



Patches of protest

UNDER Allende, the arts in Chile were gaining ground as "part of the whole productivity of a people." Since September 1973, when Pinochet's military junta seized power, popular art has become a weapon of resistance.

In the last two years, groups of women living in the poorest shanty towns have been making patchwork panels, both to earn essential money for food and as a form of protest against intolerable political and economic tyranny. And 52 of these panels have been touring Britain since December, and will end up in Sheffield in May and June.

They are now at the AIR Gallery, 125 Shaftesbury Avenue, London WC2, till April 1, supported by events, talks and films, including several showing of Jonathan Dimbleby's report for Thames Television, filmed in Chile, largely in

secret. Admission is free except to the concert on the last night.

The patchwork pictures are made of scraps of waste cloth picked off textile factory floors, and sold as folk art, "naive" in their bright colours and decorative designs. Many of the artists are relatives of political detainees who have disappeared, despite the so-called

Galleries

amnesty 15 months ago when the notorious Tres Alamos prison camp was closed following internal and international pressure.

The patchworks, full of detailed observation, show prisoners behind bars, families trying to trace them, people sharing food in communal soup-kitchen or scavenging from dustbins, unable to feed their sick

and hungry children. Yet while they tell of brutal oppression and cruel suffering experienced at first hand, there is no self-pity in the simplicity and humour of the imagery, which expresses a sense of resilient defiance and solidarity.

Sometimes the meaning is half hidden to avoid censorship. The panel illustrated here shows the American dollar as a winged snake dominating the Chilean economy, symbolised by basic products in the surrounding circles — copper, foodstuffs, clothing, etc. The rectangles are frames for workers, for a factory, a farm, a mine, all crossed with a zigzag line meaning closure and still more unemployment. The bat-like creatures are the four members of the ruling junta.

Every patchwork picture has to meet three tests laid down by the selectors chosen by the rest of the group: it must be well finished, well composed and must "say something." "We want people to know the truth."

Margaret Richards