

## ARTS

# A view from the margins of Chile

Paz Errázuriz photographed her country's 'other' lives under military rule. As a UK show opens, she talks to Charlotte Jansen

**W**e were living in grave danger — everything was dangerous. It was a really hard, really ugly time," the photographer Paz Errázuriz reflects on life in Chile during General Pinochet's 17-year regime. During the violent, US-aided coup in 1973 that brought Pinochet to power, Errázuriz's home in Santiago, where she lived with her young children, was raided by the military. "I had an early experience of what horror truly was. But you learn how to get around and how to be careful."

Despite the turbulence and peril, Errázuriz, who is now 81, dared to photograph many of Chile's most neglected, vulnerable and clandestine communities, including Santiago's homeless, sex workers, gay people, the elderly, the mentally ill, protesters and Indigenous people — groups who faced ignominy under Pinochet's rule.

When we speak on the phone two weeks before she is due to travel to the UK to open her exhibition at MK Gallery in Milton Keynes, it is early evening in Santiago, and Errázuriz is at her home and studio in Providencia, a middle-class neighbourhood in the east of the city. Classical music plays in the background (she tells me it is her preferred genre, since she trained as a pianist).

When *Dare to Look* opens on July 19, it will be Errázuriz's first ever solo exhibition in the UK: more than 170 photographs representing the profound, unwavering humanity of her gaze, despite the inhumane circumstances in which much of the work was made.

The show is also something of a homecoming — it was while living in Cambridge as a student in the 1960s that

Errázuriz taught herself to use a camera. On returning to Santiago, Errázuriz began to practise photography while working as a primary school teacher. "I decided to learn photography with the children, and to make portraits of them and their families — many of them could not afford a camera." She ventured beyond her classroom community with *The Sleeping* (1979), tentative documents, given the strict parameters of censorship, of people sleeping on the streets of Santiago. The classical repose of these unknown subjects — the

Photography, Errázuriz explains, was 'a way to fight against the dictatorship'

pictures were taken at a distance, so as not to wake them — is sharply punctuated by their obvious disenfranchisement. The images marked the beginning of Errázuriz's subtle demand for social change through the camera.

In 1980 she held her first solo exhibition in Santiago, presenting some of the images of *The Sleeping* — radically different to the conservative documentary style of the day. The following year, she co-founded a group with other photo-journalists living in Chile, known as AFI (Association of Independent Photographers), active until 1990. AFI members worked to create images that would pass the military censorship. Errázuriz developed metaphors, allusions to violence and darkness such as creeping shadows and peeling wallpaper, to hint at what the government wanted to conceal from view. Photography, Errázuriz



Clockwise, from main: Paz Errázuriz, 'Evelyn, La Palmera, Santiago' (1983); 'Boxer VI' (1987); 'Talca' (1984)

explains, was "a way to fight against the dictatorship". Her tenebrous, tender portraits made sure Chile's most marginalised people remained part of the country's history.

Santiago has been the location for many of her major bodies of work, often made over several years and the result of embedding herself in the communities she photographed. That was especially true of Errázuriz's most prominent series, *La manzana de Adán* ("Adam's Apple"), made between 1982 and 1987. Errázuriz had spent time in La

Palmera brothel in Santiago, and it was there she met transsexual sex workers Pilar, Evelyn and their mother Mercedes. "They received me with a lot of kindness and interest," she says. "With a tremendous amount of care, given with the political repression, I began to work with them over four years. I felt solidarity with them." When Pilar and Evelyn were forced to flee Santiago — the regime persecuted sex workers and gay people, often through police harassment, violence and, in some cases, torture — they invited Errázuriz to come to stay with them in Talca, a city south of the capital.

The photographs remained private exchanges between the photographer and her subjects for years. "In truth, I didn't invite the viewer to dare to look at this," she says. "At one point, I didn't even know what to do with this material. I couldn't show it during the dictatorship. I was never able to show any of this at the time."

Eventually the works were published as a book in 1990, the year the regime fell, with written testimonies and eyewitness accounts of torture and murder collected by journalist Claudia Donoso, Errázuriz's friend. It is Evelyn's fierce, unflinching gaze that commands the pictures. "She was beautiful, but a very strong character — we were very good friends." While Evelyn always appears immaculately made-up, the backgrounds — small, cramped bedrooms, crumbling walls — hint at the decrepit spaces she and her family members were forced to inhabit. At the same

time, the community was being devastated by Aids.

"The tragic thing for me is that of all those I photographed, only one survived," says Errázuriz. "It is a very precious, but very sad work for me."

In 1986, while working on *Adam's Apple*, Errázuriz received a Guggenheim Fellowship — the first Latin American female photographer to be awarded the prestigious grant. It enabled her to make another important series in the 1980s, of young boxers in Santiago, a rare view of a hyper-macho world by a female photographer at that time: she was initially denied permission to photograph at the boxing club because she was a woman.

The boxers underscore Errázuriz's abiding themes of sexuality, violence and desire, as well as the tension between strength and fragility. Some of the boxers' portraits are included in *Dare to Look*, as well as later portraits of *luchadores* in Chile. With their coruscating sensuality, they form a riveting commentary on posturing, posing, and performing conventional gender personas, especially when seen together with the bravado of her *Adam's Apple* anti-heroes. Evelyn and Pilar, or later portraits of tango dancers, bodies pressed together in smoke-filled underground clubs.

Though she continually explored the



performative, pliable nature of identity, Errázuriz was also deeply interested in those who were unmasked, unpoised, even unaware of their self-image. At the end of the 1970s, she first visited the Santiago psychiatric hospital, hoping to find friends who had disappeared during the military dictatorship — rumours at the time suggested political prisoners were sometimes forced into psychiatric hospitals. She did not find her lost friends, but the deprived conditions and abuses she saw there left a lasting impression and she later gained permission to return with her camera and work with the patients. This evolved into *El Infarto del Alma* (which roughly translates as "heart attack of the soul") (1994), focused on stories of patients who found love within the hospital walls, portraits of couples embracing, hugging, standing side by side, smiling — a glimmer of hope, resilience through desire, in an otherwise bleak reality.

Later she returned again, to make a body of work with a group of elderly women patients she had met at the hospital, "who didn't have many facilities for a good life". In the stark, squalid bathroom where they would shower en masse, Errázuriz photographed their nude, fragile bodies. The resulting series, *Antesala de un desnudo* ("Antechamber of a nude"), is among her most raw and desolate works.

"These subjects and these images are the result of my deep interest in identity, and my desire to understand ourselves better, here in Chile, and to understand myself," she says. "This has always been very important to me. I often see myself reflected in this 'other', and my work is a constant dialogue with others, translated into the form of images."

July 19-October 5, mkgallery.org



'Mago Karman' ('Karman the Magician') (1988)