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LATIN AMERICA: GLOBAL OUTREACH

**Multiculturalism:
Goodbye, Columbus?**

**Constable's Glorious
Country Days**



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GONZALO DIAZ

EVERYONE NEEDS A MADONNA

Gonzalo Díaz walked out of his house in the upper-class Santiago de Chile neighborhood of Providencia. The brilliant sunshine that had greeted the day had now, at noon, disappeared behind thick clouds. It was as if the atmosphere of Santiago, he thought, was responding to the bad news overtaking the city. All morning he had been listening to the radio. Now, out on the street, he looked up and saw a column of tanks, their headlights on, rolling toward him.

It was September 1973, and Díaz' neighbor and family friend President Salvador Allende was about to die in the military coup staged by General Augusto Pinochet.

Over the next 17 years that event would play an indirect role in Díaz' art. In his studio today, he still keeps a memento of the times, a pharmaceutical urn given to him by Allende, a physician like Díaz' father. "Half my life was lived under the dictatorship," says Díaz. "I am 45 years old. I have been working for 20 years as an artist, and 17 were under the dictatorship. It had an impact on my production."

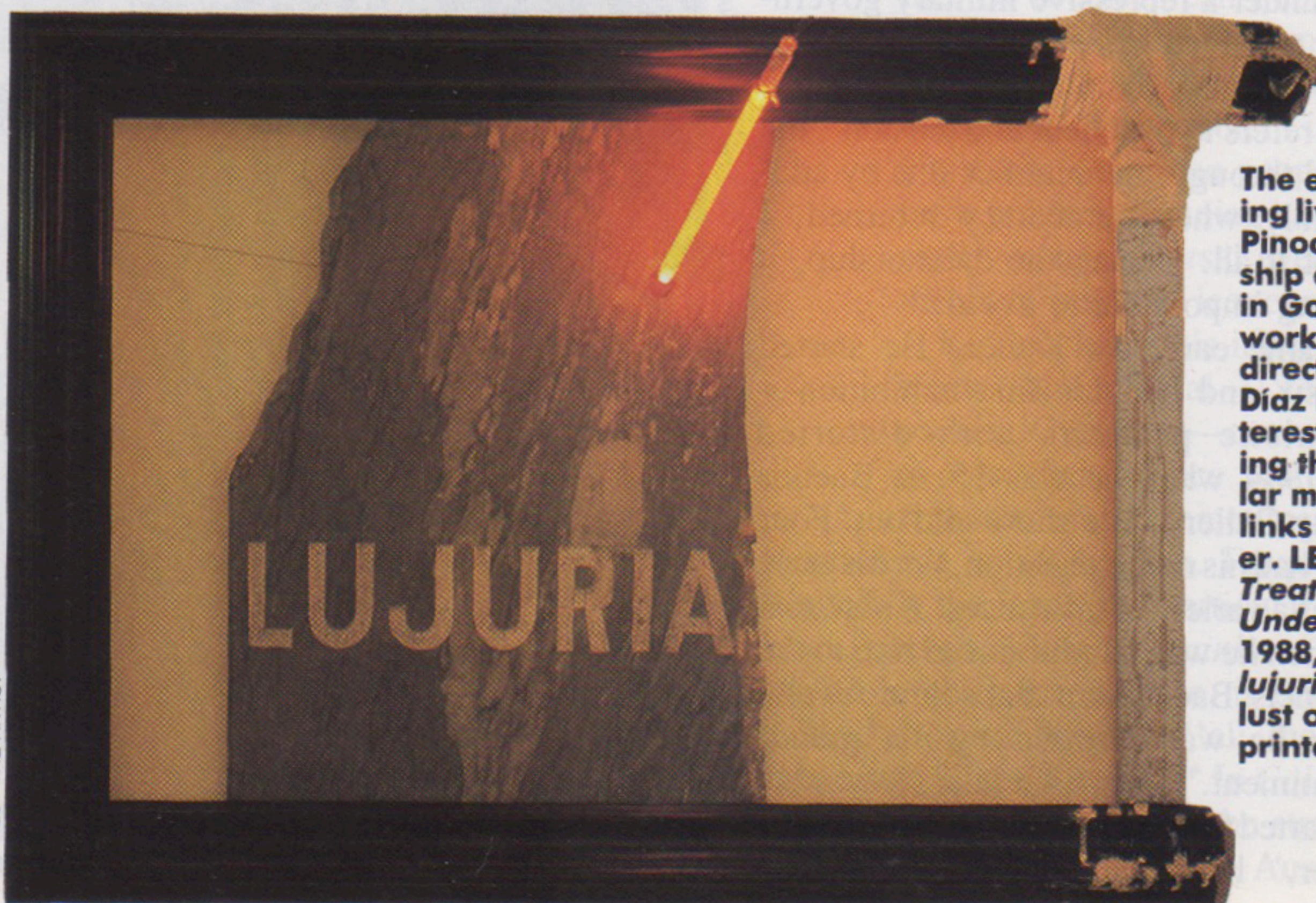
In 1989 Díaz presented an installation at Santiago's Galería Ojo de Buey called *Lonquén: Ten Years*. That work represented his most overt response to military rule. It was ten years earlier, in the town of Lonquén, near Santiago, that the first mass grave of "dis-

appeared" people was exposed. "It was discovered," Díaz relates, "through a soldier's confession to a priest. The church went there and found 14 bodies. It was a very precise point for the Chilean bourgeois. There was real proof of what was happening."

Díaz' piece includes a stack of numbered stones pinned against a wall by a wooden scaffold, with a ray of blue neon striking the stones. On the other walls of the room are 14 identical paintings, which the artist calls "Stations of the Cross," each bearing the printed phrase "In this house, on January 12, 1989, the secret of dreams was revealed to Gonzalo Díaz." Attached to the frames is a lamp and a small shelf supporting a glass of water. But such specific political



JORGE BRANTMAYER



COURTESY THE ARTIST

The effects of having lived under the Pinochet dictatorship are apparent in Gonzalo Díaz' works, though indirectly. ABOVE Díaz is most interested in exploring the way popular mythology links art and power. LEFT His *Treatise of Human Understanding*, 1988, has the word *lujuria*, meaning lust or excess, printed on it.

commentary is uncharacteristic of Díaz. He is more interested in exploring "the relationship between art and power" than in directly criticizing a repressive regime.

Part of the link between art and power is popular mythology. Díaz illustrates the point by incorporating in his work icons that the church, the state, and commerce use to legitimize their authority. In a country that lived so long under military dictatorship, whose middle and upper classes are deeply conservative, and where the Catholic church is so powerful, myths tend to flourish.

"I am interested in revealing, investigating, the kind of grand mediocrity that exists in this country," Díaz says, "a country that for some reason invents in its background qualities that it doesn't have. That Chilean women are the most beautiful in the world, that the national anthem is the most beautiful, that the wines are the best, that Chilean soldiers are the bravest. All these myths can never be touched. I believe this is what a part of Chilean art is doing—touching these forbidden things. Touching them, nothing more, putting them in a scene. It has the effect of disarming the common language."

In his installation *Bank of Evidence*—first shown in 1988 at the Galería Arte Actual in Santiago, and now in the collection of the Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery at the University of Texas at Austin—Díaz used the image of Chile's first saint, Sor Teresa de Los Andes, to examine the making of religious myth. Sor Teresa was a member of the Chilean upper class who died of tuberculosis at the age of 19. "People started generating a myth around her," Díaz explains, "until at last the church—the Vatican—decided that it would be good if, within the next ten years, each of the countries in Latin America would have its own saint."

"It's good for the politics of the church," Díaz says. "It's similar to President Kennedy's space program, whose goal was to put a man on the moon in 20 years. So now each country is looking for a person who fits into this program. And they will accommodate those who don't fit so well. I believe that is the case with Sor Teresa. I investigated her story. I read her letters. They are nothing."

Although he is one of Chile's best-known and most successful artists, Díaz struggles with the Chilean art market. "The artist here walks the tightrope, sells the entrance tickets, and later plays in the orchestra," he says. Díaz is not represented by any gallery. According to Fatima Bercht, director of the Visual Arts Program at the Americas Society in New York, his work is hard to market since "it is ephemeral, it deals with things in a very critical manner, and the subject matter is difficult." Nevertheless, he has had eight solo exhibitions in Santiago

since 1969; has been in shows in Latin America, Spain, and New York; and has received several grants, including, in 1987, a Guggenheim. Last spring he was in the show "Contemporary Art from Chile" at the Americas Society and will be in the IV Havana Biennial next month. Díaz' paintings go for \$2,000 to \$3,000 in Chile and \$7,000 to \$10,000 in the U.S.

The third in a family of 12 children, Díaz attributes a certain gravity in his work—a sense of being pulled down—to the fact that he was stricken with polio when he was five and continues to walk with crutches. At 17, after attending a German-run parochial school, he enrolled at Santiago's School of Fine Arts. For 20 years he has been a professor of painting and drawing at the School of Arts of the University of Chile.

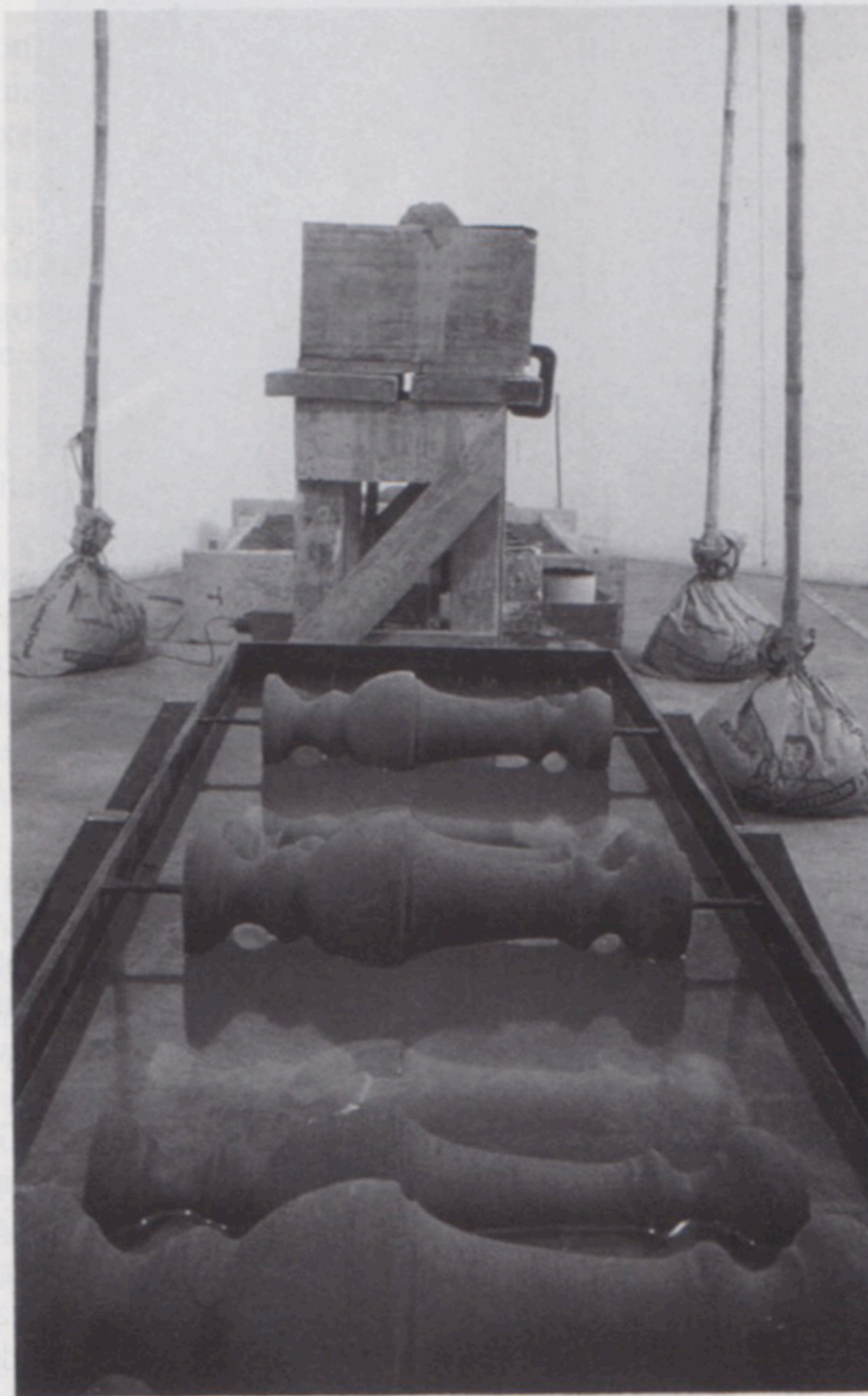
Nellie Richards, a French critic living in Chile, saw Díaz and Chilean artists Eugenio Dittborn, Lotty Rosenfeld, Carlos Altamirano, and Carlos Leppe as constituting a group. She dubbed them the Chilean *Avanzada* (the politically engaged

vanguard)—"the most important movement in Chilean art in the late '70s and early '80s," says Bercht. Díaz' career is interesting, Bercht explains, "because he comes from a painting background and he has a quest, even if he moves into other mediums, to address the history of painting in Chile. I think he plays a seminal role for the younger generation."

Before the military coup, Díaz drew the inspiration for his paintings largely from classical literature and Chilean poetry. "My head was full of myths that appeared to have resonance in contemporary life," he says. One series of paintings, "Paradise Lost," depicted the ferryman Charon bearing the dead across the river Styx. "I started to demystify the imaginary world that had much to do with literature." But after seven years under the dictatorship, he found the boundaries of a canvas too limiting for what he had to express. He began working with extensions—shelves, objects—as in *Lonquén*.

In 1980 Díaz went to Italy for a year. His *Sentimental History of Chilean Painting* (1981) derived directly from that experience. In a sense, the work involves Díaz'

own form of mythmaking. He uses the cartoonlike figure of a woman who appears on the label of a well-known brand of detergent. "I remember when I was a boy," he says, "this detergent was always in the bathroom or kitchen with this image on it of a very pretty woman, like a woman from Holland with pigtails—a Pop-like figure. "I took this figure and I elevated her to the level of a Madonna," Díaz explains, "something that had been lacking in Chilean painting. All the great painters—Italian, Spanish, German, whatever—are established because they have a Madonna, a Virgin, a big subject. So this figure—domestic, industrial, comic—is carried to the art and transformed into the Madonna of Chilean painting." —D. G.



In *Bank of Evidence*, 1988, Díaz used the image of Chile's first saint to examine the making of religious myth.

COURTESY THE ARTIST