Background & History

The following background information was provided courtesy of the National Hispanic Cultural Center Art Museum.

Overview

When the armed forces of Chile overthrew the administration of Salvador Allende nearly forty years ago now, the arpillera suddenly became much more than a charming and quaint appliqué, embroidery, or patchwork depiction of everyday life by Chilean and Peruvian women. September 11, 1973 created the necessary conditions in which this art form was born and soon the arpillera became the most visual (and visible), poignant, and widespread manifestation of opposition to authoritarianism, violation of human rights, the disappearance of loved ones—all things associated with the violation of human rights of the military government that ruled Chile until 1990.

Arpilleras are a powerful art form. Layers of sackcloth or burlap fabric (arpillera) were joined, principally through applique, to create multi-dimensional (in layers and meaning) works of protest and resistance. Arpillera the burlap cloth became the preferred medium for resistance and protest because the material was easily obtained and inexpensive. Appliqué, embroidery, and patchwork were traditional skills of women, the widows and mothers—whose families were destroyed in the months and years following the golpe de estado of September 11, 1973. Their artistry with humble cloth is vibrant testimony: history in textile form, every bit as compelling as any other of the visual media. The detail and composition of the works can be simple or intricate. Each one tells a story; each one conveys a message.

The exhibition, Stitching Resistance: The History of Chilean Arpilleras, is a result of an intense collaboration by poets, artists, scholars, and curators. Its intent is to help illuminate the artistry and the history of arpilleristas and arpilleras in the hope that what happened to Chileans between 1973 and 1990 is never forgotten. And the artists who stitched it forever recognized.

POLITICS AND AUTHORITARIANISM

President Salvador Allende Gossens was elected president in September 1970. A longtime leader of Chile's Socialist party, he led a Marxist-democratic left coalition government. On September 11, 1973 (el once de setiembre) the Chilean armed forces, the navy, and the national police, Carabineros de Chile, seized control of the government by means of a coordinated golpe de estado in which President Allende took his own life rather than surrender to the insurgents. On that day, General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte became president of a four-man military junta. Today, "once de sePtiembre" is as fateful a date (with as meaningful an aftermath) for Chileans is as 9/11 is for New Yorkers, Pennsylvanians, and citizens of Washington DC metropolitan area—and for all citizens of the United States.

Rather than restore civilian rule to Chile with elections, the junta, with Pinochet as its head, wielded power over the country for nearly seventeen years, years of extreme hardship for Chile. The golpe, or coup, split the intellectual and political communities. Many were exiled and others voluntarily left. In the streets, there were tear gas and water cannons, curfews and fear. Abductions, death squads and disappearances (whence the term desaparecidos) affected thousands of families.

In 1988 the government gave Chileans an opportunity to express their preference of a future: People flocked to the voting polls to check one of the following "Augusto Pinochet Ugarte: Si—No—." This was not a democratic election per sea and there didn't need to be a choice, the government believed they would win. Instead, "Si" or "Yes", lost with only 44% of the vote.
On October 6, 1988 the Government conceded the loss. A year and a half later Chile had a civilian president for the first time in seventeen years with the election of Patricio Aylwin Azócar.

WOMEN AND COMMUNITY

Chilenas, Chilean women, have always been depicted as having strong character as well as a sense of the importance of place and of self. They have always been noted for their outspokenness and for being politically and socially active (despite not having been able to vote in national elections until 1952). That Chilenas organized themselves into solidarity movements of protest and resistance through art during the 1973-1990 years should not surprise anyone.

Visual (and visible) courage and resistance in the guise of "simple and quaint" women's work, arpilleras made in Chile between 1973 and 1990 were masterful and significant as non-violent expressions of denunciation, outrage, and opposition. Post-1990 works show the continuing importance of stitching memory and history into humble cloth scraps.

As significant as the works themselves are the artists who created them. Gathering in church basements, soup kitchens, community centers, and workshops the arpilleristas gained momentum as a movement during these crucial years in the history of Chile. Together the women not only created noteworthy works of art, they stitched together a community torn to pieces by violence; they gathered strength to defy, protest, and denounce. With each stitch they grew more vocal and more resilient.

International Women's Day became another vehicle for women in Chile as well as around the world, to celebrate and demonstrate. Held every year on March 8th, International Women's Day has its roots in suffrage movements of the early 1900s. 1975--precisely as Chileans were suffering from the ravages of suppression-- was declared "International Women's Year" by the United Nations. Today, March 8th is celebrated globally as part of Women's History Month. Chilenas used this day to the best of their advantage and arpilleristas often depicted it in their works.

As more and more husbands, sons, fathers, brothers, and boyfriends were "disappeared" by the military regime, chilenas took it upon themselves to search for their desaparecidos. They literally chained themselves in protest in very public venues like the former tribunals of justice. They consulted lawyers and church officials, and implored public officials in their searches. And all the while they continued to produce these remarkable art works that chronicle this time period in Chilean history.

ABDUCTIONS AND DESAPARECIDOS (THE DISAPPEARED ONES)

Dónde están? Where Are They?

Can anything be more terrifying than the unexplained loss of a loved one? For the arpilleristas and so many Chileans, it was one of authoritarianism's tragic realities. Students and teachers of all levels, artists, writers, singers, scholars, members of the intelligentsia—anyone who opposed the junta might be abducted, go missing, and become a desaparecido.

Throughout Chile, in big cities and small towns alike, abductions and disappearances were all too common. Remaining family members demanded to know the whereabouts of their desaparecidos, often to no avail. As much as the people demanded and searched, the government was not forthcoming with information. Vulnerable communities, including the Mapuche, feared reprisals and could not publicly announce their search for lost loved ones. But all the people could not be deterred.

To put a human face on these desaparecidos, the women wore black and white identification photos on their clothing like badges, marking themselves with the image and memory of the missing. Arpilleristas incorporated such photos and other likenesses as well as scraps of clothing and other objects belonging to desaparecidos into their works. In doing so, they kept them ever in the public eye and memory. An empty chair, a longing glance from a window, grieving women dancing alone are emotionally haunting visuals utilized to convey this experience.

As the desaparecidos grew in number, women, families, church groups and other human rights organization continued to press for information, gaining strength in numbers and expanding protest methods. Encadenamiento (enchainment) became an important method to visibly and physically denounce human rights abuses. Organizations like La Asociación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos (Association of Families of the Detained and Disappeared) and Vicaría de Solidaridad (Vicariate of Solidarity- a Catholic Church run agency to help families of victims) formed and grew in numbers.

Over twenty years after the return of democracy, many Chilean families continue to search for answers to the whereabouts of their desaparecidos and stage public protests in their honor and memory.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND EXILE

The record of human rights violations in Chile during the 1970s and 1980s includes, but is not limited to, imprisonment, torture, murder, and exile. Opponents of the regime were detained, interned, and imprisoned-- often sent to remote parts of the country as relegados (individuals internally exiled in locations with adverse weather and harsh living conditions).

Torture was a routine occurrence, ranging from severe beating to simulation of execution by firing squad, from mutilation to electric shock. More routine methods were frequent. Assassination of influential Chileans and the murder of suspected enemies of the regime marked the days, the months, the years. Intentional abuses of human rights by the government have been likened to tactical and strategic policies designed to wage war on internal enemies of the regime change initiated in 1973. The official violation of human rights ("state-sponsored terrorism") served to create an environment of terror and fear that permeated everyday life for Chileans. Martial law, state of siege, and curfews; tear gas, water cannons and the breaking up of public gatherings terrified a nation. Prisons and prison camps bulged with detainees. Chile was not alone among Latin American countries in suffering human rights abuses at the hands of the government during these decades, but the extent of the abuses found greater and more lasting artistic portrayal there. The arpilleras in the exhibition speak to these violations through their depictions of the confrontations between Chileans and their own police and armed forces.

Human rights organizations were formed in response to these abuses that occurred in Chile. In 1975 Chile's popular Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez, an outspoken activist in the human rights movement organized what became the internationally well-known Vicaria de Solidaridad (Vicariate of Solidarity) as an official agency of the Catholic Church for the express purpose of rendering assistance to afflicted families of the detained and disappeared.

Exile, clearly a human rights abuse, was also a form of emotional and mental torture. Being forced to flee one's homeland for fear of death, or having to leave for one's own safety, is a most severe sentence to be handed down by a government that is widely seen as illegitimate. Many had no choice in the matter, others including members of the intelligentsia left voluntarily. All were exiles. More than a few, like Hortensia Bussi de Allende, the dead president's wife, were perceived by the government as potential threats to its existence, rivals who challenged the authority of Pinochet and the junta. Academics, artists, musicians, novelists, poets, students, writers, and activists from various stations of life traveled to neighboring countries, to Europe, and to the United States. Every Chilean exile left behind family, jobs, and community.

In 1992, then President Patrico Aylwin Azócar relayed the well-documented findings of the National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation Report (the "Rettig Report," named for its chairman Raúl Rettig Giessen) to Chile and the world. The report made clear the extent of human rights abuses that occurred in Chile resulting in death or disappearances. Since the report first came out, all Chilean administrations have made it a priority to locate unmarked graves and the remains of the missing. A 2004 report published by the Ethics Commission against Torture found that 33,000 Chileans had been tortured during the seventeen years between 1973 and 1990. In Chile, the process of recovering desaparecidos' bodies has taken on symbolic and enormous importance.

AFER THE DARKNESS: POST 1990 WORKS

In 1990, Chileans became once again a people with a civilian, democratic government. Seventeen years of dictatorship had taken their toll on the country, but had not exhausted the creative talents of arpilleristas. In the post regime decades, they have enhanced the use of this art form as a medium for visual, political, and social commentary. Recent works remind viewers to both remember the painful times of the past and to look forward to a better future.

It was a long-standing tradition in Chile (and for families) to fly kites on Sundays and festive occasions. In arpilleras the flying of brightly colored kites represents affirmation of faith in the present with soaring hopes for the future of democracy. Numerous arpilleras portray aspects of the rebuilding of Chilean democratic institutions and constitutionalism after the military regime. Flowers and colors used are more vibrant, and while always on message politically and socially, these artworks portray less sorrow, more hope. Some artists now proudly sign their full names to their works, whereas before they may have been afraid to do so.

The 1998 arrest and detention in London of Augusto Pinochet was a milestone event for the human rights movement and a symbolic step toward healing for Chileans. Numerous arpilleras make reference to this controversy and Spain's attempt to extradite him for trial there. Spain's request for, an d Britain's refusal of, extradition made it imperative that Chile take responsibility for legal action against the former president.

Works portraying the presidency of Michelle Bachelet, especially her dedication to women's causes and her vigorous support for the founding of the Museum of Memory, have also been popular themes of the post 1990 arpilleras. The Museum of Memory continues to attract large numbers of visitors. In recent years, the Chilean government has turned some of the most notorious detention and torture centers into memorials and museums; streets and buildings have been renamed in honor of torture and murder victims. That Chileans' memories of the 1973-1990 years do not fade has become a fact of life owing greatly to the efforts of the arpilleristas.

Most recently, works have vividly depicted the 2010 Chilean earthquake and tsunami and the rescue of the trapped Chilean Miners- events that captured the world. They also depict continued protests by Chile's indigenous people, who seek to recover lands taken from them in the past.

While opinions continue to differ on the experiences of the 1973-1990 years --and beyond--Chileans are more united than ever before on the merits of civilian, democratic, representative government. The simple arpillera and the courage of women who made (and still make) them are an integral part of this unity.