mail interviews took place.