

Critics' Forum

Visual Arts

“It’s the Village Life:” The Atwater Casitas Artists’ Community

By Jean Murachanian



“All Armenians are trying to get back to the Village life. It’s inside them trying to come out” says artist Sevag Vrej of his experience working out of Casitas Studios, a newly renovated industrial building with a high concentration of Armenian artists in Atwater Village, or “the Village”. Sevag was the first artist to move into the structure about two and a half years ago. At that time the space was cavernous and scattered with remnant furniture and miscellaneous supplies from its previous occupant, a pharmaceutical company. Today the building is about 90% built-out with office and studio space occupied primarily by artists, although roughly 20% is rented by satellite companies and non-artists. With its cement floors, lack of official signage, and re-used pharmaceutical furniture, the building maintains its industrial past alongside a hip element brought to life by its current creative occupants.



Located in Atwater Village, California, Casitas Studios is conveniently situated between the cities of Glendale and downtown Los Angeles, the major recreational attractions of Griffith Park and Dodger Stadium, and just minutes from the entertainment industry in Silver Lake. Atwater Village is an old residential community begun in 1912 for the successful working class. It became a blue collar neighborhood of primarily Hispanics and Filipinos and was ignored until recently by developers and prosperous urbanites because it had been over taken by street gangs. In fact, it is home to some of the oldest gangs in Los Angeles, a point which is quite evident from their names – Rascals, ToonerVille Rifa, and Frogtown. Although improvements are apparent everywhere, including the highly anticipated Northeast satellite campus of Los Angeles City College in the old Van de Kamps building, the gangs are still busy tagging the neighborhood with signs of rivalries that occasionally end in tragedy. Bordered on the west by the Los Angeles River, that quintessentially urban body of water with its banks of cement, and on the east by railroad tracks, the Village has a definite gritty urban feel. But it is precisely this combination of ethnic community, hoodlum menace, and metropolitan lifestyle, mixed with the excitement of urban renovation that makes Casitas Studios an inspiring place to work for its resident artists.

But beyond its interesting ambience, what is particularly unique about Casitas Studios is that about two-thirds of the space is occupied by Armenian artists. As many of our readers know, when you place Armenians in close proximity to each other, the result is a lot of interaction. And when those Armenians are artists, the result is creative stimulation and networking multiplied. As a bonus, what often emerges from their contact is the pleasant discovery of common friends and even relatives. It is in essence a microcosm of an Armenian village where everyone specializes in a particular skill, is somehow connected, and shares a common culture. Although they may hail from many different parts of the world – Armenia, Argentina, Canada, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon – the resident “Armos” nevertheless feel a deep ancestral link that makes working together seamless. Of course there are also non-Armenians that are part of this community, some of whom have been adopted as honorary Hyes, like graphic designer Nathan “Nishan” Wong, who generously serves as the building’s ad-hoc IT consultant.

Casitas Studios came into being when the building’s owner, Dr. Avo Tavitian, decided to convert the space into offices for the creative community, with the loose idea of targeting Armenian artists. The ratio of Hyes grew through word of mouth as each new occupant

told their friends about the unique space. Sevag was the first to move in. Sole proprietor of Pomegranate Pictures, Sevag is a film director and editor. Soon he was sharing office space with Roger Kupelian, owner of Fugitive Studios, whose growth has occurred at such a rapid pace that he has moved three times within Casitas Studios to a progressively larger suite. Roger creates backdrop paintings for the film industry, his most prominent recent work being for The Lord of the Rings cycle. Sako Shahinian, sole proprietor of Sako Designs, who moved in about one and a half years ago, was referred to Casitas Studios by a mutual friend of Sevag's, Ara Soudjian. A designer extraordinaire, Sako is well versed in the design of diverse media, including graphics, animation, fashion, film, and editorials. When Sevag heard about Sako and learned he was Hye, a member of AYF (Armenian Youth Federation), and a graduate of his alma mater, Pasadena Art Center (PAC), he knew he had found the perfect office mate.



All three of these artists recently collaborated on a large project, the completion of an unfinished film, *Angels, Devils, and Men (ADM)*, which Roger came upon while searching for investors for his biggest endeavor, the development and production of *East of Byzantium*, a motion picture about Vartan Mamagonian. ADM was a huge undertaking because while all the scenes had been shot, the writer and director, Lindsay Shonteff, died suddenly without leaving much of a script or storyboard outlining his complete concept of the movie. So Roger, Sevag, and Sako were left trying to create a story out of the various filmed sequences. Using their sense of creativity, in an effort to enhance the plot and its flow, they decided to supplement the picture with animation. Roger and Sevag served as Associate Producers and Sako as Creative Director. Sevag edited both the film and the trailers and Sako designed the logo, website, and animation. They also hired mutual friend and musician, Barrett Yeretsian, to compose the music for the soundtrack, though he does not have an office in Casitas Studios. ADM will soon be making the rounds of the international film festivals and our artists are optimistic that it will find a cult audience. So be on the lookout for it in the art houses and on DVD.



Local readers may be familiar with Casitas Studios by way of an open house held in March 2007, which also highlighted Vahe Berberian's Milagros, small colorful images painted on metal, a format inspired by an old Spanish tradition. A hip event with food and music, the opening was attended by an eclectic crowd of over two thousand, including Serj Tankian, lead singer for System of a Down (SOAD), and successfully showcased the enormous talent of each artist. The occasion also allowed the occupants to get to know one another as well as each other's clients. Interestingly, Sako landed a large project from the March happening when a friend he already knew hired him after actually seeing his work that night.

The event may have even propelled Serj to hire some of the artists to create visual imagery for his first solo album, *Elect the Dead*, released in October 2007 to rave reviews. Roger and Sevag, already friends of Serj, were each asked to make a music video, while Sako was asked to design the album website, create graphics for a limited edition CD, and add imagery to Sevag's music video, which was also filmed at Casitas Studio. Reacquainting himself with Sako's work, Serj remembered the haunting posters Sako had created for SOAD's 2004 and 2005 Souls concerts.

Sometimes collaborative work arises when the artists least expect it. For instance, when Roger was casting parts for the publicity photos and film teasers needed to market *East of Byzantium*, he ended up finding the perfect cast right under his nose at Casitas Studios. After interviewing loads of commercial actors, Roger realized he already had Vartan right there in resident artist Dro Arzooian, complete with sturdy build and full beard. In the end, he cast most of the major roles for marketing purposes from Casitas residents, or affiliated family and friends.

Casitas Studios even houses a husband and wife team, Talene Gureghian, owner of ALSO, a graphic design firm, and Andrew Hall, photographer. Family connections extend across the hall as well, since Talene and Sevag are cousins. Also a graduate of PAC, Talene recently completed a major project, a catalogue for Lexus automobiles, for which Andrew did the photography and Sako the retouching.

Besides collaborating on various projects and referring business to each other, the resident artists also benefit from sharing recommendations for preferred vendors. For example, rather than using trial and error to find a good animator or printer, designers can simply walk down the hall and ask another artist for a good referral. Needless to say, this streamlines their efforts and enhances the quality of their work.



Like Atwater Village itself, the occupants at Casitas Studios are an eclectic mix – The Fitness Forum (private gym), Anna Yepremyan (florist), Imasu by Kellynshimoto (fashion designer), Ruzz Photography (portrait photographer), AIM Marketing (advertising talent agency), Kluger (architects), Dro Arzooian (fine artist), Yithzhak Dalal (photography), The Atwater Playhouse (live theater and method acting school), and most recently, Bodies that Work (yoga studio). In addition, the second floor houses a team of lawyers, Avo’s administrative staff, and until recently the Los Angeles office of the Armenian Reporter. With such a variety of businesses, the atmosphere can be quite lively, with fashion models clacking down the halls on their way to a fashion shoot, actors milling around anxiously awaiting their audition at the Atwater Playhouse, and gym patrons sprinting through on their way to their next appointment. All this leads to some antics from the occupants, including lots of head popping at the first sound of high heels, rounds of basketball in the hallways, and the circulation of animated note cards illustrating quirky occurrences in the building. Their camaraderie also extends beyond

the walls of Casitas Studios, with lunch outings in the urban neighborhood and bike rides along the L.A. River bike path. They even share in major life events, sometimes by contributing their own talents as seen in the upcoming wedding of Andrew and Jennifer from AIM, for which Ruzz will provide the photography, Kelly Nishimoto the bridal gown, and Anna Yepremyan the flowers.



Casitas Studios is a dynamic place where members of a small primarily ethnic community are working, playing, and in some cases even living together for the common purpose of creative expression. As Roger indicated, many of the Armenian tenants have an ingrained sense of old-world thinking modified by a modern outlook, a combination which makes their collaborative efforts . . . effortless. Perhaps it is precisely this intersection of rural Armenian village and urban Atwater Village that one finds so compelling in these resident artists.

All Rights Reserved: Critics' Forum, 2008. Exclusive to the Armenian Reporter.

Jean Murachanian is a Ph.D. candidate in Art History at UCLA.

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.