

*Seeing Between the Lines; Art of Survival*

by

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## **Dedication**

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to Cristina Araya Castro, America Bianchi Castro, Victoria Saavedra and all the woman of Latin America who were the first ones to face repression and started the resistance looking for their loved ones. They have never stopped searching.

## Preface

This document contains information based on eyewitness personal accounts of events that might be offensive and uncomfortable in content. By no means is it my intention to offend nor to be partisan. This is my truth and I feel it is very important to include this history of human rights violations that I lived through, as well as a historical connection to the oppressive and brutal forces of colonization from first contact with the Spanish Conquistadores. This information is essential to connect with my thesis because it is the essence of my artwork and to my identity as an artist, as a refugee, as a political activist and as a survivor of trauma.

Coming to Canada as a political refugee has influenced me in the way I see and create art. I have had to change my perception of art and how to express and deliver it, thus creating a fresh chapter in my life. History does not always reveal the personal traumas of an individual. It is more general and after the fact. Ultimately, we know there has been death and injury, but how has that been internalized and processed by those directly involved, those who have borne witness?

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has not only personally affected me, but also the lives of family and friends. It is quite an insidious syndrome, weaving a path of pain, solitude, depression and at times death by suicide. A close friend of mine took his own life a month ago, not being able to obtain any relief from painful experiences and memories. Thousands of human beings suffer from PTSD yet are unable to discuss and come to terms with the traumatic life events which have affected themselves and their lives.

I have often wondered how we can relate these experiences and feelings so people will see and question the realities being faced by an exiled artist or anyone trapped in two cultures. Having had first hand experience with human injustices such as death, torture, incarceration, persecution, and exile, my hope is to engage an audience through my sculpture and installation, and to challenge the viewer to delve deeper into their psyche. I want the viewers to question not only their own experiences and events which have shaped their lives, but I also strive to create a context which allows audience members to come to a place of understanding.

Gaining insight into the artist behind the work and being made aware of the artist's pain and sharing this pain with the viewer has been a fountain of inspiration for my art. It is the ultimate realization of compassion, a visual and authentic communication of human experience.

Knowledge and understanding transferred through the process of empathy; reality concentrated through an artist's vision, providing me with a vehicle to create and transfer the feelings and consciousness of my works of art to the public.

## **Abstract**

My Master of Fine Art thesis reflects on the personal experiences of my life's journey while living in Chile, the country of my birth, and now Canada, my exiled and adopted home. It is about art being a therapeutic, fostering recovery from trauma in my life.

I came to Winnipeg in 1977 and have recently been able to balance the experiences lived in Chile with my new life in Canada. It took me 40 years to mentally digest those experiences and gain the courage to tell my story. Also, twenty years as an educator in an inner city school has allowed me to learn, and to educate myself through my students and their traumas, which are numerous. These accumulated moments enabled me to open up to myself and face the past. This new chapter in my life has allowed me to begin to fully express myself as both an artist and a survivor of trauma.

## Introduction

*“What matters in life is not what happens to you but what you remember and how you remember it”*

-Gabriel Garcia Marquez

September 11, 1973, the day of the Chilean military coup d'état led by Augusto Pinochet's coup, marked a pivotal point in my life as both a person and an artist. At the age of fifteen, I was a member of the *Student Union Council* and a practicing artist in the *Brigada Ramona Parra (BRP)*, a political youth brigade responsible for using art as protest. The origins of the BRP date back to the 1940s, during one of the worst periods of Chilean politics. In 1946, there was a general strike, and of course with that came protests on the downtown streets of Chile's capital, Santiago. During that protest, a young woman named Ramona Parra was killed. Because she was a member of the JJCC (a Communist youth league), Ramona became a martyr symbol of the Chilean struggle against oppression. She is the namesake of the BRP and of the artistic movement. This brigade usually operated illegally, filling the street walls of Santiago with murals and art, and political propaganda demanding the implementation of human rights (Art Crimes, 1990). Some of this art remains today.

I found I could contribute and express my desire for social change by painting large, public murals. This way of expressing myself highly influenced my life due to the changes I experienced between 1969 and 1973. I was part of a cultural, socio-political renaissance that took place in Chile due to the democratically elected and socialist President Salvador Allende, whose government was in place from late fall of 1970 to early summer of 1973. Anchored by the *Popular Union Movement*, the Chilean people experienced positive life changes including free education, free health care, nationalization of all natural resources, and access to alternative information and new technology. These changes created an explosion of art and cultural freedom that in the past was repressed by a long history of brutal persecution. Witnessing and being a part of the changes during that time I realized my role as an artist had given me a voice not only to promote political propaganda for a cause, but to inform and educate the people of Chile about the injustices being carried out by previous governments and multi-national corporations. Little did I realize at the time that this role would foreshadow my future.

Unfortunately, shaping a better future for the people of Chile lasted less than four years. Allende's government was overthrown in a coup d'état, orchestrated by the right wing party and backed by the Chilean oligarchy, in conjunction with foreign governments and multi-national companies.

On September 11, 1973, a military coup ended a century of democratic tradition in Chile and started the long reign of General Augusto Pinochet. Similar coups followed in other countries, and soon half the continent's population was living in terror. This was a strategy designed in Washington and imposed upon the Latin American people by the economic and political forces of the right. In every instance the military acted as mercenaries to the privileged groups of power. Repression was organized on a large scale; torture, concentration camps, censorship, imprisonment without trial, and summary executions became common practices. Thousands of people "disappeared"; masses of exiles and refugees left their countries running for their lives. New wounds were added to the old and recent scars that the continent had endured (Galeano, x).

Everything positive ended and dreams became nightmares. Mass murders, rapes, imprisonment, and tortures induced a long trail of trauma that continues to affect and claim lives today.

Human rights violations during the military government of Chile refer to the acts of human rights abuses, persecution of opponents, political repression and state terrorism committed by the Chilean armed forces and the Police, government agents and civilians in the service of security agencies, during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile from September 11, 1973 to March 11, 1990.

According to the Commission of Truth and Reconciliation (Rettig Commission) and the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture (Velech Commission), the number of direct victims of human rights violations in Chile accounts for around 30,000 people: 27, 255 tortured and 2, 279 executed. In addition, some 200,000 people suffered exile and an unknown number went through clandestine centers and illegal detention.

The systemic human rights violations that were committed by the military government of Chile, under General Augusto Pinochet, included gruesome acts of physical and sexual abuse, as well as psychological damage. From September 11, 1973 to March 11, 1990, Chilean armed forces, the police and all those aligned with the military junta were involved in institutionalizing fear and terror in Chile (Skidmore, 134).



## **The Caravan of Death**

This term, “Caravan of Death”, was used as the military backed government rounded up political prisoners, tortured them, beat them, and then loaded them into the back of trucks, took them out to the desert and shot them all. Their bodies were dumped into mass clandestine graves that had no markings. The first group of prisoners included teenagers as young as sixteen years of age, for anyone involved in adverse politics of the military and/or the Allende government, no matter the age, was to be rounded up and “dealt” with.

Standing in place and waiting for the next list of names to be called was the longest day of my life. I had no idea whether I stood for minutes or hours, was going to live or die. Thirteen of us survived the ordeal, but I lost my best friend who was seventeen years old, one of my teachers, neighbours, and union and student leaders. In total, ninety-seven people were executed and/or disappeared. The next day I was put in the position of collecting the personal possessions of the executed, bundling and tagging these possessions and informing the family members of the deceased as to what had happened to their loved ones. This experience ignited the first spark of inspiration. I began to see how I could incorporate the objects left by these victims and create a historical component to use in connection with my art in order to make a statement for justice.

The month I was not chosen for the “Caravan of Death” was in October, 1973. This date marks a crucial point in my life and for my art. I am compelled to tell this story as the details of this experience are strongly connected to my art and my art is strongly secured to my experiences. The two are tightly entwined and woven into the fabric of this artistic adventure. This life-changing event has become the centre of my inspiration as it connects the past and present with a limitless source of ideas. I continue to make art denouncing and confronting on ongoing genocidal colonization that started five hundred and twenty-five years ago in 1492.

## **501 Days of Rain and Silence**

In November of 1973, when I was 16 years old, I began my long walk into exile. Tortured and eventually released from jail, the military sentenced me to exile far from my family, friends, and home for a period of 501 days which was spent in a very small town in the south of Chile at the end of the South American continent. During this time period, as a part of the conditions of my exile, I was required to be silent about my experiences and why I was living in this community so far from my home. I was not allowed to acknowledge that I was a political prisoner and that atrocities were happening in my country.

Since I was unable to practice my art I had to find a media that could easily be hidden from the fascist police state and ambiguous enough so it would be difficult to interpret. I began sketching interpretations of my experience on newspapers and book pages and I began to write music for my poems. Most of the time this art was about contradictory information given out by the government, army and/or transnationals, which I felt to be wrong or untrue. This was one of my first experiences and demonstrations of using art as a metaphor in order to express my feelings and ideas. It was also a form of resistance and an avenue to cope with repression against the military junta and all the injustices suffered by the Chilean proletariats.

While practicing this art form I realized for the first time a change had occurred in my approach to the delivery of my ideas through art. My art had shifted from collective -oriented expressions, where I had to compromise my individual ideas and my personal artistic vision to deliver political propaganda messages, to being a process of making a statement as an individual and independent artist. This transformation gave me “super powers” and the courage to continue making art.

Unable to buy art tools and materials, I had to rely on natural and found objects in order to create my art. This in turn opened a new creative world of three-dimensional media. I started to notice the beauty and potential of nature and to explore ways to use objects which were discarded but had great historical connections. Ironically, I felt the same way when I came to Canada and I myself turned into a discarded, found object in this new Canadian context; I was given a second chance.

At sixteen years of age, I was able to create this art on my way to school or on my way home from school. I found these new materials and ways of expressing myself to be quite fascinating as I was able to witness the reactions of others to my sculptures and installations. In the beginning I noticed a lot of negative reactions. My peers and the average person, who usually could not read nor interpret my artistic expressions, did not understand what I was trying to convey. These sculptures composed of natural elements, found objects and debris, which I created along the road or street corners were usually taken

apart and destroyed because they were perceived as garbage piles, ungodly and/or scary. I realized that these natural materials and abandoned artifacts had value and could be used as a metaphor in my continued artistic endeavours.

My first piece consisted of a layer of rocks and then a layer of large sticks layered alternately in pyramid form until approximately 6 feet high. This represented the bodies which were dumped in the river, a common practice and a common sight those days. Years later, reflecting on these reactions from the people, I realized it was the lack of knowledge, education, and information about art itself and the imposed ideal of only seeing value in realistic portraits and sculptures that had been influenced by religion. Anything else was considered offensive and blasphemous. The people could not accept the message as they did not understand or appreciate the medium in which it was being delivered. Despite them, it was through my artistic expression I communicated my memories.

## **Thesis Exhibition: *Pain Maker***

The artwork for my thesis is founded on my belief that governments, armies and colonial/neo-colonial forces all over the world engineer human crises. Good examples are Syria and Afghanistan. These crises instigate chaos, oppression and wars which claim millions of lives, , massive displacement of peoples from ancestral territories and total social cultural breakdowns, creating an opportunity for corporations and governments to take advantage and exploit this need for help by profiting from the development of refugee camps.

This method is highly profitable for the “ghost” companies who supply and design the infrastructures of these aid depots. Ironically, many of the organizations that provide help to people in dire need who are immigrating to North America and Europe are from the countries directly involved in creating war, violence, and displacement. They then benefit from these protracted conflicts by hosting the victims of war. A recent inquiry from Australia and written in *The Guardian, 2016* states:

Spanish infrastructure corporation Ferrovial, which is owned by one of the world’s richest families and the stakeholder in Heathrow Airport, has been warned by professors at Stanford Law School that its directors and employees risk prosecution under International Law for supplying services to Australia’s camps on Nauru and Manus Island (Doherty and Kingley, 2016).

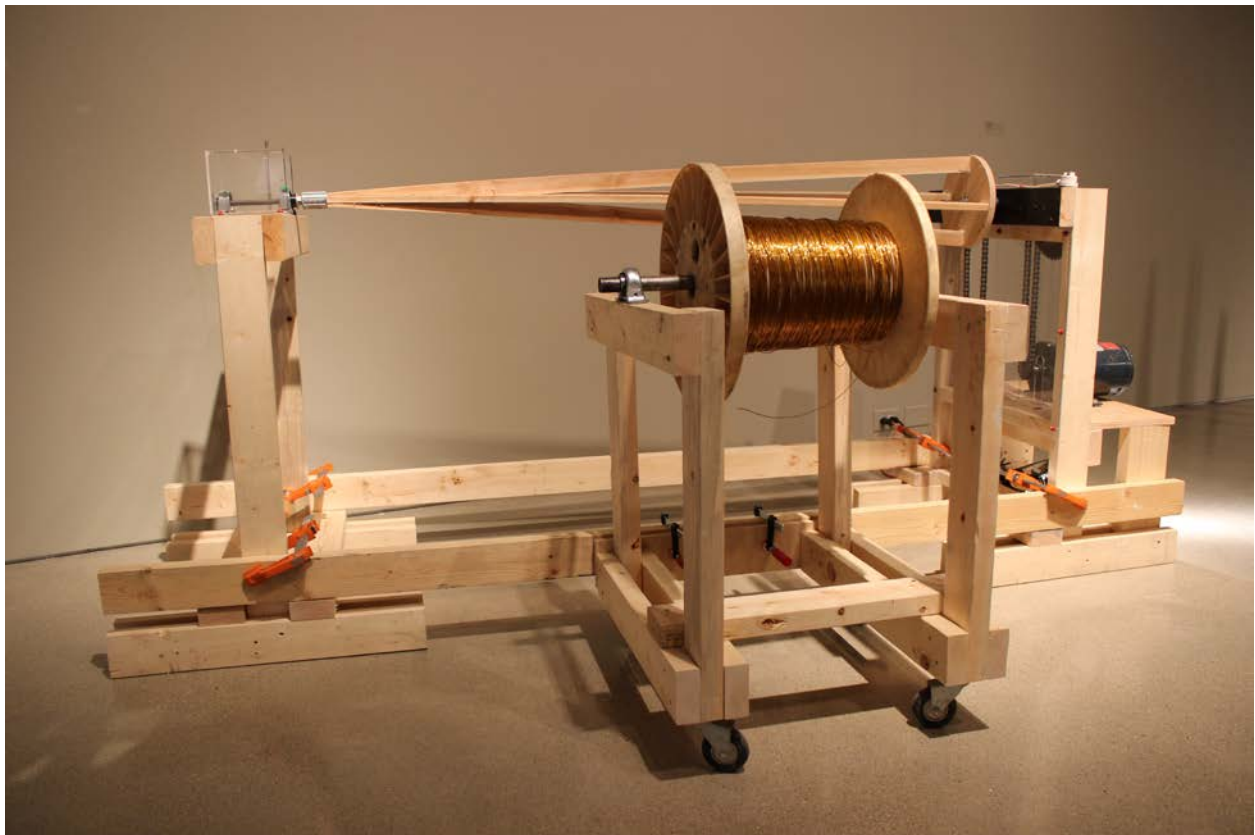
Diala Shamas, a Clinical Supervising Attorney at the International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic at Stanford Law School, goes further to suggest that their involvement, essentially a conflict of interest, could mean “criminal liability for crimes against humanity under the Rome Statute”. (Doherty and Kingley, 2016) It is commonly understood, and my belief, that the multi-national corporations inflict the pain and poison and then feed the antidote and pain killer.

My thesis exhibition work consists of two large works of art; a multi-media sculpture and an installation. Both emphasize socio-political statements, which are integral to my work, creative process, and identity as an artist. The multi-media sculpture is titled *Pain Maker*. It consists of a functional machine propelled by an electric motor of low speed built into a wooden frame, a lathe that winds gold coloured wire, which then wraps around a wooden frame shaped like a long, sharp spike. The *Pain Maker* sculpture with its implied violence signifies the “machine” of war that does not stop creating human pain for human profit. The construction of this machine was a new and emotional experience for me.

As soon as I began creating this installation, I immediately started to feel the painful connection between the machine/sculpture and myself. This response was not an intended consequence of the installation, but it evolved into a significant component of the process of creating the art piece. Designing the mechanism of the *Pain Maker* resurrected personal experiences which have taken me forty-four years

to mentally digest. I was compelled to name every spike which was put through the lathe and wind the wire from end to end. The slow wrapping of the wood frame began the process of a profound visceral relationship between myself, the wire, and my twenty-eight friends who were slaughtered and processed (like animals) by the *Caravan of Death*.

The creation of each spike was a different experience. The spikes started to claim identity and individuality. None of the spikes were made from a list nor was there any intentional order. The people all came to mind as I remembered their intrinsic characteristics and personalities. The one exception was the final one as I reserved it for my best and closest friend who was killed at the young age of seventeen. Here I realized the process of creating art could become a powerful therapy for recovering from trauma for me.



Pancho Puelles, *Pain Maker* (2017), Multi-media Sculpture, 20w x 30 tall x 120" deep

## **Thesis Exhibition: *Pain Killer***

The installation titled *Pain Killer* is large in scale, approximately twelve feet by fourteen feet and stands six to twelve feet high. The twenty-eight golden wrapped spikes of varying heights are anchored to the floor with copper brackets. The copper represents Chile's natural resources and the mining companies which controlled the people, their lives, and their jobs. The six to twelve foot spikes are approximately two feet apart. Each individual spike or "pica" (spike in Spanish) is branded with a name and number corresponding to the identity and age of the person executed by the *Caravan of Death*. The same names and numbers are displayed on the back wall of the gallery randomly, mirroring how each victim was selected for the *Caravan of Death*.

In order to fully understand the significance of the spikes (picas) one must understand its roots in colonization, a process that was cruel and oppressive from the first contact in 1492. "La Pica" was introduced to the South American continent with the arrival of the Spanish Conquistadores. It was widely used as a tool of torture and death to conquer this part of the western hemisphere, the Americas. It was used to disembowel, behead, amputate, and impale. The cruelty had no bounds as not only men and warriors were executed, but women, pregnant or not, children, even babies were decimated. Using these means, the tool created an atmosphere of repression and fear within the native population of this continent. Impalement of mass numbers of people enslaved by the Conquistadors was usually reserved for leaders and people who resisted the Spanish invasion. In addition, "la pica" was also used on their own Spanish people who disobeyed or refused to enforce the Royal Mandate of the Crown and the Church, which was driven by the obsessive quest for gold, the mythical "El Dorado" and Christianization, felt and saw the horror of "la pica".

The myth of El Dorado, the golden king, was born: golden were the streets and houses of his kingdom's cities....There was indeed gold and silver in large quantities, accumulated in the Mexican plateau and the Andean altiplano. In 1519 Cortes told Spain of the fabulous magnitude of Montezuma's Aztec treasure, and fifteen years later there arrived in Seville the gigantic ransom—a room full of gold and silver—which Francisco Pizarro had made the Inca Atahualpa pay before strangling him (Galeano, 115).

Today the Museum of Gold in Bogotá, Columbia, houses over 25,000 pieces of gold-ware, the largest in the world (Panesso,1975).

One of the most historical and accurate accounts of these brutal massacres was written in 1515 by Bartolomeo de las Casas, a Spanish Dominican friar, in his short account of "*The Destruction of the Indies*". He was an historian who became an advocate and denouncer of the atrocities committed against the peoples of the Americas by these colonizers (de las Casas, 6). In particular, in the southern region of Chile, a most renowned Araucanian Toqui, meaning War Chieftain, of the name Caupolicán,

was impaled (De Ercilla, 558 ). Following that period, the linguistic use of “La Pica” became quite a popular term in Chile as a derogatory symbol and word. Today it is a term used to represent injustice, dishonesty, or castigation by the law. This historic, personal, and first-hand experience has had a great impact on me and has evolved into this installation which symbolizes and denounces the systemic elimination of human beings (genocide).

It is not my intention to erect a monument or memorial for victims of any kind. I believe that traditionally constructed memorials are made to stay grounded and firm as a constant reminder of the time and place of an event. There is a determination among survivors and family members of these events to resist the creation of permanent monumental landmarks. Memorials are seen as a pacifier, con-formative monuments which create a momentary acknowledgement without lasting impact as opposed to justice and reconciliation. They are also a place of reflection and isolation, not a societal or political remedy to the strife they are intended to represent. Even though they are permanent reminders, they tend to be forgotten or become passé and do not evoke feelings or critical thinking.

My installation is not intended to be ephemeral, but is a testimonial to the political violence I was a part of. I feel it is my duty to tell the story I witnessed and share my experiences by creating an art exhibition that exposes the injustices and atrocities against human beings. It is also a poignant reminder to myself of how making art became a healing force that has long helped me to survive in this world. It has given me freedom of expression, resilience, and moments of survival and empowerment.

It is very important for me to execute these feelings of duty and responsibility as I feel they ignite my artistic inspirations. I like to take advantage of the aesthetic aspect of nature and manipulate the found objects into works of art that advocate a strong movement of resistance while using the art piece as a vehicle for protest.



Pancho Puelles, Painkiller 2017, Multimedia Installation, 12 x 14 10 feet



## **Other Sources of Inspiration and Artistic Influences**

My source of inspiration comes from various artists, Daria Marchenko and her sculpture/portrait of Vladimir Putin, entitled “The Face of War.” It is the face of President Putin created with found bullet shells plus bullet donations from friends fighting across the war zone. In eastern Ukraine, “A bullet shell is a symbol of an interrupted life...Unfortunately war gives artists like me a lot of material to work with” (Marchenko, 2005).

Another influence is Doris Salcedo, whose works come to fruition from her personal history of violence in Colombia. One of Salcedo’s works done in Turkey in 2003 and titled *Installation for the 8th Istanbul Biennial* includes a large installation consisting of one thousand five hundred and fifty chairs stacked between two buildings, meant to represent mass graves of war. Another, called *Shibboleth*, is a one hundred sixty-seven metre crack in the floor of the Tate Modern Gallery. This crack represents borders, experiences of immigrants, segregation, and racial hatred, all of which are experiences faced by an immigrant coming to a foreign country. I include these same types of representations in my own works of art, using different approaches, styles and techniques.

Another artist I look to is Adel Abdessemed, an Algerian conceptual artist. Adel works with animalistic themes using defenceless creatures such as turtles, doves, and dogs, which are then loaded with dynamite on their backs, and served as symbolic sacrificial beings, sparking a sense of fear and mistrust. This artist also works with found objects that are monumental in scale. A boat in a precarious condition full of garbage bags represents the belief that immigrants are dirty, like rubbish. In my past works I have used found and discarded objects to metaphorically represent the “rubbish” of people immigrating to a foreign country. Likewise reclaimed objects were used in the creation of *Pain Maker* and *Painkiller*.

I am influenced also by the ancient American civilizations (from Alaska to Patagonia) from which I extrapolate ideas. Some of these inspirational leaders and artists include Lautaro (circa 1535-1557), an Araucanian chieftain who led a rebellion against the Spanish Conquistadors and settlers; Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957), poet and first Latin American woman to receive the Nobel prize in literature; and Ernesto Guevara (1928-1967), a global symbol for the emancipation of the working people. The ideologies of these historical figures influence my artistic approach to challenge and re-examine historical events from a colonial perspective and with an emphasis on justice and verifiable truth. These figures have an influential role within the theme of my artwork as their politics and philosophies are similar to my own. These are the

elements I work with in my own art pieces with the goal of evoking an emotional and physical reaction from the viewer.

My vision is to honour the victims and survivors of the *Caravan of Death* in a temporary but moveable and transient installation. Even though the families of victims and survivors of these atrocities have written a big part of this history, there is still a lack of accountability and many questions left unanswered by those responsible.

The crimes committed in the 1970s in Chile claimed thousands of lives and resulted in many thousands of survivors suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). One of the difficulties of PTSD is the inability to discuss events because “the mix of apprehension and fear that causes a suppression of opinion and voice is caused by the people or things that have power over you and can neither be controlled nor predicted. People or things that make you feel vulnerable, and to which you are vulnerable” (Watt-Cloutier, 72). The long lasting side effects of PTSD are just starting to be recognized in academia and the media, largely among emergency workers and soldiers. Many soldiers and civilians involved in past traumas are still dealing with the consequences today.

In his book “*Waiting For First Light*” Dallaire says “treatment programmes can relieve many of the symptoms, much about the disorder is still unknown, and it can take years for the symptoms of PTSD to be felt and recognized...the horror never really disappears, and months or years later, the trauma bubbles to the surface” (Dallaire, 79).

## Conclusion

Forty years have gone by since I first came to Canada. At first I did not believe I would be living in this country for long, thinking events would eventually subside in Chile and I would return. Reality soon set in and I knew I had to search for a better future for myself and eventually knew Winnipeg would be my new home forever. The one thing I could not escape in my new country were my memories and struggles which I experienced during my fifteen years growing up in Chuquicamata, my place of birth, my hometown and a place which does not exist anymore.

Due to the massive exploitation of the copper minerals which sat beneath the townsite, the government and mine holder decided to bury the town, thereby ridding it also of its dark past which has a history of apartheid, intolerance and murder (disappearance) of people. The American Mining Company, a foreign corporation well established in the area, had complete control of the town and the people in it. Native Chileans were not allowed into the “American” section of town nor were we allowed to use any of their facilities. Americans, however, could go wherever they desired and purchase whatever they wanted. Chileans had separate schools, stores, housing, and recreational facilities. The company controlled everyone and everything. This is the place which shaped me as an artist, this place of pillaging and injustices was my school. It created a place in me to which I can go and pan and dig out the buried inexhaustible bank of treasures, like a painful inner El Dorado.

When I am asked or when I ask myself: “Why do I do this kind of work? Why do I work with the themes of human rights and the denunciation of atrocities and injustices that happen in the world”? The answer is clear to me. I usually have to explain the history of the work that I do, thereby informing the viewer.

The creative process for me begins with a full visualization of the project, the emotional connection to the subject matter, and identifying the construction method in its entirety. Through this process themes emerge. Only then do I begin physical development of a piece.

The sculptures are constructed with found and discarded objects, an important aspect to the project because I am giving them a second chance by incorporating them into my creations. I use these objects as a symbol of second chances because I, as a person and as an artist, was dispassionately discarded, and in my adopted country of Canada, was given a second chance. So many years later, I have discovered that I am putting my experiences into my art and in the process, I am giving myself a second chance by sharing my experiences through art the way I do now.

Today, I have discovered that this project has helped me a great deal to work through the pain I have experienced. Art took me through this after so many years. Eventually, getting involved and finishing my Master of Fine Art (MFA) has helped me to recover, remember, and exorcise everything that I had buried for so many years. It has been an eye opening process going through this program. I was given the freedom and guidance to express myself in a way that has helped to heal me and give me the courage to continue my work as an artist. I was stuck for quite a long period of time but art has given me the freedom to express myself and to digest these problems and traumas. My art is not only something I create — if you see between the lines — you can also see it is my own personal legacy of survival.

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