

Guernica Remakings

A talk and exhibition by Dr Nicola Ashmore & Claire Hignett

WCML Salford, 13 March 2019



There are two iconic images that all of the Niños Vascos and their families 'own' as part of their history. The first is the picture of the *SS Habana* arriving at Southampton on the 23 May 1937 with the children crowding on every part of the decks to get their first view of England and the welcome they were to have there. And the second is Picasso's *Guernica*. Looking at the banner copy of the picture displayed as part of *Guernica Remakings* I nearly mistook this textile project as the real picture which of course is on display at the Reina Sofia Gallery in Madrid. Then I wondered if it was the embroidered copy which hangs in the UN building in New York. Could I have mis-remembered the immense picture I had seen in Madrid? Had it shrunk? Had colour and texture been there all the time and I had not noticed?

The picture of the banner was the central part of the talk given by Dr Nicola Ashmore. The banner was made in 2012 to take on demonstrations and so generate discussion asking the question is *Guernica* still relevant? Does it still powerfully convey a humanitarian message calling for solidarity and compassion across borders?

Picasso had been commissioned to paint a mural for the Republican Pavilion at the Paris Expo. In March 1937 as the attack on the Basque Country began he didn't know what to paint. His subject was given to him by the Nazi and Fascist planes that bombed Guernica on the 26 April 1937. His picture captures the death destruction and misery brought by the Franco insurrection to the Spanish people. It is a haunting image of that war which brought the Niños to England, and broken down into its component parts shows the death of a soldier, a woman crying out over her dead baby, and in the agony of the death throes of the horse the pain of the whole of Spain.

Guernica Remakings has allowed others to interpret for contemporary audiences suffering of our own century. From the photo of Colin Powell giving a speech in front of the tapestry version of the painting in the UN building covered by a curtain at the beginning of the First Iraq War; to the banner made in South Africa to expose the inhumanity of the response to the HIV/ AIDS crisis there; to the use of the banner on anti racist demonstrations in Britain. Art being used as protest much as Picasso had originally wanted with his painting touring Scandinavia, Britain, and the USA to raise funds and Aid for Spain and to decide which side of the divide they were on.

Clare Hignett talked about the two weeks in 1939 when the original *Guernica* visited Manchester and was displayed in a car showroom – the only space big enough available to show it. Britain divided at the time was illustrated by reports of meetings addressed by MPs opposing Aid to Spain and calling for charity to be directed to the poor of Salford. These MPs were of the Conservative Government which had cut unemployment benefits and wages in their own version of austerity. Whilst crowds came to view Picasso’s masterpiece they were invited to donate to the Manchester Foodship.



Claire’s own work showing through childlike things our Basque Children history was also on display. Striking images of the twenty five Niños Vascos who came to Salford before travelling onto Sheffield, and Keighley represented as cloth dollies look out from the display cases with their faces pressed together as the children on the *SS Habana* looked out from their deck vantage points with their faces blurring into a crowd. Most of the Salford Colony returned to Spain but we know that the Pascual Perez children Alberto, Alfonso, and Aurelia stayed in Britain. Clare’s exhibitions in Manchester and Southampton have previously been reported on the www.basquechildren.org website.

Artists have taken sides on important issues and I am pleased to see that the story of the children of Guernica is being retold. The refugee crisis and its individual tragedies are introduced for the viewer to consider. Who is the only child without facial features – eyes, nose, mouth? Could this doll represent the unknown and un-named children whose lives have been lost crossing the Mediterranean? Could he be Alan Kurdi?

Simon Martinez