

Critics' Forum
Theater
"Truth" Dazzles as Art and Drama
By Aram Kouyoumdjian



The title of Vasken Brudian's latest exhibit, "Of Art and Architecture: A Contemporary Discourse," which opened on June 19, speaks to the artist's dual talents. Brudian's sophisticated art combines hand painting and architectural design, sprinkled with lines from literature. The mixed-media creations that result are coated with sublime colors – for me, the deep reds, haunting blues, and shades of orange take on symbolic significance – and reveal truths among layers that dazzle gradually.

It is not surprising, then, that earlier this spring Brudian organized an artistic experiment he called "In the Name of Mikito Yamaguchi: The Truth Dazzles Gradually," recruiting four Armenian artists to join him in the endeavor at his Center for Experimental Art and Architecture in Atwater. Over the course of an afternoon, Sara Anjargolian, Varuzhan Hovakimyan, Susanna Sahakian, Vanig Torikian, and Brudian himself engaged in a unique collaboration, taking on the persona of Mikito Yamaguchi and creating a series of paintings while embodying this entirely fictional Japanese artist.

Brudian says he found inspiration for the project in the way Japanese gardens are constructed – through a gradual process that entails "several individuals working together and alone – sometimes adding, sometimes subtracting, and sometimes leaving exactly as-

is.” Following a similar approach, he and his fellow artists took turns on each canvas, applying paint with their brushes or with their hands (and even feet), outlining, smearing, dotting, and erasing, to produce abstract expressionist works.



I have little of the requisite qualifications to critique those works as art, although I like several of the pieces immensely. Instead, I look at “The Truth Dazzles Gradually” as theater.

The theatrical elements of “The Truth Dazzles Gradually” may not be readily apparent, yet they surely framed the collaboration. For starters, the participants were asked to perform not as themselves, but as a character – the fictional Yamaguchi – meaning that they had to step outside of their own identities and into his. Essentially, they assumed a dramatic role, for which they developed a back story – Brudian, at least, conceived of Yamaguchi as a monk.

Of the participants, only Hovakimyan and Brudian are themselves painters. Brudian doubles as an architect, which is Sahakian’s profession as well. Anjargolian’s artistic focus is photography, and Torikian is a graphic designer.



All five had to *act* as Yamaguchi, and in order to act – that is, to be able to create *his* art – they had to define the fictional character’s features, ascribe to him a belief system, figure out his motivation, and dictate his behavior.

Having multiple performers embody a single character is a theatrical device that serves to illustrate different – and even conflicting – dimensions of the character’s personality. In playwright Paul Baker’s unconventional adaptation of Shakespeare’s “Hamlet,” for instance, three actors simultaneously portray the brooding Danish prince. And five actors of various ages, along with actress Cate Blanchett, personify characters inspired by “the many lives” of singer-songwriter Bob Dylan in filmmaker Todd Haynes’ independent feature, “I’m Not There.” The multiplicity is a strange kind of cloning that sometimes allows the character to interact with himself – or, rather, versions of himself.

In the process, the artist – as the subject of a play (or film) – becomes the art. Likewise, “The Truth Dazzles Gradually” is as much about the actualization of Yamaguchi as it is about the creation of his art. Audiences who viewed the paintings after their completion saw art; if they had watched Brudian and his cohorts create the paintings, they would have seen a stage performance.

Now, while Yamaguchi’s art survives, the artist himself does not. He remains a character awaiting resuscitation by someone willing to portray him. As a brilliant *theatrical* moment, “The Truth Dazzles Gradually” similarly exists only in memory and awaits its own revival, of which it is eminently worthy.

All Rights Reserved: Critics' Forum, 2009.

Aram Kouyoumdjian is the winner of Elly Awards for both playwriting (“The Farewells”) and directing (“Three Hotels”). His latest work is “Velvet Revolution.”

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