

Critics' Forum

Visual Arts

Photography Now: The Art of Nubar Alexanian

By Adriana Tchalian



In my recent article, “Documentary Photography in the Diaspora” (October 2005), I recounted a conversation with photographer Ara Oshagan, who pointed out the lack of comprehensive literature on the topic of Armenian photography, defined as photography by or about Armenians.

Oshagan, who has been following Armenian photography since the early 1990’s, suggested that Armenian photography has for a long time been synonymous with landscape photography. This is the Armenia of our grandparents, filled with the proverbial images of an idyllic life—countrified settings spilling over with apples and pomegranates, set against the backdrop of an all-too-familiar mountain range.

For this reason, much of Armenian photography looks to the past. Armenian photographers often find themselves trying to capture the elusive element of our long-ago through the grandeur and majesty of landscapes, all captured through rose-colored idealism.

Wanting to look at the world through rose-colored glasses is understandable. After all, the unresolved issue of Genocide recognition makes it difficult to turn to a more realistic portrayal of the mother country. Idealism allows for a way of dealing with a difficult past.

But although in many ways admirable, this kind of photography has also acted for too long as the vessel for distilling national pride.

It does seem, however, that Armenian photography is finally working its way out of the idealism and romanticism of landscape photography and toward the realism or “verism” of documentary photography. The time has come to examine new paradigms, ones rooted in an appreciation of the power of the documentary approach to photography.

There are many Armenian and non-Armenian photographers doing important work in the field of documentary photography, as enumerated in the above-mentioned October article. Among them is the accomplished photographer from Gloucester, Massachusetts, Nubar Alexanian, whose books include *Where Music Comes From* (1996), *Gloucester Photographs* (1999), and *Stones in the Road* (1991), a book on Peru by Aperture Foundation.

In many ways, Alexanian is the consummate Armenian photographer, not by virtue of his subjects (which are non-Armenian) but by his ability to translate his “Armenian-ness” into great photography—the subtlety, the enormous sensitivity, the depth and, at times, the humor that suggest the subtle influence of his roots. (It is not too far-fetched, I think, to suggest that being born into a certain heritage allows us to “be” a certain way.)

Alexanian understands the effect of the Armenian past in all its complexity. In an interview for *Aim* magazine, the photographer suggests that “one of the first and most important pieces of healing in trauma is to name it. And I think photographs can help that process. I am sure of it. I am not sure of the effect, but I am sure of photography’s ability.”

We can think of Alexanian’s own photography as the art of a healer or shaman who, by knowing and naming trauma, helps create new archetypes. These new archetypes help heal old wounds by focusing collective attention on the present—what is going on now—as opposed to interpreting it through the lens of the past.

An example from Alexanian’s work will help highlight this point. The photograph entitled “Stripped Bass,” from *Gloucester Photographs* (1999), captures a close-up of the eye of a fish. The image is a strange and wonderful combination of the mundane and the mythical. After all, what could be more mundane than a fish, caught in black and white? But the close-up of the eye also magnifies the image’s impact, placing the viewer into a direct encounter with the present, even conveying in the act of looking into an eye the power of perspective itself.

Strangely enough, Alexanian’s portrayal of non-Armenian subjects, including a book about the Andean culture of Peru (to which Alexanian has been traveling since 1974), speaks volumes about Armenian consciousness. And the power of those photographs is a genuine product of his roots. This remaking of traditional photography is the true work of the moment in the Armenian experience. We might even say that Alexanian’s

photography is more genuinely Armenian than the idyllic landscapes we have all become accustomed to.

Armenians have a tremendous capacity to recognize, appreciate and comprehend beauty and experience. The rise of documentary photography suggests that the time has come to give that experience its due.

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