

20th Century horrors

ARTISTS IN EXILE — A group of artists of the Americas sponsored by the Boston Visual Artists Union, Three Center Plaza, through June 4. Curators of the show are Nyna Polumbaum and Caroline Harris.

By Robert Taylor
Globe Staff

"The day of the military coup, Sept. 11, 1973, my husband was arrested and I was put under house arrest. My husband was released and expelled from Chile in Sept., 1974. I was permitted to join him two months later. We came to the United States. He was assassinated on Sept. 21, 1976."

Thus Isabel Letelier, widow of Orlando Letelier, Chile's ambassador to Washington during the Allende regime. She has contributed three small representational terra-cotta figures to *Artists in Exile*, and, like most of the 16

Chileans, various other Latin American artists and one Canadian in this exhibition, she has suffered perhaps more than art can represent.

The background of this exhibition, the most ambitious project to date of the Boston Visual Artists Union, is one of physical torture, concentration camps, beatings, humiliations, murder, sadism and foul play. It is a useful reminder that throughout much of the world, top dogs, whether of the left or the right, will not burke at any means to stay on top. From a human standpoint it inspires pity and indignation; but from an art standpoint — that is, of form as distinct from content — it presents distinct problems.

Unfortunately there is no language of visual form commensurate with the horrors of 20th-Century existence. To portray electro-shock torture, jack-



Huge pastel by Chilean artist Roberto Matta was donated to aid refugees.

booted thugs and heaps of corpses implies we ought to respond positively because decent human beings reject brutality. In general, it reminds one of Raemakers depicting the atrocities of the Hun in World War I — there is no question about the sincerity of the artist's motives or about the lesson being conveyed, but so heavily didactic is that message, it becomes agit-prop exhortation.

Indeed the singular exception I know to the posterish character of "involved" 20th-Century art is Picasso's *Guernica*, which has more to do with Picasso than with *Guernica*. That leads to another problem, the presence here of a painter of world

stature, Roberto Matta Echaurren. He has generously contributed one enigmatic pastel and three Surrealist drawings to *Artists in Exile*; proceeds from their sale will go to Chilean refugees.

When you have an artist of Matta's standing in a show, he tends to dwarf his colleagues. In his shadow, artists like Myriam Holgado, Eduardo Leon Rodriguez and Jose Balmes may be overlooked. In particular I thought Nemisio Atunez deserves careful attention. *Artists in Exile* has diverse aspects, and Saturday, from 9 to 4, more than 100 Latin and US artists will collaborate under the direction of Rene Castro on a huge public mural on Boston Common.

MARQUEE

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