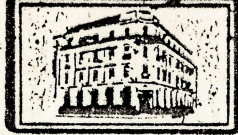


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Hidden message

It is more than four years now since President Allende's government was overthrown in Chile by a military junta whose brutality has since achieved worldwide notoriety.

Britain has taken its share of refugees, who total a quarter of a million from a population of only 10 million.

An exhibition which opens at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham Shopping Centre, on Tuesday reveals something of the life of those who remain.

It consists of patchwork pictures made by women from the poor shanty townships around Santiago, pictures which over the last two years have been exported as a form of folk art. In addition to their decorative qualities, the pictures contain a commentary on life under an authoritarian regime.

Guy Brett, former art critic of *The Times*, first saw examples of them two years ago and immediately had the idea of assembling a number of them for an exhibition. They were first shown at the Third Eye Centre, Glasgow, and come to the Ikon as part of a British tour which will continue until May.

OUTLOOK

"I put the exhibition together by borrowing the patchworks from different people, so they were mainly patchworks which were already outside Chile," Mr. Brett said. "Some were from France, some from Spain, some from here. All of them were made in the last two years.

"Normally they come out of Chile through the Church, but they do come out in other ways. They're not made by artists, but by ordinary women in shanty towns. It's really a form they more or less invented. On the face of it, it is surprising that a notoriously repressive government permits the export of subversive works of art.

But the social comment is subtly combined with decorative elements, even involving the use of code: for example, the motif of three green poplar trees represents one of the camps where some of the regime's 200,000 political prisoners have been held.

"The patchworks are just one of a number of crafts which are exported, and mixed in with the

others they get by," Mr. Brett explained. "The other thing is that the authorities have such a low opinion of the people that they would dismiss it as decorative folk art. But when you put the works together in an exhibition, the meaning comes across strongly."

But is there not a danger that the exhibition itself might draw the attention of the Chilean government to the content of the patchworks?

"Of course, that was the first question I asked myself," Mr. Brett said. "I asked a number of Chileans, and every single person said: no, go and do it, if they clamp down, the people will find another way."

Many of the women who make the patchworks are wives or mothers of detainees, or at least of men who are unemployed due to the economic depression of Chile, which has brought a level of poverty not seen since the turn of the century.

They work in groups of 12 or so, deciding at the beginning of each week what their subject for that week will be. Mr. Brett feels that their organised way of working is impressive, particularly when combined with a clear sense of social purpose and no little artistic ability.

TERRY GRIMLEY



The US dollar lords it over the workers and production of Chile — one of the patchwork pictures included in the exhibition which opens at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, on Tuesday.