

## Critics' Forum

### Visual Arts

#### **Sophia Gasparian: Engaging the Art Scene**

By Ramela Grigorian Abbamontian

A young emerging talent in the Los Angeles art scene is Sophia Gasparian (b. 1972), whose presence in the *Armenian* art scene, however, has been subdued. The fact may be attributed to her style (raw, cartoonish, seemingly simple) and materials (spray paint, grocery bags, stencils, stickers), which have challenged many members of the community, who tend to ask, "How old is the artist?" or simply conclude "Well, her colors are interesting," as was overheard by the author at one of Gasparian's exhibitions.

Yet Gasparian's seemingly simple compositions and vibrant colors engage the viewer and necessitate in return an intentional – an active – engagement with the image being presented, an exchange ripe with socio-political implications. A closer look at Gasparian's work will demonstrate how its emotional resonance with the viewer helps create the context and the call to activism that its subjects depict.



**Sophia Gasparian**

Born and raised in what she calls a "country that no longer exists," Sophia Gasparian left Soviet Armenia in December of 1987, making her new home in East Hollywood. Her memories and experiences of living in Soviet Armenia, which include being (as she puts it) "immersed in propaganda and confronted by the effects of oppression," inform her work conceptually. Those experiences sometimes also trickle into Gasparian's compositions in the form of characters that once inhabited the pages of her childhood alphabet books, as in the painting *Let's Not Chat About Despair*.

Even though she received early art training in Yerevan, Armenia, it was during her training in the United States (B.A. in Theater Arts with an Emphasis on Film and Video from UC Santa Cruz and M.F.A in Fine Art Filmmaking from San Francisco Art

Institute) that allowed her to explore her own identity, particularly regarding issues of cultural dislocation.

These explorations engendered her first installation series “*Dia De Los Muertos: Armenian Genocide 1915*” (1999-2003). The series considered themes such as the Turkish government’s denial of the Armenian Genocide, Armenians’ responsibility to honor the victims, and the inexpressible nature of the calamity itself. One poignant example from the installation is *What Have You Done to Assist the Armenians?* (2001), a mixed media painting in which, against the patchy red semblance of a blood-stained wall, a shoeless orphaned girl (re-appropriated from Japanese Manga artist Yoshitomo Nara) locks eyes with the viewer and angrily demands to know the answer to the question that comprises the painting’s title.

Gasparian’s work asks another, and equally compelling, question: Who is the viewer? Gasparian could be addressing much of humanity, many of whom stand by, ignorant and helpless, as mass murders continue to take place everywhere. Considering the work was created and exhibited in the United States, however, it might just as easily be directed at the host country of many Armenians, which has yet to acknowledge the “massacres” as premeditated genocide. Gasparian could also be querying her own people, wondering if Armenians – herself included – have done their part to remember the calamity, honor its victims, and ensure its recognition.

In all of these instances, Gasparian is clearly calling for a revival of consciousness and a recommitment to one’s sense of responsibility. To intensify the urgency of such a call, Gasparian has incorporated “signifiers” such as the orphan’s shoeless feet and the life-size knife that inhabits the space behind her – the former referencing the long distances walked by Armenians during the deportation and the latter denoting the instrument of genocide, which in turn points to the Turkish star and crescent. The orphan’s plight also embodies that of the Armenian nation in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, while her determined gaze, directed at all viewers, reenacts the clear call to action that is at the center of Gasparian’s work.

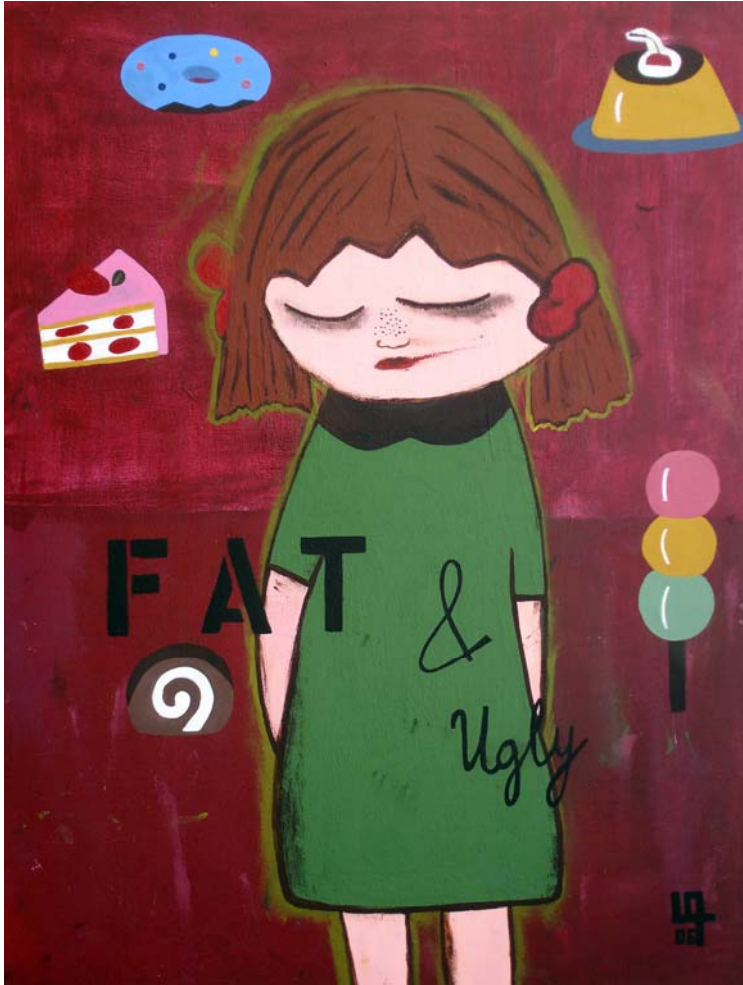


What Have You Done to Assist the Armenians? (2001)

“While my previous series addressed the evils of history, my recent work confronts the evils of society,” says Gasparian about the installation series that followed, entitled “Confronting the Face of Evil” (2005-06). The series explores issues such as ethnocentrism, racism, sexism, violence, feminism, abuse, and the obsession with body image, as in the painting *Fat & Ugly* (2006), where the young girl – neither fat nor ugly according to today’s standards – stands with downcast eyes and forlorn expression amidst the junk food dancing idly and temptingly around her.

Her two most recent series (both of which are in-progress) are entitled “Triumph” and “Celebration,” because Gasparian believes they aptly “follow sorrow/grief and confrontation/resolution.” It appears that in these series, Gasparian has transcended the pain of the past and the problems of the present and instead offers viewers a vision of the simple pleasures of the present along with the subtle promise of the future. The young characters who had in the earlier works suffered persecution and were subject to harsh societal expectations have now been transformed into self-sufficient individuals “exercising their rights and enjoying being alive.” For example, the young girl in *Girl with Piggy Bank* (from the *Triumph* series) optimistically considers her future by purposefully, in fact quite literally, saving money for it.

As its title conveys, the “Celebration” series, when complete, will celebrate each month of the year by focusing on an astereotypical signifier relevant to that month. For example, *Miss October* is identified by a persimmon tree ripe with fruit rather than the more common Halloween costume or pumpkin patch. Other characters in the series include the wryly titled “Miss Genocide” and “Miss Cherry Blossoms”. In this way, Gasparian’s characteristically unconventional approach reconstructs the calendar cycle from a fresh, sometimes ironic, perspective that once again engages viewers, in perhaps discovering similar moments of celebration available to them.



Fat & Ugly (2006)

Gasparian’s perception of her role as an artist, in her own words, has to do more with engaging and activating the viewer’s emotions than with activism per se:

While human rights, ethnic dislocation, social identity and women's progress form my everyday thinking and influence my art, I do not consider myself an activist. My intention with each painting is to trigger an emotional reaction and

alter the perspective of the viewer through illustration of a personal viewpoint. I simply strive to illustrate subjects that interest me.

But in illustrating socio-political issues and aiming to “alter the perspective of the viewer,” it may well be argued that Gasparian is inherently, if unwillingly, assuming the role of art activist. In fact, one might say that art’s agency alone renders it activist in society. Therefore, while Gasparian rejects the label, her inclusion of questions or other text in the works and her desire to create a dialogue with the viewers allow her works to effect change, or at least present the opportunity for it. By engaging viewer’s emotions, Gasparian’s unconventional pieces have the potential to raise awareness, ignite self-reflection, and even spur the viewer to action.



**Miss October (2008)**

Gasparian’s work can be found in the private collections of many individuals well-known in the art scene, including Dahlia Elsayed, Sam McCay, and Joan Agajanian Quinn. Her poster of Miss Genocide is archived at the Center for the Study of Political Graphics in Venice, California. Gasparian’s work has also been featured in a number of galleries and exhibitions in Southern California, including Cactus Gallery (Eagle Rock), Arroyo

Arts Collective (Highland Park), Avenue 50 Studio (Highland Park), and Gallery 825 (West Hollywood), to name only a few.

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*You can reach her or any of the other contributors to Critics' Forum at [comments@criticsforum.org](mailto:comments@criticsforum.org). This and all other articles published in this series are available online at [www.criticsforum.org](http://www.criticsforum.org). To sign up for a weekly electronic version of new articles, go to [www.criticsforum.org/join](http://www.criticsforum.org/join). Critics' Forum is a group created to discuss issues relating to Armenian art and culture in the Diaspora.*