

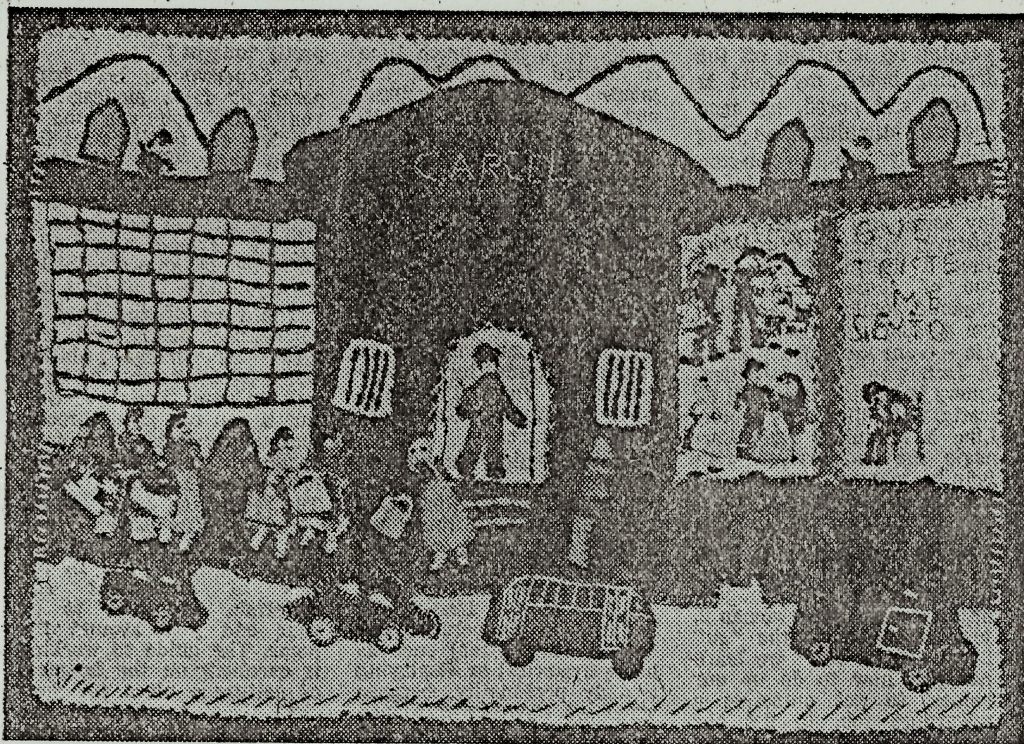
# Patchwork over Chile: Guy Brett reviews an unusual exhibition of folk art which has been generated since the Generals' coup

16-11-77

APPARENTLY the generals and torturers hold sway in Latin America. It is in their image that we see those countries today and read about them in newspapers. That gloomy combination of images and words: torture, curfew, disappearances, censorship—an overall militarisation of life. Those in power appear in images of rigid authoritarianism, whether in the form of the military officer, the judge, the university professor; and those without power appear as victims: the blurred snapshots of “disappeared” prisoners.

From all these images it is easy to imagine that the people in those countries, the population as a whole, have been crushed and reduced to silence. They seem to live a completely shadowy existence. But this is partly because far less reaches our newspapers and television about the resistance people put up to conditions like these. In fact as well as a continuous story of repression, there is a continuous story of resistance unfolding every day. It takes different forms. Almost inevitably it reaches into the artistic sphere.

In Chile about two years ago (in other words about two years after the military coup which overthrew the Popular Unity Government of Allende) women in the shanty-towns on the fringe of Santiago began to produce small pictures by cutting out



Women carry parcels on prison visit, but some prisoners are in solitary: “How sad I feel.”

scraps of waste cloth and sewing them together like patchworks. These pictures showed what the secret police were doing and denounced the military junta. They were in a naive, childlike style because the women had no training in visual techniques (though they are very skilled at sewing).

So great was the relief at finding this means of expression for all that had happened to them, that the movement of patchwork-making spread wider and wider. The women began to organize it as a form of production, selling the patchworks through the church, to try to overcome some of the extreme poverty

which the junta's economic policies had reduced them to. By now hundreds of these pictures have been produced and it is some of these that are on show at the Third Eye Centre in Glasgow.

At the beginning of the week they decide among themselves what subjects they are going to embroider. They

work in groups of twelve or more, sitting together in one of the huts of the shantytown. A big heap of off-cuts and left-overs from the clothing factories lies on the ground. As they work there is a continuous stream of talk. About basic problems: the unemployment of the men, whether all the children can be fed in the emergency canteens they have had to set up, about someone's husband who was forced into a car and taken away by a gang of armed men in plain clothes.

Their work is necessarily anonymous, or sometimes signed on the back with a christian name and the date. Often words are stitched on as part of the picture. For example one patchwork consists of a large black square on the left to represent the dark present. On the right is a scene showing the artist's conviction of hope in the future, with the words: “The day will come when we will see the resurrection of our saviour.” The religious phraseology conceals a double meaning because the Spanish word for saviour, *salvador*, is also the christian name of Allende.

Many patchworks have been made by the wives or mothers of political prisoners expressing their anger in images bordered by barbed wire, and using the shared code-sign of three green poplar trees to stand for the prison camp of Tres Alamos. But probably

the largest group of patchworks deals with the harsh problems of everyday existence, as the people themselves know them, problems common to most of the population in most of the underdeveloped countries in the world. They treat them with extraordinarily sharp observation and detail through this medium of needle and thread.

Some of these pictures could be taken as merely charming and naive if one did not understand the subject; and some people, understanding the subject, find it hard to reconcile this with the obvious care and enjoyment taken in the use of materials.

But I believe these qualities are important. For one thing, it is not a simple question of naivety. The artists began at a certain stage, out of necessity; but they are all the time trying to go beyond these limits, stretching them, struggling to express complex ideas and relations between events in society. For them the patchworks are a medium of truth. This is the truth of the events shown in the pictures. But also the truth of the pleasure of finding a medium through which to express and begin to master a desperate situation.

“We want people to know the truth,” patchwork pictures from Chile, at the Third Eye Centre, 350 Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow, until November 23. After Glasgow the exhibition will tour, with a showing in London in February 1978.

# THE GUARDIAN

Printed in London and Manchester

Wednesday, November 16 1977

15p