

Artisan Colombia



Mauricio Rivera



This edition of *Artisan Colombia*
 was finished in Melbourne, Australia,
 on 14 October 2016.

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2016



The images and stories compiled in this publication were produced between 2009 and 2015. They present a tribute to the vast community of artisans who live in Colombia. Most of the work was originally commissioned by the Italian fashion house *Marni* and the Colombian company *Manos Latinas*. In a combined effort, these organisations have developed a social venture that offers job opportunities and promotes the exchange of knowledge between artisans from different regions of Colombia. While documenting the work and part of the life of some of these artisans, I have had the fortune to visit different regions, from the Caribbean coast to the Southern Andean highlands next to the border with Ecuador.





Caribbean Region



Jorge Henao's workshop



San Bernardo del
Viento, Cordoba



***Note:** this story was originally written in 2009. A few years later, Jorge was forced to leave his workshop by the paramilitary groups that operate in the region.*

Jorge Henao's Workshop is located a few kilometres away from San Bernardo del Viento, a small village in the Caribbean Coast, close to the border with Panama. When he was 16, Jorge left his home in Medellin and started traveling around Colombia. "When I finished High School, as I had no choice to go to a university, I decided to walk the country. But not as a crazy wanderer; I always identified myself as an artisan."

Jorge opened his workshop in 2003 after he returned from New York. There, he worked in a pizzeria in order to send money to his family in Colombia. Before that, he lost all his savings in a failed venture, when he got involved in a project to build an artisan museum in Paipa (a town in the central Andean region) together with a group of colleagues.

The state of Cordoba -where San Bernardo del Viento is located- is famous for its fertile lands, which are mainly used to raise cattle. It has also been one of the main strongholds of the paramilitary groups in Colombia for decades. Because of its proximity with the Darien Gap, the region is commonly used to export Cocaine from Colombia through the Caribbean. For this reason, it is somehow common for the region's inhabitants to run into a barrel full of cocaine. "When they find it, they go to Lorica (the closest city), and sell it for around \$100.000 USD. Then they organize a party we call safra, which lasts for a week; and everyone is invited. When is over, they end up with a new stereo or a new bike at the most."

Workshop and house of Juan Lara:
founding member of the legendary folk-
lore band *Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto*.



San Jacinto, Bolívar



Traveling with Claudia Escobar and Jorge Leiva
from the Melbourne-based band *Miss Colombia*.

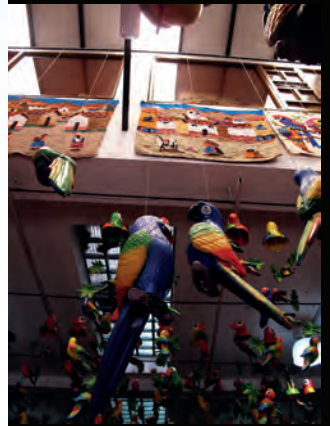




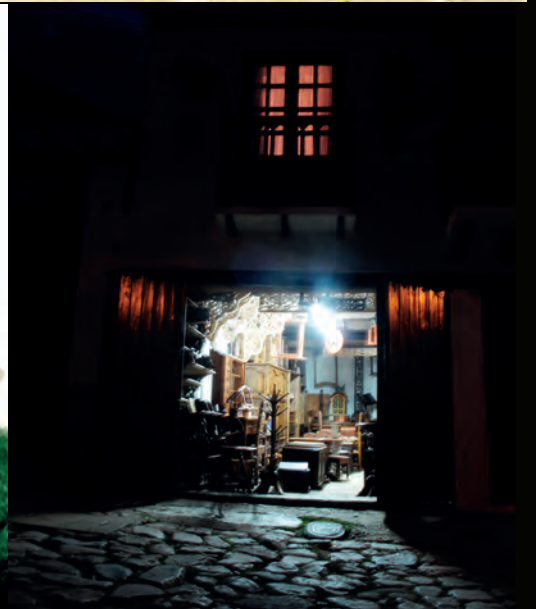




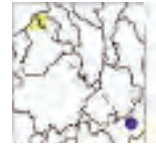
Central Andean Region



Boyacá



Workshop of Anayibe Rincon



Iza, Boyaca



In 2002, the town of Iza was declared historical and cultural heritage of Colombia. According to the legend, it was in this place where Bochica (protector god of the Chibchas) spent his last days on Earth and, before his departure, left a footprint on a rock. During pre-colonial times, the town was a healing place where women travelled to pray for protection during their pregnancy.

Anayibe's workshop began to operate in 2007, when a group of Italian fashion designers travelled to Iza to teach a group of 60 women different techniques to work with cloth. They first started lining pieces of wood; then they learnt how to print over cloth and how to work the batik; and finally they were taught how to give colour to the cloth.

The furniture and decorative figures in the following pages have been a central element of Marni's pavilion at the Salone del Mobile of Milan from 2013 to 2016.

























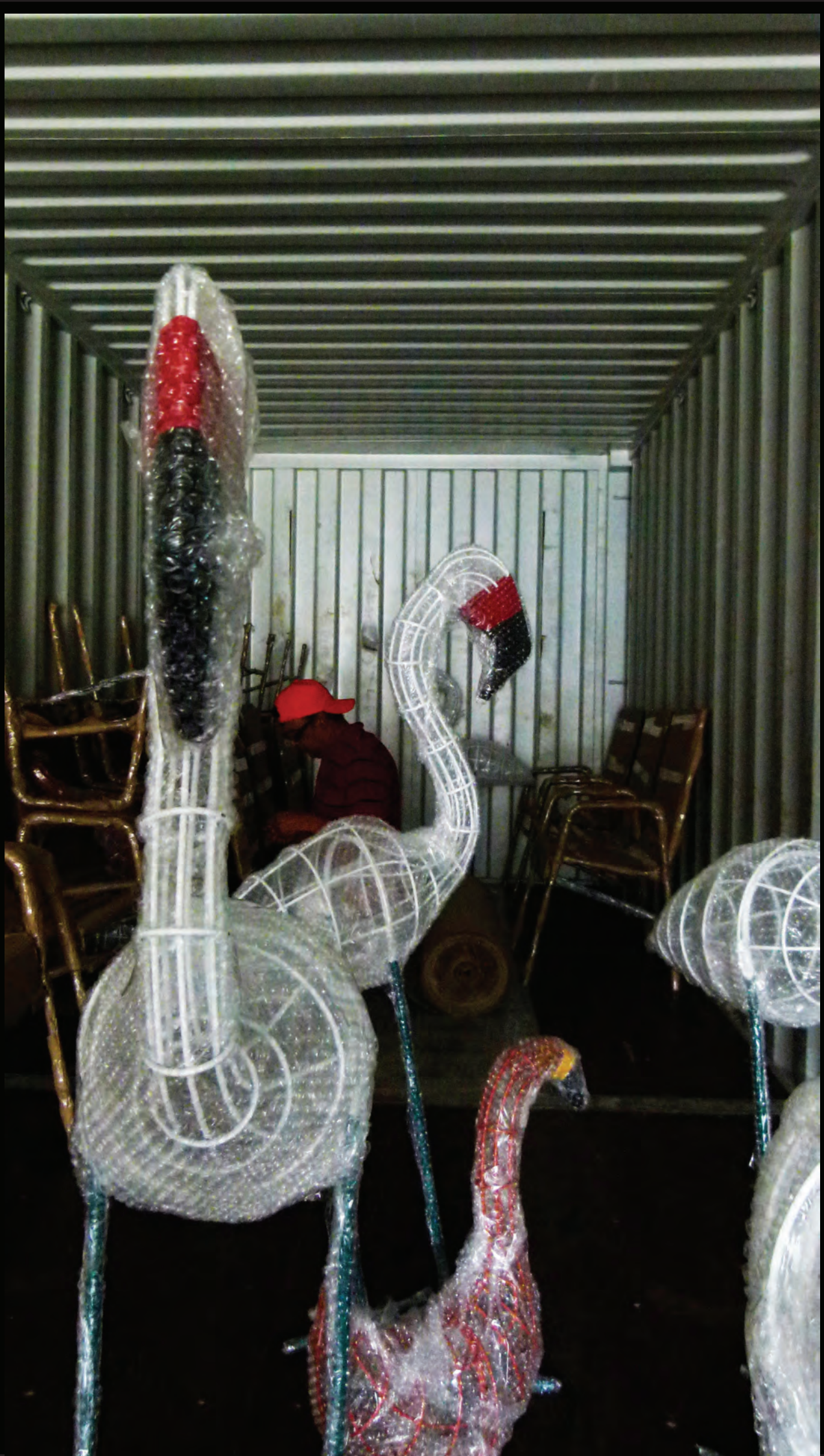








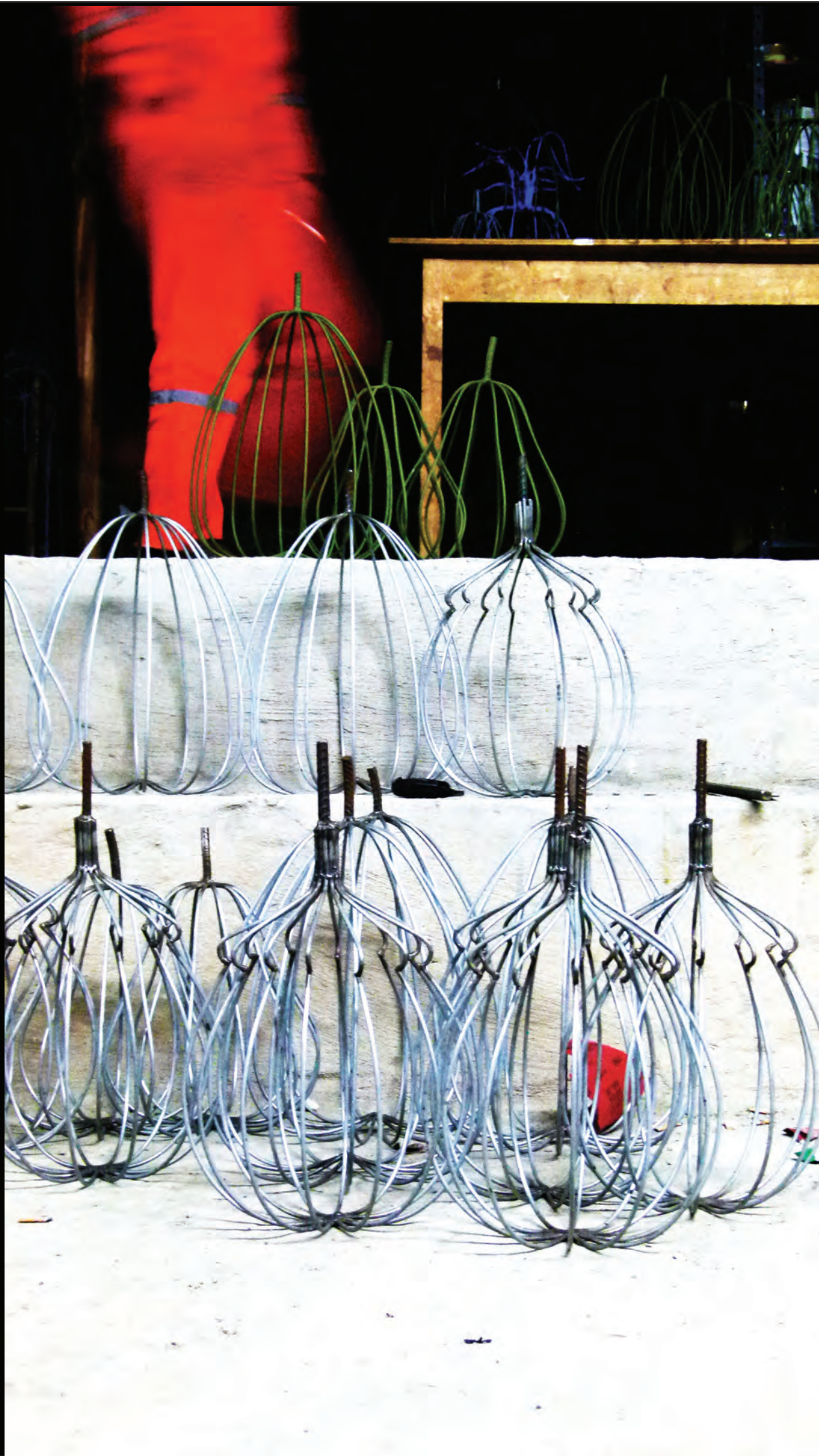












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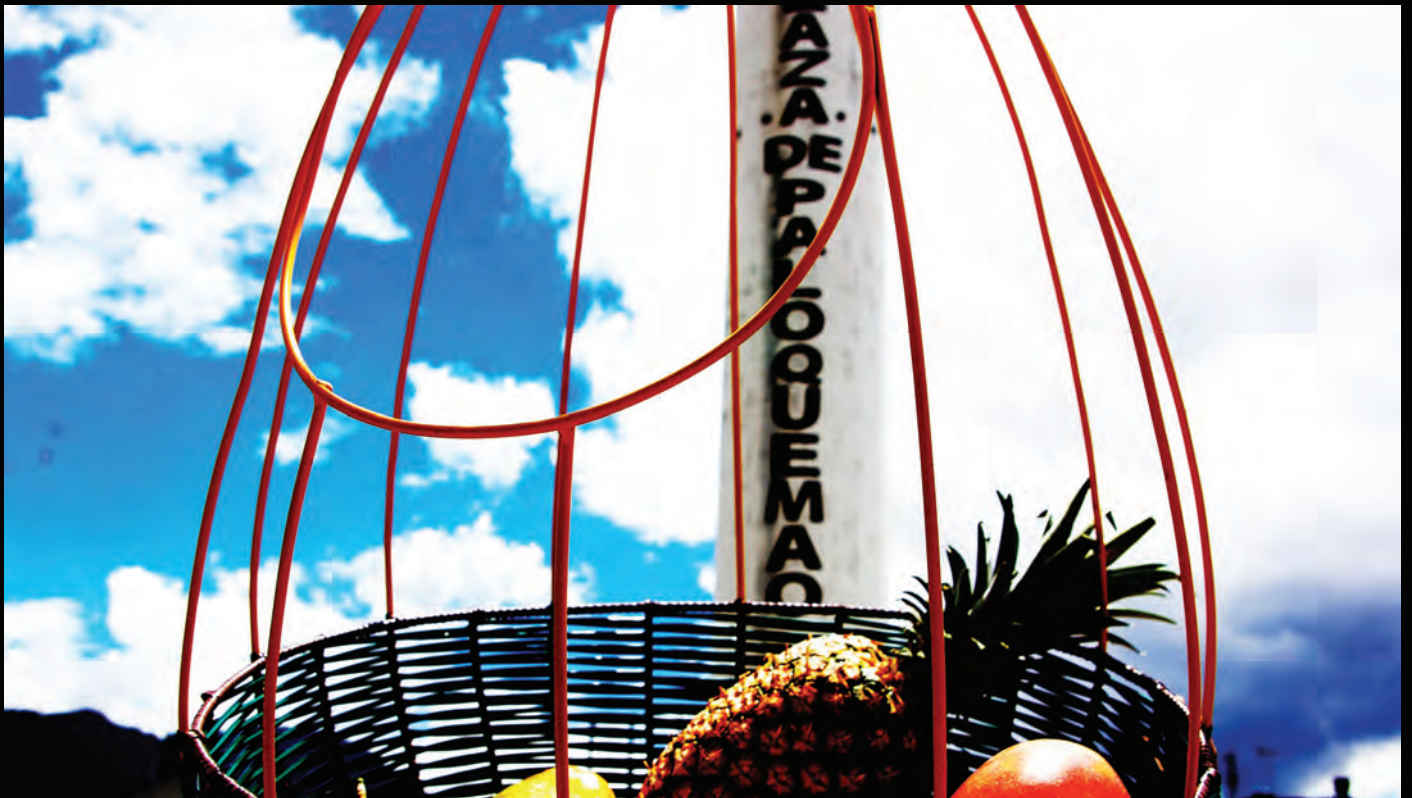
Scene 1: market square at the town of Villa de Leyva.







PHOTOSHOOT



Scene 2: market of *Paloquemao* in Bogota

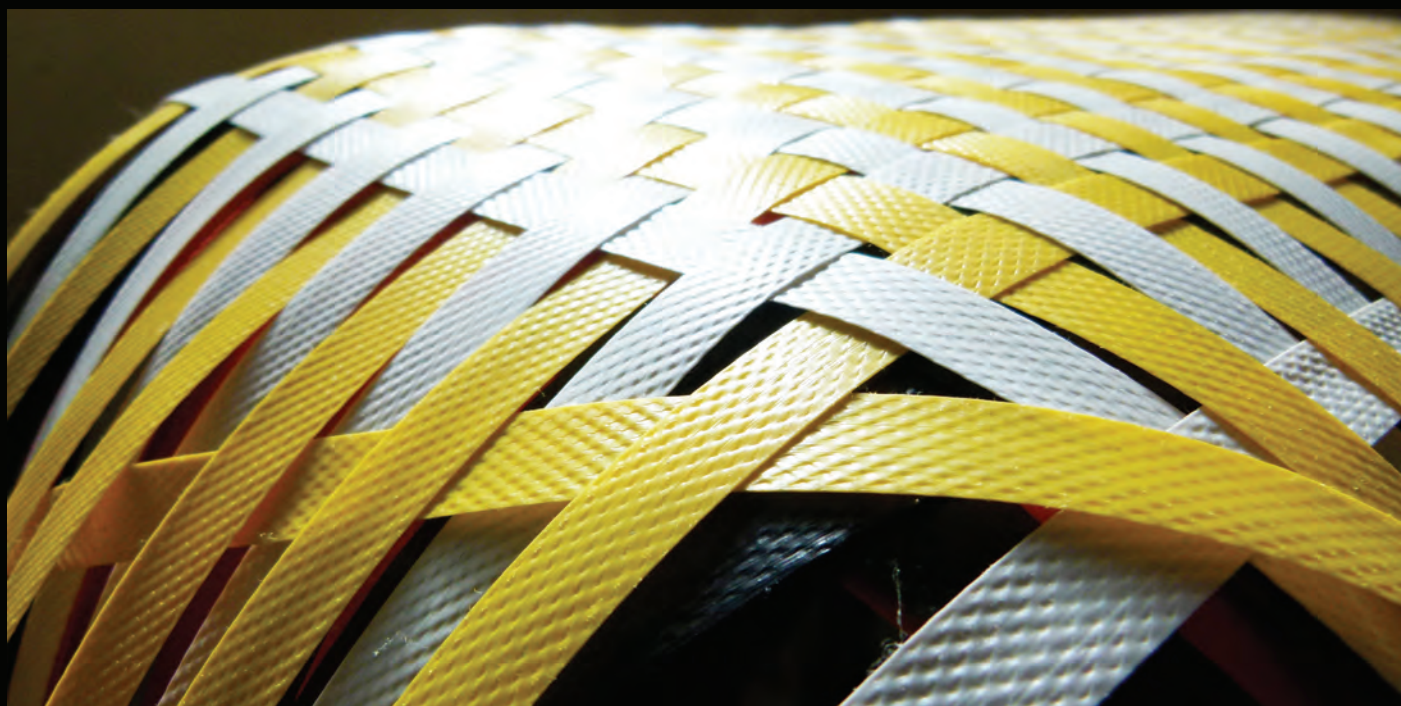
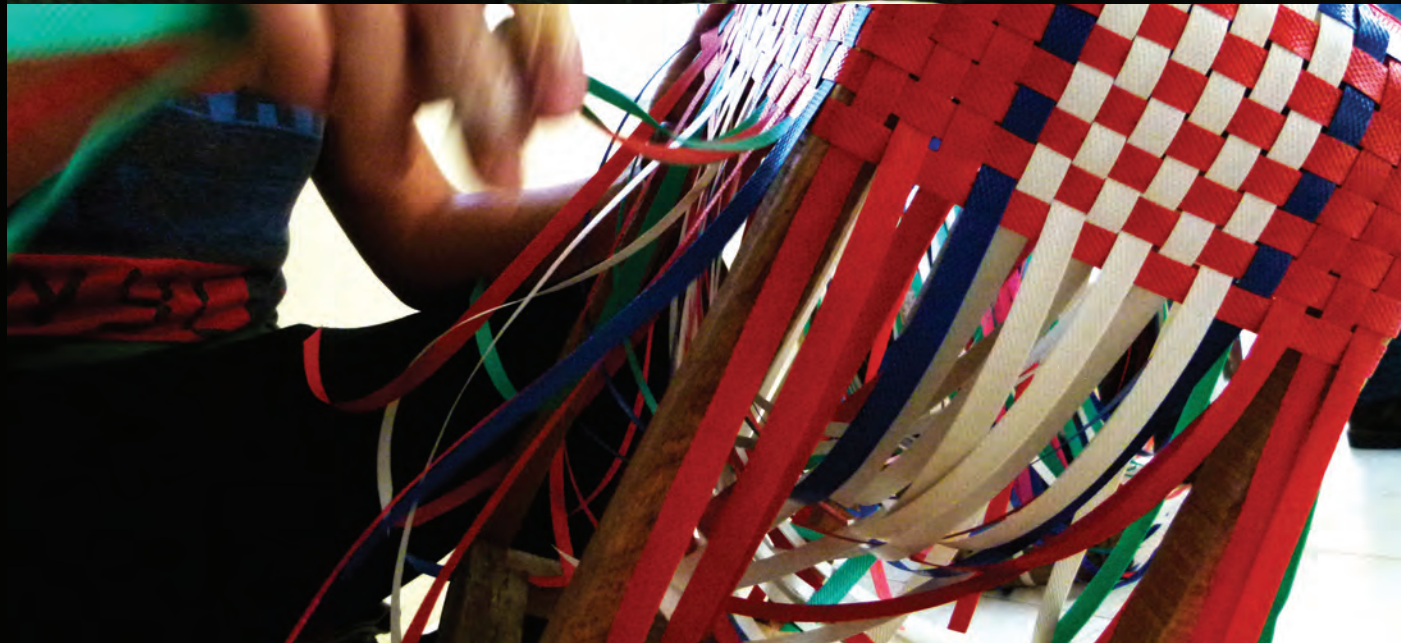
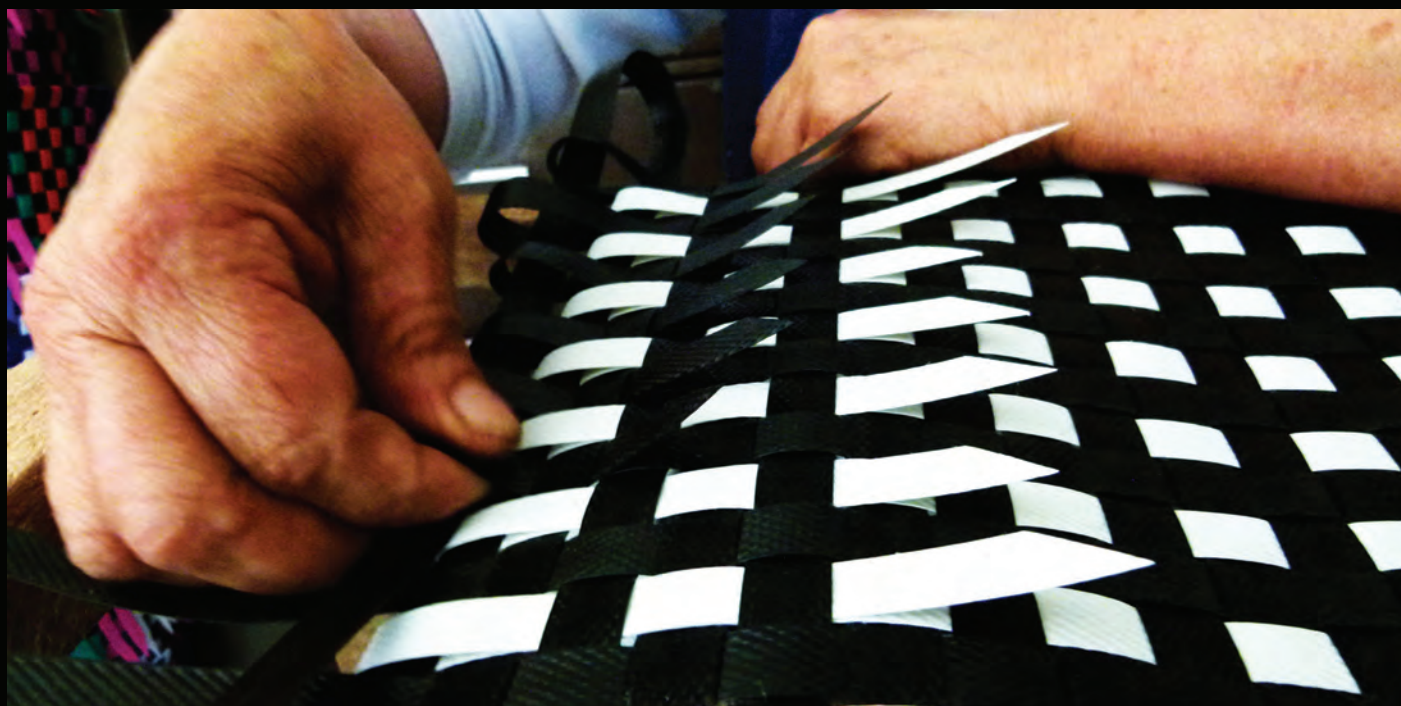




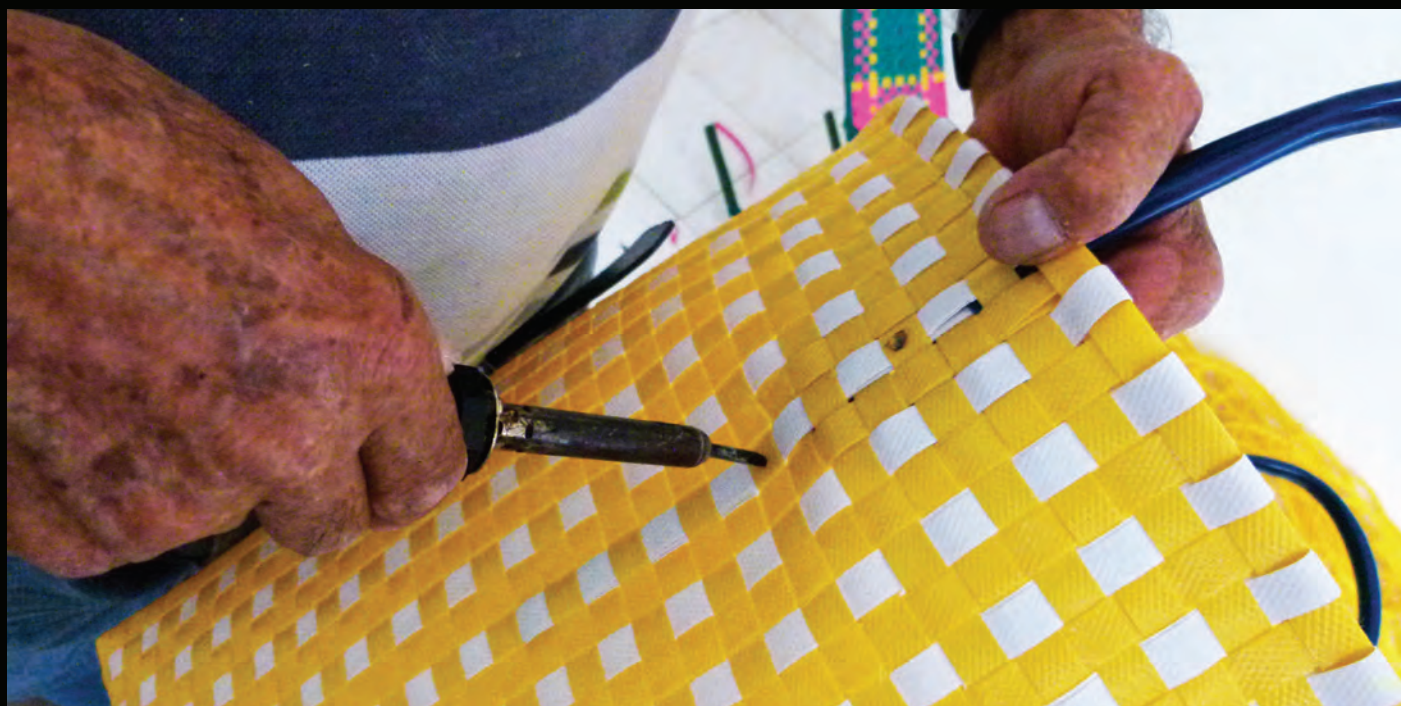














Bogotá



Workshops of the Vivas sisters



To access Alejandra's neighbourhood -*el Barrio Bella Flor*- one must climb 245 steps, which stand around hundreds of small houses made of recycled materials. This neighbourhood is located in the borough of *Ciudad Bolívar*, located in the southeast of Bogotá: famous for its high rates of poverty and violence. Alejandra came in 2002, as one of the millions of displaced people that has left the internal conflict in Colombia. While she was working on a farm next to the town of *Frías* -in the state of Tolima- the guerrilla came to the town to collect a tax. Shortly afterwards, remembers Alejandra, the army visited the town and threatened the population, "one of them even hit me. They told us that on the following week the paramilitary were coming and they were going to kill us."

Alejandra's sister Ana Maria had arrived to the neighbourhood, together with her family, a couple of years earlier. At the time, she remembers, it was like living in the countryside: they didn't have an aqueduct or sewer system and she had to buy weekly barrels of water and carry them all the way up. They lived in huts, made out of sticks and metal boards. They had to tie the barrels of water to the roofs so the wind wouldn't blow them away.

When the Vivas brothers were still young, they left their hometown of La Dorada to go to Puerto Boyacá. There, Alejandra started working in the town's slaughterhouse, aged 8. When she was 12 she had already killed, cleaned and butchered a cow by herself. Afterwards, she worked the land in different farms around the central states of Colombia. She used to plough the fields, gather coffee beans, grow yucca, cut plantain and fumigate the crops.

When Alejandra came to Bogotá, the Vivas Sisters started working as recyclers: walking around Bogotá, picking up and sorting out the trash. When they couldn't collect enough to earn their living, they had to look for food amongst the rubbish, "we know what a turkey tastes like because we found one in the trash", comments Ana Maria. During this time, the Vivas sisters also worked in a chicken slaughter, "it was very hard", remembers Alejandra, "we used to work all night and then returned at noon with chicken guts to clean and sell in the neighbourhood."

Today, both Alejandra and Ana Maria have workshops that operate in Bella Flor, where they employ people from the neighbourhood. They have also started to diversify their investments, opening a bakery and store, also within the neighbourhood. Besides being one of the neighbourhood's main employers, they are positive leaders within their community.







Bogotá

Jesus Narvaez workshop



Jesus was born in Pasto, a city in the Colombian southern Andes. When he was 16, he enlisted in the army and was sent to Santa Marta, on the Caribbean coast. It was the 1970s, a time where “heaps of drugs” ran through the region: “I used to earn the minimum wage, which was around 40 thousand pesos a month, but we could go out and earn 50 or 60 thousand in just one night”, he remembers.

The day before leaving on a three-day campaign, Jesus left the barracks and ran into a girlfriend. He went on a night-out with her and missed his call. As punishment, he was locked in a cell during a weekend when his parents travelled to visit him. This led him to desert the army. For this, he was sentenced to do forced labour in an army base in the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta for nine months. After that, he went back to Pasto, where he got married and started working as an artisan. During this time, he also used to wash cars and sell potatoes at the market.

A few years later, he moved to Bogotá with his wife and three sons. After a couple of failed efforts to start an artisan workshop, he ended up working as a security guard in the National University. While doing so, the university organised a competition for new business ventures. As Jesus recalls, “there were projects worth millions and even hundreds of millions, I just went with my stool and my toolbox and started showing my work”. He was selected amongst the finalists, but the university wouldn’t allow him to win because he was not a student. Nevertheless, a woman from a bank offered him a loan to start his own business.

Today he runs a successful workshop in company with his wife and sons.

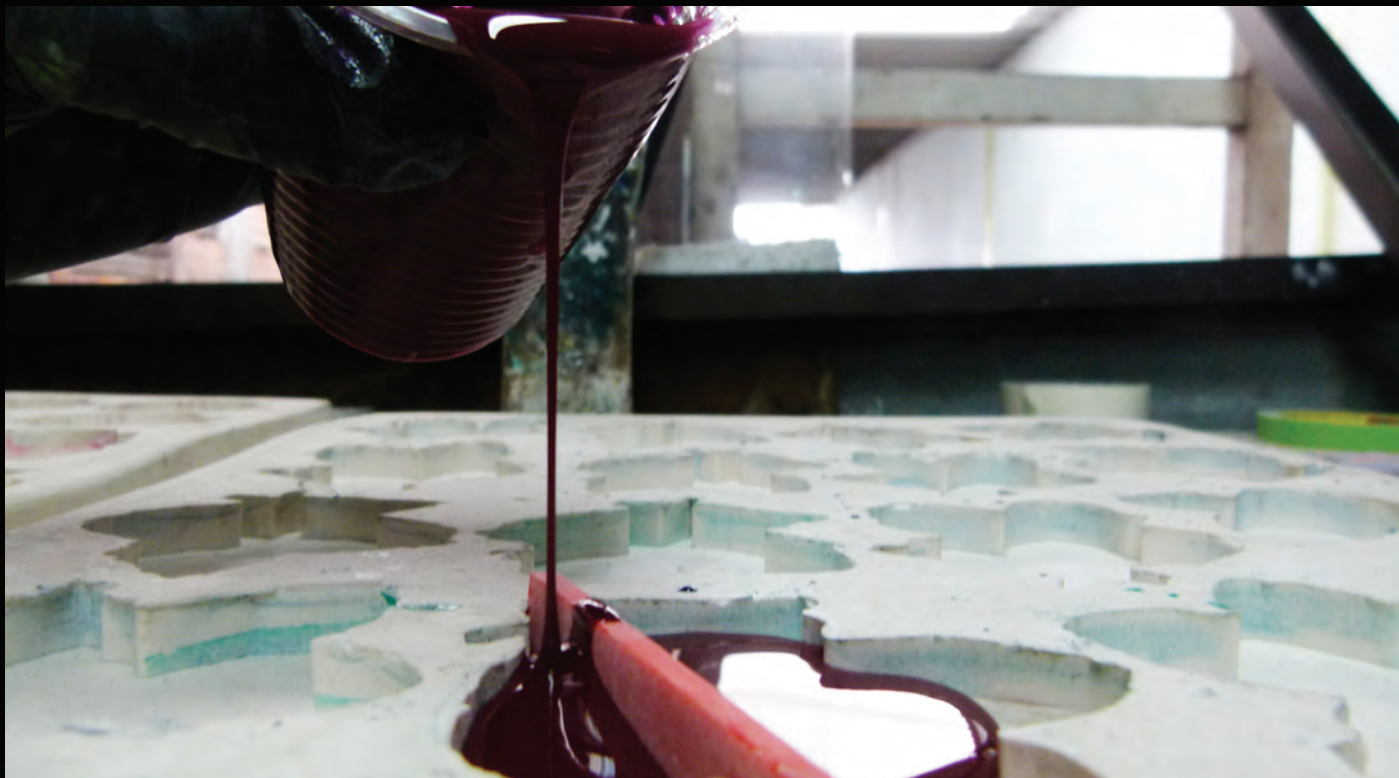


















Patricia and Victor's workshop



***Note:** this story was originally written in 2009. In the present, Patricia and Victor are no longer together and now Patricia runs the workshop on her own.*

Victor and Patricia met in Neiva, a city located in the south of Colombia, in the year 2000. They were both working as street vendors. Patricia had recently arrived from Popayan (another city in the south) together with her daughter, while Victor had recently come out of jail. He served a five-year sentence for rebellion, because he used to belong to the Farc guerrillas: “we were collecting a tax in a town nearby, when the army’s mobile brigade fell on us. Two of my companions were killed, I was lucky to end up alive”, he remembers.

Victor was born in Neiva. When he finished high school, he travelled to Bogotá, to study in the Autonomia University. This was in the 1970s, when left-wing revolutionary groups recruited numerous university students in Colombia. “I used to hang out with the people who died in the siege of the Palace of Justice. That was my crew in Bogotá. The only girl that couldn’t go inside was an ex-girlfriend of mine. She is now with the Kurds, fighting in Turkey.”

When Patricia and Victor met, they started a cooperative with a group of artisans from Neiva. Today they are the only two remaining members. In the workshop, Patricia is in charge of the production and Victor of the administrative and commercial activities. They hire around 20 young men from their neighbourhood. Some of them arrived to Neiva displaced by Colombia’s internal conflict.







Southern Route

The workshop of Patricia Montezuma



Travelers to Sandomá must head southwesterly from Pasto on a road surrounded by mountains and cliffs. Out of the 48Km that separate them, 16 are unpaved. The public transport vehicles that make this journey are 4wd SUVs, which do not have a specific departure time. They just wait until they fill their capacity and go. Sitting on the back seat of one of these vehicles, a woman and a man are talking about the financial crisis affecting the region. This was due to a ponzi scheme that burst at the end of 2008.

The official numbers talk about 600 thousand people affected by the scam (out of a population of approx. 1 million). The estimate is that the pyramids raised funds for over one billion pesos. However, the folks in the back seat assure these figures are too small. There seems to be no other topic of conversation across the south west of Colombia. Everywhere you go, you hear stories about retired people who lost their pensions, students who lost the money for their tuition, businessmen entering psychiatric institutions, and the suicide-rate raising exponentially.

Patricia Montezuma is one of the people affected by the scam. She has a workshop in Sandomá, which works exclusively with the Iraca palm. They knit hats and accessories using this material. She started as an artisan when she was a young girl, learning the skills from her mother, who used to have a small workshop of her own in the house where Patricia and her four brothers used grew up. As Patricia remembers, “she taught us craftsmanship as a way of surviving, my mother doesn’t have a father and didn’t have a husband either, so we all had to work to pull us through.”

She has been running her workshop for 12 years. She employs 12 women, all heads of family from the town.





