

# Memories of War and Oppression Color Two Shows in the Bronx

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

**THE BRONX**

**T**HINGS long ago and far away are made strikingly current and palpable at two venues here. At the Lehman College Art Gallery, Jorge Tacla is represented by an extended and highly original elegy on Chile. At the Longwood Arts Gallery, where Vietnam is the subject, the mood is angrier.

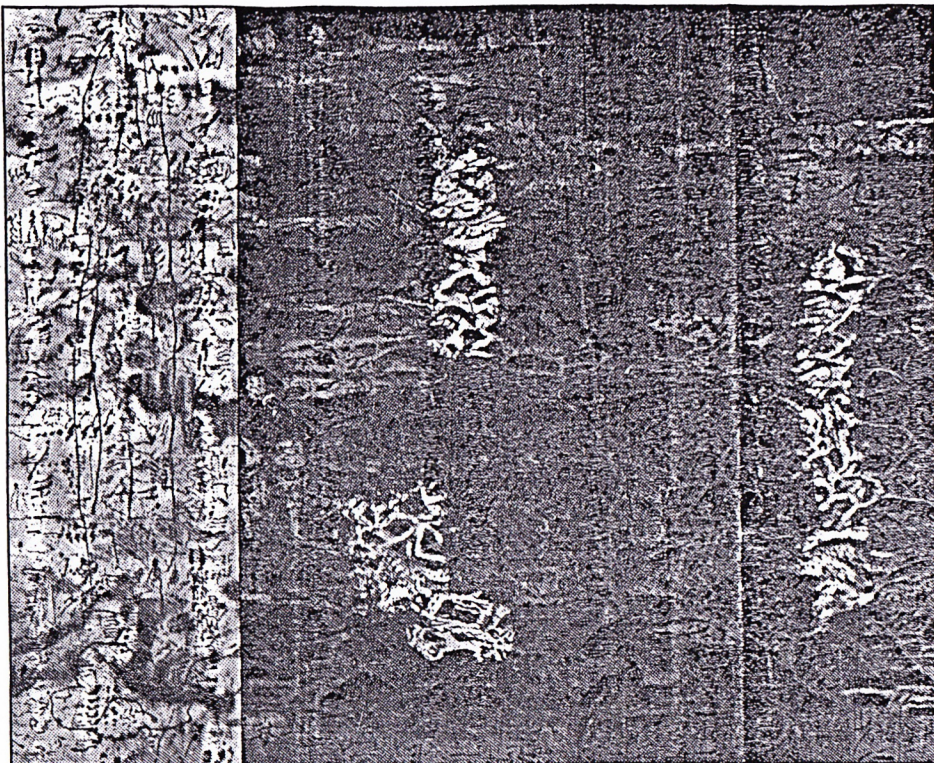
One of the crucial pieces of information about Mr. Tacla's life is that when he first came to New York from Chile in 1980 he worked as a disk jockey and conga player, and among

The past haunts a Chilean émigré and six of Vietnamese descent.

the people he met through this work was the painter Jean-Michel Basquiat, who became celebrated for splashy paintings that are a kind of stream-of-consciousness graffiti.

Mr. Tacla has adopted some of this flash, but when you stand in the presence of his large works you are aware of how sober-sided they are. In a catalogue essay, Dan Rubey, a professor of art history at Lehman College, compares him to a desert hermit, the desert in this case being the Atacama in Chile. The dry open spaces that haunt much of his work can be seen to represent life in Chile before democracy was restored in 1989. In this regard, Mr. Tacla resembles the monkish Anselm Kiefer, the contemporary German painter whose work is heavily influenced by the Nazi era.

In a sense, the mind already knows the locale of these paintings. A framework for many of them is a sepia-tone rocky landscape that recalls Chinese landscape painting. Mr. Tacla is eager to find common ground with his viewers, and he accomplishes this in the most basic way through the material he employs. The canvases are of different weaves, but they share a common humble brown tone, and the



"Private Information 'Borderline'" by Jorge Tacla.



"Elemental Notes" by Mr. Tacla.

Photographs by Nohra Haime Gallery

newest paintings feature collage of rougher material that approaches the coarseness of burlap. Mr. Tacla can either stain directly into his surfaces or build up thick paint. These divergent physical sensations contribute in no small degree to his paintings' hold on the viewer.

The paintings bear titles like "Elemental Notes," "Elemental References," "Pretext for a Landscape," "Private Information 'Borderline'" and "A Classic Problem With Two Unknowns." They seem full of shorthand and personal diagrams — private information — but have the general look of anybody's sincere struggle to sum up his experience. Mr. Tacla's output is not unrelieved austerity: an image that becomes humorous through repetition is the outline of a lumbering Neanderthal followed by a homo erectus.

A couple of paintings feature

boughs of luscious fruit, indulgently painted, as if the artist is positing a Garden of Eden period before the onset of the desert. At least the fruit is a potential signal that Mr. Tacla's primary interest is in offering food for thought.

The painting that most addresses our emotions is "Pretext for a Landscape," which features, in large scale, the image of a crouching Cuna Indian child. The child is laughing, which means that although Mr. Tacla is serious, he is not somber. The image reminds us that the most resonant investigations are sensual.

Sensuousness is in short supply at the Longwood Arts Gallery because the participants in "Here and Now, Now and Then" have scores to settle. The prevalent tone of righteous indignation is keynoted succinctly on a poster that is affixed to the gallery door and that is also visible to the

public. A print of a work by Dinh Le titled "Accountability," the poster uses irony to make the case that the M.I.A./P.O.W. issue is paltry compared with the enormous amount of damage inflicted by the United States on Vietnam and that Vietnam as the aggrieved party should be the country that sets the terms for a normalization of relations.

The participants in the show are all of Vietnamese descent but have gone through art schools in this country. This shows up, for they have mastered all of the techniques of Conceptual Art, which entails being political above everything else.

The tightest political net is woven by Hahn Thi Pham, whose "Expatriate Consciousness" is a mélange of photographs and short printed phrases. The artist reveals that her protagonist, identified only as "she,"

Asian lesbian "fearful of black gay men" and "enchanted by white women."

Some traditional paintings on canvas extend the mood. "A Sister's Life" by An Ngoc Pham is disturbing because of the central image, a naked young girl supine on a background that at first resembles fallen leaves but that turns out to be United States Army camouflage. It is not hard to read into this a narrative of desecration. In another painting, a figure wields the sickle from the Soviet emblem.

The handsomest and most technologically advanced work is "Home" by Dan Cao, which uses computer-generated imagery. Atop a sepia-tone printout of Jacques Louis David's "Oath of the Horatii," a neo-classical depiction of the republican virtues of ancient Rome, are both a running

1968 and another text, in a different type style, that chronicles the artist's reaction to these events.

Photographs by Christian Nguyen are of Vietnamese who have been displaced to China. They are mostly offhand pictures, but one of a baker who has twisted dough into the shape of a large noose is disturbing. Also shocking are pastel drawings by Long Nguyen in which skulls are still attached to spinal columns, something rarely seen. The tenderest image is two round smooth stones carved so that they interlock, by Thai Bui.

Mr. Tacla's exhibition at the Lehman College Art Gallery continues through Dec. 16. The number to call for information is (212) 960-8731.

The Vietnamese artists at the Longwood Arts Gallery continue through Dec. 19. To obtain more information on that exhibition, the number