

**songs of ascension:
poems for Chilé/raiment series**

Jane Davidson

The *Divergence Project* exhibition was held at the St James Theatre in Wellington in 2000 and a series of my digital laser prints was included. Images of these are incorporated into these notes from the exhibition. The following text was later developed as a parallel text to accompany the images. This text was developed to further explore and unravel the themes inherent in the visual work; a series alluding to the disjunction between fictional history and the urban reality of surviving the nightmare of political chaos. This disjunction is reflected in the contrast between the harsh realities suggested in the writing and the softer and more romantic nature of the images. My project explores – amongst other things – the potential resonance of such a contrast. Ernst van Alphen points out how extreme trauma – for example through the Holocaust – can be enacted in art by the use of play and toylike motifs. He argues that the direct representation of trauma is impossible and that toys and playful images can be used to allude to the 'unreality' of extreme historical events.¹


raiment / korowai / cloak / wings: clothing, apparel, dress/ migration; needing wings: symbols of transformative and protective device; mixing metaphors of exile as flight and wishing a final flight for the *los decaparecidos*; the *disappeared ones*, who were denied their own history.

horse: symbol of colonialism, symbol of 'mares' of the night...*'with or without wings, the horse used to be a common symbol of the soul journey: a trip to the other-world, or to the land of the dead where the visitor might learn the great secrets of life, death, and magic; and return with god-like wisdom...'*²

butterfly: symbol of survival from *Papillon*.³ Also, traditional prison 'signature' icon scratched on cell walls, signifying a logo for the nameless; symbol of regeneration, transcendence, survival, freedom, flight; symbol for the 'disappeared ones'.


alien-skin: symbol of citizenship for illegal immigrants/ exiles/ who endure 'alien' on their passbook until legitimised. A series of enlarged and enhanced black and white random drawings (saved 'doodles' or subconscious markings). Overlaid, sometimes uniting two objects in the frame. These small illustrations look like tubes, arteries and cross-sections of veins are passport stamps over a fictional photograph. Reality is mirrored and inverted, as the invisible-people, literally erased on paper even after their corporeal time, now become envisible. As the 'ghosts' of bad history they are loud in their silence. Demanding identity: acknowledgement, affirmation, apology, and justice.

...Beside her was a carved wooden figure of a man with wings, folded at his sides. On the couch lay a carved heart,



also with wings, made from the same red wood. ...This winged heart is ours... It knows how to fly to the heavens & how to return...

... you must promise me you'll look for that city & take me there. Only a few ever enter. When



someone falls & loses their way, another takes their place & continues on ...taking on the mantle of the elect...

Miguel Serrano



Chile
A disease of dermal
21st c. malaise

3,000 blank masks
bodies flying
to the ground
in the name of a military régime

guilt looks like mother, sisters, lovers,
-wont go away
memory looks like children having nightmares
silence screams like torture
am I the
ghost of my mother's brother

forgotten children / sister / broken
on the run
exile / alien
on the run
missing persons
on the run
never born now
on the run

¿ you who have never taken life / given birth
what do you know of war, soldier-boy?

These images are part of a series of work in progress using photography and sampled texture from personal sources as a starting point. Messing around with mixed media. Hi-tech vs lo-tech. Narrative and image. Text as texture. Fabricating fiction and mixing metaphor. Mending; a necessary stitch, with invisible thread; (no photos, no passport, no papers, does-not-exist-now) – some sort of cloak.

Currently exploring issues of relating to Chile and lost relations in Chile, this work is to do with Chile and the 'disappearance' in the mid 1970s of my mothers' only brother and his wife. Incorporating ideas of regaining/ reclaiming identity for the disappeared/ *los decaparecidos* who have had their identity stolen, even after death. Trying to come to terms and resolve feelings around issues of past history, relating this to contemporary politics and looking at the idea of somehow moving on...

This work is also connected to an especially profound story of loss in a family context and the effect on identity this has. As a family myth unravelling during my childhood, it spoke, in spite of family history between the gaps (absence) of death, loss, exile and erasure. (Death and the Maiden, this time: La Llorona.) As a series, I try and translate this, trying to come to terms with political and personal family history relating to Chile and how the effects of such times are continuous and far-reaching.

It is a highly personal interpretation, with information gained from a range of sources, e.g. readings of South American history (and the almost permanent state of plunder and siege it has endured primarily for its mineral resources),⁴ combined with a file of contemporary news clippings I have built up of the unfolding Pinochet-in-exile story, 1999-2000.

This story continues today with the instigation of the International Criminal Court in 2002. The death of the dictator and the unresolved issues it raises, show it is still an unfolding episode of history. First there is silence, only now are people able to open up to try and process bad politics. My mother still searches the archives for evidence. The latest version is he never existed. History is twisted.

Because it is a personal, emotive and an on-going story from my family background, I have been able to

take some poetic liberties. Mixing truth and fiction, taking for inspiration and also asking permission or blessing. I realise along the way, that stylistically, the artwork relates to the magic-realist style of contemporary latino fiction, literature I have been immersed in for years: multilayered meanings, collage composition, playful colour and poetic narrative.⁵

Trying to express multilayered meaning in a positive, colourful and personal style, I am not so much aiming to seduce the viewer; rather to leave them with a positive spin.⁶ Playing, yes; trying to subvert some metaphor with subliminal combinations: slightly acidic colours to leave a taste of thought in the viewers mouth, hopefully. Ultimately a feeling of faith in spite of the underlying seriousness of this sad chapter of human history...

BUTTERFLY FOR CHILÉ/LOS DECAPARECIDOS

Beside her was a carved wooden figure of a man with wings, folded at his sides. On the couch lay a carved heart, also with wings, made from the same red wood... This winged heart is ours...It knows how to fly to the heavens and how to return...you must promise me you'll look for that city and take me there. Only a few ever enter. When another falls and loses their way, another takes their place and continues on...taking on the mantle of the elect.⁷

With esoteric lessons from Miguel Serrano, the text seemed appropriate for butterfly imagery, alluding to flying/ cloaks/ death, and spirit and hope. Appropriate appropriation for *los decaparecidos*?

Kitsch fridge magnet brooch aligned, still-frame style, next to a skeletal silver butterfly, alluding to the fragility of life, also.

CABALLO DE LOS SUEÑOS/DAWN

Caballo de los sueños, literally translates: 'horse of the dreams' aka dream-horse/nightmare. Dawn is the time of street kidnappings/this is a red dawn and shepherd's warning for sure, despite the folk-painted, wooden, puppet-play-horse ...I have heard its red horse neigh.⁸

White horse represents Jon/Juan Poirot-Robinson. He spent part of his life as a working horseman. The over-dubbed-like text messes the fact with the fiction.

BLACK HORSE/CABALLO NEGRO

Representing wife of Jon, also 'disappeared' for many years, though possibly still alive.

CHILÉ

First we will kill all the subversives; then we will kill their collaborators; then...their sympathizers, then...those who remain indifferent, and finally we will kill the timid...
(General Iberico Saint Jean, Governor of Buenos Aires, May 1976).⁸

CHILÉ

A disease of denial
20th century malaise
3,000 blank masks,
bodies flying
 to the ground
guilt looks like mothers, sisters, lovers,
– won't go away.
memory looks like children having nightmares
silence screams like torture
 am I the
ghost of my mother's brother

forgotten children/ stolen/ broken
 on the run
exile/alien
 on the run
missing persons
 on the run
never born now
 on the run.

¿you have never taken life/ given birth
what do you know of war; soldier boy?⁹

With thanks for words from Pablo Neruda/Miguel Serrano;
essays from Eduardo Galeano/John Simpson and Jana Bennet;
also for many conversations and much support from Ana Poirot.

Dedicated to Juan Poirot-Robinson b. 1930 - d. 1985?

- 1 Ernst van Alphen, "Playing the Holocaust", in *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 184.
- 2 B G Walker, *Womens' Symbols & Sacred Objects* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988).
- 3 Henri Charriere, *Papillon* (London: Harper Perennial, 1970). *Papillon*: French for butterfly, H Charriere named after the butterfly tattoo on his chest.
- 4 Eduardo Galeano, *The Open Veins of Latin America/Las Venas Abiertas de America Latina* (first published as an essay 1970).
- 5 E.g.: Eduardo Galleano, *Faces & Masks* (*Memory of Fire* trilogy), Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude & Love in the Time of Cholera*, Isabel Allende.

- 6 "There is a kind of allegory between the cultural loss that has been experienced in the Pacific...and the loss that migrants have sustained, but these paintings are not at all pessimistic...work(s) to generate positive energy, to put art into the world in a way that can help cure individual ills and the wider problems of who lack a sense of place. Despite its personal character; this art is part of a wider effort of collective affirmation". Nicholas Thomas, *Oceanic Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995).
- 7 Miguel Serrano, *El/Ella, Book of Magic Love* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1973).
- 8 Pablo Neruda, *Residence on Earth/Residencia en la Tierra* (London: New Directions Press, 1973).
- 9 John Simpson & Jana Bennett, *The Disappeared: Voices from a Secret War, 1976 – 83* (London: Robson Books, 1985).
- 10 Jane Davidson, poem: *Chilé*, (Sept 2000).

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