

Critics' Forum

Visual Arts

Documentary Photography in the Diaspora: A Conversation with Ara Oshagan

By Adriana Tchalian

Armenian photography may be defined as photography by or about Armenians. The description is similar to Aram Kouyoumdjian's definition of "Armenian Theater," in his article of the same name in Critics' Forum. Armenian photography is perhaps an even more difficult subject to survey, given the lack of information on the topic. Simply put, there is no comprehensive literature on this very important subject. Even Armenian visual artists, including photographers themselves, are sometimes unfamiliar with Armenian photography and Armenian photographers. Why is that so?

Part of the problem has to do with the disconnected and dispersed state of the Armenian people, which makes the task of centralizing information all the more difficult. And though the worldwide scope of the internet has the potential to fill this gap, that potential has yet to be fulfilled in Armenian photography.

Part of the responsibility lies with us, the Armenian viewing public, who, much like mainstream society, place greater value on painting than other forms of visual art. Yet there is far more innovative work being done today in the field of Armenian photography—and especially documentary photography.

Ara Oshagan, himself a documentary photographer, has been following Armenian photography since the early 1990's and has collected in that span countless names, books and articles on the subject, an unusual accomplishment. I sat down with him recently and had an extensive conversation about the future of Armenian photography, and particularly documentary photography in the diaspora.

Oshagan believes that "the most important work in documentary photography about Armenians is being done by Armenians themselves." These include the photographer Ara Guler of Istanbul, who has created his very own signature "street photographs" of his beloved city and has several books to his name; Max Sivaslian and Antoine Agoudjian, both from France, who have worked in Armenia and Karabagh and have managed to both publish monographs of their work; Edmond Ter Hagopian of London, who has done very important work in the Leninakan earthquake region, looking at the aftermath of that catastrophe ten years on; Hrair Hawk Khacherian of Montreal, who has single-mindedly dedicated his life to photographing Armenian subjects. Also working in Armenia and Karabagh for many years are Robert Kurkijian and Mathew Karanian.

"Steering clear of single, catastrophic events—in this case, the Armenian earthquake of 1988—one can find notable and important excursions by non-Armenians into Armenian territory," explains Oshagan. Jerry Berndt, for instance, a well-known American photographer, has now published two books that include photographs from his many trips to Armenia. These projects were wholly supported by Dr. Donald Miller of USC; Bruce

Strong has published a book of photographs on Armenia; and John Tordai of England has worked in Armenia and the reclusive Bruce Haley in Karabagh.

According to Oshagan, “there are also Armenians of significant accomplishment doing work with non-Armenian topics.” These include Nubar Alexanian, the author of three major books, the first one on Peru, by the Aperture Foundation; Michael Hintlian, with a recent monograph on the Boston subway; Eric Grigorian, the winner of the 2003 World Press Award Photo of the Year. And there are many others.

Among female Armenian photographers, there is Alexandra Avakian, who is a photographer for the *National Geographic* and recently published a lengthy essay on Armenia. Also notable are Armineh Johannes, who has not only worked with Armenians in Armenia and Karabagh but also in Georgia and Iran; Aline Manoukian, who photographed the Lebanese Civil war for years; Sara Anjargolian, with her photos from Armenia; and Greta Torossian from Beirut, whose work is included in an exhibit about the Arab world—*Nazar*—currently being exhibited at the Aperture Gallery in New York.

Oshagan also spent some time discussing his own photographic projects and the travels associated with them. Since 1999, he has traveled to various parts of the world, in an effort to photograph Armenian life. He is scheduled to make yet another trip next month. According to Oshagan, “the photographs taken in Karabagh, as well as Los Angeles, Yerevan and New York are part of a long-term photographic project that involves the exploration and documenting of the Armenian nation and its way of life, in a global sense.” He added, “I’m interested in exploring the lives of Armenians in the diaspora, wherever it exists and evolves. These include Beirut, Istanbul, Syria, Haleb, and Kessab, among others.”

Despite its emphasis on diasporan communities, Oshagan’s documentary photography does not fall under the rubric of what we might call “multiculturalism,” a term that emphasizes the distinct characteristics of different cultures and their preservation within one nation.

The Postmodern phenomenon of “transculturation”—as defined by critic Fernando Ortiz—is perhaps a better conceptual model for defining and understanding Armenian documentary photography in general and Oshagan’s work in particular. Simply put, transculturation is the merging of different cultures into a *new* cultural phenomenon.

A focus of the theory of transculturation is the concept of the “fetish.” In *Visual Culture* (1999), Nicholas Mirzoeff explains that the small wooden figurines common in the Congo (or Kongo, modern-day Zaire), known as the *minkisi*, were regarded by nineteenth-century European settlers as “primitive,” due to the pierced nails and other sharp objects embedded in them.

Mirzoeff suggests that Europeans did not realize at the time that the nails on the *minkisi* were, in fact, derived from medieval Christian iconography brought to Africa by fifteenth-century European missionaries. In Mirzoeff’s words, the “pierced body image

was transculturated—that is to say, the image was acculturated in Kongo during the Christian period, deculturated as Christian observance diminished and given neo-cultural form in the *minkisi*” (152).

In similar fashion, Oshagan’s photographs capture the synthesis of Armenian and mainstream (and less-than-mainstream) cultures. Oshagan’s approach seems to recognize the fact that life within the Armenian diaspora—be it within Los Angeles, Paris, Tehran or Beirut—can no longer be identified as multicultural. It is better described as transcultural, one that is constantly merging, changing and giving way to new expressions.

The equivalent of Mirzoeff’s fetishes in Oshagan’s work are items such as the designer pots and pans in *Burbank* (2002), set aside the silhouettes of more familiar objects in Armenian life, now amalgamated into the Armenian experience. What was once identified as mainstream seems fused in the photograph into Armenian life, which has in turn fashioned a “new” culture. It is the creation and re-creation of this new culture that Oshagan captures in his work.

Oshagan’s other projects include *Juvies*, a series on high-risk juvenile offenders; *iwitness*, with photographer Levon Parian, featuring portraits of survivors of the Armenian Genocide; *UrbanScapes*, photographs of Los Angeles, Yerevan, and New York; and *Traces of Identity: An Insider’s View of the Los Angeles Armenian Community*.

Over the last few years, Oshagan has also traveled to Karabagh a number of times, in preparation for the publication of an upcoming book. The photographs will be placed alongside Armenian text written several years ago by Oshagan’s father, the writer and critic, Vahe Oshagan. According to the younger Oshagan, “there’s an indirect link between my father’s text and my photos. They compliment each other rather than offering an explanation.” It appears that Ara Oshagan’s photography will continue to explore and produce even more opportunities for comparison and growth, both personal and cultural.

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