

Exilio (Exiled): Chile to South-West Sydney (Exhibition)

Liverpool Regional Museum, 21 May–28 September 2024

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September 11 is a date etched into the consciousness of a large proportion of the Western world. However, its significance had already been established before the terrorist attacks in North America in 2001. On 11 September 1973, a military coup d'état led by General Augusto Pinochet overthrew a democratically elected left-wing government in Chile. This South American coup, which was supported by the USA, UK and Australian governments, led to people being murdered, tortured and 'disappeared'. It was also the catalyst for over 18,000 Chilean refugees to seek a new home

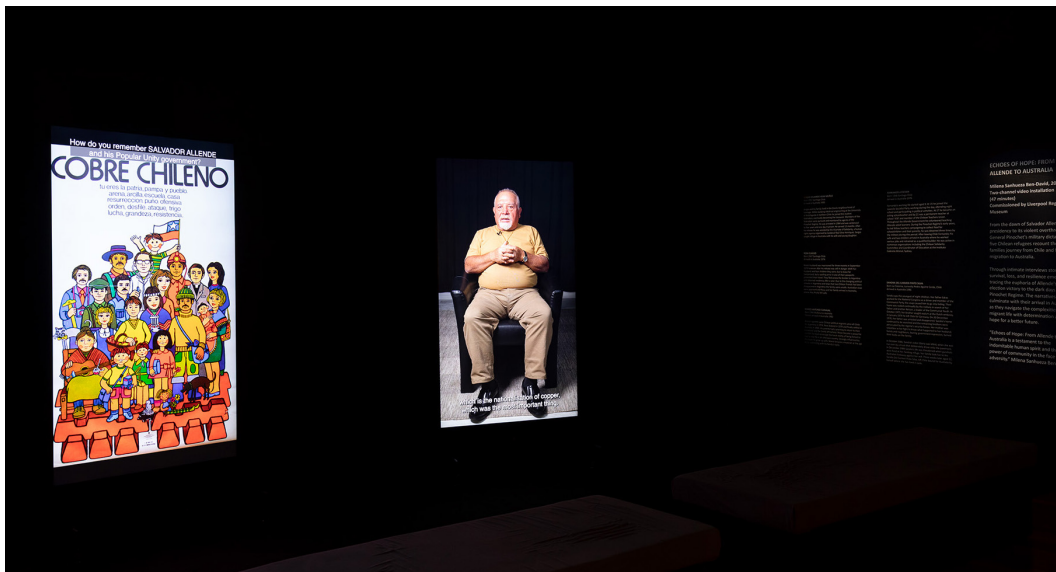


Figure 1 A photograph of the two-channel video installation, *Echoes of Hope* at Liverpool Regional Museum. Photograph by Michael Waite Photography. Used with permission.

in Australia, with many settling in the increasingly multicultural western suburbs of Sydney. Their stories are told through artefacts, artworks, and oral testimonies in *Exilio (Exiled): Chile to South-West Sydney*. It includes a video installation called *Echoes of Hope: From Allende to Australia*, which is a wonderful example of what can be achieved by oral history. This video work was commissioned by the Liverpool Regional Museum and will be accessioned into the Museum's Heritage Collection, thereby ensuring that it will be available as an education resource after *Exilio* closes.

The exhibition is divided into three sections, which are within three connected rooms. When visitors enter the museum, they can either proceed straight ahead into a narrow space, which has an illustrated timeline of the events leading up to the coup of 1973, or turn right to view personal objects and *arpilleras* (a three-dimensional Chilean textile artwork) belonging to some of the refugees. In the final room, there is a 47-minute compilation of five video interviews with Chilean refugees.

The video installation, *Echoes of Hope*, was created by professional videographer and community worker, Milena Sanhueza Ben-David. She sees it as 'a testament to the indomitable human spirit and the power of community in the face of adversity'. Like her video subjects, Sanhueza Ben-David and her family were forced to flee Chile as a result of the coup. Having a shared country of origin, language, and experience of exile helps her to achieve an affinity with her subjects that other oral historians would have to work harder to develop.

Echoes of Hope is a two-channel work – one channel shows the edited oral history recordings with subtitles in English (four of the interviewees speak in Spanish) and the other provides a slide show of related archival images. Text panels on the wall introduce each speaker and provide a brief overview of the reasons they were forced to flee. Their accounts of life in Chile, the 1973 coup, their political exile and the aftermath are told chronologically with each interviewee answering the same questions. Sanhueza Ben-David skilfully weaves these personal threads into a single narrative, which reminds visitors that refugees experience loss and separation differently. While this structure creates a well-rounded narrative, because visitors will dip in and out of the 47-minute video installation, it would have been improved if the

names of the speakers were provided each time, so that viewers understood which of the five interviewees was speaking.

The experience of watching the video installation is intensified by its presentation. Firstly, it is displayed in a tiny room – just 51m². Secondly, all the walls except one are painted in black and the only light is on the text panels (white text on a black background) and from the video (see Figure 1). The wall that is not painted black is covered with a brown 1980s wallpaper design and postcard-size black and white photographs of Chilean families, including some of the interviewees, as they left the country. These are solely illuminated by a spotlight (see Figure 2). The design ensures that the visitor feels enveloped by the darkness and makes the survival stories more powerful.



Figure 2 The 'departure wall' behind where the video installation is projected at Liverpool Regional Museum. Photograph by Michael Waite Photography. Used with permission.

At times, the content of the stories is as dark as the room. The interviewees speak of murder, torture, imprisonment, suicidal thoughts, kidnapping, the disappearance of family members and other traumatic events. There is a content warning at the front desk of the museum, but this reviewer observed no information about support services. However, the fact that the interviewees are alive, in Australia, and able to speak about their experiences is a sign of hope.

The idea for a video installation and exhibition emerged when Sanhueza Ben-David approached the Liverpool City Council (LCC) about recording some oral histories with Chilean refugees, having been referred to them by the State Library of New South Wales. She knew two of the interviewees personally, and a third worked for LCC. Two further interviewees were identified through their friends in the Chilean community.

Some speakers have loaned cherished personal items that they brought with them from Chile for the exhibition. Curator Tony Nolan said that it took many months and many conversations before some of the refugees could trust the museum with the custody of the few mementos they still have from their life in Chile. The number of personal items loaned for the exhibition is a testament to his relationship-building work.

The three *arpilleras* in the exhibition are like oral histories in the form of textiles. Traditionally, they are stitched onto flour or wheat sacks with brightly coloured threads. Crafted by women, they represent both an act of political defiance and a form of art therapy that allowed them to express and share their stories of pain and loss. If anyone was caught with an *arpillera* during Pinochet's regime, it was confiscated and destroyed, and the bearer was punished. The exhibition contains this quote from Chilean-American author, Isabel Allende: 'With scraps of fabric and simple stitches, the women embroidered what could not be said in words, and so the *Arpillera* became a powerful form of political resistance'.

Coincidentally, on a recent train trip from the Blue Mountains to Sydney, I sat next to a young man who had the outline of an AK47 tattooed behind his ear. I opened my laptop to continue writing this review, and he read the opening paragraph over my shoulder. He then told me that his grandfather was forced to fight for Pinochet and killed many people. His grandfather's story echoes those in *Exilio*, as he migrated to Australia as a refugee with two small children, one of whom was this young man's father. Excited to learn about the exhibition, he said he'd try and take his father and grandfather to see it. He told me his four older brothers were in jail, and that he too had done time in jail but was now proud to have learnt a trade and to raise his three young sons. Intergenerational trauma is sometimes the sequel to a refugee's story and, given the violence of the Chilean coup and the repercussions, it

is not surprising. Violence and trauma are facets of the Chilean refugee experience that are not overtly discussed in the video installation or exhibition, as the focus is on hope, and 'successful' refugee stories.

Exilio conveys the history of the 1973 coup and how it strengthened Australia's connections to Chile without being melodramatic. The video installation that centres on the interviews does the 'heavy lifting' of communicating the personal stories. The exhibition text and marketing collateral could be enhanced by a good editor. This is something that small museums sometimes cannot afford, although it is well worth the investment. It is not easy to present oral histories well in an exhibition space – *Exilio* succeeds, where many have failed.