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An Interview With Guillermo Bert

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By Christopher Michno

Guillermo Bert's Encoded Textiles Project, a series of exquisitely wrought tapestries that embed the stories of indigenous communities through QR codes woven into the textiles themselves, brings together traditional weaving techniques, digital technologies and stories of identity. The QR codes within the weavings launch additional content and documentary video Bert shot while working with weavers in Chile and Oaxaca, Mexico. His tapestries are currently on view in two Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA exhibitions in Los Angeles —The U.S.-Mexico: Place, Imagination, and Possibility at the Craft and Folk Art Museum, and Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas at the UCR Arts Block. They also may be seen in two museum exhibitions: *Unsettled,* at the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno, reframes human migration within the context of a vast super-region that encompasses the western edge of the Americas from Alaska to Patagonia and much of the Pacific; and *Tied, Died, and Woven: Ikat Textiles from Latin America,* at the Textile Museum of Canada, juxtaposes textiles from the museum's permanent collection with contemporary objects by Bert and other artists.

In a conversation at the Nevada Museum of Art, Bert discussed his move from Chile to Los Angeles in 1981 and elaborated on his Encoded Textiles project and how it came about.

QR code

CHRISTOPHER MICHNO: You came to Los Angeles after you finished school in Chile. What drew you to LA?

BERT: We have family here, so we came straight to LA. The reason we left Chile, I was in college when Pinochet was in power. And it was still Pinochet for another 10 years after I left. So it was in the middle. I was very young when the coup happened. So the five years I was in College, there wasn't real freedom of expression. You had a lot of repression, in fact. I finished in December, and we left in January. I developed my entire career in the United States. But I was educated and my formative years were in Chile. So I was very attuned to politics.

MICHNO: What kind of work were you doing before Encoded Textiles?

The Price of Democracy

BERT: I was working with street posters. Originally I did traditional painting, and then I did a lot of collage and photography. Right now, I'm doing a lot of video. Prior to Encoded Textiles, I did some pieces with vertical bar codes. They referred to the code as an object. The code itself was like the price of a product, for example, "The Price of Democracy." They were highly glossed—luxuries, if you wish. But they were titled, "The Price of Democracy," or "The Price of Justice." Values became commodities. That series was called the Bar-Code Series. When the next generation code came about, I thought it would interesting to use it with the tapestries. I thought it could capture identity through the codes, for example, the tradition and the language embedded in the code, and to have it woven as a conceptual piece of art.

I see it as a more universal concept. The craftsmanship has thousands of years of history and is a portal that allows you to interact with these communities.

Bert next to Mapuche Portal #1

MICHNO: You've been working on the weavings for 6 – 7 years?

BERT: Exactly. It evolved quite a bit. These are two different examples. [Bert refers to the two weavings on display in the museum, *Zapotec Poet* (2015), and *Mapuche Portal #1* (2014).] This is from Oaxac, this is from the Mapuche.

MICHNO: I saw some photos of women working on these weavings. Are these traditional, hand woven pieces?

BERT: Totally, yes. These are from different countries. *Mapuche Portal #1* was made in Santiago. But some of the other pieces were done in the south of Chile. On one occasion, the weaver from the Mapuche community, Anita Pailami, flew to LA and worked with me for several months in Los Angeles. The Zapotec pieces were made by the Navarro sisters. They have the lovely situation where they have a house with a big patio, and the three of them sit on the ground, and they do what is called back-strap looming. They strap the loom around their back and then to a tree, and they can just do small pieces because it is limited by whatever you can reach with your hands. And then you sew it together and build a larger piece.

Each country and each community has different weaving techniques, and they have different stories to tell that reflect different traditions, mythologies, cosmologies.

So we traveled to different communities. We started videotaping, and interviewing, and recording that segment of the culture and the language, and those videos end up encoded in these [QR] codes.

Anita Pailami

MICHNO: In terms of encoding, you're encoding multiple things here. You're encoding a particular cultural history; there is also technology that is embodied in the way the weaving is made that is specific to particular communities; but then you're also using these QR codes.

BERT: Right. These are definitely interactive pieces—I call them portals. [For *Mapuche Portal #1*] I asked Graciela Hurao—she is one of the biggest poets in Mapuche culture—if she could do research and reinterpret the traditional stories of the Mapuche people. We made some videos with her where she read the traditional stories for us. So we did ten stories, and we encoded one in the QR code.

We developed software that enabled us to swap the codes, so you can scan it once and listen to one of the stories of the Mapuche people. But if you scan it in a month, it's going to be a different story, and then another one and another one.

Graciela Hurao

So there's going to be ten stories bouncing from tapestry to tapestry. We're planning on doing ten of these tapestries.

MICHNO: And what is the market for these traditional weavings, if a Mapuche weaver were to bring them directly to market?

BERT: They have a couple of outlets for that, and normally they show weavings in Santiago in various boutiques. They also export weavings to Europe. There are a number of organizations in Chile and through the United Nations that help native tribes to promote their work.

MICHNO: You said you didn't know if the QR code in the weaving would actually work as a QR code?

BERT: The museum show to exhibit that work was scheduled two years before I made my first tapestry. For two years we worked without knowing whether it was possible to do it. So that's why I had to fly the Chilean weavers to the States to work with me in the studio—the process was very difficult.

Guillermo Bert: Encoded Textiles, at the Pasadena Museum of California Art

In Chile they still use what is called the vertical loom, which is just a piece of wood on the top and bottom. They weave it with a very thick thread. The codes we used for that series—it was in the show at the Pasadena Museum of California Art [*Guillermo Bert: Encoded Textiles*, October 28, 2012-February 24, 2013]. All of those pieces are Mapuche textiles. They are all 8 feet tall by 5 feet wide. The code has to be large enough because of the thick thread in order to be read—you have to have it a certain size. In fact, when we first did this, the first code was much more dense than [what you see now], and it was impossible. It had eight hundred squares to be precise enough with that thick thread. After a year, when we managed to make it read, we had a big celebration. And then we did the other ones. We simplified the codes, so it was a process.

La Bestia

So in the beginning it was actually very difficult to pull it together and make it work, but after we did that, we moved on to other countries. Zapotec was much easier because the code could be smaller and more precise. [The Zapotecs in Oaxaca use a pedal loom, which allows for smaller thread.]

The pieces that are at CAFAM are a mix of the tapestries made with the back-strap loom used by the Mayans and some photo transfers that I created with a laser, so it's 3-D on canvas.

But that particular piece is interesting because the train that's depicted in the piece is called La Bestia—the Beast—it's a freight train that brings people from the Central America to the United States. People just jump onto the back of the train.

The picture of that train is faded out in the back, and the colors are in front. As you scan the code, the story that is behind the code is of somebody who is of Mayan origin that lives in Los Angeles and is describing the voyage. He actually came on that train. And he's talking about life in Guatamala, as a Mayan, and the journey to the train, and what it's like for him to live in Los Angeles.

There's a direct connection between the image and the actual code, but all these other traditional stories are stories of their own land. But this one is called the Exodus Series. It's tells the stories of people that live in Los Angeles but have come from those communities. So it adds a new twist to the story.

The loom

MICHNO: I don't know if you intended for this to be part of the conversation, but also embedded is how we value work, and how we value traditional forms of work versus other forms of work. Is it just a by-product of how it came about, or was it something you considered in advance?

BERT: No, I never thought of it in advance. I thought about the conceptual element and whether it works or not, and whether it interests me or not. This has an anthropological edge to it. I had never really worked with an indigenous culture before, so this is a new thing for me. I'd never made a documentary film before. So it was a completely different approach to my art making, but it was so rewarding. Traveling around different countries, filming stories, and the stories were amazing. So I got totally in love with the process and with the material.

MICHNO: When you first started thinking about the project, how did you think about the the work of indigenous communities related to traditional art forms?

BERT: I was thinking, and this is particularly true for me, being Latin American in the United States, the idea of identity is always present. When I traveled to different countries in Latin America and see these indigenous populations, you can see clearly that they are losing their identities. They are losing their languages, their traditions, their religions. And I thought, you know, I live in America, but the people, their identity has been stolen.

Coded Stories: The Mapuche

So I thought that there was a parallel between these two elements. In one instance, they don't belong to the mainstream, they don't use the language as much, they are losing who they are. And then in America, your identity can be digitized and then it can be stolen. So I thought this code is a transition in between, it is a

portal. I thought, 'These codes already look like traditional tapestries, what if we infuse them with this culture and this tradition and language, and you can tell a story?' And at the same time, you can use the traditional two-thousand year old weaving techniques to produce it.

And, I thought, the way that they communicate is through an oral tradition, so this is going to be like an oral tradition in the twenty-first century, where you use your cell phone to access through these codes, but they are still weaving the entire piece, as you access it, and it becomes an interactive piece. So the marrying of these two technologies, I thought it would be exciting to see. It's a form of archiving the culture, of course, and making it more accessible and reinserting it into the mainstream, if you wish. And that allows them to save a piece of their identity in the same way that you're losing your identity when it has been digitized and replicated or copied. So I thought it was something in between that is represented by this process.

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Christopher Michno is a Los Angeles area art writer and the Associate Editor of Artillery. His work has also appeared in KCET's Artbound, the LA Weekly, ICON, and numerous other publications. He is also an editor for DoppelHouse Press, an LA based publisher that specializes in art, architecture and the stories of émigrés.

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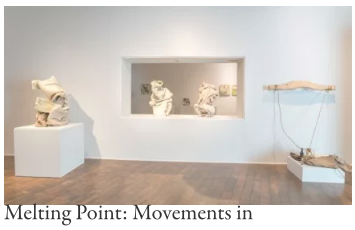

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