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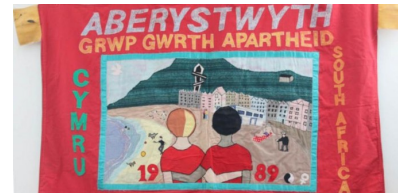
BLOG Michael Tomlinson

04/04/2017

Stitched Voices

This exhibition runs every Saturday until Saturday 13 May at Aberystwyth Arts Centre.

There is a long tradition of protest and human struggle being expressed by means of textile hangings and banners, however I am uncomfortable with the idea that there may necessarily be an artistic dimension to works of this nature. I have this same feeling about war art, so I approached this exhibition with some misgivings. Of course, there is a constant need to employ imagery that is both striking and engaging. The danger here is that, when artistic choices start coming into effect – this colour rather than another, or a more pleasing arrangement – the subject matter becomes romanticised. Instead of rendering appalling human actions purely as a matter of dark record, they can be seen to bestow an aesthetic dimension and with it a peculiar type of acceptability. The mere fact that the work is displayed in a gallery focuses our attention on this possibility before anything else.



This tension between message and means can be clearly seen within this exhibition. Beautifully made, carefully composed and brightly coloured *Arpilleras* (brightly coloured patchwork pictures) depict quaint, idyllic scenes from life. One wall has a bank of six works from Chile from the 1980s–90s: their bright and naive compositions belie the despair and alienation revealed by their blunt titles: 'Fasting', 'There is a Coup d'Etat' and 'Women Banging Their Pots', to name a few. The fact that they are communal pieces of work and not the work of one artist is a moving reflection of a community's protest in a situation where individuals faced great danger merely by stepping forward. At this point, my misgivings on the political nature of the pieces had started to waver. There is a similar communal feel to the Peace Ribbon, produced by women from Wales and the USA in 1985, of which a selection is included here. There is often a simplicity and naivety in the hope that is expressed here. There are four childlike figures in different colours: two male, two female, and the words, 'We Are Precious'. Celtic-style lettering on another piece quotes the poet Eve Merriam, 'I dream of giving birth to a child who will ask, Mother, what was war?' It is both folksy and poignant in equal measure. Another, by contrast, is a sophisticated composition of four overlapping fish which are either swimming or flying over a mountainous backdrop.

'Continuum' by Eileen Harrison, from 2014, is a complex and beautifully conceived stitched collage of images from the Troubles in Ireland. There are small shards of glass sewn into the design, a disturbing reminder of the victims killed during the violent history this work remembers. It is a gorgeous work, one that is almost too tasteful for the subject matter. 'The Disappeared' by Irene Macwilliam, 2013, is almost unbearable. At first glance, one sees a minimal, abstract wall hanging of two cloths. One coloured black, which has been cut through with numerous different sized, neatly edged holes. Through this, the second, crimson-coloured cloth behind can be seen. This is covered with stenciled words; however the holes are not large enough to read without moving your head or peering between the hangings. Some of these words are: 'anger', 'bodies buried in pits', 'torture', 'stolen babies', 'shots', and 'taken away'. Stepping back, I notice the front, black cloth is covered in the delicately stitched outlines of people, and it is through their bodies that the holes are cut.

Hung out like washing above one corner of the gallery are handkerchiefs, embroidered with messages remembering the dead and disappeared of Mexico. Visitors are encouraged to contribute to this work by doing simple running stitch along already-marked handkerchiefs in the two sewing chairs below. It is an immersive process, more so for the writing, which suggests stories that are almost too awful to contemplate and are unthinkable here in Britain. I am



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soon lost in a task that is only a few letters long. How much more then must this act of devotion, of willful remembrance, mean to the people who have experienced the appalling violence, bereavements and unknowingness? It is their voices that give a more sophisticated shape to the works here in this exhibition.

Michael Tomlinson blogs on art for New Welsh Review.

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