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## PAULINA ORTIZ THE TIES THAT BIND

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# The ties that bind

*The life of artist Paulina Ortiz is about building connections, both with other textile artists in Central and South America and within her own practice, writes Jessica Hemmings*

**L**abyrinths I can knit with my naked hands' is how the Costa Rican artist Paulina Ortiz describes her work. Ortiz belongs to a community of artists often overlooked in discussion of contemporary textile practice in Britain. When we think of Central and South American textiles we tend to remember the remarkably intricate constructions of the past. One basic reason for this could be the language barrier. Another is potentially distance, although the internet makes this a poor excuse today. The magical gold weavings of Columbian artist Olga de Amaral or Chilean Cecilia Vicuña's poetic explorations of text and textile are familiar to some. But the list, particularly of Central American artists, is limited. Ortiz has spent much of the past two decades working to change this, not only constructing material labyrinths within her own work, but also enabling networks of communication between Central and South American artists. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the two tasks share striking similarities.

## Networks

Ortiz graduated from the California College of Arts and Crafts (now the California College of the Arts) with a BFA in 1982. By the mid-1980s she was working as a design consultant for Aid to Artisans Costa Rica and involved in preliminary work to create a textile department at the University of Costa Rica. Alongside the development of her own practice, the ensuing decades have found her tackling increasingly public roles with an aim to linking and improving networks between the textile artists of the region.

In 2004 and 2006 she represented Latin America as Coordinator of the Third and Fourth International Biennials of the Organization of Women in Textile Art held in Venezuela and Costa Rica. Currently, she is President of the Iberoamericana Textile Network, which aims to promote communication between individuals interested in textile

culture around the globe through conferences, seminars and workshops.

These public roles are evidence of the importance Ortiz places on networks and connections: key visual elements also evident in her own practice. Historians Elaine Hedges and Ingrid Wendt note: 'For women, the meaning of sewing and knotting is 'connecting' – connecting the parts of one's life, and connecting to other women – creating a sense of community and wholeness'. In practice, Ortiz creates just

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this: she knots and weaves connections. Her work uses plant fibres and often takes on organic forms: suggesting natural growths and groupings from a landscape we have yet to visit. Much of this work is large in scale with installations and wall hangings often enveloping the maker and viewer. Working predominately with locally sourced materials, she uses acrylic paint and feathers to create a palette reminiscent of the strong light and vibrant colours found in many of the textile traditions of Central America.

Weaving and knotting only with her bare hands, the industrialisation of textile production plays no part in her

Top row from left: *Sotobosque IV* (detail) 2007; *Atrapasueños III* (detail) 2005; *Bejucos I*, 2007

Centre row: Detail of *Sin tiempo...* 2008 also pictured centre; *Huari* 2005

Below left: *Chichicastenango* 2005 and pictured as a detail far right. Centre: *Nandayure II* (detail) 2005