

#44

Zeszyty Artystyczne

TKANINA ARTYSTYCZNA
Wobec współczesności

TEXTILE ART
In the face of contemporary times



Uniwersytet Artystyczny
im. Magdaleny Abakanowicz
w Poznaniu

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Studying music at the University of Costa Rica due to the absence of textile education as an option, she is self-taught in textiles. Her decolonial style is entirely handmade, with a special emphasis on Indigenous and environmental themes. Having participated in numerous biennial and triennial international competitions, she founded Galería Octágono in 2001. This community space utilizes textiles as a foundation to develop skills not traditionally taught in schools. The gallery not only offers income opportunities but also serves as a cultural hub for everyone involved. Silvia actively supports Latin American textile creators through articles, blogs, and voluntary contributions to event organization.

Thoughts On Being a Latina Textile Artist

Upon receiving my invitation to write this, I was provided with a list of considerations describing the purpose and ideas behind the open call for the journal “*Zeszyty Artystyczne*”, and my mind went into overdrive. How can I embrace everything that needs to be said to describe myself as a textile artist without leaving out my identity within Latin American surroundings? Latin America is a huge place. It is larger than the USA, Canada and Mexico combined, and it is just as varied in terms of its textiles. To make things more complicated, I recently participated in the 7th Riga Triennial of Textiles, which added an interesting international layer of thought from the perspectives of both myself and textiles.

I am from Costa Rica, a country with no animal fibers and no weaving tradition, where the art scene is mostly controlled by a clique of painters and sculptors who thwart any creation that employs traditional craft techniques, with the exception of the new trend of using a piece of cord or thread within mixed media and calling it “textile”. Within this small society, there is a need to develop a market that makes all creators zealous of their own space; there’s an instilled notion that textile art doesn’t exist, and there is a fear of investing in textile art in a humid, tropical environment where it might not last. There is also a tremendous aversion to crafts, I guess due to being a country that attracts tourism, where the quality of crafts varies greatly in design and appearance: artists don’t want to take the risk that their art might be considered cheap! Other countries with a formal textile tradition and educational opportunities tend to have textile artists who don’t know how to market themselves in a way that is deemed professional and effective. Moreover, shipping from Costa Rica is very expensive and customs restrictions are huge; for example, we’re often required to ship under the premise that we’re sending a textile sample with no commercial value. Often there are also requirements that we don’t insure our shipments, and few artists can afford professional photography. Some countries have a Ministry of Culture to support artistic activity of

any kind, but my country just has a few embassies here and there, where ambassadors play not much more than an honorary role.

Currently, the University of Costa Rica Fine Arts department does not have a formal textile art curriculum, and two other universities only offer a very limited emphasis on textiles at the end of their regular Baccalaureate art diploma, from which just a few artists graduate each year. Only one of the state universities has made the name switch to 'visual arts' instead of 'fine arts' (there is a special intention of superiority in the connotation of textiles not being considered 'fine art'). Many of these graduates engage in fashion design for a living, mostly offering a small textile line of accessories and garments in very tiny business spaces. Lately, I have seen painters delve into textile exploration, with a few of them actually showing surprisingly good work; however, for the most part, textiles are still in the process of being born in my country.

I studied music instead of textiles, but I kept reading and trying to figure out how to immerse myself in the textile world in a professional way – professional meaning "educated", even if I was willing not to make money out of it. So, 20 years ago I came to the conclusion that biennial and triennial competitions were my only chance to enter the international textile scene. Since then, I have earned my self-made diploma with a lot of help from texts, videos, and works in exhibitions.

My rebellious personality has led me to provide youngsters with the hand skills that they're not always taught at school. At the same time, I want to develop a better sense of community and show people what textile crafts and textile art are all about. Since then, I have used textile crafts as a teaching resource in my small gallery space, while I engage in international textile shows at a personal level. My style is Decolonial. It embraces the Indigenous suffering that is going on in our current "human Darwinism" world and environmental work in the form of awareness of bad industrial textile-production practices. I work strictly with my hands, and my Indigenous expression is always contemporary. I am honored to help neighboring women progress beyond not having their homemaker activity appreciated by family and society and actually start earning money on their own. In a poor society such as ours, the need to empower women and girls is sometimes not understood in more affluent places, and in my case it is accompanied by a very sensorial environment, where these women discover different foods, different music, different ways of doing things, and improve their reading skills. Throughout the world, education tends to leave out the study of humanities in general, and a feeling of "dumbing down" is prevalent when governments and religion expect to exercise control.

Lack of a textile curriculum means lack of exhibition opportunities, and many other Latin American artists share the same problem. Very few artists can market themselves and thus position themselves on the professional catwalk of educated textile production, but at the same time there are differences from country to country: in some cases, artists don't have any interest in selling and don't look beyond their own city or country.

In South America, it is common to see fantastic artistic creation as part of a more spiritual attitude to everyday life. Textiles have been linked to religion for hundreds of years, and when invited to promote their work to the rest of the world, these artists don't understand why they should do so. They create for the sake of creating because it depicts their culture and tradition, or simply for their own satisfaction.

Latin America has always been in a state of financial stress, but this stress and poverty have encouraged creativity. I think it is fair to say that we have had four pandemics rolled into one: COVID, of course, changed our lives to the point that thousands of artists experienced hunger; the realities of not being able to show or sell artwork because nobody had the money to create or buy it; a lack of technology to comply with market requirements far from home; and all this was followed by governmental budget reductions and institutional downsizing in many countries.

Concurrent with the double problem of dealing with the wide spectrum of problems caused by the pandemic plus the severe economic setback it created, the political campaigns and elected presidents of many Latin American countries are being financed by Neo-Pentecostal churches in the United States: Giammattei in Guatemala, Ortega in Nicaragua, Chaves in Costa Rica, Bolsonaro in Brazil (2019–2023), Macri in Argentina (2015–2019) and more. Hunger, poverty, rising crime, the war on drugs, drug abuse, gun violence, lack of opportunities... all this has led to the severe problem of human migration. All of these problems have made textile creation enhance the protest art scene, taking textile feminism and decolonization to the point where it is almost its own genre. Other protest themes include gender identity in times of discrimination, Indigenous persecution, street violence, and environmental concerns. At home, as part of art therapy, more and more people are taken to embroidery, knitting and weaving – in that order of preference – “to find solace” although erudite art education and practice appear to be less cherished by the general public, both in schools and at exhibitions.

These paragraphs are necessary in order to explain the despise felt in South America towards the United States and Great Britain, to the point that relatively few people want to speak English. Unfortunately, the 20th-century U.S. intervention in many Latin American countries was deplorable, to say the least, and the Malwiny/Falklands war is still deeply

resented in Argentina. Now faced with deep problems as a result of human migration, the U.S. has come up with “brown” as a new ethnic label to describe even persons of Latin American descent, although they may have lived in the U.S. for many years.

Surface Design Association, headquartered in the U.S., published a Latin America edition in its Journal in 2013, mostly featuring Diaspora textile artists in the United States, plus a handful of artists that are known in international circles. Rather than offering a broad look at textiles in our area, it made evident the cultural gap that exists with respect to the actual Latin American territory, which is home to thousands of excellent textile creators of all types. Lack of knowledge of geography and culture, the language barriers between English, Spanish and Portuguese, and textile technologies that appear abhorrent to some textile artists have made it difficult to break the ice. Colonization tactics were horrible in the times of the Conquista and are equally belittling now: I refuse to be brown! Nowadays the term “black” is demeaning and politically incorrect, and so it is to be called “brown”. Latino is meant as “a brown wetback living in USA”, which is to say “*A person from one of those poor developing countries that are Banana Republics*”. Latina is a woman from Latin America, I scream! Costa Rica has no army! “America” is not only the U.S. but the north, central, south, and Caribbean sections of the Americas!

As a competition artist, I have participated in eight international biennials and triennials, including the 7th Riga Triennial 2023, and a few juried collective shows. Nowadays the competition is fierce, and some organizations finance their shows with participation fees, which is unethical if the fee is not refunded to rejected artists. That, plus the appearance of what is known as a “*boîte artist*” (Portuguese for an artist who is a friend or lover of the organizers and therefore gets special treatment) usually happens when the organizers are self-appointed. These organizations reduce the pool of opportunities in Latin America due to the “bad reputation” associated with artists not being a part of their circle of friends.

As far as textiles, I often get asked which country, in my opinion, has the best textile art, and my answer is usually Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, and Chile, not because it’s the best – which would be a very subjective observation – but because these countries have a large number of well-known, educated creators. Creativity stems from political turmoil, and unfortunately these countries have had a long history of bloodshed and unrest, combined with a very strong textile tradition. Uruguay enjoyed having one of the best possible tapestry masters and teachers, Ernesto Aroztegui (1930–1994), whose students have perpetuated his weaving style and teaching methods throughout Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina. Even though Andean weaving techniques remain as traditional forms,

the Southern Cone countries have greatly benefited from a number of world-renowned tapestry and fiber artists visiting or staying more permanently, such as Sheila Hicks.

The Riga Triennial is the first face-to-face show I attended after the pandemic. Both Latvia and the triennial exposed me to multiple sensory and textile experiences, both good and bad. I learned that many of my concerns are shared in various parts of the world, and I felt the high level of anxiety that accompanies us, humans, in our modern endeavors. Textile art cannot exist without artists, and nowadays artists are deeply troubled everywhere.

I would have liked to have had a greater opportunity to discuss the future of textiles, but I think it was therapeutic to hear the laments of fellow artists instead: We are not alone! My take is that we are at the brink of a bifurcation of what we consider traditional art, with its beauty, erudition, material self which is apolitical... and a new form of expressionism with a very political purpose. However, what surprised me the most was the relatively few additions in terms of techniques, and the fantastic conceptual interpretations of the same theme.

I also enjoyed the work of artists I had not heard of before, which leads me to mention the cultural gap between East and West. We really are segregated by more than geographic distance. I know this may be considered trivial from the perspective of university-level textiles, but culturally there might be things that few people know about on the reader's side of the planet.

One important thought in the face of the current war and destruction of heritage that's happening in Ukraine, for example, is that we don't notice the full scope of the loss of identity unless we pay attention to what fellow artists are showing us. It is understandable that cultures go through constant cultural transformation reflected in the arts, but it's also important to observe work from other lands in order to discern our own. Consciousness is the trick to keeping ourselves up to date.

I remember the beautiful "Splendour of Textiles" exhibit in Warsaw. While sitting at the stately Zachęta Gallery for hours, taking in all those decades of evolution and creative process – which, by the way, didn't happen in a pain-free way – it didn't cross my mind that anyone of sound mind would be willing to surrender textile art to the artistic mainstream for the sole purpose of being able to have an exhibition opportunity. What I mean to say is that textiles have evolved to be our own genre, with our rules and order, and it's a pity to subject ourselves to the general rules of people who don't understand it. Even judges in general art competitions may have no idea of what they're doing, or what they're judging.

You have in me a strong advocate of maintaining a certain restraint in the use of materials and techniques that would disperse the textile medium... for the sake of honoring and protecting what has taken so much effort to accomplish.

The modern discussion involves processes that may push the envelope in every walk of life and every aspect of living, such as artificial intelligence, while at the same time they contribute to separate manufacturing and design practices that address the environmental and political responsibility to protect the world we still need to live in. Beyond that, I have questions, but don't know the answers.

Silvia Piza-Tandlich,
June 2023

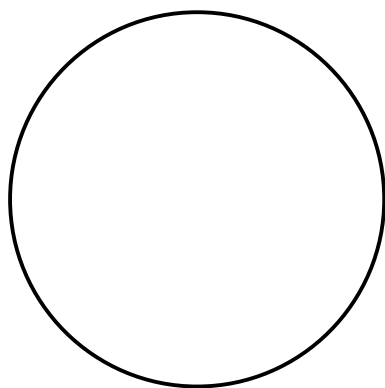
Abstract

Geographic distance, cultural differences, and language barriers are often the reason why textile artists from Latin America are not more engaging in the general international textile scene. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic and related problems have accentuated isolation and difficulties for textile artists in the region.

The text is a personal account of the Latin American situation as experienced by a textile artist from Costa Rica.

Keywords:

Latin, America, latino, Latin American, textiles, textile art





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