

ART PAPERS

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The range of contemporary works included in *The Undiscovered Country* (also among them pieces by Thomas Lawson, Peter Doig, Lukas Duwenhoger, Mari Eastman, Thomas Eggerer, Kirsten Everberg, Jochen Klein, Silke Otto-Knapp, Enoc Perez, Mamma Andersson, Kerry James Marshall, and Richard Prince) indeed challenges the notion that painting has nothing left to say. These works reveal that painting can uniquely take pleasure in palpability and expose the complexity of layering content. They refreshingly represent their baffling and ever-changing surroundings, while also rehearsing the history of painting and encapsulating painting's relation to representation.

—Christina Kline

LOS ANGELES

Decades of political unrest, civil war and economic instability in the Middle East, combined with the break up of the Soviet Union, have made of Los Angeles a home away from home for some 300,000 Armenians. Documentary photographer **Ara Oshagan's** exhibition, *Traces of Identity: An Insider's View of the Los Angeles Armenian Community, 2000-2004* (Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, September 24—December 31, 2004) resists the temptation to strive for a comprehensive visual definition of Los Angeles Armenians. Instead, thirty-nine carefully selected black and white photographs challenge our perceptions of a neatly integrated community. Striking if somewhat banal, the photographs offer glimpses of ethnicity through diverse, evolving and contradictory identities.

Set against the urban landscape of Los Angeles, to which exhibition curator Charlie

Hachadourian aptly refers as a "Cultural Cuisinart", the artist sketches a culture shaped by centuries of exilic or diasporic predicaments. Images like *Serving Coffee*, 2001, *Easter Services*, 2001, and *Genocide Recognition*, 2001, present traditional practices that, containing residues of encounters with other cultures, have also been internalized as contemporary rituals to ward off globalization's newest currents of assimilation.

Discontent informs *Traces of Identity* and speaks softly to the probing eye and mind. A young man gazes ambivalently at the feet of a woman carrying a tray full of Turkish coffee cups. A mother struggles with restless children while a man sits, lost in thoughts, on a cozy living room couch as TV blasts in the background.

The Lebanese born photographer comes from a lineage of prominent writers. His novelist grandfather, Hagop Oshagan, who escaped the 1915 Armenian Genocide, has been compared to Balzac and Dostoyevsky. Known for his ability to give voice and dimension to social misfits existing on the margins of Ottoman society, the author also grants them a profound humanity that transcends the pain and ostracism they experience. We can draw parallels between these characters and some of the gang members and criminals who inhabit the California prisons and rehab centers in the younger Oshagan's photographs. Images like *Cell*, 2003, *Haircut*, 2003, and *Revolutionary Heroes Mural*, 2003, portray an underclass of recent immigrants who left Armenia in search of better life.

Family gatherings, children playing, wedding and baptism scenes also attract Oshagan's faithful gaze. If more than one drama unfolds within a given composition, rarely do we get a complete story. Oshagan pushes and pulls our attention, offering remnants, images cropped with awkward margins. Fragments are all we have, especially since the whole is unattainable.

This salvaging of scattered traces of identity to portray a complex transnational community resonates in the celebrated poetry of Vahe Oshagan (1921-1999), the photographer's father who, after living in Cyprus, Jerusalem, France and Beirut, moved with his family to the United States at the outbreak of

the Lebanese Civil War. An iconoclast whose narratives shunned sentimentality and nostalgia, Vahe Oshagan left his mark by transgressing every taboo of Armenian literary traditions and institutions. *Intimate Moment*, 2002, a sexually charged photograph of a gay couple, echoes this legacy.

Humor sometimes mitigates the pervading sense of estrangement found in Ara Oshagan's photographs. A subtext of isolation, however, dominates, even in group images such as *Men Playing Cards*, 2001, *Armenian Presidential Elections*, 2003 and *Outing, Antelope Valley Poppy Preserve*, 2003. Paradoxically though, it is not so much the weight of the past but the tension created by a pending encounter with total separation or loss that accents Ara Oshagan's visual narratives—an existential predicament that's shared by most exiles, émigrés and displaced peoples.

—Neery Melkonian

SAN FRANCISCO

Bin Dahn's work evinces an understanding of war that comes with first-hand witnessing. Using found photographs, Dahn mines the faces of people who experienced the Vietnam War and Cambodia's killing fields, using the photographic instant to articulate their pain and loss, decades after they themselves were silenced. Throughout his work, Dahn explores the impact of war upon second-generation Americans who, as infants like himself, escaped Vietnam with their families in the mass exodus of the Boat People. Dahn's work scrutinizes the aftermaths of past wars, the scars that permanently alter the landscapes of countries and of individual lives, unearthing them now through experimental photography.

The photosynthetic process provides Dahn a technique for printing found photographs by using sunlight to project the photo's negative onto the surface of leaves. These "chlorophyll prints" are then cast in resin and framed with UV glazing in order to preserve them both for gallery viewing and for scientific study. These works were recently on view at San Francisco's Haines Gallery, where *human/nature* (September 9—October 30, 2004), Dahn's first solo exhibition was held. In it,



Ara Oshagan, *Haircut*, Christian Outreach Rehab Center, Palmdale, 2003, gelatin silver print, 13 X 19 inches, (courtesy of the artist and L.A. Municipal Art Gallery)