Work-shopping arpilleras: in-class cultural production
Author(s): Joan Simalchik
Published by: The Department of Historical Studies, University of Toronto Mississauga
Stable URL: http://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/prandium/article/view/19693
Work-shopping arpilleras: in-class cultural production

Joan Simalchik

Arpilleras tell a story. They are a unique artistic medium that allow people to express individual and collective experiences, ideas and feelings. They are made from a variety of fabrics and trimmed with buttons, ribbons, rickrack stitched onto a small burlap (arpiller) canvas. They were first created by Chilean women during the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990) as testimonial appliquéd tapestries that revealed their lives under the military regime. Banned in Chile but secretly sent abroad under great risk, arpilleras carried messages of hope and resistance and were exhibited in museums worldwide.

Much like the women who subverted traditionally understood gender roles of wife, mother and daughter to take on the first public resistance against the Chilean dictatorship, women’s domestic sewing experience was transformed into a powerful public tool of protest. First organizing themselves into ‘Relatives Groups’ (Association of Relatives of the Disappeared, of the Executed, of the Imprisoned), women took to the streets confronting the military regime with ‘Donde Estan’ (Where are they?) demanding an end to human crimes. Finding themselves blacklisted, the women organized themselves into workshops that saw the birth of arpilleras.

Students in WGS368, Women and World Cultures, had the opportunity to create their own arpilleras selecting themes significant for them in the contemporary moment. Led by Cecilia Salazar, artist and arpillerista, the class engaged in a two-day workshop where their designs took shape and their own messages became manifest. The project was facilitated through the expertise of Ms Salazar who started her own career in an arpillera workshop in Chile during the military dictatorship, later applying her skill as a painter.

Gaining knowledge about the historical and cultural legacy of the Chilean arpillera movement is only one aspect to the class project. As a course assignment, a key objective is learning how culture is constructed, created and represented through direct experiential scholarship. How can the theme be physically situated within the arpillera’s frame and how can its context and meaning be conveyed? The assignment is multifaceted with the first step being the selection of the topic that would form the subject of each arpillera. Students chose themes that were of concern to them and connected to the course conversation. While much of the construction of the arpillera itself took place during the in-class workshops, students were asked to explore how they represented the meaning of their arpillera’s message in an accompanying five page essay that explains why the topic was selected and how the meaning of its message is represented. The essay includes references from the course readings and lectures on women, culture and representation and forms the basis for the assignment mark. Artistic criteria are not factors considered for grading.

On the due date, an in-class exhibition takes place with the arpilleras displayed and students sharing their rationale for both the topic and its expression. One example is the Highway of Tears, a stretch of Highway 16 in British Columbia where indigenous women have been abducted and murdered (numbers range from eighteen to forty three such cases). Elizabeth Cooper explains her choice: “There has been a
considerable lack of knowledge, understanding, and correct representation that has led to the continuing victimization of these women [...]. It is through these new representations that a change can be made in the lives and safety of Canadian Aboriginal women." Cooper goes on: "It is through small pieces of work and research, such as the Arpillera, that Canadians can start making a change in the way that all Canadian women are seen and treated."

When Rochelle Mazar, Emerging Technology Librarian, saw the students’ arpilleras, she determined that they needed a wider viewing. Enter Mary Atkinson, Digital Assets Management Technician, who arranged for them to be photographed in 3D and then created a permanent digital exhibition that can be accessed from the Library’s webpage. The exhibition was launched with a reception at UTM’s Library on International Women’s Day March 8, 2013 where attending students spoke about their arpilleras and the importance that this assignment meant to them. It is intended that the exhibition will grow to include arpilleras from future Women and World Cultures classes.

The arpilleras can be viewed at: http://library2.utm.utoronto.ca/wgs/arpilleras/