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Exhibit puts lens on L.A. Armenians

By Naush Boghossian
Staff Writer

GLENDALE — Artist Ara Oshagan has spent four years photographing Armenians throughout Los Angeles in a quest to answer the question, What does it mean to be an Armenian?

"Where does the Armenian stop and the non-Armenian begin? What are those boundaries?" said Oshagan, 39, whose day job is as a computational physicist. "We're using Armenians to try and address universal issues of identity for all immigrant communities."

"Traces of Identity: An Insider's View into the L.A. Armenian Community" features 40

black-and-white photographs exploring identity through religion, family, society and politics.

Oshagan's photographs capture scenes in everyday life — a family retreat at Big Bear Lake, inmates at Ironwood State Prison, church services in Pasadena, demonstrations on east Hollywood streets, a

party in Studio City, a drug rehabilitation center in Palmdale and a convalescent home in Eagle Rock.

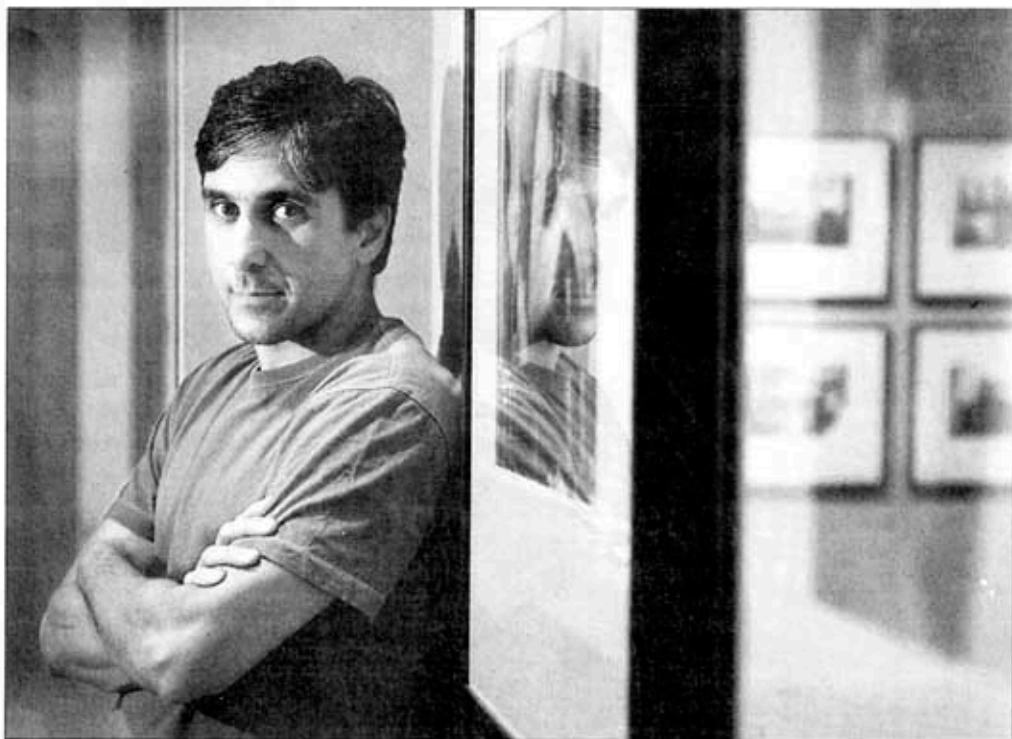
"Ara moved beyond stereotypes of Armenians and really was able to get inside the variety of different expressions of Armenian identity," said Donald Miller, a professor of religion and executive director of the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California. The center sponsored the exhibit. The documentary exhibit is partially funded by grants from the California Council for the Humanities and the George Ignatius Foundation.

"On one level he shows Armenians living the good life with extended family by a swimming pool, but at the other extreme there are photographs of Armenians in jail. That's a long ways from the stereotype of the good life by the pool," Miller said.

The identity of immigrant groups is constantly being challenged, and the photographs show that there are multiple identities of Armenians, he said.

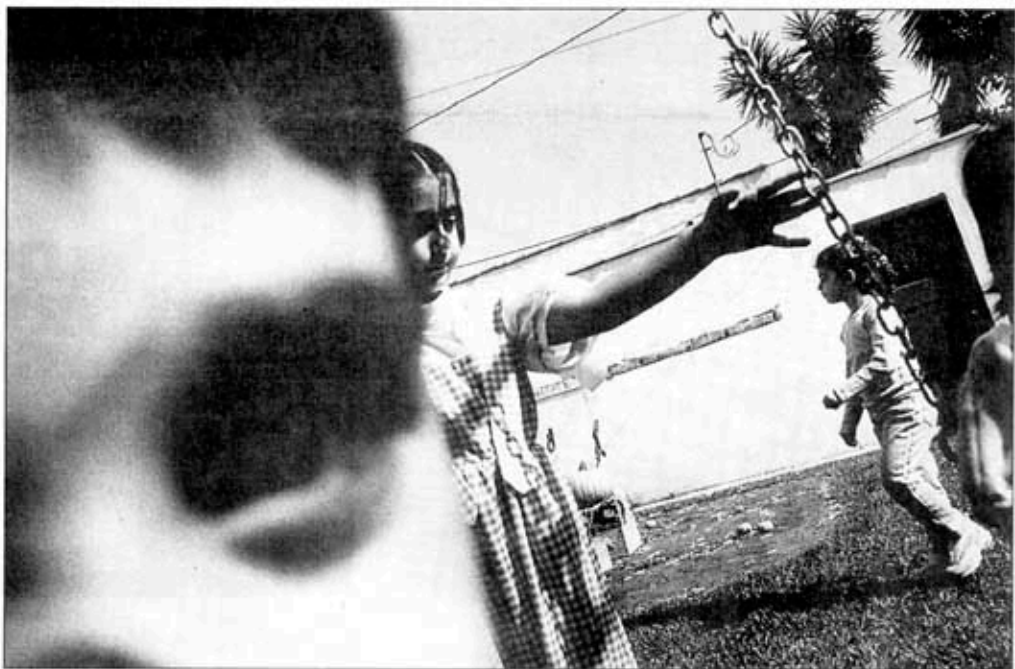
"I hope what will happen is people will see the complexity of the Armenian community, that there's not one identity, not one social class, and they'll walk away from the exhibit with a sense of the contribution that Armenians are making to this rich mosaic of Southern California," Miller said.

Exhibit curator Charlie Hachadourian said



Michael Owen Baker/Staff Photographer

Glendale photographer Ara Oshagan stands near his shots of the local Armenian community in a gallery at Barnsdall Art Park in Hollywood.



Children play in a black-and-white photograph from Oshagan's exhibit "Traces of Identity: An Insider's View into the L.A. Armenian Community."

Oshagan has created a literary narrative with his work.

"Everything is about the relationships Ara creates with the people he photographs, and in that tension he shares with his subjects is the ever evolving identity of Armenians in Los Angeles," Hachadourian said. "Ara is constantly asking how we delineate our identities as Armenians and how we perpetually reinvent ourselves as a unique component of a multifaceted and vast whole."

Oshagan, who comes from a long line of Armenian writers, said the answer to what being

Armenian means is at the hands of each viewer. His own conclusion is that identity constantly evolves.

"The lines between the subcommunity and the larger community are getting blurred all the time," said the Glendale resident. "For each viewer there can either be an answer or there could be more questions. It's an interaction between the audience and the work. I'm posing the question."

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