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# KISS THE GROUND

## FINDING THE "NEW" ARMENIA

The question is: What does the "new" Armenia look like? While attempting to understand "Kiss the Ground," I kept an impression from a quote by famed Armenian-Canadian master photographer Yousuf Karsh in mind: "Character, like a photograph, develops in darkness."

The old Armenian word "Yergurbakootyoon" means to be in "total submission." In English, the word and concept translates to "kiss the ground," used here to mean heritage reverence. Contemporary Armenians

are removed from the original source of Yergurbakootyoon; their disconnect and subsequent re-grounding is expressed in "A New Armenia" – a redefined "Kiss the Ground."

"Kiss the Ground" presents a vast five-component, two-venue exhibition project of visual expression, in a variety of artistic modes, applications and styles that dialogue about the Armenian-American cultural experience.

At its core, this is a project that defines, again, contemporary art; if we remove the Armenian character focus,

we see a presentation that highlights the diversity of artistic production today.

The project in totality, all exhibition components at both venues, a long catalog and programming are organized by artist, author and curator Todd Bartel, the founder and director of The Thompson Gallery at The Cambridge School in Weston, Mass.

Bartel is an important part of this story. He has a history of creating multi-component, interdisciplinary exhibitions about important timely issues. His deep interest in the Armenian cultural experi-

**KISS THE GROUND:  
TALIN MEGHERIAN  
THOMPSON GALLERY  
THE CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOOL OF WESTON  
45 GEORGIAN ROAD  
WESTON,  
MASSACHUSETTS  
THROUGH  
MARCH 13**

**KISS THE GROUND: A  
NEW ARMENIA  
ARMENIAN MUSEUM  
OF AMERICA  
65 MAIN STREET  
WATERTOWN,  
MASSACHUSETTS**

**PART I: THROUGH  
JANUARY 20  
PART II: JANUARY 25  
THROUGH MARCH 1**



Aida Laleian, *Turn to Their Blameless Deceits*, 2008, UV ink on canvas, silk border, 54.5" x 72".

ence, specifically, spans decades and is both scholarly and personal. He explained that his interest in the theme of the 1915 Armenian Genocide and Diaspora (the keystone subject of the project) “arose out of familial circumstances, coupled with The Cambridge School’s dedication to engage with issues of social justice.”

The project features two spotlight solo exhibitions: the narrative paintings of Talin Megherian (discussed below) is the second of three shows in the series now at the Thompson Gallery; it follows a fall 2014 exhibit of the kinetic industrial sculptures of Chicago-based Gagik Aroutiunian.

“A New Armenia” Parts I, II and III is a series of group exhibitions, or “one theme, three views,” featuring 12 artists. Part I is on view through January 20 at The Armenian Museum of America in Watertown, Mass. The project culminates at the same time as the centennial anniversary commemoration of the Armenian Genocide in April 2015.

Bartel collaborated with participating artist Adrienne Der Marderosian (Belmont, Mass.), who assembled most of the artists and served as co-curator, giving form to the overall theme and defining the new Armenia. Der Marderosian’s intellectual “Migration” series is an elegant map-based, figurative, clean-line collage, mixed-media series that grapples with the complex issues of immigration dislocation, displacement and assimilation.

## 12 VOICES IN HARMONY

The 12 voices in “A New Armenia” are well-known regionally, with some having exhibited nationally. They bring in disparate modes of thinking and manners of visual expression. Along with Der Marderosian, Megherian and Aroutiunian, the artists are Gail Boyajian (Cambridge, Mass.); Aida Laleian (Williamstown, Mass.); Yefkin Megherian (Queens, NY); Marsha Odabashian (Dedham, Mass.); Kevork Mourad (New York, NY) and Jessica Sperandio (Franklin, Mass.).

It is vitally important to understand that “A New Armenia” is not an exhibition of “ancestor worship.” It is, rather,



an exploration of individual and collective identity by way of contemporary and new media forms of visual art. Together, these artists are trying to define and create an updated “Armenian” aesthetic.

Here’s the background: the artists are direct descendants of individuals who experienced the 1915 Armenian Genocide. In their independent visual art work they may share story parts, pieces of events, and things that

they’ve heard from their parents and grandparents as a way to respect, honor and give voice to their family and, more importantly, to personally process the burdens of history.

Because these artists did not experience the events directly, their final forms reflect remembrance presented as abstracted impressions characterized by conceptual points of view, narrative metaphor and allegory, and a recombining of material motif.

Jessica Sperandio,  
*Chakatagir*, 2014, laser cut  
leather, thread, wood, acrylic,  
70" x 68" x 2".



A good example here is Jessica Sperandio, who presents four impressive laser-cut leather, painted wood, three-dimensional wall sculptures that read almost as “fairy tales” or “epics,” but are views of the long, traumatic, real-life story of two family members – Perousse and Mardiros Boyajian – who escaped the massacre of their village. “Chakatagir,” 2014, depicts a dinner scene in which the Turkish government feasts on the body parts of Armenian dead. “I grew up hearing about family members losing physical body parts during the Turkish raids,” Sperandio writes.

Some artists engage only with heritage and identity and do not comment on the genocide theme. For example, Marsha Odabashian does not ignore the violent past, but she doesn’t make it the star feature either; she stages beauty. Her painting, “Greatness Has Passed,” 2010, is a glorious portrait of a regal peacock from the series “Half-Perceived: Stalking the Peacock,” an allegory.

### PROUD AS A PEACOCK

This painting celebrates decorative heritage, she explained on the exhibition

label, adding that the peacock motif is abundant in medieval Armenian illuminated manuscript. Curator Bartel interprets the work as honorific, being similar to “placing flowers on tombstones.”

Yefkin Megherian is another who does not focus on blood story. Her two works bring the traditional into the contemporary. She’s interested in the grand foundational moments of Armenian history, those establishing events that gave the people their present culture. Her bas-relief genre scenes depict the invention of the 36-letter, script specific Armenian alphabet and the events that gave rise to Armenia becoming the first official Christian nation.

Those who do process the Genocide and Diaspora in their work directly live with certain challenges. How and why some of these artists’ organize the events of family heritage is expressed in Elliot Baker’s play, “The Past is Not the Past.” This play tells the story of how survivors of war rebuild their lives and transform their pain and loss into beauty, exploring interconnectedness, or what happens during revelatory moments.

Baker, a retired psychotherapist turned playwright of Jewish ancestry, wrote the story inspired by the life experience of his

friend, Armenian-American artist John Avakian, whose expressive-realist monochromes depicting select horrific scenes of war-torture were published by The Thompson Gallery along with the play, in catalogue form, specifically for “Kiss the Ground.” (A dramatic reading of the story was performed in conjunction with the exhibition opening.)

From Act II:

Aram (grandson): “So it was art that saved you?”

Haron (grandfather, artist): “You got that right again. Ha. I discovered I could gain some mastery over the terrorizing images ... get them out of my brain by painting them on canvas. I could transform the scenes and make them less frightening by creating beauty amidst the vultures of death. I could be faithful to history AND be able to free myself from the frozen past.”

Framing history and understanding the complex and layered experience of victimization, and how this condition marks future generations, is what Talin Megherian does in her work (as depicted by Haron in the play mentioned above). Megherian is serious, but she’s also playful in how she arranges narratives.

Aida Laleian, *Untitled*, 1993  
gum dichromate and van  
Dyke print on BFK, 13" x  
23.5".



Talin Megherian, *Khatchkar No. 3*, 2014, gouache, ink, tempera and gesso on tiled watercolor paper, 18.625" x 15.75".

Love and honor, with a slight defiance, is the undercurrent of her history-rich, tile-collage-assemblage paintings and drawings on paper. Although not as light-hearted and insubordinate as Aida Laleian (discussed below), Megherian does have an "edge."

She's the daughter of a traditional Armenian family, and we can read this characterization in her work. How? Megherian presents pictures that are exuberant and engaging, that dive deep and pull out truth, but she's subtle and secretive.

Megherian communicates with "fragments." Like chapters in a book, each square or rectangular space depicts a vignette that, when placed next to another, reveals a "plot line." Her lexicon is a culturally specific symbolic iconography that can be read by those closest to the events as a specific story, or read as a tale of universal, collective, almost primal understanding. A repeating motif is braided hair, a very intimate subject: hair carries the markers of personal

health as well as genetic story. It's also a design element.

Some of her stories depict tales of horror, especially torture, layered and interwoven with compassionate presentations of landscape and homeland. Her visual forms are design- and pattern-driven with explosions and washings of color, along with glittering and moving tones of light and shadow, organic interlacing line forms counterpointed with geometric structures, the Armenian alphabet script, and figurative representations taken from traditional Armenian folk art – and from the artist's comprehensive arsenal of art history knowledge. It's layered, smart work.

A good argument to Talin Megherian is Aida Laleian. Laleian does not re-harsh the past or comment on what is "Armenian" directly. Rather, her focus is on new creations that

offer up rebellious forms, borrowing from heritage and history in random ways. Her mixed-media-print textile, the enigmatic, "Turn to their Blameless Deceits," from the "Defying Gravity Series," is an example.

Laleian's surreal composition is frolicsome and amusing. She studies ideas related to the Self. The body and the circle motif connected by lines and ropes are focus elements. The scene depicts women, some pregnant, in what appears as a circus performance, engaged in rope tricks, walking on stilts – one riding a flying-carpet and manipulating poles. We can almost hear the lively, anxious, "Sabre Dance" (from the ballet "Gayane," by Armenian composer Aram Khachaturian) as the soundtrack to this scene!

(Note: the women here do not touch the ground. Laleian's piece is wonderful because the joyful spirit and mysterious commentary [perhaps controversial] offer a possible "rebirth" or definition of what could be the "New Armenia.")

The overall concern of "Kiss the Ground" is connection: intertwining, weaving and braiding together lines of narrative. Heritage is utilized and borrowed from and applied to modern, new media and conceptual methods. What we learn: The New Armenia is about hope moving forward, as Haron says in "The Past is Not the Past":

"Life, Aram, life. There is death ... but there is life. And that's what we have to see ... create."


**J. Fatima Martins**

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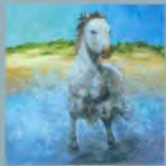
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