

'Artists in Exile': Caught Between Slogans and Truth

By Neil P. Hansen

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The "Artists in Exile" exhibit at the Boston Visual Artists Union gallery in Boston offers evidence for a statement by Herbert Marcuse: "Art is perhaps the most visible return of the repressed, not only on the individual but also on the generic-historical level. The artistic imagination shapes the unconscious memory of the liberation that failed, of the promise that was betrayed. Art opposes to institutionalized repression the image of man as a free subject."

Art as protest against tyranny and oppression, as witness to the horrors of murder and torture and imprisonment, as opposition, resistance and upheaval is not new. It almost seems to be an accepted part of the artist's function to struggle against enslavement both physical and spiritual, to help protect and preserve the level of human consciousness and significance which it endeavors to raise. Perhaps art alone, since it creates a collective consciousness and universal memory as a

mechanism of survival and evolution, can hope to unite all people in complete and lasting outrage at such political atrocities as those presently being committed in Chile, Iran, South Korea, Argentina, Russia and other countries.

The show at the BVAU gallery is a painful reminder that the number of artists driven from their homelands is growing at an astounding rate. It offers testimony to the frightening loss of liberty as tyrannical governments throughout the world seek to silence opposition to their regimes. Solzhenitsyn from Russia, Baraheni from Iran, Matta from Chile — their fight for the preservation of human rights is an agonizing ordeal which must involve us all.

The works in this show have been collected from several countries of Europe, Mexico, the United States and Canada. Of the 18 artists represented, 15 are from Chile — the exceptions being Guido Rocha from Brazil, Myriam Cristina Holgado of Argentina and Toby An-

derson, an American living in Canada since his army desertion during the Vietnam war.

Among the Chileans are Roberto Matta, a surrealist painter of international reputation and Nemesio Antunez, also a well known painter whose painting, "The Heart of the Andes," hangs in the United Nations building in New York.

Matta has contributed to the BVAU show a large pastel called "The International Idiot" and three untitled lithographs. His work, which ranks with that of Yves Tanguy, Wilfredo Lam and Francis Picabia, has always contained a sinister, menacing quality (which now seems to have been prophetic) with its Piranesi-like dungeon interiors and cold, efficient machinery, unrecognizable as to function and purpose. However, the mural-sized pastel in this show seems free of any violent image and is intent only on laughing to scorn the cigar wielding, sub-human figure tottering idiotically in the midst of chaos and absurdity. It successfully represents a figure (instantly identified with Pinochet of Chile) of complete contempt and laughter. The tragedy it conveys is that once again in history madness reigns with unchecked power over the lives of the innocent and worthy.

The urgency of the political content of such a piece makes it difficult to assess its aesthetic value as a lasting work of art. However, as one would anticipate with an artist such as Matta, the very things which make it a strong political statement also tend to lift it into a larger significance — its directness and accuracy of expression, its illusiveness as to all the ramifications of its content, the compelling visual impact it makes and its lack of any kind of dogmatic or emotional entrapment.

The same is true of the three small lithographs. They speak eloquently in the present tense, yet their lasting impact is in the sense of balance and satisfaction they provide; as if they contained the local-historical in a universal-eternal vehicle.

built, Hispanic-looking with dark skin and curly black hair; the woman as about 25, tall and thin with long blonde hair and quite pretty.

Later, another tenant of the building reported having seen the piece of sculpture in the parking garage under the building. A garage attendant said the couple had parked a motorcycle there and had returned with the sculpture, which they asked him keep while they did an errand. They later reclaimed it.

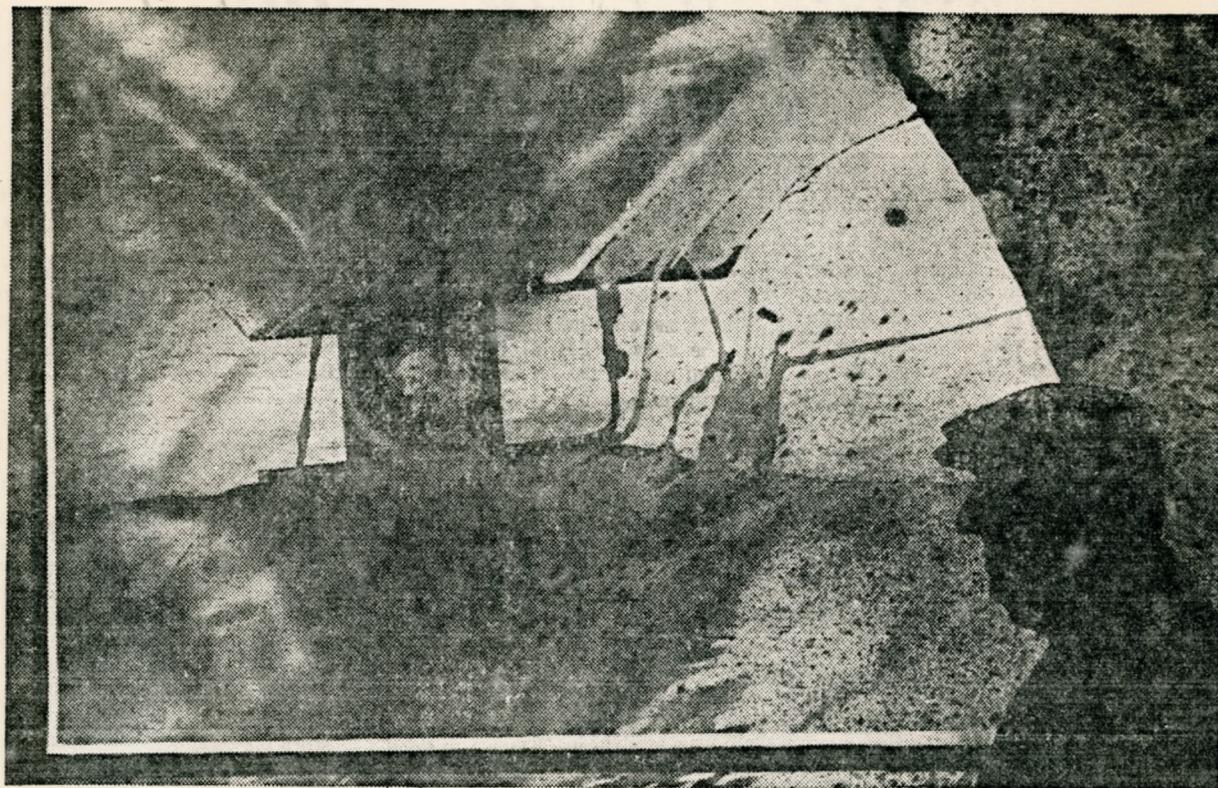
William Whiteman, business manager for the union, said the stolen works would be difficult to resell and that he believed the thieves took them "to hang on their wall," or as a prank.

Cool Couple Suspected in Theft

An unidentified couple are believed to have coolly taken the seven pieces of art stolen from the Boston Visual Artists Union May 31 during viewing hours and to have carted it off through downtown Boston on a motorcycle. None of the pieces have been recovered.

The largest work taken was a two-foot-high concrete and resin sculpture, "The People Are Crucified," by Guido Rocha, valued at \$800. The six other works were small paintings and photographs taken from the walls of the gallery and valued at a total of about \$400.

A couple entered the gallery on the afternoon of May 31 and engaged assistant Ellen Ganter in conversation. The man was described as about 30, large and well-



"Neruda, September, 1973," watercolor by Nemesio Antunez is included in the exhibit, "Artists in Exile," at the Boston Visual Artists Union gallery.

Unfortunately most works of a political nature do not succeed as well. Subject matter, because of its terrible immediacy, overwhelms any possibility of significant content which might demonstrate tension and resolution on a deeper level. Much of the work in this show suffers from an inability to establish itself on either the political or the artistic level. As political statement it can have little effect isolated in an art gallery rather than broadcast in the mass media.

And ironically, the repression of some, at least, of the artists included in the show has followed them even into the exhibition. Guido Rocha's crucifixion sculpture, titled "The People Are Crucified," which was used as the centerpiece of the show, was stolen two weeks ago from the gallery, along with several smaller works. One effect of the theft may be to confer on

Rocha's sculpture a notoriety outweighing its artistic merits. For the crucifix, which I saw before it was stolen, was a prime example of an artwork much of whose emotional impact is dissipated by its simplistically interpretive title.

The same sort of confusion damages two abstract acrylic paintings by Guillermo Nunez which might conceivably represent hanging carcasses. When we are asked to view these as "Mouths They Have Silenced, Eyes They Have Blinded, Hands They Have Crushed, Songs They Can't Kill," the result can only be confusion and disappointment. However, when the same artist, Nunez, does a pen drawing in his prison journal of a face plagued by gnats crawling at every orifice, the effect is indeed one of powerful statement and artistic integrity.

Perhaps what is troublesome about this

BVAU is the inability to resolve the contradictions between collectible art and art as topical statement; between popular, almost primitive expression and sophisticated, formal work catering to elitist understanding. Most of the work presented would be more effective if it could be mass consumed, as for example, in the people's outdoor murals of Chile during the Allende regime.

Ultimately, the success of the show lies in its expression of solidarity and support by the world art community for those engaged in the struggle against oppression. The BVAU deserves applause and support for its commitment in this effort.

"Artists in Exile" continues through Saturday at the BVAU Gallery, 3 Center Plaza in Government Center, Boston.