

## Current Chilean art on show in Gunma

By NANCY SHALALA

Under the blood-soaked dictatorship that stifled Chile for the last two decades, Chilean contemporary artists rarely exhibited their works abroad. Censored both within and beyond Chilean borders, artistic expression remained relatively curtailed. With the return of democracy in recent years, however, came the reversal of these repressive conditions.

Currently the Hara Museum ARC in Gunma is featuring the first major presentation of Chilean contemporary art in Japan in an exhibition curated by Gabriel Barros. Displaying the paintings, prints, photography, sculpture and ceramics of 15 leading contemporary Chilean artists, "Chile Today: Contemporary Art from Chile" provides a representative look at current art movements in Chile and challenges viewers to formulate terms in which to think about these works.

Separated geographically by the Andes Mountains and the northern desert, Chile remains separated from her South American counterparts in artistic expression as well. Instead of the typical use of bold colors, most Chilean artists have opted for more earth tones reflective of the native landscape. A distinct sobriety marks much of Chilean art, work that is often cast in shadows of ironic smiles.

Expressing a range of concerns, the artists of the exhibition contribute to the construction of a renewed artistic voice emanating from Chile. Some begin in history, then delve still deeper into questions of Chilean identity and the past. Others, rooted in the Chilean landscape, branch out in a more global appeal.

The most overtly political pieces are the bronze caricatures sculpted by Hernan Puelma, who satirizes policemen and politicians, soldiers and spies. In one of his works, titled "The Speech," he portrays a politician delivering a public address from a platform that tilts to the right.

Also politically charged are the spartan canvases of artist Jose Basso. Using only a few minimal signs (a tree or a house for instance), Basso records with economy and sensitivity the tragic lives of desperation endured by men and

women today. In his highly political "Eight Shots at Dawn," for example, the artist depicts the black burn marks of revolver shots fired in a circular formation. In the center lies a faint outline of a windowless house. Replete with social and political criticism, the work exemplifies the artist's beliefs on the nature and function of art.

An artwork, for Basso, is itself a fractured gesture that responds with weakness to weakness, with impotence to impotence. It is like a mark made in the sand in a desperate effort to be seen and saved from the obstinate darkness (solitude), and similarly bears sorrowful marks that symbolize the tragic gesticulations of someone consumed with self-doubt.

Terse economy of expression also typifies the disturbing canvases of Francisco de la Puente. Against a characteristically matte background, the artist may paint chords of rope that hang menacingly down over various objects made from natural resources. These may include, for instance, wooden stakes bound by rope, bare branches tangled in barbed wire, or segments of unfriendly fences. The artist leaves part of the painting blank, a void that asserts a disquieting presence through subtle insinuation — a hint of a detention camp or death, or perhaps the global threat posed to the environment. Embedded in various connotations, his works stir feelings of profound unease deep in the heart's core.

A pervading sense of isolation and decay invades the work of Roberto Geisse, who paints landscapes devoid of any evidence of life. The works silently record the mental landscape of the former Chile under oppressive rule.

Like Geisse, Enrique Zamudio also records the mental landscape of the Chilean past, but does so with nostalgia as opposed to despair. Using snapshots that he retouches of historical sites and peoples of Santiago, Zamudio creates a patchwork reconstruction of Chilean history.

Painter Benito Rojo uses Chilean landscape as a point of departure to investigate questions of perspective and problems of the environment. In warm, earth tones he cap-

tures large aerial perspectives in which he then places a small window that depict more focused views. His works present poetic visions of the landscape and raise concern for the present mistreatment of natural resources today.

From charting the preoccupations of artists with politics, history and the environment, the exhibition additionally maps other subjects, ranging from the abstract fantasies of Cristian Abelli to the brilliant mythologies of Patricia Israel to the modern absurdities of Gonzalo Cienfuegos.

The canvases of the latter become theatrical stages for the paradoxical dramas of human existence. Casting characters who belong to different time periods and placing them in parlors also typified by incongruous times and locales, Cienfuegos confronts the viewer with absurd performances that enact the plight of modern men and

women. However, an undercurrent of seriousness runs beneath the artist's sense of humor. Cienfuegos explains, "If we can see our lives mixing the serious things with the absurd ones we can develop or improve our life quality."

Replacing the element of absurdity with one of fantasy, Pablo Dominguez explores the redemptive properties of the imagination. In "The Leopard," for instance, the artist paints the southern Chilean coast in deep blues and rich emerald greens, warm hues that beckon the viewer to enter his mysterious landscape. A leopard, half cast in a dark shadow, sits at the edge of a cliff that overlooks the deep crevices. From the leopard's perspective, the viewer gains a glimpse into Dominguez's fabulous world of fantasy.

A visit to the Hara Museum ARC in Gunma Prefecture is certainly recommended.

*The exhibition runs through Nov. 23. Tel. (0279) 24-6585.*