

Contemporary Art from Chile/
Arte Contemporáneo desde Chile
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Almost two decades separate Chilean artists working today from the 1973 coup that overthrew President Salvador Allende Gossens's elected coalition government. The oppression, torture, and exile that marked the following 16 years' rule under General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte effectively splintered and impoverished the artistic community. Few artists working in Chile today maintain economic viability by producing art, and there is no substantial art "market." Gallery and/or museum support is an untenable expectation for most working artists.¹ Organized shows of work by artists who remained in Chile during the reign of Pinochet are practically nonexistent, although it has been possible to see the works of those who left Chile in the 1970s and became integrated, during their exile, into artistic communities in the United States or Europe.²

The recent exhibit at the Americas Society in New York City of "Contemporary Art from Chile/Arte Contemporáneo desde Chile" marks the first time in over a decade that new work by artists who live and work in Chile has been made available here. Curated by gallery director Fatima Bercht, the show brought together five visual artists working in disparate styles. Each artist, to varying degrees, uses a photographic process in his or her work: their media include slides, photosensitive emulsion on canvas, photocopies, straightforward photographic documents, and series of Polaroids. A panel discussion, a lecture by Chilean critic Adriana Valdés, and a program of independent video were held in conjunction with the exhibit.

While using nationality as a rationale for grouping artists rarely provides insight into their work and often serves instead as a false common denominator, in many ways this group show provides an exception. The extreme repression of Pinochet's regime, at all levels of society, informs much of contemporary Chilean art. There is little need to use incendiary imagery to expose and denounce what has been shared experience, and artists need not be bound by issues or speak solely through content. Those works in the exhibit that precipitate the strongest reactions do so not because they are inherently political but because they indicate how the present has been mutilated by the past. Photographic paintings by Enrique Zamudio, a triptych by Gonzalo Díaz, and a slide installation by Alicia Villarreal are cases in point.

Zamudio was represented by a series of 36 individual panels arranged along one wall of the gallery. *Fotopictográfica Santiago: Paisajes desde la cámara oscura* (Santiago photo-pictographs: landscapes from the camera obscura, 1988-90) appears to be a haphazard amalgamation of images of public spaces: government buildings, schools, statues, parks, neighborhood grocery stores. Most are straightforward documents, others are low angle, tilted, or slightly skewed in composition.

Zamudio's snapshot approach to documentation and his decision to install the panels side by side creates the impression of a chronicle or album. Yet the scenes he depicts are bleak, and for the most part uninhabited. The absence of humanity contributes to the disquieting nature of the work. Shadows of palms that could have been depicted as shady refuge instead prove ominous. Zamudio's images are like crime scenes, innocuous on the surface, that provoke horrific memories in the mind of the witness.



Detail, *Fotopictográfica Santiago: Paisajes desde la cámara oscura* (1988-90) by Enrique Zamudio. Photo by Elsa Ruiz. All images courtesy of the Americas Society.

MEMOIRS OF SURVIVORS

Examination of some of the locations confirms the presence of an unforgettable anguish rooted in events that took place during the dictatorship. One photograph shows La Moneda, the presidential palace where Allende was killed during the 1973 coup. This building, bombed by the traitorous armed forces, exhibits none of their inflicted damage. (Interior rooms at La Moneda were changed by Pinochet as well. Allende's former office is now used for dining, and the room in which he died is kept locked.) A photograph of the University of Chile calls to mind the contrast between the strength of the student movement during Allende's time and the subsequent arrests and disappearances of students who had participated in pro-Allende demonstrations. Photographs of the public jail, the penitentiary, police stations, and the courthouse indicate places not only of confinement but also of torture and death.

Stylistically Zamudio's work rests somewhere between photography and painting. His techniques are not new; what is of interest is the way in which and reasons for which he combines these traditions. He prepares his canvas with a photosensitive emulsion so that photographs can be easily and inexpensively transferred and proceeds to paint selected areas. Through retouching Zamudio clarifies his point of view: delib-

ate obliterations of detail emotionally intensify the images and draw attention to the flatness of surface, heightening the theatrical quality of the compositions.

Pintura por Encargo (Painting on commission, 1985) and *La Lumpérica* (1989), both by Díaz, are extremely different in style and scale yet similar in tone. The first, a satirical, life-sized billboard, is aggressively confrontational. *La Lumpérica*, a triptych, undertakes a subtler but no less mordant commentary. Bercht explains in her introduction to the catalogue that the title refers to Sister Teresa, who will be the first Chilean to be sainted. She is also affectionately known as *La Lumpérica*, or a name that derives from the German word *lumpen*. Lumpen is used to describe the extremely impoverished members of society, and here obliquely refers to Teresa's religious work with this sector of the Chilean population. A broader definition of lumpen connotes a change of social rank or status that breaks the artificial boundaries of class origins. This latter meaning provides a context for Díaz's juxtaposition of seemingly disparate subject matter. An assembly of rearranged and layered images, *La Lumpérica* combines a variety of materials (paint, photography, Mylar, silkscreen). An iconoclastic critique of Chilean history, the work is replete with rel-

ferences to conquering heroes, religion, social upheaval, youth, and romance.

Díaz's use of a triptych, a form used in Christian art for centuries, is significant. The work as a whole is framed on each side by cropped photographs of architectural balustrades, which stand on top of color-chart strips. Stalwart and formal, their authority seems unaffected by the content of the rest of the piece. Their verticality is reinforced in each panel by the yellow outline of a crudely painted knife. This knife refers to the brutal murder of Zuléma Morande, a Chilean aristocrat butchered by her husband in the early twentieth century. The knife represents the intense class struggle that has been part of past and present Chilean history, and is both a literal reference to and figurative stab at the power maintained by the ruling oligarchy. In each panel a similarly painted hopscotch pattern intersects or parallels the knife. It is disconcertingly intrusive, and blatantly phallic in shape.

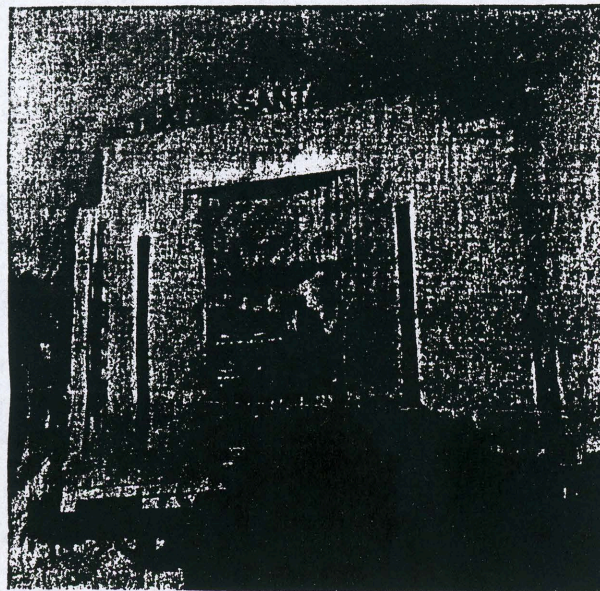
Marked with the seven ascending numbers used in the child's game, the hopscotch grid also provides a reference to attaining heaven. The top space of the pattern, the goal to which the players aspire, is often called "heaven" or "sky blue." (In Spanish it is *cielo*, a word that carries the same meaning.) Working toward heaven is a trait notably shared by Chile's Sister Teresa, whose portrait is included, to different degrees of prominence, in each panel. A nun of aristocratic family, she died at the turn of the century, is now beatified, and is on her way to becoming Chile's first saint. In the Díaz triptych her lofty gaze is directed outside the frame, disconnected from but juxtaposed to the powerful elements surrounding her. Lists of angels' names, connected to cartouche-like forms, are joined by drawings of wings that visually repeat the phallic shapes of the knife and hopscotch grid.

The power of Sister Teresa's chastity is problematized by her picture's proximity to a photographic image of two embracing and kissing youths. Their sex is difficult to determine, further charging the association. Teresa's sexual repression and sublimation of earthly to heavenly desire collides with their confidence and display of emotion. The notion that virtue is achieved or deepened by denying one's sexuality is thrown into question.

Difficult to distinguish but nonetheless present in the panels is the image of Bernardo O'Higgins, who became Chile's first supreme dictator in 1817. Commander of the forces that defeated Spain, O'Higgins was the illegitimate son of a Spanish officer of Irish descent. His reforms antagonized the church, the aristocracy, and ultimately the business community, until in 1823 he was forced to resign his office. Nonetheless, O'Higgins is recognized as Chile's national hero, and his image graces everything from public plazas to currency. The irony of O'Higgins's life comfortably suits the themes of shifting power and class disassociation presented in *La Lumpérica*. Díaz gives us a heroic bastard son whose image is impossible to tarnish and a powerful aristocrat whose image will fuel the souls of the poor and working class. In opposition to these images that allude to blind obedience to government and religion, Díaz has prominently inserted the knife of retaliation against oppression.

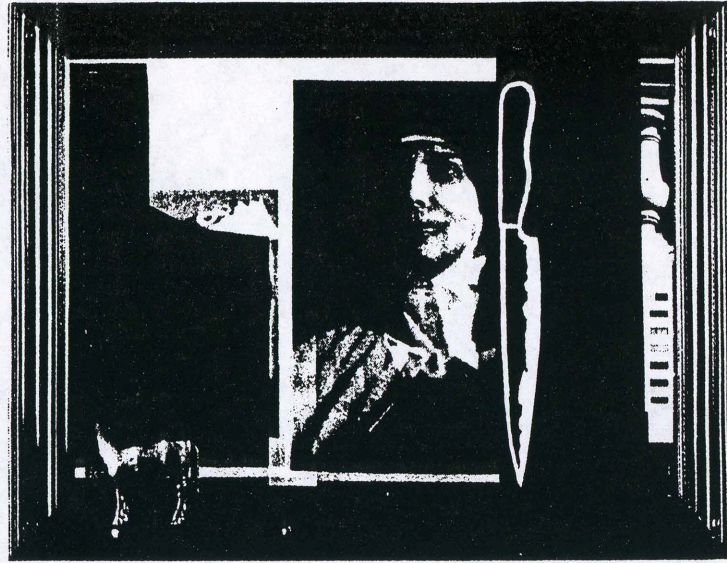
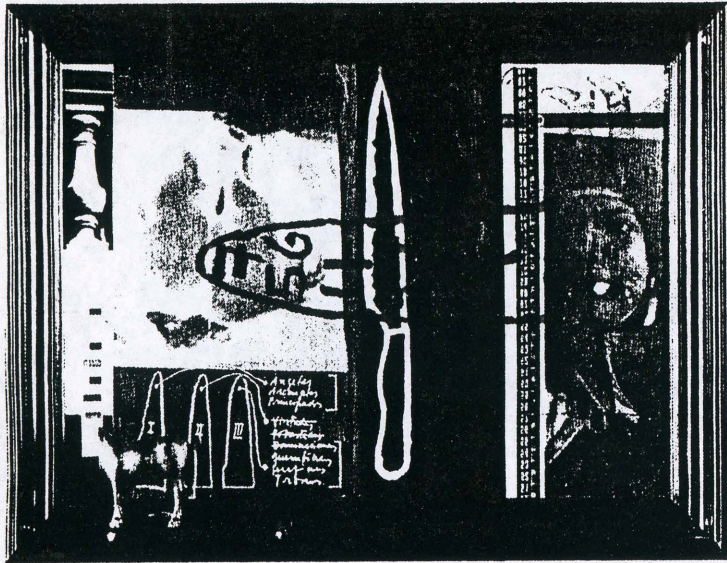
Villarreal's installation, *Por el Ojo de Mi Cámara* (Through the eye of my camera, 1987-90), located in a separate room at the end of the gallery, consisted of four slide projectors positioned so that upon entering the space one passed through a bombardment of projected images. The sounds of the levers dropping slides into their slots, the machine fans, and the slide trays advancing contrasted with the subdued imagery projected on the four walls. The slides present Villarreal's collection of "little nothings": bits of metal wire, pieces of broken pottery, uncoiled clock springs. Villarreal carefully photographed these lost and found fragments as if they were valuable archaeological or art-historical treasures. As in the formal construction of Zamudio's panels, each disconnected piece gets a separate moment for examination and reflection.

Villarreal's *Caja de Resonancia* (Resonating box, 1989) was one of the Chilean videotapes presented in conjunction with the exhibit. Stylistically similar to her installation work, the tape uses slide sequencing to combine independent objects. This time Villarreal's gathering procedure is a transac-



Detail, *Fotopictográfica Santiago: Paisajes desde la cámara oscura* (1988-90) by Enrique Zamudio. Photo by Jorge Brantmeier.

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Left: *La Lumpérica*, (Tryptich, part one 1989). Right: *La Lumpérica*, (Tryptich, part three 1989). Both by Gonzalo Díaz.

tion between artists, in which she requested friends to contribute images. The process used in *Por el Ojo de Mi Camara* of selecting and retrieving abandoned fragments here gives way to a more direct assembling of human and artistic relationships.

The program of short video pieces, coordinated in Chile by video artist Tatiana Gaviola, gave an indication of different styles and genres. Two of the documentary tapes, *Popsicle* (1984) and *No Me Olvides* (Don't forget me, 1988) by Gaviola were programmed in the 1989 American Film Institute Video Festival's "Siempre Presente: Latina Perspectives in Video."³

Camiruaga's straightforward work is relentless in its condemnation of government-supported transgressions against the Chilean people. *Popsicle* is an unfolding horror set to a numbing recitation of the Catholic rosary. As the words are chanted, children eating popsicles reveal plastic soldiers placed as surprise toys at their centers. The tape effectively alludes to the dogmas of church and state and questions and compares their purposes and effects. Caught between these powers are the children. The battle-ready soldiers hidden in the popsicles succinctly suggest how the Chilean military manifests its insidious power within Chilean society.

Gaviola's *No Me Olvides* establishes the importance of preserving a memory of the disappeared. This documentary follows a

protest organized by *Mujeres por la Vida* (Women for Life) just prior to the plebiscite that resulted in a vote of nonconfidence for the Pinochet government. Each demonstrator carries a black cardboard figure inscribed with the name of a missing person and the date on which he or she was last seen. As the protestors infiltrate the crowded city streets and the life-sized forms intermingle with the daily rush of activity the effect is disconcerting. When police arrive, they turn a water cannon not only on the marchers but also directly on the silhouettes of the disappeared. This action represents the paranoid and arbitrary use of power that is characteristic of the police's role as accomplice to an intolerant government.

Vereda Tropical (Tropical footpath, 1990) by Pablo Lavin, which combines an assortment of documentary footage with an experimental narrative, offers yet another set of responses to the legacy of the Pinochet regime. Stylistically consistent with Lavin's earlier independent works, *Vereda Tropical's* more precise message and narrative progression are carefully structured. *Vereda Tropical* takes its name from a song popular in the 1950s and uses it as a metaphor for the need to move beyond the crushed dreams of Allende and the crippling memories of Pinochet to a new political future. A low, crooning male voice mourns the loss of a woman who presumably walked out on him. Throughout the piece

Lavin works with the idea of departures and the inability to return to past love. Train tracks, which are a visual trademark of many of his tapes, are used here to represent a forceful, committed movement toward the future, having acknowledged the pain of the past and expressed determination not to repeat failure and sorrow.

The tape's sound track is constructed as a commentary on the footage. Passages of solitary jazz saxophone vehemently protest the arrest of demonstrators during marches that took place in 1987. Energetic percussion combines with thousands of people jumping to shouts of "no more." Wild sound taken from political rallies is intertwined with romantic lyrics to challenge the efficacy of sentimental yearning. Lavin is in control of his diverse material and moves the viewer by turns fluidly and erratically along his own, personally experienced "vereda tropical."

Vereda Tropical is an embittered criticism and condemnation of the past regime. However, Lavin eschews didactic techniques in favor of thought-provoking poetry, casual interviews brimming with opinions, and bemused, satirical sequences that reenact frustrating daily experiences. In general the tape is a cautious but affirmative look at the average politically engaged person coping with everyday Chile and its future. As one returned Communist exile comments, "We cannot give up. We have to be able to live politics without forgetting

love, nature, our dreams."

The disparate group of artists discussed here are all involved to some extent in exposing the past and resolving present conflicts. Continued mourning and continued caution are part of the process but no longer the only appropriate attitudes. Díaz, Lavin, Gaviola and Camiruaga openly confront and challenge images of prestige and authority. Both the sorrow and anger and the moments of clear vision in the work of Zamudio and Villarreal indicate an increased strength and determination. Even shadows of the disappeared now are given a profile in Chilean society. As is said in Gaviola's *No Me Olvides*: "I will begin to live in your memory. I will wander, feeling your happiness. And in every child, I will praise your name."

NOTES

1. Sara Diamond, "Art After the Coup: Interventions by Chilean Women" (interview with Diamela Eltit and Nelly Richard), *Fuse*, no. 49 (April 1988): p. 18.
2. In New York City, for instance, there have been recent shows by Ismael Frigerio at INTAR, Alfredo Jaar at Grey Art Gallery, Cecilia Vicuña at Exit Art, and Catalina Parra at INTAR. Parra will also be having a retrospective at Lehman College in the Bronx, October 31-December 21.
3. This program, curated by Yvette Nieves-Cruz and Debra Zimmerman, is available from Women Make Movies, 225 Lafayette Street, New York, NY 10012.