

ՀԱՅԳԻՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ
ԵՒ
ԱԶԳԱԳՐՈՒԹՅԱՆ
ԻՆՍՏԻՏՈՒՏԻ
ԱՇԽԱՏՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐ
7

VI

ՑՈՒՑԱՅԱՆԴԵՍ

Gassia Armenian
Fowler Museum, UCLA

REMAIN IN LIGHT: VISIONS OF HOMELAND AND DIASPORA

Exhibition curated by Gassia Armenian at the Goldenberg Galleria of the Fowler Museum at the University of California at Los Angeles from June 10 to October 15, 2023.

This photography exhibition comprising of the works of three photo-artists born in the original hub of the Armenian Diaspora, Beirut, and living in the new hub of the Armenian Diaspora, Los Angeles, casts a beam of light on the transformation of lifestyle, cultural and moral values, and customs during the immigration or the forced migration process after the 1915–1923 Genocide of Armenian people in the Ottoman Empire. This exhibition of photographs transferred the longing for the homeland, the trials and tribulations of immigrants, and the rebirth on foreign and new lands to images on the walls – to stories on the walls to be shared and communicated with the audiences.

This exhibition of 47 photographs endeavors to visualize the contemporary Armenian experience at home, in Armenia and in Artsakh and in Los Angeles. Three Diaspora born Armenian photo-artists living in Los Angeles, Ara Oshagan, Sossi Madzounian, and Ara Mgrdichian, create a luminous connection between the immigration process, and the rebirth on foreign shores. The exhibition permits the viewer to visualize that quest for light. Is it leading towards a better life or is it expanding the fear of loss?

Madzounian, Mgrdichian, and Oshagan draw their inspirations from a combination of memories, life experiences, preferences, and life philosophies by acknowledging the existence of two and sometimes three homelands. They grew up with the eternal yet impossible dream of seeing an independent Armenia out of bondage from the Soviet Union.

The impossible dream became possible on September 21, 1991. The three photographers did not hesitate to arm themselves with their cameras and travel from Los Angeles to Armenia and to Artsakh to capture the reality. They did capture many variations on the theme of survival in the homeland and the host city in Lebanon or Los Angeles following Diaspora as well as the forward motion of the new generations empowered with their inheritance and cultural identity.

Currently, Los Angeles has the largest Armenian community outside of Armenia, half a million strong. The community has four high schools, four elementary and middle schools, and many pre-kindergartens and kindergartens. More than twenty churches, ten cultural and sports organizations, the Ararat-Eskijian Museum, and several professional associations, like the Armenian Bar Association, Armenian American Medical Society, Armenian Engineers and Scientists Association, the Armenian Relief Society, and others cater to the socio-cultural endeavors and needs of the community.

Armenian immigration waves to Los Angeles began in the late 1800s and early 1900s following the Hamidian Massacres, a series of atrocities carried out against the Armenian pop-

ulation organized by the government of Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II. The massacres broke out in 1894 in the vicinity of Sasun, where Armenians resisted Kurdish attacks and protected their families at all costs. The Turkish government seized the opportunity to send troops to crush the Armenian resistance.

The Armenians were outraged both at the Sultan's cruel policies and at the indifference of the European powers. They organized a demonstration in the Ottoman capital city of Constantinople to bring attention to their plight. Police crushed the Armenian demonstrators with unparalleled brutality and organized massacres in Armenian-populated cities, including the burning of the church of Urfa.

As a last attempt, Armenian nationalists seized Constantinople's major international bank, the Ottoman Bank. The government responded with more violence. The Adana Massacres were instigated by local officials and Muslim clerics and took the form of riots in neighborhoods followed by pogroms, with no overt involvement from the central government.

The Hamidian Massacres set the precedent and blueprint for the Armenian Genocide of 1915, perpetrated by the Ottoman government, as the systematic destruction of the Armenian people and Armenian identity in the Ottoman Empire. The Genocide created a new wave and a great influx of survivors to the United States. Political instability in the Middle East from the 1950s onward to the 1980s generated a third wave of Armenian immigrants from Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Iran, and Turkey. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 due to socio-economic and political reasons contributed to yet another wave of Armenian immigrants to Los Angeles. Armenians from countries troubled with political, religious, and human rights violations found refuge and the possibility of a new start in the Armenian neighborhoods of Los Angeles.

What did the immigrants bring with them? What could they carry in their suitcases? They carried traditions, customs, religion, language, memories, and most of all the hope that they were moving towards the light leading to a better life. They had faith they would find and remain in light in Los Angeles.

The Exhibition Space

The exhibition was mounted in the Goldenberg Galleria of the Fowler Museum at the University of California at Los Angeles, UCLA. A square space surrounding the museum atrium, Goldenberg Galleria has entrances to the four main galleries of the Museum. Each wall has two large panels dedicated to the display of photography exhibitions – eight panels in total. The first panel at the entrance of the Museum was dedicated to Mount Ararat with a case displaying eight-thousand-year-old soil from Masis Blur on the Ararat plain. The soil was on loan from the Armenian Department of the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at UCLA. Dr. Kristine Martirosyan-Olshansky contributed to the scientific explanation and caption of the soil [photo 1].

Mount Ararat, situated on the border of Armenia and Turkey, is a snow-capped, dormant volcano with two peaks: Greater Ararat (elevation of 5,137 m or 16,854 ft) and Little Ararat (elevation of 3,896 m or 12,782 ft). The ground base of the mountain is about 35 km (22 mi). The mountain has been revered since ancient times. According to legend, Armenian deities lived in its heart. The name Masis meant “protective and nourishing mother.” The volcano eventually became a symbol of Armenia, reminding its people of the homeland with its cherished sights, landscapes, cultural sovereignty, and proud inheritance¹.

¹ Wall Mounted Clear Case with Soil from Mount Ararat; caption in the case to the right of the soil; case is 36" long; six small mounds of sifted archaeological soil from Mount Ararat] Masis

The soil samples were field-collected in 2018 at the archaeological site of Masis Blur (Masis Mound, Մասիս Բլուր) in the Ararat Valley, in the foothills of Mount Ararat. According to Dr. Kristine Martirosyan-Olshanksy, excavation director, the soil constitutes the “heavy fraction” and did not require a special export permit. Heavy fraction contrasts to light fraction in archaeological terminology.



*Photo 1. Sossi Madzounian (b. 1957, Beirut, Lebanon)
The Light Under Dark Clouds, October 2015, Araratian Plateau, Vayotz-dzor Province,
Armenia, on the way to the Areni, ©Sossi Madzounian*

Archaeologists use a flotation process to retrieve burnt plant remains, small bones, and small tools from the soil, thus revealing the subsistence practices and day-to-day activities of ancient communities. During that process, soil is poured into a bucket of water. Burnt botanical remains float to the surface and are called “light fraction.” Rocks, beads, small tools, and bones sink to the bottom and are called heavy fraction. By law, the US Department of Agriculture must issue a special permit for the import of light fraction, while heavy fraction can be imported without a permit.



Photo 2. Display of photographs by Ara Oshagan at the Fowler Museum at UCLA.



Photo 3. Display of photographs by Sossi Madzounian at the Fowler Museum at UCLA.

Blur (Մասիս Բլուր; Masis mound), Armenia, “Heavy fraction” from an 8,000-year-old farming community, collected in 2018, Soil, small rocks, small obsidian tools, animal teeth and bones (sheep and goat), Loan of the UCLA Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, Armenia Lab, Research Program for Armenian Archaeology.



Photo 4. Display of photographs by Ara Mgrdichian at the Fowler Museum at UCLA.

The second and third panels were dedicated to the photographs of Ara Oshagan [photo 2]. The fourth and fifth panels were dedicated to the photographs of Sossi Madzounian, [photo 3] and the sixth and seventh panels were dedicated to the photographs of Ara Mgrdichian [photo 4]. Finally, the eighth panel represented the photo album of the curator with her favorite photographs from the portfolios of Madzounian, Mgrdichian, and Oshagan [photo 5].

The photo-artists participated actively in the exhibition. Besides the selection of photographs from their extensive portfolios, they shared their voices and contextualized their photographic visions. The captions of the photographs, indicated by quotation marks, were composed by them.



Photo 5. Curator's Choices from the portfolios of the three photographers, Mgrdichian, Oshagan and Madzounian, at the Fowler Museum at UCLA.

Ara Oshagan (b. 1964, Beirut, Lebanon)

Ara Oshagan is a Diasporic multi-disciplinary artist, curator, and cultural worker whose practice explores collective and personal histories of dispossession, legacies of violence, identity and (un)imagined futures. He works in photography, film, collage, installation, book arts, public art, and monuments. His work is in the permanent collection of many museums in the United States and in Armenia. Oshagan is based in Los Angeles and is a curator at ReflectSpace Gallery in the City of Glendale.

In his own words, Ara Oshagan describes himself as an intersectional artist and curator working in photography, collage, archive, endangered language, film, book-arts, and installation art:

“Vectored by my own personal history, I am a documentarian as well as a conceptual artist. A descendant of communities who were deracinated from their indigenous lands by the Armenian Genocide in 1915, I was born in Lebanon and displaced by civil war as a youth. I am diasporic and live in the wake of multi-generation displacement and dispossession. My work researches and explores the associated visible/not-visible structures of identity, memory, and histories of site/not-site. My own familial and personal history is deeply connected to my work.

So is my identity, which is transcultural and hybrid: a neural network made up of American/Armenian/Arabic/French parts that are in constant flux, in harmony and conten-

tion. I am interested in the exploration of these ambiguities of identity; and in the crossing of physical, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. I live and work among communities with histories of multi-generational displacement – that have been uprooted, dislocated, and are multi-diasporic across time and space. My practice works to articulate the various multi-valiant dimensions of ‘diasporic presence’ and all its attendant ambiguities and erasures.

I entangle past-present-future and imagine new futurities for my own, as well as other marginalized, displaced, and diasporic communities” [photo 6].



*Photo 6. Ara Oshagan, Holy Liturgy.
Gantzasar Monastery (13th century CE),
Vank Village, Artsakh, 1999. ©Ara Oshagan*



*Photo 7. Ara Oshagan, Santa Monica
Boulevard. East Hollywood,
Little Armenia, CA, 2003. ©Ara Oshagan*

Reflecting on his photograph taken at Gantzasar monastery Oshagan recalls:

“My father accompanied me on this visit to Gantzasar Armenian monastery. We had traveled thousands of miles from our diasporic homes to Artsakh, and we traveled another hour and a half by taxi over muddy roads . . . We climbed the last incline by foot because the taxi got stuck in the mud. It was a kind of secular pilgrimage. Upon entering the monastery, I was immediately overtaken and paralyzed by the combination of the ancient monastery walls, the ephemeral light, and the deeply resonant voices of the choir. It was a deeply spiritual moment for me, an out-of-body experience. For a long time, I just stood unmoving, bathed in this ethereal and mystical moment. My father had a similar experience. After a while, I did manage to take a few pictures and this was one of them – near the end of the holy liturgy” [photo 7].

The two store owners have commissioned their store signs, in Armenian, from the same sign maker: to the left is the shop of the tombstone carver, to the right that of the barber. The only clue that the stores are located in the U.S. is the (323) Hollywood area code.

Sossi Madzounian (b. 1957, Beirut, Lebanon)

Sossi Madzounian was born in Beirut, Lebanon and has been living in Los Angeles since 1968. After studying at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, she had a successful career as a commercial photographer before shifting her focus at the height of it all to pursue her primary passion: motherhood. Twenty years later, she returned to her roots and committed her talents and style of capturing the essence of what naturally exists towards fine art photography. Her discerning eye focuses on the ordinary often unheeded subjects metamorphosing them into compelling forms and images. She collaborated with the Smithsonian Institute on their folklore project "My Armenia" – her work was used as the featured pieces at The Smithsonian Summer Festival. Recently, her photography was used in the "Lily Vorperian Marash Embroidery" publication.

Her unblemished approach to life is her inspiration and guiding light, according to Sossi: "Being part of the Armenian Diaspora in Los Angeles has brought forth conflicting emotions of complete belonging and utter loss – a feeling I have navigated throughout my dual identity existence. From a young age, I have immersed myself and sought to be surrounded by our community, whether it was through academics, cultural and arts programs, or various other services; it provides a sense of comfort and fulfills my tribal need. Equally, I have yearned for a space where my individuality can exist apart from my group identity. It is through my photography that I find that balance. Through this specific body of work, I found an outlet to express my emotions about this complex theme. My intent was to preserve memories that others may draw inspiration from for their own hyphenated journey" [photo 8].

The bridge connecting the three crosses on the church domes stands for the strength of the Armenian people and their faith which has acted as a community-binding source. It has empowered them with faith, hope and love. It has helped them move onward to procreate for many centuries, past, present, and future. The power of the belief, faith, connected by the arch.

When I saw this scenery, I realized how tight and close the faith is. Nothing can break the faith in us. The strength of the structure that is standing tall, portrays the Armenian people. It is our faith that has held us together and moved us forward and helped us procreate for centuries [photo 9].



Photo 8. Sossi Madzounian, Meeting of the Souls, Hagharzsin Monastery (13th century CE), Dilijan, Tavush Province, October 2015. ©Sossi Madzounian

Abril (means to live and April in Armenian) Bookstore opened its doors in April 1977. The intention of its proprietor, Harout Yeretizian, was to establish a community center and to encourage political, cultural, and economic discussions of current events through books. To-

If you ask Ara about his citizenship, he would say: Armenia and Armenians have always been trans-territorial and transnational, yet thoroughly indigenous. We have always lived between disparate physical and metaphysical worlds, cultures, and societies – bridging and being bridged in the process. We have thrived and endured in the midst of great tumult where continents and cultures press up against one another, where empires and nations meet and end, a locus of creation bound in sinew and sight, seeding localisms of global consequence wherever we may go, forced or of our own volition.

The confluence of narratives, codes, and hermeneutic artifacts from all times and places, in turn, transform and become wholly kinetic in the here and now, dressed in mannerisms and nuances of form spanning myriad Armenian realities and possible futures. Faces and traces, fragments – patches of the unattainable – past, but present and future, combined, collected, re-contextualized, and innovated, creating a social force of great magnitude, not only advancing chronologically, but directionally through generations [photo 10].

Armenian priest performing a liturgical purifying ritual, as has been done for centuries, burning myrrh and frankincense in a holy censer in front of this altar under which, it is said, is buried the head of John the Baptist and other holy relics, moved and enshrined therein (during the Crusades) to ensure they would never be destroyed by ill-intentioned marauders.

Curator's Choice

The leitmotif of light emanating from the photographs in this exhibition has created timeless and boundless connections between the and the Armenian Diaspora.

The leitmotif of light weaving the threads of the social fabric that connects Diaspora Armenians has been kindled by the three photographers.

The final image of the exhibition is the pomegranate that explodes, claiming justice and casting the light of rebirth and regeneration of all the communities of Armenians around the world [photo 12].



Photo 11. Ara Mgrdichian, Pomegranate Arils in Hand, Passing on the Light, 2013, Armenian woman at home, Los Angeles, CA ©Ara Mgrdichian

Conclusion

Los Angeles connects many knots to the web of forced migrations and immigrations and brings to the forefront historical, current, and future recognition of this source community.

Where is the light? It is in every single snippet of the vibrant and multi-faceted Armenian community of the twenty-first century Los Angeles. You see the metamorphosis in the photographs where Ara Oshagan, Sossi Madzounian, and Ara Mgrdichian have used the light of their cameras to seize unique perspectives of life in the homeland, Armenia, Artsakh, and Greater Los Angeles. They have followed their intuition and their passion with a conviction and confidence that transforms life situations into images that illuminate the social fabric of the homeland, immigrant stories, and rebirth across the Armenian-American experience.

In November 2022, I turned the cover of a blank book.

I completed the mental outline of a photo exhibition for the Fowler Museum, and I transferred the story that was in my mind from words into action.

Homeland, whether it was independent or in subjugation to foreign powers, it was a constant in my life and the lives of Diaspora Armenians. I remember my grandmother, a Genocide survivor, lamenting the loss of our homeland. I am a Diaspora Armenian. I learned about Armenia through books, through maps, and through the stories of those who once lived there. Armenia was a mythical reality until Armenia became independent in 1991.

Immigration, in the lives of Armenians across the world, has been a constant movement towards a better life and light.

Rebirth around the world on new lands tested how much of the Light we could carry in our suitcases.

I decided to share my vision with three multi-talented Armenian-American photographers, Ara Mgrdichian, Sossi Madzounian and Ara Oshagan.

Within a week, all three of them came to the Museum to get a feel for the space. They submitted countless photographs that had witnessed homeland, immigration, and rebirth.

On June 10, 2023, the pages of *Remain in Light, Visions of Homeland and Diaspora* unfolded on the walls of the Fowler Museum at UCLA.

For four months, many new stories were added by the visitors (fourteen thousand visitors), and each photograph has become a chapter of its own.

On October 15, 2023, on the closing day of the exhibition, the history of Armenia and of Artsakh had changed. It was incomprehensible and horrifying.

Images of Artsakh that were in the exhibition were no longer the patrimony of the Armenian nation and the Armenian people. We were speechless.

Within the span of the exhibition, Artsakh, part of the Armenian homeland and present in the photographs, was no longer Armenian. It fell under the oppressive rule of Azerbaijan.

The Diaspora Armenian community of Los Angeles and of all cities and countries around the world were in shock. How can the nations of the world remain silent to ethnic cleansing, forced migration, and occupation of a sovereign territory?

However, regardless of where they live, Armenians gather spiritually at the foothills of Mount Ararat, recharge their inner light, and resolve and forge ahead through dark times.

Ara Mgrdichian, Sossi Madzounian, and Ara Oshagan have joined me in sharing the new patinas layered on these photographs.

Together, in unity, we turn the last page of this book.

Let us *Remain in Light* and carry the light to the future.

Author's Note:

Remain in Light; Visions of Homeland and Diaspora (June 10–October 15, 2023, Fowler Museum at UCLA) is a singular exhibition highlighting and zooming in on a very small sector in one of myriad microcosms of the Armenian community of Los Angeles.

It does not have a precedent, nor does it follow the trajectory of similar exhibitions pertaining to other nationalities with similar destinies living in Los Angeles.

It focuses mainly on what the photographers could see and capture in their immediate neighborhood and how those images translated to the stories of Homeland, Immigration and Rebirth.

Կասիա Արմենյան

Կալիֆորնիայի համալսարանի Ֆաուլերի թանգարան, Լոս-Անջելես

ԼՈՒՅՈՒՎ ՄԱՔ. ՀԱՅՐԵՆԻՔԻ ԵՒ ՍՓՅՈՒՔԻ ՏԵՍԼԱԿԱՆՆԵՐԸ

Կասիա Արմենյանի կազմակերպած ցուցահանդեսը՝ Լոս-Անջելեսի Կալիֆորնիայի համալսարանի Ֆաուլերի թանգարանի Գալերիա սրահում 2023 թ. հունիսի 10-ից հոկտեմբերի 15-ը

47 լուսանկարներից բաղկացած այս ցուցահանդեսը փորձում է ներկայացնել արդի հայկական փորձառությունը Հայրենիքում և Սփյուռքում: Լոս-Անջելեսում ծնված երեք հայ արվեստագետներ՝ Մոսի Մաժոնյանը, Արա Մկրտիչյանը և Արա Օշականն առաջարկում են իրենց տեսակետները հին և նոր աշխարհում հայ ժողովրդի կյանքի վերաբերյալ, որը տասնամյակներ շարունակ հավաքականորեն ենթարկվել է քաղաքական ցնցումների, կրոնական հալածանքների և մարդու իրավունքների խախտումների: Նույր զգացողությամբ և համոզմունքով լուսանկարիչները ցուցադրում են հայերի կյանքի զարգացող սոցիալական կտավը՝ գոյատևումը Հայրենիքում, գաղթականների փորձառությունը Սփյուռքում և ամերիկահայերի վերածնունդը նոր հողի վրա:

Երեք արվեստագետներն էլ մեծացել են անկախ Հայաստան տեսնելու երազանքով: Նրանց հույսն իրականություն դարձավ 1991 թ. սեպտեմբերին: Զինված իրենց տեսալսիկներով՝ երեք լուսանկարիչները մեկնեցին Հայաստան և Արցախ՝ արձանագրելու այդ տարածքներում գոյատևման բազմաթիվ դրսևորումները: Նրանք նաև փաստագրեցին հայերի կյանքը Լոս-Անջելեսում, որտեղ այժմ բնակվում են:

Кассия Армянян

Музей Фаулера Калифорнийского университета, Лос-Анджелес

ДА ПРЕБУДЕТ С ВАМИ СВЕТ: ВИДЕНИЯ РОДИНЫ И ДΙΑСПОРЫ

Выставка, курируемая Кассией Армянян в зале Галирея музея Фаулера в Калифорнийском университете в Лос-Анджелесе с 10 июня по 15 октября 2023 года

Эта выставка из 47 фотографий призвана представить современный армянский опыт на Родине и в Лос-Анджелесе. Три армянских художника из диаспоры, живущие в Лос-Анджелесе, – Соси Мацунян, Ара Мкртчян и Ара Ошакан – предлагают свой взгляд на жизнь армянского народа в старом и новом мире, народа, который сообщает десятилетиями претерпевал политические потрясения, религиозные преследования и нарушения прав человека. Интуитивно и с убежденностью фотографы освещают развивающуюся социальную ткань жизни армян: выживание на родине, опыт иммигрантов в диаспоре и возрождение американцев армянского происхождения на новой земле.

Трое художников выросли с мечтой увидеть независимую Армению. Их надежда стала реальностью в сентябре 1991 года. Вооружившись камерами, трое фотографов отправились в Армению и Арцах, чтобы запечатлеть множество вариаций выживания на этих территориях. Они также задокументировали жизнь армян в Лос-Анджелесе, где сейчас проживает каждый из них.