

Guatemala: Colors Within



Investigation

Topic:

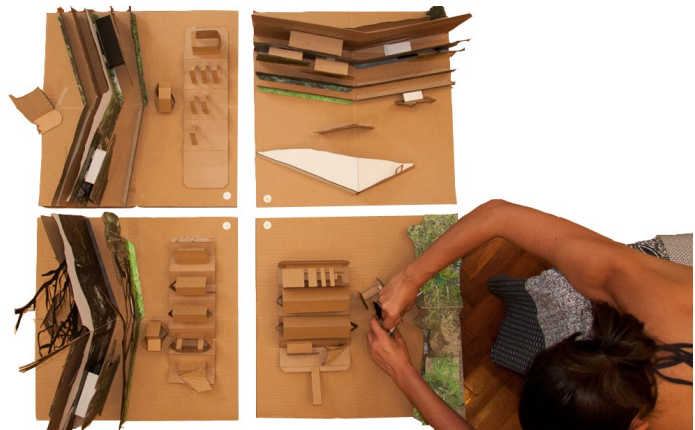
Throughout the semester we have been introduced to how various platforms of arts represent an arena for expression. Guatemala's issues of genocide, civil war, socioeconomic and collective memory are considered brushes painting on a plain canvas illustrating social attitudes, emotions, acknowledgment of pain, and a glance of what the future holds for Guatemalans. As a person who's new to all of this artistic expression, my mind and eyes learned a great deal of the power that arts transcend. In one of the guest speaker visits I had the opportunity of meeting with artist Yasmin Hage, who posed a simple question, "How would you portray the U.S. and Guatemalan relationship?". The objective of this question was initially to look for a tie between both countries, and secondly to examine the possibility of reflecting this tie artistically in a future exhibition. The first thought that jumps to mind is sweatshops run by large American corporations in Guatemala. Upon classroom discussions little did I know that my area of subject will morph into a colorful world of textile that taught me to see beyond colors and exciting patterns. Since Guatemala's unique textile is a product made by indigenous groups it is befitting to investigate the following; What is the significance of textile design, colors and patterns & what does it represent today? Did Guatemalan textile and fashion migrate to the U.S. and beyond, birthing a new identity for a country that was only known for genocide? These are the questions I investigated to get a comprehensive idea of textile industry in Guatemala. During the course of researching I was paired with artist Quique Lee, who has an interest in working with textile.



*Yasmin Hage. image
1.1*

*One of Yasmin's pieces as part
of Pequena Historia
exhibition.image1.2*

[http://
www.ciudadimaginacion.org/](http://www.ciudadimaginacion.org/)



Guatemala - Textile

Background of Textile craft :

“Within Maya societies, both ancient and current, weaving reveals a deep symbolic nature that embodies numerous aspects of the culture. Not only do the garments themselves play a role in both daily life and ceremonial purposes, but the weaving process is connected to some of the most essential cultural tenants, such as gender, class, and ethnic distinctions, as well as the creation myth. The Mayan language is another intrinsic aspect of weaving, from the distinctive symmetry of Maya animal designs reflected in the onomatopoeia of those animals’ calls, to parallels between the meanings of certain words and the parts of the loom on which textiles are woven.” Emma Tuthill, 2012

It is clear that the art of textile is one of the few traditions that remained authentic during Guatemala’s political and civil hardships. In fact it almost feels that with all the genocide and disappearance that took place, the Mayan, indigenous groups continued to weave brighter colors declaring their identity aloud. The practice of textile making or weaving combines a number of elements. Initially, the integrated use of resources starting from cotton grown in the country to other local materials such as homemade dye.



Naturally tinted cotton yarns hanging to dry. image 2.1



Masa (dough for tortillas) is often used as paste to secure the threads. image 2.2



Intricate embroidery that is done while weaving. 2.3



Typical sitting style of the Mayan weavers

Following his passion of ancient Guatemalan textile arts , Professor Matthew Loooper of Chico State Art learned from early on the importance of documenting this endangered craft. In 1996/1997 he spent a year in Guatemala wandering different parts of the country talking to indigenous groups about weaving, understanding the symbolism of it, and also spent time learning about Mayan Fashion. One of his greatest achievements was his focus and thorough studies based on oral documentation. Where he encouraged young women in the textile craft to record stories by their grandmothers who also weaved when they were young. According to him, the civil war had its toll on Guatemalan which had its impact on providing all required resources for textile making. Another aspect he touches on is how the migration of Guatemalan men from rural areas to the city or to the U.S. meant that they let go of their local/traditional wardrobe. It is simply easier to wear T-shirts and pants. “The civil war in Guatemala has taken its toll, particularly on native peoples, but other forces have contributed to the art's demise as well. There is incredible pressure, especially on the men, from the national culture and Western culture to lose the indigenous identifying features [of their clothing].” M. Loooper

According to the Anthropology Journal, the art of textile weaving created a distinction when it comes to gender role and social status. “Archaeological evidence also supports the relationship of weaving to the female identity, which is furthered by the connection between weaving and birth.”

As time passes , a small number of men joined the craft as weavers , yet they tend to have their own take on weaving methods, slightly different from the women's. The induction of modern weaving tools and dyes added a whole new spectrum to the colors of textile. It goes without saying that the richness of Mayan textile is evolving from a sacred ancient practice that has a deep rooted legacy to including an element of money-making. Textile today, is a major attraction to tourists.



detail of textile created in San Mateo Ixtatán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala image2.5

Insights with Quique Lee:

Given Quique's interest in exhibiting his art through textile it was only right that I get his opinion on the world of textile, what it communicates and what it means today in Guatemala. I first ask him, "Do you think that currently the art of textile tells the story of genocide and civil war? He answers, " This generation, the young one, hasn't been affected by Guatemalan armed conflict physically or geographically. Hence, we can't tell the story of civil war, but what we can do is to reflect on current issues that are a result of war."

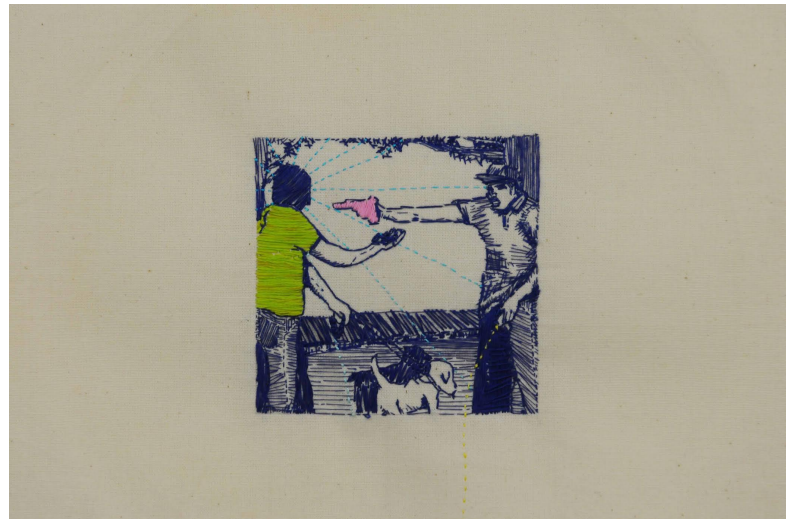


Quique Lee

“One of the recurrent topics in my pieces is memory, and how an individual remembrance relates to a collective subconsciousness. I express myself through textiles and embroidery. Therefore my war-related works might seem superficial, but they reflect another point of view, sometimes forgotten, of what I see as a collective memory. I grew up to be an adult and found out there was a war around me, which was denied to me in news, school, or casual conversations. Even now children don't learn from their teachers what happened during those years and politicians and major groups of important citizens invest a lot of time and money denying a genocide.

However, I do believe we were all affected by the war, one way or the other, regarding topics of gender, democracy, access to knowledge communications, and migration.”
Quique Lee, 2014

From the series "Avatares", tells the personal story of one time my cell phone was robbed while walking my dogs, by a man pretending to pee against a tree (real story). by Quique





From the series "Rótulos", as a kid and during a christmas visit to my father's family in Tiquisate (a small city previously part of the United Fruit Company), the Guerrilla bombed an important bridge creating a lot of traffic and delays. They wrote on the bridge "this is the christmas gift from the guerrilla to the people of Guatemala". I rescued that image from my memory as how the armed conflict affected me. These signs from the Army and Guerrilla were very popular and were used to intimidate each the civil population. by Quique

According to Quique, the textile industry has yet to boom. Despite the richness of craft and high demand there still hasn't been factories that can provide modern machines to aid in mass production. Another daunting aspect to this craft is that now cotton is imported from neighboring countries. This came as a result from framers immigration to various countries. Besides, the population movement towards the capital may encourage the abandonment of traditional cloths.

I then ask Quique about his views regarding young Guatemalan fashion designers and this is what he said, " As far as fashion concerns, the young Guatemalan designers working nowadays might not be able to tell what the war was, they are too young for that. And I do not think that fashion is a way to express war, but the access to information that came afterwards, and it answers more to a global trend. I think very few designers work with "typical" textiles, since those textiles are not massively produced, and also because they might be trying to get away of a local identity."

Guatemala Después Exhibition Proposal
Sitio-sena/ sign site
Quique Lee & Andrea Monroy

This project is inspired by the migratory journeys of Guatemalans who have left to go north. Some in search of better opportunities, others fleeing persecution. The flow of bodies south-north is recurring throughout history, and is evidenced in during the civil war in the United States. In this case, migrants used secret underground railroads, in which they communicated using a quilt code.

Symbols
that were sewn together and were left for migrants to see.

Findings:

Through this investigation I have come to realize that Guatemalan textile is emerging and becoming prominent in three areas.

1-Guatemalan Fashion Designers

In recent years, Guatemalan young fashion designers have been captured in international media. In 2013, and 2014 the associated press circulated exciting news.

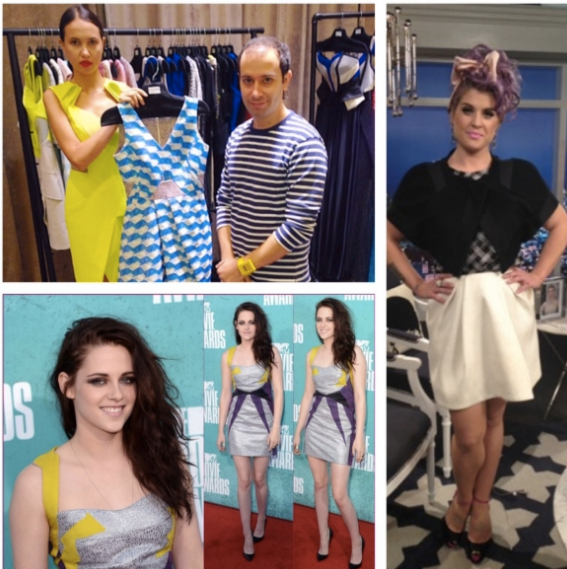


In this Aug. 21, 2013 photo, sketches with pieces of textiles attached of designs by Eduardo Figuero are tacked to a board, in his studio in Guatemala City. Embroidered Mayan textiles known as huipiles are undergoing a revival in some of the country's finest boutiques as they become a haute couture fixture. Young Guatemalan designers are using them for everything from evening gowns and purses to handmade shoes sold as far away as Dubai. (AP Photo/Luis Soto)

In this photo a pair of wedges show toes designed by Karim Corzo with embroidered Guatemalan fabric, sit on a shelf at a factory where the shoes are handmade in Guatemala City. Embroidered Mayan textiles known as huipiles are undergoing a revival in some of the country's finest boutiques as they become a haute couture. (AP Photo/Luis Soto)



Alvaro Pop, a United Nations expert on indigenous cultures, said to BigStory, “Ethnic fashion is a trend around the world but we have to be very careful to not simply infringe on the copyright of the indigenous creators of the textiles. Each textile they make is absolutely unique, they don't make it twice and that intellectual property should be paid for too.” On the same note, Eduardo Figueroa, a high-couture designer, mentioned to BigStory “I am inspired by color , and Guatemalan textiles are rich in color.”



Another designer that has been captured by The Latin Post is Guatemalan runway couture designer Guillermo Jop. He designed for top celebrities, such as Kristen Stewart, Kelly Osbourne, Julianne Hough, and Connie Britton.

Guatemalan colorful fabrics and designs are gaining respect in Couture Houses , conquering global markets including the Middle East, and getting media's attention focusing on news of color and beauty. What a far cry from the news in the 90's.

2. Weaving & Justice

Dressing for Social justice !



Marta, a microfinance borrower from the Western Highlands of Guatemala proudly displays a week's worth of work. She follows a pattern taught by her mother, typical to the Chichicastenango village.

Guatemalan women wear their traje like a flag. Their costume created a differentiation that they are now proud of despite the negative connotation the Spanish created where each indigenous group was forced to wear a certain local attire to make it easy for the Spanish to collect taxes. Post Rio Montt's trial, and given that his trial was biased, women of indigenous groups showed more commitment in showcasing their identity through their garments. This was their stance in saying NO and refusal to the court's decision. Guatemalan garments represent an entry to all minorities in the country. There has been a rise in the number of women who



Female witnesses from the Ixil Trial of Quiche. Headphones were used throughout the trial of Rios Montt to accommodate some of the 23 different Mayan languages represented in Guatemala. (Permission to use this photo obtained from Jose Rodriguez of CAL CALDH. Photo credits: José Rodríguez CALDH (Center for Human Rights Legal Action))

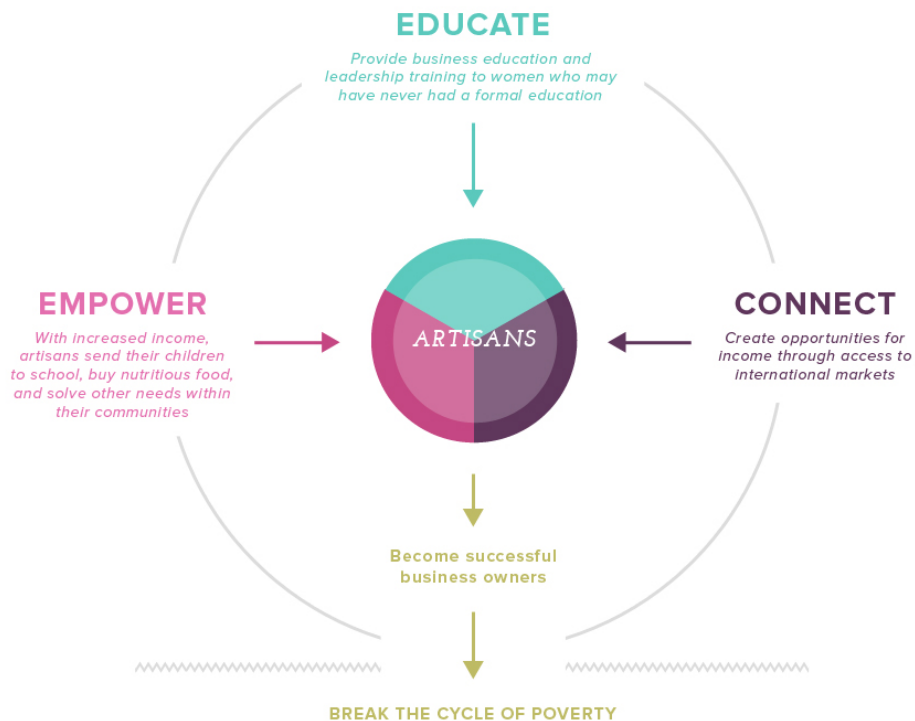
advocate for social justice in diverse areas. Wearing traditional outfits makes them more relevant to the communities they represent which means accessibility and reach.

3. Civil society & global interest

There is a huge boom in placing Guatemala in the international map. Despite the subsequent issues of civil war that will take many years to heal the people and the country, it is impressive that the country is being placed in international media for the thriving initiatives by artists and artwork. There is with no doubt a huge interest from civil society and International organizations to take part in reducing poverty by empowering women professionally. Guatemalan women working in weaving and textiles are invited to share their experiences and are trained to make a living out of this craft. There are two organizations in particular that are working directly with these women. Fashion Designers without Borders and Mercado. Fashion Designers without Borders is part of a global initiative known as Supply Chain. Supply Chain establishes the design industry and connects artisans with known retailers. Mercado Global that also collaborates with Fashion Designers without borders operates on a larger scale. Its main objective is to eradicate poverty through the model below.

MERCADO GLOBAL'S EMPOWERMENT MODEL

~~~~~ Breaking the Cycle of Poverty ~~~~~



## Exhibition:

Though I am not qualified to artistically plan or design a conceptual approach of textiles in the exhibition I can't help but to suggest the following. Through my investigation two facts remain consistent, the first is the historical significance and rich legacy of textiles and the second is how textiles do not reflect or tell the story of indigenous genocide and civil war. Accordingly, it might be worth making an installation that is composed of: a banner with a simple question "Do you know our story?", then have subjects dressed in traditional cloths while other subjects are weaving. Stories of the war could be weaved either via symbols or actual text on displayed textile and garments. Visitors can be given a printed image or postcard of various textile and outfits that has different messages all reflecting on historical memory.

## Presentation comments & Way-forward:

During the presentation, I was advised by Annabella Acevedo to consider exploring the idea of pride and women, "What does it mean when a non-indigenous woman wears a mayan weaved outfit?", also is Mayan textile appropriate for the elite and political figures or is it exclusive to indigenous groups alone. Pamela Yates, on the other hand, suggested that I look into the art work of Mayans displayed in museums which may add a lot to my investigation. At this stage, I am very much interested in getting feedback from course instructor Nitin Sawhney, and artists Yasmin Hage. I would like to learn more about textile and actively assist in adding it as a key element to the exhibition. I love Annabella's idea on the appropriation of dress/outfit for non indigenous groups. I feel this is such a vibrant subject that I would rather consider as a documentary film that I make in the future.



*Santa Maria, Guatemala*

## Conclusion:

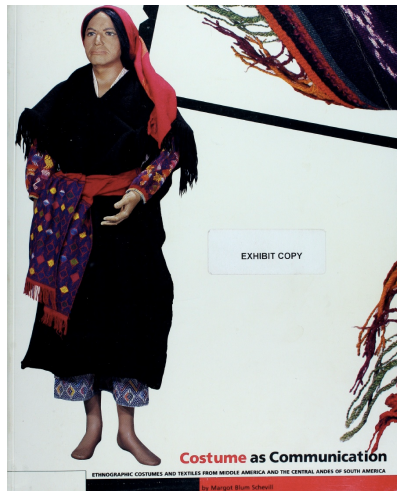
“To weave, then, is to carry on the work of gods” says M.Looper. Weaving, in a country such as Guatemala comes synonymous with breathing. The artwork of textile is engraved in the history and culture of Guatemalans. There are those who make it and wear it, then there are those who grew up absorbing the textile rainbow of colors and code to a surviving identity. The world of textile is very complex. On one hand the inside story , where there is the history, intricate architecture of designs and pride. Whereas on the other hand, the international one, textile could be an attraction for tourism and international trade, and Guatemalan fabrics and designs taking slow but sure leaps in adding to international fashion appetite. Through my work with professor Nitin, colleagues and artists I hope to be part of a team that will decode the mystery of beautiful textile to the audience of Guatemala Después Exhibition.

I started this paper with a focus on the exploitation of Guatemalans via American Market only to find out that there is a bigger and brighter reality to the country. The colors of Guatemala shine from within.



## Additional Resources:

- Costume as Communication e-booklet. [https://www.scribd.com/fullscreen/79995517?access\\_key=key-29x0jkhj91n91s8qmdidi](https://www.scribd.com/fullscreen/79995517?access_key=key-29x0jkhj91n91s8qmdidi)



- TramaTextile page : <http://www.tramatextiles.org/our-story.html>
- Schevill Maya Textile Collection: Relationship Building, Collaboration, and Public Engagement. <https://haffenreffermuseum.wordpress.com/2013/11/07/shevill-maya-textile-collection-relationship-building-collaboration-and-public-engagement/>
- Strategic planning for the US textile industry in the post-quota era: Achieving speed-to-market advantages with DR-CAFTA countries. <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.newschool.edu/docview/235466640?accountid=12261>
- Latin America in the New Global Capitalism. <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.newschool.edu/docview/1313443207?accountid=12261>
- "THEY EVEN USE US AS A FACTORY FOR THEIR CHILDREN": Perspectives on Free Trade Agreements in Guatemala. <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.newschool.edu/docview/746767353?accountid=12261>

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9. Mercado Global: <http://vimeo.com/17783719> (clip)
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