

Textiles and Resistance: The Art of the Chilean Arpilleristas

Description



Chile en venta [Chile on sale], Fondo Isabel Morel, colecciÃ³n Museo de la Mer

Chilean arpilleras might at first look like playful, whimsical patchworks, featuring brightly coloured houses, scattered children and blazing suns. But closer inspection reveal that they are a potent, emotionally raw form of resistance and rebellion, one that emerged during the brutalist regime of Augusto Pinochet from 1973-1989. While women were forced into submissive silence by a dictatorial government, they gathered in secret to create intricately woven tapestries on old burlap sacks with discarded fabric scraps, that told their stories of poverty, hunger, unemployment and loss, initially to one another, and eventually to the world. They thus reinvented themselves as â??Arpilleristasâ??. One anonymous Arpillerista wrote, â??With word and deed, we insert ourselves into the human world.â?•
Under Pinochetâ??s authoritarian regime, which began in 1973, human rights were suppressed through institutional fear, curfews, surveillance and acts of unspeakable violence. Hundreds of thousands of supposed â??ideological enemiesâ?• were identified by the government and harshly punished or executed, sometimes just disappearing entirely with no trace. Meanwhile, women were forced into traditional, subservient roles, thereby removing their voices from political discourse and pushing them into silence. They suffered further still through the loss of family members, breadwinners, income, and even water and electricity, making life unbearably hard.



Marcha de mujeres de familiares de detenidos desaparecidos [March of women detainees], Fondo Isabel Morel, colecciÃ³n Museo de la Memoria y los Derecho Artists

When church-based human rights organisations stepped in to support the suffering of these women in 1974, their goal was initially to establish a safe, creative space where women could come together and make art, while providing one another with much-needed support, as well as working together to find sources of food, water, and electricity. Churches set up arpilleras workshops, where women were taught skills in embroidery and applique. Old â??arpillleraâ?? potato, sugar and flour bags became the blank canvases on which women cut and sewed clothing scraps to create vivid, richly colourful stories.
Over time their imagery became increasingly politicised, documenting the harshest experiences of poverty, hunger, violence and destruction they were forced to live through. Many also included within their imagery a blazing sun, as a symbol of resistance, and hope for a brighter future, even during the darkest of times. They thereby began using textiles as a potent means of self-expression at a time when their voices had been removed from the wider political sphere.



Ã?xodo, 1973-1990, Fondo Isabel Morel, colecciÃ³n Museo de la Memoria y los

When international networks began smuggling the textiles out of Chile, their sales provided a much-needed income for these struggling women. But they also acted as newspaper stories at a time when so much of the Chilean regime had been muted, exposing to the wider world the gritty, brutal realities of life during this time. The migration of these textiles also served a further purpose, leading to the formation of a wider network of women, who gathered in solidarity and support for the Arpilleristas.

Pinochetâ??s government branded arpilleras as â??tapestries of defamationâ?•, confiscating and destroying any textiles they came across, while makers remained anonymous, only signing their work with their initials to protect them from incarceration. Yet a large majority of these textiles escaped censorship, thus becoming a vital means of political and cultural expression for marginalised, feminine voices.



Aunque corten la libertad, seguiremos adelante [Even if they cut freedom, we w
los Derechos Humanos

Today, arpilleras are still made in Chile, documenting themes that would have been branded as subversive by Pinochetâ??s brutalist regime, such as feminism, environmental concerns, and communal activities. Meanwhile, their role in bringing out womenâ??s voices through the seemingly innocuous form of patchwork has gone on to inspire countless other artists since, including Carolina Caycedoâ??s politically engaged installation art, which often incorporates woven and embroidered clothing, and Maria Guzman Capron, whose multilayered soft sculptures, made from fabric, explore issues around identity politics and power dynamics.

CATEGORY

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2. TEXTILES IN COMMUNITY

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Author
rosie-lesso