

innocence and beauty, things from the past that belong in the future

GLOBALIZATION FROM BELOW May 28-29, 2009

University of California, San Diego

Isabel Garretón presentation on Circuits and Cultural Policies.

How Art and Artisan Production Finds Its Way Into The Global Market

Thank you for honoring my effort and the work of many by thinking there is enough merit in it to be shared with all of you today.

Isabel Garretón is a registered trademark conceived over 20 years ago to support the advancement of underprivileged women through the development of a carefully crafted collection of children's clothing.

Bringing to market a complete product that has been ethically manufactured with the highest standard has been the goal.

Isabel Garretón promotes skills and craftsmanship of artisans, who are at risk of not being able to address the basic need to earn a living. In the process bringing about an homage to traditions that hold communities together, perpetuating skills that speak loudly of touch to a world that worships technology but feels nostalgia for a time and a place, hard to experience, full of human content.

About 25 years ago in the outskirts of Santiago, in Chile, my beautiful country, I found a group of women who sold wonderful girl dresses, full of intricate hand smocking and embroidery. I asked one of them for the price of her dresses, she responded "Whatever you want to give me"...that "give me"...that no sense of worth, triggered a desire in me to change the scene, it has since been at the center of my motivation and effort.

Along the years we met unexpected challenges, which made it clear that there is no romanticism in poverty. When survival is precarious at best and often uncertain, there is no anticipating what behavior will flourish and loyalty of any kind is not predictable.

The group that took the opportunity for what it was, was empowered and improved the quality of their lives by adding another room to their home, buying shoes for their family or a bicycle for their children at Christmas.

As I learned, I also adjusted in order to overcome cultural barriers that have held women from business. I grappled with local social norms and reflected on their reluctance to speak their mind and the tendency to say what they thought I wanted to hear. I have managed to change some of this, I am happiest when they improve on my designs or ideas.

Currently we have about 100 families involved with our initiative. We bring five collections to market: Fall/Winter/Holiday, Coats, Spring/ Summer, Special Occasion, Christening. They can be viewed at www.isabelgarreton.com. We mostly sell to stores; only our christening is available directly to consumers through the Internet at www.igchristening.com.

When telling our story it is difficult to choose an angle, there are so many. It is important to state that a constant preoccupation in the beginning was that I did not want our initiative to be perceived as little more than a marketing tool to capitalize on our social conscience. Because of this, for over 20 years I never mentioned the motivation behind our endeavor. We went to market and competed solely on the merits of the product. Today you will find our designs at Saks 5thAve, Barneys, catalogues and other fine retailers across the US.

I am happy to say the prevailing values, influenced by the current economic turmoil, point clearly to social enterprise as an idea whose time has arrived. People are looking for a more ethical context for the goods they consume and turning a profit while making a positive difference is an appealing and appropriate goal, more relevant these days than before.

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