

Folkloric traditions, pottery, caramel and jam factories, fresh bread, homemade local food, pine forests, wild flowers, various fragrances of burning wood and fields full of sheep, cows and horses. These are all characteristics of Casablanca, a small town situated in the fifth region of Chile.

This is where I grew up. Surrounded by family, predominantly women, who would swarm my parents' home to have tea (or "Once" in the local slang).

It was a loud gathering, accompanied by the old classical guitar and the song book so we could all sing along, the cigarettes or "puchos" puffing around the house. No matter if it was torrential rain or freezing cold my great grandmother, grandmother and aunties would all gather around the stove that would expel that rich pine wood fragrance that stuck to our clothes for days after.

What always caught my attention was the amount of textiles they all brought to our gatherings - of various colours and techniques.

My mother would make clothing for me with her own knitting machine, which was her main tool in her small business that distributed through my father's shop just down the road.

I was brought up surrounded by textiles, buttons, wool and the constant sound of the knitting and sewing machine working away in the background.

Unfortunately I had to leave my life in the small town, family gatherings and the country on the 15th of August of 1975. After the coup of 1973 that shattered the country.

I left for Australia with my parents and siblings.

I was desperate to reconnect with my roots in a foreign country and rescue the memories that I had left behind; so in 1977, once I was in Melbourne, I found the Punch Needle, Macrame, leather design and pottery techniques. Which also led me back to Folklore music where in 1978 until 1983 I became a dancer for a Chilean folkloric music group.

It wasn't until 1993 that we left for Chile with my four children and in 1997 I discover Cross Stitching in a women's group in Casablanca. This technique led me to create designs inspired in our national indigenous communities like the Aymara and Mapuches. My first entrepreneurial endeavors in this technique led to be recognized by the Government of Chile in the North.

My passion for design led me to dive back into the books in 2000, where I studied Interior Design at the University of Saint Thomas.

Fifteen years later I find myself back in Australia where my passion takes another turn and discover the world of weaving, specifically the Japanese technique Saori, that was being taught at Box Hill, Melbourne. The philosophy and freedom to use a variety of fabrics in a single textile without worrying about order or repetition had captivated me. I continue to practice this

technique for four more years. All while I decide to head back to University and study at RMIT in 2016.

In 2018 I was invited to exhibit at the Frankston Art Centre to show my work in Saori as well as Cross Stitching and consequently, this year, to sell and show my work at Stonehouse Gallery in Warrandyte, Victoria.

It's been a long and winding road throughout the years since those smokey nights in Casablanca, that pushed me to discover my passion for textiles. With historical and personal events weaving in between I graduated this year in Textile Design, Development and Production.

Valeria Benavides, 2019.