

MERCEDES AZPILICUETA

in conversation with Sorchá Carey

Sorchá Carey: Filling the City Dome is the monumental tapestry *Potatoes, Riots and other Imaginaries*. The selection of images combines a fascinating mix of contemporary and historic references including two collective movements taking place around 100 years apart: the Potato riots led by women in the Jordaan neighbourhood of Amsterdam in 1917, and the Ni Una Menos (translated as 'not one less') feminist grassroots social movement which began in Argentina in 2015.

How were you drawn to exploring the story of the Potato riots; and to bringing these two narratives together within your work?

Mercedes Azpilicueta: I was living in Amsterdam already for five or six years and I felt a need to get to know the place where I was. Histories play a role in how I encounter what surrounds me and there is a strong need to live in an embodied way, engaging with my context from a personal point of view. I guess I was searching for a way to connect with my place, my city, that at times feels so foreign.

Then my friend Sjoerd Kloosterhuis, a historian and curator, invited me to do a performance in the neighbourhood of Jordaan, in Amsterdam. The Jordaan, now one of the most expensive places in the city of Amsterdam, was once a working-class neighbourhood with a high concentration of *hofjes* (inner courtyards), built by rich people for elderly women, as a kind of charity. I remember we visited the Jordaan Museum located inside a retirement home and met its director Mieke Krijger. Mieke is a curator and keeps alive the memory of the working-class women who lived in the Jordaan neighbourhood and told us about the Aardapeloproer (Potato riots) which seemed like a perfect story to work with. It was important to realise that women were at the centre of this story; working class women that fought for their children, families and friends. Women that actually formed some sort

of patriarchy in that neighbourhood, dealt with the (poor) economies of their households and had the courage to self-organise and take to the streets to feed their loved ones.

Their bold approach reminded me of my own collective struggle back home in Argentina, being part of the Ni Una Menos movement that started in June 2015. There we took to the streets to protest against femicides and gender-based violence, as well as to campaign for reproductive rights. Thanks to the marches that took place – I had the privilege to be in most of them – the abortion law was passed in December 2020. It felt so powerful to change the course of history by uniting and coming together.

SC: How did you go about researching and sourcing the details and imagery informing the design of the tapestry?

MA: The researching and sourcing for the imagery of the tapestry was a long process that took a year approximately. I worked closely with Sjoerd, Mieke as well as with art historian Laura Kneebone. We approached several archives in the city of Amsterdam, but also in the cities of The Hague and Utrecht. We were looking for material that could relate to the story of the Potato riots, the working-class in Amsterdam, the industrialisation of the city (which came a bit later than in the UK), and young women (and children) entering the factories. In short, we looked into the way working-class people would live their lives, balancing life and work. The domesticity was at the centre of this research. We sourced material from the likes of the Rijksmuseum, Stadsarchief Amsterdam, Amsterdam Museum, IISG (International Institute of Social History), TextielMuseum, Tilburg, and the Allard Pierson collection from the University of Amsterdam.

For Ni Una Menos, I dived into my own personal photos, the ones I had taken in every march. I also asked my sisters Victoria and Argi to send me photos

from their own personal archives. They all appear in the composition. I also added personal screenshots from my phone that were related to the abortion law when it passed in 2020; messages sent to my mom and sisters when we were celebrating that moment. I also included other personal connections: a few photos a friend took when visiting Chiapas in Mexico and meeting with the Zapatistas women, whose organising I was already interested in. Or pictures from the work my mom did – she was a social worker but opened a boutique as a second job. She would organise fashion shows in my hometown where she used to present her seasonal collections and her friends (and my friends) used to wear them and walk the runway. That was a celebratory moment where women would come together, enjoy the beauty of making, of fabrics and of how to think abundantly together. The personal is always present in my work, because without it the work seems empty to me. There has to be a piece of my own flesh woven into what I tell.

SC: The stories and images within the tapestry are further amplified with the use of sound. Was the audio work conceived in direct response to the tapestry?

Yes, the audio was made specifically for the tapestry. It contains bits of chants from Ni Una Menos marches such as: “somos las nietas de todas las brujas que nunca pudieron quemar” (*“we are the granddaughters of all the witches who they could never burn”*) or “nos quitaron tanto tanto tanto, que hasta nos quitaron el miedo” (*“they took so much from us that they even took away our fear”*). Made together with sound artist Constanza Castagnet, the chants are combined with percussive beats also related to the marches, as well as sounds from sewing machines, zippers, and domestic labour. We also included old slang words and expressions spoken in the Jordaan neighbourhood and that also appear woven on the tapestry. For example, boezelaar translates to “apron” or danserkater which translates to “dance hangover” and meant back in the day “a real woman”. These are almost lost words nowadays.

SC: You often choose to work with textiles – whether sculptural items or wearable garments – informed by hand-made or craft-based traditions or using industrial processes such as the monumental Jacquard tapestry in the exhibition.

Where does this deep connection with textiles come from?

MA: I think my connection to textiles really comes from home, and from the women in my family. Both of my grandmothers used to sew and knit or had a strong love for fashion in their own way. My mother, as I mentioned before, was a social worker, but she also had a small boutique on the side. She sold retail but also designed some pieces herself. It’s still running today – almost 35 years later – in my small hometown.

Growing up around her, I learned how to touch a fabric and understand it – how it feels, what it’s made of, how to tell the difference between cotton, wool, leather. She taught me how to wear something, how to match colours. She used to work with local industries, which were still active in Argentina in the ’90s. Wool and leather were big at the time. That all disappeared with the rise of mass production and fast fashion.

There are a couple of analogue photos woven into the tapestry in this show that are taken from the catwalks she organised – where her friends, and even myself and one of my best friends, modelled the clothes. That boutique was our main source of income, and it’s what made it possible for me to pursue a career in art. It was amazing to see my mum as a designer and entrepreneur, doing something she really loved.

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SC: How have you enjoyed the experience of collaboration with the Jacquard tapestry makers?

MA: This has been a wonderful collaboration with the TextielLab in Tilburg, The Netherlands. The TextielLab is part of the Textile Museum and they work with artists and designers on different textile techniques, weaving, knitting, embroidery. I have been collaborating with the same developer, Judith Peskens, since 2018. I find these long-term collaborations very important and very formative within my practice.

SC: While your imagery clearly points to 20th century and contemporary narratives, the richness of the design, the sense of movement and depth

of colour are also reminiscent of grand narrative paintings or tapestries of the Baroque period.

In working with the form of tapestry on such a grand scale, are there perhaps aspects of the language of the Baroque period which you are interested to explore?

MA: Definitely, the Baroque period, especially in Latin America, is something that I am very much interested in. The Baroque travelled to the Americas in the late 16th and 17th centuries to become one of the central literary and artistic expressions of the “New World”.

Nowadays, the New World Baroque is understood as the result of transatlantic colonisation, slavery, and transculturation that at the same time introduced the foundations for a failed Modernism. On the other hand, the Baroque “revivals” in Latin America are often explained, in part, as an artistic and ideological reaction to the unfinished and continuing production and performance of identity in Latin America. Some see the recurrent Baroque elements in culture as an “ethos” that disrupts, or as a crisis of that unfinished modernity. Somehow I feel connected to these ideas and identify with them.

SC: Labour, community and self-initiated activist movements are central themes in the work. Can you tell us how these are conveyed in the costumes that hang in the space, for example the materials used and practicalities of the clothes?

MA: The costumes were inspired by the aprons and baskets used by the women during the Potato riots, as well as the kind of gear people wear when taking to the streets in Latin America – things like caps, practical backpacks, even make-up. There’s always a bag or some kind of carrier involved, which feels central to the work, both literally and symbolically.

All the costumes are white, which also connects to the visual language of care – those clean, crisp aprons and overalls you see in hospitals or kitchens. I made the pieces in collaboration with Lucile Sauzet, a designer I’ve been working with since 2017. With Lucile, we focused on using everyday, domestic materials that would create a kind of contrast to the richness of the large Jacquard tapestry in the space. So we worked with things like kitchen wipes, fruit nets, zippers, plastic clips... really basic, affordable materials that also speak to questions around access, labour, and resourcefulness.

SC: You are devising a new performance work for

the exhibition at Collective – which will extend beyond the gallery and into the public spaces of Calton Hill.

Can you tell us about your research into Calton Hill and any unexpected histories that have informed the performance?

MA: I’ve been immersing myself in the layered histories of Calton Hill. A key starting point was *Calton Hill: Journeys and Evocations* by Stuart McHardy and Donald Smith. What struck me most was how deeply the site is rooted in stories of resistance, radical politics, and collective struggle. It’s not just a scenic viewpoint in Edinburgh – it’s a charged and symbolic landscape where political dissent, protest, and alternative visions of society have long played out. This spirit of defiance and resilience is something I want to carry into the performance.

I was also drawn to the more mythical and folk dimensions of the hill’s past. Reading *Wain – LGBT Reimaginings of Scottish Folktales* by Rachel Plummer opened up a world of alternative mythologies and queer re-tellings that reframe the landscape in surprising and irreverent ways. Stories such as that of the Stormwife and other elemental figures brought a new texture to my understanding – shifting from historical to emotional, from the political to the poetic. These tales allowed me to consider the landscape (so dramatic, with its volcanic genealogy and grandiose sea) not just as a backdrop, but as a living entity layered with many imagined and forgotten voices.

Women’s histories, both real and mythological, have emerged as a particularly strong thread. I was fascinated to learn about the May Day tradition where women climb Arthur’s Seat at dawn to wash their faces in the morning dew – believed to bestow beauty, health, and vitality. This ancient practice, connected to Beltane rituals, speaks to a longstanding reverence for the land’s healing and transformative powers. It’s a practice rooted in empowerment and cyclical renewal, and I find it incredibly resonant with contemporary conversations about embodiment and ritual.

Yet Calton Hill also holds darker histories. It was the site of Calton Jail – where many suffragettes were imprisoned, and is associated with the persecution of women accused of witchcraft – reminders of the gendered violence embedded in the landscape. These contradictions – the sacred and the brutal, the mythical and the political – are all feeding into

the development of the performance. I'm interested in how a site like Calton Hill can hold space for grief and celebration, memory and transformation, all at once. The performance will draw on these multiple layers, reaching beyond the gallery to invite the public into a shared act of remembrance, resistance, and reimagining.

SC: You have also been making new ceramic sculptural pieces and textile elements to form part of the exhibition, and which will also be carried or worn as part of the performance.

Can you tell us about your thinking for these pieces – and the ways in which the materials and imagery extend the themes that you explore in both installation and performance?

MA: For the performance, I've been working closely with Anna Leoni Klas, a young artist based in Amsterdam. Together we've been imagining and creating these body-worn pieces and sculptural tools that are part of both the installation and the performance. Somewhere along the way, we ended up picturing them as medieval astronauts – setting out on a kind of expedition across Calton Hill. Since we're starting from an observatory, it felt natural to lean into cosmic imagery and this idea of venturing into the unknown.

The project continues some of the thinking behind *Potatoes, Riots and Other Imaginaries*, especially the use of bags, carriers, and wearable forms that speak to movement, labour, and occupying public space. A lot of the materials we used came from leftover scraps of the large Jacquard tapestry, along with various metallic and silver fabrics. We also worked with a black clay for the ceramic elements, finished with a silver glaze, and even included bits of deconstructed fire-resistant gloves and pieces of rubbish that had been collected and sent to me from Calton Hill itself.

We were also thinking about the idea of the fisherwomen who might have lived or worked in the area long ago – some of the textile elements reference nets and imagined “fish lungs.” The whole process has been about mixing the practical with the symbolic: tools that could be used but also feel a bit like ritual objects or amulets. There's a strong focus on combining materiality and storytelling, and how these wearable sculptures can extend the performance out into the landscape – like mobile extensions of the installation itself.

SC: For the performance you will work in collaboration with artist and choreographer Janice Parker and two other performers – all of whom are based here in Scotland.

Can you talk about the importance of collaboration as a part of your wider practice – and any hopes that you have for the partnership with Janice, Federica and Carmen?

MA: Collaborative practices are really central to my work. I just find them more enjoyable – I learn so much from others, and hopefully they get something from me too. I also like to think of collaborations as long-term relationships. When there's a good connection or chemistry, I tend to keep working across different projects over time. One of my personal intentions is to keep learning how to be more collective in the way I make work – not just in the outcome, but in the whole process.

Working with Janice, Federica, and Carmen is honestly a huge honour. I really hope I can offer a clear enough framework that gives them something to hold onto – but also enough space to play, disrupt, and bring their own voices into the piece. I'll be performing myself as well, which makes it all the more exciting.

So far, one of the things we've been developing is a shared vocabulary – key words drawn from all the stories and myths I've been researching. We're treating these words almost like landmarks on the site, where small choreographies or gestures will take place. Many of them are verbs or actions – because I want to make a strong link between the language and the body: *Assemble, Occupy, Raise, March, Resist, Disperse, Confront, Clash, Stand, Collapse, Form a line / Break a line, Surge, Freeze, Withdraw, Block, Invoke, Circle, Offer, Burn, Mark, Call / Respond, Cleanse, Transform, Ascend / Descend, Open / Seal, Fasten / Unfasten, Bury / Unearth*.

It's a growing list, and each word feels like a portal into both the physical and symbolic space of Calton Hill. I'm excited to see where it leads us, together.

*Mercedes Azpilicueta and Sorcha Carey
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● This interview is part of the exhibition *Fire on the Mountain, Light on the Hill*, 20 Jun – 7 Sep 2025.