

Art

WILLIAM FEAVER on remarkable patchworks from Chile.

AT A distance, seen through the Air Gallery window from outside on Shaftesbury Avenue, the appliqué scenes, traycloth-size and done in cheery fabrics, could be teacher-assisted Mother's Day gifts or Women's Institute joint efforts. They look artless and carefree. Home in on the details though and the picture changes. There are grey soldiers on the colourful streets, creepy little armoured cars, prisoners in cages, laments and exhortations stitched all around them.

These Chilean patchworks have been made over the past two years, mostly by women in the shanty towns outside Santiago, as a humble form of resistance and a means of making a scratch living. Some are little more than diagrams of roads to freedom and patterns of unemployment. There are ideograms: government under the dollar sign, rule by the four Batmen of the Junta. Situations are laid out in the form of equations and abrupt contrasts: life then (that means under Allende), existence now.

Most of the pictures are overhead views of everyday matters. That is, waiting rooms, prison yards, queues at the pawnbroker's, at the water tap, arrests, suicides, work in the laundries and communal kitchens. A wavy line signifying the Andes runs along the top of many of the compositions. Mountains and sun represent permanency and hope. The predicaments illustrated lower down on each cloth ground are considered temporary. So for every tribulation there is some compensating hope or promise. The prisons will open, these who have vanished without explanation will be restored to their families. The junta's economic policies will stand revealed as clownish tricks.

One of the most striking designs is divided down the middle. The left hand side stands for the present: it's a dark blank. The other half shows a future perfect; happy children, factories going full tilt, farming revived, an age of plenty. The simplifications are not so much dogmatic as pious. The messages are obvious.

Cryptic symbols are used to establish the scenes. Three poplar trees denote Tres Alamos Prison. Four vertical lines stand for Cuatros Alamos, the isolation wing there. Inside the khaki walls the atrocities appear quite

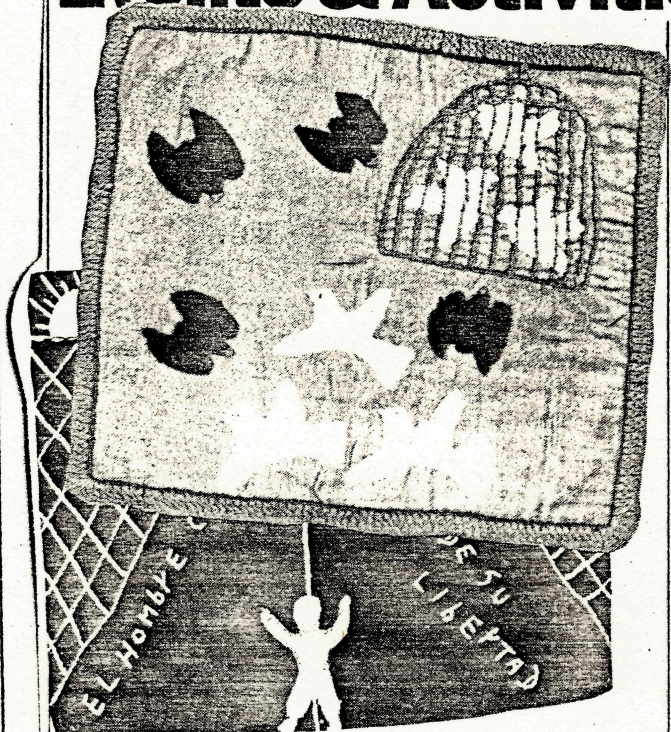
Shanty town truths

THE OUT MARCH 17-23, '78

★AIR Gallery 126-9 Shaftesbury Ave, WC2 (240 3149) Tot Ct Rd tube.

'We want people to know the truth'—patchwork pictures which bear a direct and poignant indictment of the Chilean junta. (See caption review.) Until April 1. Closed Sunday and Monday.

Visual Arts: Events & Activities



A Chilean patchwork picture from the exhibition at the AIR Gallery (see listings and events).

playful until you examine the figures, read the caption and realise what they are up to. Last summer, incidentally, the Junta dissolved the DINA or secret police. They'd come in for adverse publicity. It was replaced, in true 1984 spirit, by a 'National Information Centre.'

In shanty-town circumstance the advantage of patchwork over drawing, say, or photography is that it comes naturally. The rag materials are available, whereas film and cameras are not. The techniques are familiar and reassuring, the format encouraging; one by one, experiences are set out and clarified. The women who sew them together met in groups to discuss designs and approve the finished pieces before they are taken off by Oxfam, the Church and other sympathetic organisations. Their slogan is 'We want the people to know the truth.'

'But is it Art?' some are bound to ask, bothered as always about letting anything that looks unprofessional receive the sacred tag. Of course it is. In fact, these pictures have the content, the vigour and direct appeal that usually go missing when artful sophistication sets in.

One of them has been enlarged to banner-scale by John Dugger. As an image of hope (doves ascending, distant Andes) it works a treat.

★AIR GALLERY
Shaftesbury Avenue
pictures from a simple, pass against dictators, includes films, (smuggled from music. Until