The Sunday Star
WASHINGTON, D. C., SEPTEMBER 22, 1968

What's Chilean About Chilean Art? It's the Attitude

By BENJAMIN FORGEY
Star Staff Writer

Nemesio Antunez stood in the middle of a cluttered exhibition gallery at the Pan American Union, insisting that there was something specifically — and yet ineffably — Chilean about the diverse group of paintings and drawings leaning against the walls and strewn across the floor.

Antunez was in the process of hanging an exhibition of Chilean art that is the principal component of the Chilean Embassy's celebration of the 158th anniversary of Chile's independence. In addition to being cultural attache to the embassy, he is one of the foremost, and one of the most characteristic, of Chilean artists.

His first art discipline was architecture — a step that is perhaps not significant but nevertheless is a common one among Chilean painters.

But it is Antunez' internationalism — stylistic, spiritual and, in fact, physical — that strikes the characteristic pulse of Chilean and, in fact, Latin American art of today. He first came to the United States in 1943, moved to France when Stanley Hayter transferred his print-making workshop across the Atlantic, and returned to Chile in 1953 to organize Taller 99, a Chilean version of Hayter's workshop. He returned to live in the United States in the middle '60s.

This internationalism explains why such an exhibition — a delightful sleeper — can be organized with such ease and relatively minimal cost in Washington. Four of the eight artists represented live and work in the United States; two reside and work in France; and only two are currently living in the homeland.

This internationalism also accounts for the difficulty in extrapolating specifically "Chilean" elements in the art on view; the stylistic antecedents are so obviously European and, to a lesser extent, North American. Surrealism is the dominant tone of the exhibition, and, as Antunez points out, it is a surrealism of attitude and not allegiance to an academic style; therein, he says, is the "Chilean" link.

His thesis is supported by the evidence at hand, namely, the works on view. Mystery, emotion, and a subtle exploitation of the unconscious are the elements which unite works as stylistically diverse as the non-objective, surrealist canvases of Matta and Juan Downey's magic boxes with their playful use of electronic components.

Matta is unquestionably the leading international light among Chilean artists. Never mind the fact that his painting developed entirely outside of Chile — in France with Breton and Ernst and other leading surrealists, then in the United States during the war with the same supporting cast, then in Italy and then again in France. Never mind the fact that he is now a citizen of France. His example in terms of style and more important in terms of attitudes toward art, has been important in the lives and work of several generations of Chilean artists.

There are five Matta paintings from the late '50s and early '60s on view in the current exhibition — one on loan from the embassy, the rest from private collections in Washington. Here is one of those artists who develops his characteristic stance fairly early, and who for the rest of his active life reworks, elaborates, clarifies, codifies and, perhaps, deepens, these perceptions. One is tempted therefore to walk quickly by, registering the visual stamp, "Matta," and little else.

This is a ridiculous temptation on several counts. The first is that Matta is important historically, not only in the development of Latin American art, but in the development of modern art in general.

The second and most important is that Matta's canvases are technically superior and psychologically haunting. The indeterminate space in which his superbly drawn, superreal, mechanistic figurations live, the use of light and color for dramatic (subtle, instead of blatant) emphasis—these qualities repay prolonged looking.

This kind of latent content goes through many subtle variations in the work of the other artists on view: Antunez, Enrique Castro-Cid, Ernesto Fontecilla, Raul Valdivieso, Sergio Castillo and, to a lesser extent, Downey. (There is another artist—Santos Chavez—listed, but I didn't see any of his works.)

When in Chile during the 1950s Antunez predated Op art with some of his geometric abstractions (they were, however, more personal and expressionistic than the typical Op painting), but once back in the United States, he found his style changing. The works on view are an imaginative blend of fantastic, figurative and abstract concerns in which an eerie fantasy predominates. They are overviews of real little people who are hardly human, placed in crowds in cold, gray and black, geometric worlds.

Fantasy again is the main element in the drawings of Castro-Cid, currently a New Yorker. The landscapes, in particular, are wierd and lovely combinations of the close-up (botanical) with the far-away view (the landscape). Fontecilla's drawings are the find of the show: technically they stand out by virtue of the eraser, and psychologically by virtue of the recurrent frightened, frightening human face, one to a drawing.

Valdivieso and Castillo are the sculptors of the exhibition. Castillo's piece is an open arrangement of welded steel planes, good but hardly exciting; Valdivieso creates biomorphic bronzes with elegant chrome patinas of which I saw only one—apparently the least effective of the three on view.

Downey is a young artist currently working in Washington, adding an exuberant note to the local scene. His box is a playfully participatory projector, in which various parts are activated by the viewer. A series of abstract slides are projected upon the wall, and they'll go through a series of quick, lovely color changes on command.

What is Chilean about these Chilean artists? It's difficult to say—but Antunez is right, the works do hang remarkably well together. And how different the atmosphere from the varieties of intellectual cool one finds today in the typical show of advanced American painting, and how refreshing a repudiation of the banalities and inadequacies apparent in much of contemporary French painting.

The exhibitiion, and the other cultural events, are indeed a delightful way to share with Washington a celebration of national independence. And after its closing on Wednesday, there's still more to come: next month a panoramic exhibition of the mysterious art of Easter Island (a film, photographs and some artifacts), probably the most comprehensive of its kind ever in the United States, will be shown at the PAU. And what's Chilean about Easter Island? Simple enough: the place belongs to Chile—ever since 1887.