

Critics' Forum
Visual Arts
Art in the Time of Change: Contemporary Art in Armenia

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In order to understand where art in the now independent Armenian republic is going, we need to look back at where it has been, especially since the fateful days of independence in 1991.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 instigated change not only in the economic, political, and military spheres of the former republics but in the everyday freedoms of its people. The sister policies of Glasnost and Perestroika, established in the late 1980s by Gorbachev in his feeble efforts to save the Soviet structure, ultimately resulted in the

beginning of the end of the Soviet era. Glasnost (meaning “openness”) promoted a spirit of intellectual and cultural openness which encouraged public debate and participation in support of the program of Perestroika (or, “economic restructuring”).

By promoting an exchange of ideas and information, a concept long foreign to that area of the world, Glasnost allowed the introduction of the western tenet of freedom of speech. Soviet citizens began to artistically and journalistically express themselves in ways that for years had been forbidden by the Soviet regime. The introduction of such “anti-soviet” concepts, and the resulting relaxation of censorship, eventually led to the Communist Party losing its grip on the media and ultimately to the dismantling of the tight soviet structure that had been in place for the past 75 years. Each of the former soviet republics reacted differently to this loosening of control and in their own way contributed to the eventual fall of the system.

Armenia proved to be one of the more vociferous republics, as its citizens took full advantage of the changing political and social atmosphere. In 1988, soviet tanks firmly planted themselves in Yerevan’s city center, the then “Lenin Square”, in response to demonstrations against soviet policies, including religious, environmental, and political issues. People took to the streets in demonstration and some camped out in front of the Opera House, bringing attention to their cause by organizing a hunger strike.

While this political and social chaos kept escalating on the streets of Yerevan, artists were in their studios recreating their art to reflect the times and documenting the birth of

a new era. At this time, a small group of these artists organized a number of exhibits called “Third Floor,” named after the floor in the Artists Union where they would exhibit. At Third Floor, artists experimented with different art forms and techniques, fomenting change while foreshadowing the creative freedom to come.

The abundance of artistic styles that emerged in Armenia during this tumultuous time of rapid transition revealed the anticipated need of release the art community was struggling with. This post-collapse “fresh breath” was a long time in coming. Artists in Armenia stripped themselves of the constraints placed on them by the state-imposed genre of Socialist Realism, a style of representational art that furthered the goals of socialism and communism, and began exploring other techniques and forms of expression. No longer did artists need to restrict their subject matter and purpose when creating art.

This new-found freedom resulted in artists casting aside the stale, contrived images of tractors, workers, and other proletariat models of socialist realist art for newly discovered inspirations, forms and techniques as artists were finally allowed to openly learn, study, and discover western art. The abstract and modern schools of thought, which had streamed out of 1950s and 60s New York (abstract expressionism followed by pop art) and had taken the rest of the art world by storm became more accessible and tangible to these artists. They began studying Rauschenberg, Rothko, Warhol, and their American peers as well as various members of Germany’s 1980s neo-expressionist movement. The influence of these various schools of thought in correlation with the social and historical

context surrounding the artists created a new perspective – and ultimately a new school of Armenian Art.



The dichotomy of pre- and post-soviet influence is very much apparent in the art work of many of the artists who have established present-day Armenia’s contemporary art scene, including Yerevan-based Arthur Sarkissian. Like many of his contemporaries, during the 1980s, Sarkissian steered away from Socialist Realism and began experimenting with abstraction. During an interview in 2005, Sarkissian suggested, “my approach to painting developed from the desire to free myself from Socialist Realism. Abstract thought was the means of free expression. I have never given up and always experimented. So, now there are no boundaries for me; I create freely and at any desired moment I can return to abstract art, or incorporate several styles.”

This notion of freedom that Sarkissian yearned for in his desire to depart from the restrictive principles of Socialist Realism can be seen in his style and technique. Often compared to one of his great influences, American artist Robert Rauschenberg, Sarkissian's collage-like method of painting juxtaposes silkscreen images on a canvas with painterly gestures. In his work, Sarkissian incorporates signs, texts, manuscripts, photographs, interiors and exteriors of different architectural structures, as well as images of Renaissance and Baroque art. The spontaneous placement of these images on canvas along with expressionist brushstrokes demonstrates the freedom of expression he enjoys in making his art today.

In present-day Armenia, artists, such as Sarkissian, experiment with their various inspirations, moods, philosophies, and perspectives, without having to pay homage to any ideological dogma. Sarkissian takes this freedom and runs with it. And the western world is taking notice. In a review of Sarkissian's work, Peter Frank, an art critic for LA Weekly has written: "Just as he can transit from manual gesture to photographic document, his imagery can fluctuate in mood from lighthearted and sweet to ominous and grave, from fluid and beautiful to stark and coarse. The shifts between tonalities can be more dramatic than the tonalities themselves."

Like Sarkissian, many artists in Yerevan have embraced the creative freedom of Armenia's new era and are collectively changing the historico-cultural discourse of

Armenia's contemporary art scene. With such an auspicious beginning, we cannot wait to see where the artists, and their art, will take us.



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