

The “Salmon of Knowledge” Shared with Children in *Zona Imaginaria*, San Fernando, Argentina

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Abstract: Argentina has the fifth largest Irish community worldwide and in 2018, Tina Lawlor Mottram became the first Irish artist-in-residence in *Zona Imaginaria* in San Fernando, Buenos Aires province. *Zona Imaginaria* is a not-for-profit arts centre founded in 2008 by the Argentinian artist, Lucrecia Urbano. This entry explores the use of artistic endeavours to increase the cultural capital of lives in underprivileged areas and presents the way in which the residency informed the visiting artist’s work.

Keywords: Tina Lawlor Mottram, *Zona Imaginaria*, Lucrecia Urbano, The Salmon of Knowledge.

“La historia es siempre la misma, oprimidos contra opresores, y hoy los opresores son dueños de la comunicación.”²

Javier Parbst

History is frequently a description of victors in struggles, the powerful writing their own legacy on monuments and in official documents, textbooks, and literature. Image, however, is decipherable by the eye, with the viewer an active interpreter of what is shown. My first image shows street art on the *Casa Cultural Padre Pancho Soares* in Tigre town, close to Buenos Aires, as I first saw it from the train I was taking to my residency nearby in San Fernando (Figs. 1, 2). These are hand-painted images on a cultural centre dedicated to Padre Pancho Soares, who worked on behalf of Tigre’s poor and who was assassinated in the 1970s military takeover. At first glance, the image might seem to be but a colourful depiction of hands waving, outlined graphically on a blue and black background. Yet, with the slogan above it, “*Fuera Ingleses de Malvinas*”, the meaning becomes clear. The panel over the door reads as “Freedom for Milagro Sala, Political Prisoner of Macri”, referring to the controversial 2016 arrest of the indigenous leader of the Túpac Amaru Neighbourhood Association in Jujuy province in northern Argentina. Many, including Amnesty International, continue to protest that her arrest was politically motivated. Sala has declared her innocence; recently condemned to thirteen years imprisonment, this association in Tigre continues to protest on her behalf.

Finding out about this arresting artwork on the Padre Pancho Soares cultural centre was the start of my exploration into history on the streets of the Argentine province of Buenos Aires in 2018, when I was the first Irish artist-in-residence in *Zona Imaginaria* in San Fernando. *Zona Imaginaria* is a not-for-profit arts centre, founded by artist Lucrecia Urbano in 2008, offering free creative

¹ Tina Lawlor Mottram currently lectures at Medway Adult Education, previously worked for HMSO, Collins Publishers, and as the Design Manager at the Royal Armouries, HM Tower of London.

² My translation of Javier Parbst’s words: “History is always the same, oppressed against oppressors, and today the oppressors are the owners of communication.” Parbst is town councillor in the area in which my residency was located.

workshops to local children. The *Cartonera* style book created during this residency was illustrated by the children in my group, with my assistance (Fig. 3). Titled (in translation) “Pulgar the dog and his magic paw”, it incorporates some adventures of a local dog along with elements from the “The Salmon of Knowledge” Irish myth and the Argentinian Mariana stories. Mariana is known as an indigenous storyteller whose pockets were full of gold— which the *conquistadores* wanted to remove; eventually her dog transforms magically into a monster, thereby depriving them of their gold prize. “Patterns for Peace”, my subsequent exhibition at the Royal Engineers Museum in Gillingham, Kent, UK, reflects on my experience and various Black Madonna images I saw on my South American travels and elsewhere.³ What follows in this paper is an exploration of how art can increase the cultural capital of lives in underprivileged areas and how this residency inspired my artistic purpose.



Figures 1, 2: Casa Cultural Padre Pancho Soares (calle Vilela 1006), Tigre, Argentina.

The dynamics informing this cultural centre’s art seemed to me comparable with energies I witnessed nearby in Villa Jardín, San Fernando, where my residency was located. Like Tigre, Villa Jardín is a district of stark contrasts. Javier Parbst, a local town councillor and member of Tigre’s cultural centre describes Tigre as follows: “We live in a district of great contrasts, with very wealthy areas alongside neighbourhoods without running water, sewers or asphalt”⁴. San Fernando’s poverty, so similar, can be illustrated by the story of the infamous “Wall of Shame” of 2009. This wall was the three-metre high barricade that the then-mayor of San Isidro, Gustavo Posse, built to separate San Fernando from the more affluent San Isidro. The wall significantly disrupted the lives of especially those living in San Fernando, owing to transportation blockages. The then-president of Argentina, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, weighed in on the controversy, describing the wall as exclusionary in an interview with the mayor of San Fernando, Gerardo Osvaldo Amieiro; and a host of European papers reported on the incident, as well. Finally, Posse was forced to dismantle the wall, which by then had been decorated by graffiti such as “Somos

³ Lawlor Mottram, Tina, “Patterns for Peace”, Royal Engineers Museum, Kent, UK, July-October 2019. http://serpentinacreation.com/site/?page_id=2674

⁴ Original text: “Vivimos en un distrito con contrastes muy fuertes, con zonas de muchísimos riqueza y barrios sin agua, cloacas ni asfalto”.

iguales”, but the wall remains a reminder of the strict and steep separation of rich and poor in this Argentinian region. As for the number of the poor, roughly a third of the local population is precariously employed and lacks access to routine health care.⁵

Cultural capital and cultural exclusion

Cultural capital, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu, refers to the set of cultural experiences and aesthetic sensibilities that enable people to wield power and status in society (Bourdieu 1986: 46-58). Cultural exclusion, as discussed by John O’Hagan et al., is part of the greater cycle of poverty in which “exclusion from access to cultural goods and resources that are regularly accessed by the better-off in society provides an unfair advantage for communities” (O’Hagan et al 2007: vi). On the problem of exclusion and art, Eleonora Belfiore proposes that “arts and heritage play a positive role in alleviating the symptoms of social exclusion” (Belfiore 2002: 1-4), which supports Bourdieu’s sense of the interconnected forces involved in people’s marginalization. The idea of the positive role the arts can play in alleviating the symptoms of exclusion is also shared by Lucrecia Urbano, the founder of *Zona Imaginaria*. Her belief that art can transform lives and her efforts to connect local residents and international artists are showcased in a book entitled *Zona Imaginaria*.⁶

“The Salmon of Knowledge” at the Zona

Knowing that Argentina is home to the fifth largest Irish community in the world, I felt that it was apt to introduce “The Salmon of Knowledge” story to local children. It was certainly a magical part of my own youth in Ireland. My sessions with the children commenced with me acting as *seanchai* (the Irish storyteller as “a bearer of old lore”). I explained that Irish history was and continues to be handed down from one generation to the next by storytelling. I also referenced the Argentinian storyteller Mariana of Pocito. Besides being known for having outwitted the conquistadors and telling stories to children, she is said to have had a dog. The canine added to our own story was inspired not only by Mariana’s, however, but also by the roaming strays and guard dogs of San Fernando—and the dog Bran belonging to Fionn MacCumhail in the salmon story. Our dog became known as Pulgar, or Thumb, because of the way Fionn’s thumb is a part of the myth. The magical salmon ate nine hazelnuts from nine magical hazelnut trees, which had fallen into the river. Fionn is warned not to eat the fish, but as he is cooking it, the fish blisters and bursts; he burns his thumb and sucks his thumb to soothe it, thereby absorbing the fish’s wisdom. There is a storyteller figure in “Pulgar the dog and his magic paw”, named *Maedbh*, so that children learned about both languages spoken in Ireland. They had little problem understanding this, given Argentina’s many indigenous languages, such as Mapuche, Quechua, and Guaraní.

Influenced by the *Cartonera* style books which have been created by many Brazilian and Argentine art groups and also my personal environmental concerns, our handmade book was created from leftover, recycled printing proofs from the Arta Ediciones *Zona Imaginaria* book. The book took shape over the course of the month of my residency, then was read by the children.

⁵ See “El conurbano bonaerense, la región más pobre del área metropolitana”, a report by DeBrown University, Buenos Aires, 4 July 2014.

⁶ Balut, Valeria and Lucrecia Urbano, Eds., *Zona imaginaria*, Arta Ediciones, Argentina, 2017

The children were photographed by Zona and the work was shared with families and the Zona community via YouTube and Vimeo.⁷

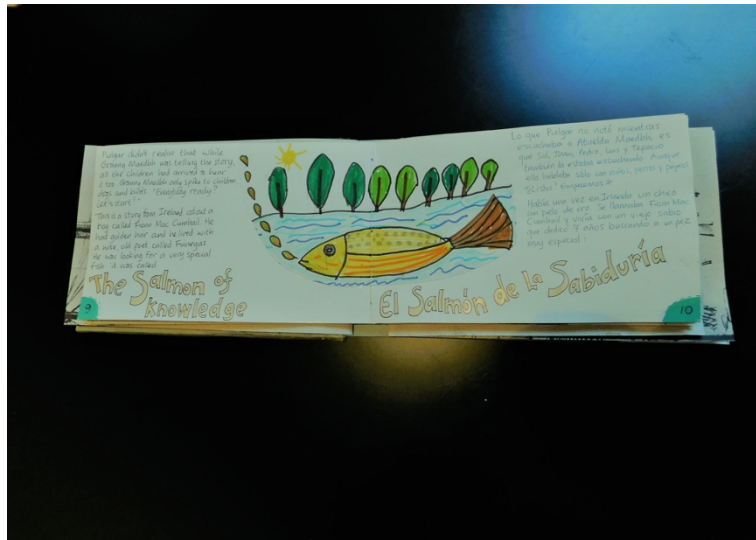


Figure 3: A page from “La pata mágica de Pulgar, el perro”..

Unlike children I normally work with, none of *Los Aprendices* had mobile phones to record themselves. In fact, several days when they came for workshops, there was no power and we had to make do by setting up tables outside where the light was better. There were black outs every week, which made me unhappy; locals were resigned. Furthermore, I watched the highest devaluation of the peso since the 2001 financial crash while I was in San Fernando, with President Macri negotiating with the International Monetary Fund. Needless to say, foreign travel is a dream for most locals. All of this points to why Urbano believes in her project. She believes that the invited international artists offer her community new perspectives, in addition to developing their “capacity to interpret visual culture”, as discussed in depth with Marian Otera for *La Voz* newspaper in 2019. The resulting article, “*El arte transforma las personas y su entorno*”, reveals insight not only the philosophy of the founder but also shows above all how she wants to provide local “children with the ability not only to interpret but also confidence and curiosity, improving their overall quality of life and well-being”.⁸

Other artist-led projects in *Zona* have included making a vegetable garden in an unused green space outside the house; also seed sharing and tree planting supported by government agencies, banks, and arts organisations. I observed that almost every house in the neighbourhood grows plants, flowers, and vegetables, while Urbano remembers many empty, unused spaces before *Zona* opened its doors. One of *Zona*’s apprentices has capitalised on his experiences and opened a vegetable shop close to the arts centre, selling locally grown produce.

⁷ See *Zona Imaginaria* website on my residency and “Pulgar the dog and his magic paw”:

<http://www.zonaimaginaria.com.ar/NEWS/tina-lawlor-mottram.html>

http://serpentinacreations.com/site/?page_id=2225

Vimeo links: Children reading their book * <https://vimeo.com/291508105> Children reading their book *

<https://vimeo.com/291505680> Tina Lawlor Mottram reading the book

⁸ Urbano, Lucrecia (interviewed by) Otera, Marian, “El arte transforma las personas y su entorno” in *La Voz* newspaper, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 15 May 2019.



Children and staff member Leonardo Blanc at *Zona Imaginaria*, with Tina Lawlor Mottram, right.

Artist-in-Residence exhibition: “Patterns for Peace”



Figure 4: “Black Madonna,” Tina Lawlor Mottram, 2019. Monoprint on paper. Exhibited in “Patterns for Peace”, Royal Engineers Museum, Gillingham, Kent, UK, 2019.

My residency in San Fernando and travels through Brazil resulted in an exhibition entitled “Patterns for Peace” in the Royal Engineers Museum in Kent. The Black Madonna (Fig. 4) was created after the Madonnas I had seen in *La Plata* cathedral and *La Aparecida* in Brazil, in addition to Madonnas I had previously seen in Montserrat (Catalonia), Prague, and Dublin. As a series, my

Madonna images are hand-coloured monoprints on recycled paper, presenting the Madonna as Earth Mother, religious icon, and protector. With respect to various of my creative choices, the intense blue colour reflects the spring blue seen in the domes of the Russian Orthodox church, near where I stayed in central Buenos Aires; the browns echo the colour of ploughed, rain-soaked coffee and banana plantations of *Minas Gerais*; and the use of gold was a direct reference to the famous gold in the pockets of indigenous storyteller Mariana. While I had been interested in Madonna figures for some time, this exhibition of my work at the Royal Engineers Museum would never have taken the final form it did if I had not spent time in San Fernando. Working with the children of San Fernando while living a month as a resident in *Zona* humbled me and made me determined to let them and their world speak through my art.

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