

Critics' Forum
Visual Arts
Reflections in the Aftermath of an Exhibition
By Ramela Grigorian Abbamontian



Earlier this year, I was asked by the sub-committee of the City of Glendale's officials and community artists to be the Guest Curator for the city's Annual Commemorative Events exhibition. Three intensive months later, the exhibition, ultimately titled "Man's Inhumanity to Man: Journey Out of Darkness . . ." opened at the Brand Library Art Galleries on April 4, 2009 and was on view until May 8, 2009. Over seventy works, including paintings, sculptures, installations, and photographs by forty-four artists were represented in the show. The list of artists included familiar Armenian artists such as Ara Oshagan, Kaloust Guedel, Alina Mnatsakanian, Sophia Gasparian, and Zareh as well as well-known non-Armenian artists such as Ruth Weisberg, Mark Vallen, Poli Marichal, Lark (Larisa Pilisky), Beth Bachenheimer, Hessam Abrishami, and Sheila Pinkel.



The exhibition was organized into three thematic sections to illustrate the unfolding of various stages of a journey. The first segment, *Faces of Inhumanity*, included works representing various forms of atrocity throughout human history, including war, genocide, forced labor, and homelessness. The physical, mental, and spiritual aftershocks of inhumanity were explored in *Scars of Inhumanity*, which portrayed survivors telling their stories, fragmented bodies and identities, and the use of prayer as a means for transcending grief. The final segment of the exhibition, *Humanity's Triumph*, offered works that conveyed hope, survival, rebirth, and even forgiveness – an alternative, or perhaps even a remedy, to inhumanity.

For an art historian, such an opportunity was a dream project: to have at her disposal the provocative works of a number of artists and construct the narrative that would be told about them. As an Armenian familiar with the historical and visual repercussions of the Armenian Genocide, I was also curious to see how non-Armenian artists represented instances of historical or contemporary injustice. But my interest was also tempered with caution: considering myself comfortably versed in the work of Armenian artists in Los Angeles, I wondered how their works would interact and dialogue with those of non-Armenian artists and how this interaction could best be presented.



Multiple viewings of the over 300 submissions uncovered significant themes, and I was able to identify an unfolding narrative, one that the sub-committee and I eventually titled a “journey out of darkness.” My training has taught me to examine artworks critically and interpret them contextually. In other words, I rely on the visual strategies in artworks to unveil their stories and perceive my role as the decipherer and interpreter of these narratives. Yet I am also aware that undoubtedly – though often unconsciously – I bring my own biases, expectations, and even hopes to such an exhibition. Hence, I was often plagued with the question of whether I was constructing a certain desired narrative and had an agenda of my own, or whether the works did indeed expose some underlying themes. I realized that I was, after all, constructing a narrative as well as letting it emerge from the pieces.

I also considered other, related questions: Were the works in this exhibition, and similar visual representations of historical realities, sufficient representations of their respective atrocities? Can the magnitude of such things as war and genocide be appropriately related in visual form? And, finally, are the representations effective conduits for remembrance? I came to realize that artworks did not necessarily function as historical documents, presenting for the audience a truthful account of historical realities. Instead, they were sites of memory, spaces through which the artists endeavored to understand the events, their aftermath, and ultimately their own roles and identities.

But we might also ask how, or whether, artists can visually articulate a calamity, especially one they have not directly experienced, as was the case for a number of artists in the show. In *Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing* (2002), Dora Apel suggests that postwar generation artists are “ultimately in the position of unwilling post facto bystanders” and can, theoretically, choose their specific position of identification: victim, bystander, and even perpetrator (p. 4), positions assumed by several of the exhibition’s artists. In this way, the artists become “witnesses” to these events, because even though they have not directly experienced the inhumanities, they have nonetheless been privy to their repercussions. Perhaps one of the exhibition’s most potent ironies turned out to be that, by assuming their roles, the artists made a choice for the benefit of those to whom history did not offer that choice.



The process of visual representation, then, becomes a means through which the artists confront and construct historical memory. It provides the instrument through which the artists, and through them the audience, take on the responsibility of drawing on and preserving historical memory. As one visitor to the exhibition aptly noted, the pieces constituted “art that gives me eyes to see.” From this perspective, the artworks are conduits to remembrance and, as Lorne Shirinian puts it in *Survivor Memoirs of the Armenian Genocide* (1999) regarding the use of photographs, “through remembering, the past is retrieved and identity is recreated and affirmed”(p. 67).

But what impact, finally, did the display of works about the Armenian Genocide placed alongside other catastrophic historical events have on the viewing public, both Armenian and non? And what impact did such a presentation have on the artists represented? A memorable moment during the exhibition shed new light on these questions and helped reactivate my own commitment to collaboration. It took place rather unexpectedly, during the Artists' Question and Answer Session, one of several events organized in conjunction with the show.

Originally intended as a forum where the audience could ask the panelists questions about their artistic influences, motivations, and meanings, the panel simultaneously served as an impromptu opportunity for the artists to interact. Throughout the question-answer session and especially at the end of the session, the artists – Sophia Gasparian, Lark (Larisa Pilinsky), Poli Marichal, Hessam Abrishami, Arpine Shakhbandaryan and Mark Vallen – began to engage each other as much as the audience. They often eagerly turned to one another and inquired about intent, purpose, and process. Each seemed to recognize the same sense of artistic responsibility in engaging historical atrocities that pervaded the work of the others. The artists' lively interactions created an unexpected and contagious energy that spurred the audience to ask even more spirited questions.



When the artists exchanged business cards at the end of the session, the scene epitomized to me the critical need for Armenian artists to engage non-Armenian artists in direct dialogue. Because many contemporary Armenian artists emphasize the universal element

in their creative work, they often reject categorizations of their art as exclusively or even primarily “Armenian” or “ethnic.” Consequently, many Armenian artists place their efforts into appealing to a broader audience, often at the expense of collaborating with other, similarly “ethnic” artists. As the interactions among the artists participating in the panel suggested, such collaborations are not only productive, they are a natural extension and confirmation of the representational issues the works themselves address.

This exhibition and accompanying programs were organized by the City of Glendale Arts & Culture Commission, in collaboration with City of Glendale’s Cultural Affairs, a division of Parks, Recreation & Community Services Department, Glendale Public Library/Brand Library, and by a generous contribution from Advanced Development & Investment, Inc.

All Rights Reserved: Critics’ Forum, 2009.

***Ramela Grigorian Abbamontian** received her PhD in Art History from UCLA. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Art History at Pierce College.*

You can reach her 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.