

# When freedom dies

Tony Craze

"A people that sings for the Resistance is a people that hasn't died," said Mikis Theodorakis, and here from the people of Chile, by way of exhibition of some 200 patchworks, made from remnants of the lives of the rich, comes a song simply of everyday life.

Yet the simplicity makes for a more powerful testimony to their condition, to the fact of their suffering.

In the patchworks from Chile, exhibited at the AIR Gallery in London, art functions not as propaganda, but as part of the human struggle. The spirit, speaking out of the childlike need for communion, speaks the truth.

The patchworks have been made, mostly by ordinary women who live in the shanty towns around Santiago. They are both a meagre expression of protest, and a means of making a minimal living. If there is no direct link with previous cultural activities, they nevertheless show how the creative spirit will adapt and survive in the face of immeasurable odds.

Bold stitched lines divide many of the pictures. On one side, the junta, prisons, brutality, helpless figures behind bars, guards cut from the great denim cloth sold the world over in the name of liberation; here, dull, grey, faceless.

On the other side, women queuing at a single water tap, women shopping for a half-kilo of bones; women working in the laundries and communal kitchens set up to combat starvation, and bearing with dignity the insult of being forced to feed from a table composed of a patch of a general's pin-striped suit. And there are the family graves, silently echoing Eduardo Galeano: " 'peaceful country' means, in many places in Latin America, 'ordinary cemetery'."

Still there are children, playing with fire hydrants, risking their lives through running traffic, attempting to sell newspapers for a few pesos. The children, left behind by the vast numbers of men who have disappeared or been held, are hope for the future, and perhaps the only real present joy of these women. Very much so are the patchworks the work of women without men. Amongst their many laments, the one unsung is about

their separation from their men.

Much of their struggle is fought with silent determination. Their dedication to survival shows in the definite finishing of the patchworks.

The love entailed in their work parallels their own love for each other. All that they show has to do with people: cut out, set down and stitched with complete lack of self-consciousness, figures still retain a tenderness and respect for each other; the face of a woman weeping elicits most respect of all.

Yet the understatement, the matter-of-factness, also reveals a lack of understanding about all that has happened. Images here are an attempt to order the chaos, to sort out what was before and what is now.

To evade censorship coded symbols are frequently used. Tres Alamos Prison is denoted by three popular trees. The sun and the Cordillera of the Andes stand for the future. The Andes, like God, watch over all. The sun peeks from behind threatening to burst out.

On show with the exhibition, smuggled from prison, carved literally from ash, from breadcrumbs, and spittle, a sculpture of a hardened clenched fist. It is a symbol for the future of Chile.