

Psychiatry in pictures

CHOSEN BY ROBERT HOWARD



Clay pots by Bibi Herrera (b. 1956)

In 1973 Herrera, the daughter of a prominent communist activist, was studying Chilean Indian art. On the morning of the coup that brought General Pinochet to power she was arrested and taken to the notorious Chile Stadium in Santiago where she was held for over three years, enduring interrogation, torture and rape. She arrived in Britain as a political refugee in 1977 and initially lived in a hotel in Notting Hill Gate with a group of other Chileans. In 1979 she was moved to a flat on a large estate in Tulse Hill, South London. Here she felt isolated and unable to face the brutality of her past and made her first suicide attempt. In 1993, after receiving news that a close friend in Chile had been killed in a farming accident, she cut her wrists with a Stanley knife, damaging nerves and tendons so severely that she has permanently lost the use of her left hand. During her subsequent admission to the Bethlem Hospital she was encouraged, for the first time, to talk about her experiences in Chile. She recalls that at this point she was 'extremely unhappy, angry to be alive and reluctant to do anything'. Offered occupational therapy in the form of pottery, she watched a fellow patient holding a cigarette in one hand while he coiled clay into a pot and realized that this was something she could do. After reading books on ceramic arts she began to produce elaborate and intricately designed pots. Her pots and their decorative designs draw heavily on her memories of Chilean Indian art and traditional symbols. 'My pots remind me of my people and I like the colours. I think the reason is, when you've been through so much, everything is black and white. I think it's that I want to see that life is not only black and white'. Herrera believes that without pottery she would almost certainly have not been able to come to terms with her traumatic and degrading experiences and would have made further serious attempts to end her life. 'My life has been quite black but I want to show that there is still much beauty in the World and we can all find something better. Pottery has given me a reason to carry on living. I can make something instead of destroying it, especially my life'. These and other pots by Bibi Herrera are in the collection of the Bethlem Royal Hospital Archives and Museum (telephone 020 8776 4307). With thanks to Patricia Allderidge, archivist and curator, and to Bibi Herrera.