



Francesca Guerisoli

▲ Red Shoes, Turin, Italy, 2013.

Gina Bechelany Fajer*

ELINA CHAUVET

An Emblematic Figure in the Fight Against Gender Violence

Set apart from the federal government's discourse, which minimizes and even cracks ironic jokes about it, criminal violence not only refuses to leave Mexico in peace but has also surpassed any known records since the time of the Mexican Revolution.

Antonio Ortuño, *El País*

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All photos courtesy of the artist.



▲ *Trust*, Bergamo, Italy, 2013.

In Mexico, we're experiencing a curious paradox: violence, in all its forms, is widely publicized in the media, but the reality of it is kept in the dark. Violence has evolved into "a normal way of interacting" and is manifested in a myriad of ways: homicide, femicide, human trafficking, extortion, kidnapping, forced disappearance, child prostitution, rape, and torture. In this context, the way violence is represented across the media is an essential matter, and artistic mediums serve as vehicles to establish dialogues between artists, society, and victims. Art has always sought to document that which takes place in society, keeping its memory alive.

Elina Chauvet, a Mexican architect and visual artist, defines herself as a lucky, creative, persistent, empathetic, and happy person. Rather than creating museum pieces, she focuses more on interventions and projects that seek to raise awareness around violence, making it visible and pushing a more critical perspective in society. She views visibilization and the fostering of critical reflection as a way of demanding justice. Each piece and intervention by Chauvet speaks to her commitment to multiple social issues, especially gender violence. Her creations are unique in that they leave those who view and interact with her pieces with something to reflect upon. With each of her pieces, Elina

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For her most powerful installation, *Zapatos Rojos* (Red Shoes), she scatters multiple pairs of shoes across a public space—usually a town square. The shoes are hand-painted red and seek to make the absence of disappeared or assassinated women palpable. This piece originated in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, after a very painful loss: Elina's sister was murdered by her husband. After this unjust death, Chauvet felt a close connection to other cases of violence against women and decided to gear her work toward them not disappearing from memory. This project has been replicated across several countries, such as Italy, Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Spain, and the United Kingdom, among others. Her emblematic work has transcended borders and has led to debates and reflections on violence and injustice in society.

When approaching Chauvet's work, it seems obvious that her goal is not only to create an aesthetic experience. Rather, she evidently perceives art as a catalyst for social change as she seeks a fairer, violent-free society. In her performances like *Confianza* (Trust) —dedicated to an Italian woman artist who lost her life in her quest for an ideal¹— and *Mi Cabello por tu nombre* (My Hair for Your Name) —in which Chauvet cut her hair in sections and tied her locks with pink ribbons marked with the names of the victims, after which she tattooed her skull with the word "justice"—Chauvet affirms that art is a powerful social tool that can cast light on multiple issues.

Recently, she agreed to collaborate in a closing event for Dior's presentation of the collection *Cruise 2024* for creative director Maria Grazia Chiuri, at Mexico City's San Ildefonso College (now a museum and cultural center). Elina Chauvet created a new iteration of *Confianza* called *A Corazón Abierto* (With an Open Heart). Alongside a group of embroiderers, she used red thread to stitch certain words, phrases, and symbols alluding to violence against women on white muslin dresses created in Dior's Parisian ateliers. For this piece, twenty models walked up and down a catwalk donning these white, embroidered dresses as well as red shoes

to the beat of Vivir Quintana's feminist protest song "CanCIÓN sin miedo" (Fearless Song).

This event sparked controversy, as some saw the brand as coopting a fight that was not its own, while others were left wondering whether this was a case of activism or of profiteering. Yet, for most people, *A Corazón Abierto* was the most moving part of the collection's presentation.

When I asked the artist for her opinion on the matter, she said, "Yes, I was invited to this closing event by Dior, and I understand the differences in opinion. For me, this was a forum in which to express my message and the message of my work. I think that we should all be fighting violence against women, since it's a huge, social problem. Each part has its own meaning, and it's hard to judge without taking in the entire piece. Plus, besides the negative opinion, there have been plenty of positive reactions, nationally and internationally. In art, it's normal to have positive and negative criticism, and it doesn't affect me."

Chauvet's work sparks emotion and generates community. Her art has been, and will continue to be, central to memory-building around the fight against violence, a fight that should be sustained in the present and projected toward the future. ■■

▼ *Pietatem*, Roma, Italy, 2019.





▲ *Trust*, Oslo, Norway, 2013.

Elina Chauvet in her own words

Gina Bechelany: What led you to transition from architecture to visual art?

Elina Chauvet: Art has always been part of my life, so I was able to leave behind architecture willingly and naturally.

GB: What's the best thing about being a visual artist?

EC: Art is the best means of communication available to express my ideas. That's the best part.

GB: What's the worst part?

EC: The lack of support for artists in Mexico.

GB: I understand that the *Zapatos Rojos* (Red Shoes) installation was born in Ciudad Juárez but has been replicated in Mexico, Italy, Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Spain, the United Kingdom, and more. How have you sustained this piece, which has overcome geographical barriers and managed to incite debates and social reflections on justice and violence against women?

EC: I've sustained this project with great efforts, with no grants or support of any kind.

GB: The above piece has morphed into one of your most powerful pieces, but tell me more about its evolution.

EC: The evolution of *Zapatos Rojos* has spanned more than fifteen years, in countries all over the world, and it's hard to summarize the history of fifteen years in just a few lines. All I can say is that the piece has upheld its mission, sparking social awareness around violence against women across the globe. This kind of violence does not recognize borders—neither cultural nor geographical—and affects the community transversally. I wish there were no more reasons for this piece to exist, but the reasons remain, and I suspect that, unfortunately, the piece will stay relevant for many years to come.

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GB: The calling out of generalized violence as well as violence against women in particular recurs across your pieces. You show solidarity with social causes and empathy towards others' pain. You've taken on many projects that call for a reconstruction of social awareness with pieces like *Confianza* (Trust); the curating of the exhibition *Los queremos vivos* (We Want Them Alive), in memory of the students who disappeared from Ayotzinapa; and the performance *Mi Cabello por tu nombre* (My Hair for Your Name), in which you cut your hair and tie your locks with pink ribbons marked with the names of victims, then tattooing your skull with the word "justice."

EC: Yes, the denouncing of the violence we experience is a recurring theme in my work, and it's something we must make visible. To me, it's important to do this through my work.

GB: How do you view yourself? Can you define yourself in five words?

EC: Lucky, Creative, Persistent, Empathetic, Happy.

Notes

¹ The piece is dedicated to artist Pippa Bacca, who decided to hitchhike from Milan to Jerusalem in a wedding dress. A friend of hers would hitchhike in the same fashion, but they were never able to meet again as Bacca was murdered during the trip.