

Ararat Convalescent Hospital, Eagle Rock, 2002



Identity Confirmed

Artist Ara Oshagan documents the lives of Armenians in Los Angeles in their object state of being.

By **Talene Kanian**

If you live in Los Angeles, you know an Armenian. It could be your co-worker, your drycleaner, your neighbor, or your doctor. Armenians are like any other nationality living in the greater Los Angeles area, they have integrated themselves into society, but have been able to hang on to their heritage and history. They have the same experiences as everyone else, life, loss, friendship, religion, but how do they separate themselves from the larger community. How do they stay Armenian?

For four years, Ara Oshagan has documented Armenians in Los Angeles.

The highlight of this collection of work resulted in an exhibition of 40 black and white photographs, "Traces of Identity: An insider's View of the L.A. Armenian Community," depicting the everyday life of a community of people that is diverse and vibrant. Many of the images portray family life, which is the core strength of the Armenian community. However, the images of Armenians on the fringes of society or living alternative lifestyles are most striking.

Ara Oshagan is a computational physicist by day. He comes from a long line of authors and it was his desire to illustrate his literary work that led him to

photography. Greatly influenced by the work of Nubar Alexanian, Oshagan has come into his own as a social documentary photographer. All of his projects have focused on Armenians for the reason he explains, "It took quite a few years for me to convince myself that the important thing is not the medium you use but what you have to say. At that point, writing took a back seat and photography became my main endeavor. Most of my topics are Armenian-related because I feel one can only say something in-depth about what one knows best. In a mirror you really only see yourself."

This body of work takes an in-depth look at the Armenians in Los Angeles. It is the largest population of Armenians outside of the Republic of Armenia. The images are candid, people going about their everyday lives. Oshagan draws us into the image with close-up shots and tight compositions. In many images the

Easter Service, St. Mary's Apostolic Church, Glendale, 2001



central focus seems to be some obstruction. Whether it is a child's head, or an elderly woman's hand at a convalescent hospital, the pictorial space is complex yet intriguing. Using innate environments and natural light, Oshagan captures moments that are intrinsic to him. He says, "My work is about the moment and what that moment can reveal to us about life - in terms of attempting to explain as much as attempting to question. There is a careful balance there. That and the visual strength of the image are my main editing criteria. Of course, this comes after all the photography is done. During the photography itself, a lot of it is instinctual."

What Oshagan has captured is the scope of life that Armenians in L.A. experience. The image of hands reaching to touch the cross at Easter Service reflects the strong connection that the Armenians have for their faith. A young man in the midst of an emotional outcry at a political rally tells the world that Armenians living in the "land of freedom" have not forgotten their history and their cause. Inmates in their cell at a state prison show that everyone, regardless of nationality, can become outcasts of society. We see that although Armenians have successfully become a part of the community as a whole, they

have also struggled to keep their identity. Charlie Hachadourian, curator of the exhibition, says of Oshagan's work, "Ara not only visually defines and redefines who L.A.'s Armenians are: he candidly demystifies a constantly evolving community, purposefully sharing with his audience both the role of the Armenian community as an ethno-specific island onto itself and its role as an integral vibrant part of the whole."

As an insider to the community he has documented, Oshagan's images

are intimate yet straight forward. They possess a profound sense of humanity and compassion. He is not an outsider that simply observed and recorded. He is part of this group of people, he identifies with them. What better way to discern this community of people, than through the lens of one of its own.

Ara Oshagan has exhibited his work across the country at various venues, galleries and museums, including Senate Rotunda on Capitol Hill in Washington D.C., Fulton Street Gallery in New York and Louis Stern Gallery in Los Angeles, and the Downey Museum of Art in Los Angeles. His various projects have included the "Genocide Project" and the soon to be released book "The Spirit of Karabagh," by Editions Parantese in Marseille, France.

His exhibition "Traces of Identity" was sponsored by the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California (USC) and partially funded by grants from the California Council for the Humanities and the George Ignatius Foundation, was the first photographic project about Los Angeles Armenians to be exhibited publicly. III



Cell, Ironwood State Prison, Blythe, 2003