

Critics' Forum

Visual Arts

The House on Wheels: Alina Mnatsakanian's Search for "Home"

By Ramela Grigorian Abbamontian

How do most Armenians, having crossed a number of borders and encountered many homes, construct a diasporic identity? Can the diasporic Armenian live in one place and still be part of another – a historic homeland, a site of origin, a prior home? Post-colonial theorists Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, in defining “exile” with regard to diasporic peoples, wonder if “home” is “[i]n the place of birth (nateo), in the displaced cultural community into which the person is born, or in the nation-state in which this diasporic community is located” (*Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 93). These are questions that burden many Armenian artists as well, including Alina Mnatsakanian.



Mnatsakanian's installations have been exhibited and her performance pieces have had a run in Los Angeles over the last several years. Mnatsakanian's work continues to live online, asking questions we have yet to answer. Her work engages the issues of “home” and “homeland” as well as the incessant movement across borders and the encountering of many cultures. Mnatsakanian's personal history inspired many of her pieces: she was

born and raised in Iran (to Russian-Armenian and Iranian-Armenian parents) but left for Paris at the onset of the Iranian Revolution in 1979. After pursuing an art education in Paris for several years, she settled in Los Angeles in 1983. After twenty-two years and several sporadic trips to Armenia, she relocated once more, in September 2005, to Switzerland.

Mnatsakanian's installation, *House on Wheels* (2000), confronts the issue of constant movement and hybrid identity. The installation incorporates a wooden structure, audio recordings, and projected images on the wall, all of which together create a multi-media and multi-sensory space of engagement. Hanging inside the house-shaped wooden frame are four large transparencies representing homes and cultures the artist has encountered: Iran, France, the United States, and Armenia. Each home is referenced with very specific iconography, which includes such things as identification cards, passport photos, metro maps, visas, and citizenship papers – all of them signifiers of movement, belonging/not belonging, and the creation of “home.”

Mnatsakanian considers her “homeland” Iran as well as Armenia, explaining, “It’s like a kid who has divorced parents,” referring to the sense of attachment one feels to more than one place (home) and implying an involuntary separation from an initial source of origin. Even though Mnatsakanian cites her strongest connections to her birthplace of Iran and to Armenia (noticeably the most colorful transparencies), she had created the home structure for Armenia without ever having visited the country – emphasizing my earlier suggestion that “homeland” is an imagined place for many Armenians. When the imagined place was transformed into a real one during her first visit, in 2001, Mnatsakanian recalled: “I kind of felt like I had been there before, like I belonged there.”



Mnatsakanian's structure is merely the frame of a house – no walls, no roof, no foundation, no other reinforcements. The skeletal structure, transparent houses, and the fact that it is on wheels once more point to the impermanent and mobile nature of the Diasporan, who has changed homes a number of times and whose identity, even in the present, is still not fixed. Interestingly, R. B. Kitaj, an American-born artist of Jewish descent living in England, suggests a similar experience of immigrant life as displacement, quite apart from actual physical or geographic movement. In *First Diasporist Manifesto* (1989), he explains that his identity was “born from the amalgamation of dislocation, rupture, and a hybrid self which exists – and paints – in two or more societies at once.” Clearly, the sense of a displaced identity is not exclusive to the Armenian diaspora – it reflects the larger immigrant experience.

Mnatsakanian's installation layers this sense of displacement into her installation. A ten-minute video loop, evoking the notion of home and movement that are central to the installation, is projected onto the back wall, casting the structural form of the house itself on the wall. The video is a layered collage of various scenes with a superimposed audio component – giving the viewer a multi-sensory experience similar to the disorientation engendered by displacement. Mnatsakanian's own voice plays in the background, her words often muddled, disrupting any sense of clarity and denoting, as the artist herself writes, “confusion related to the multi-cultural existence.”

In the audio portion of the installation, the artist briefly recounts the specific experience related to each respective country: a childhood in Iran; art school in France; adulthood in America; and an imagined home in Armenia. These narratives are delivered in the languages of the specific country and include a corresponding song in the background. Mnatsakanian also recites the following quote by the Iranian-born Armenian-American author Hagop Karapents in all four languages – Armenian, Farsi, French, and English – identifying her many homes: “Everyone goes from one place to another to get home. Some people who go from one place to another never get home. Some others get home, but always stay in exile.”

The key images projected on the back wall reinforce the notion of constant movement and the attempt to create a home. The identification card is the identifying marker of newcomers to the United States. Its rather paradoxical moniker – “Resident Alien” – denotes someone who lives in the States but does not quite yet enjoy the full benefits of citizenship, in other words, one who does not quite yet belong. The next segment shows the repeated movement of a pair of hands putting up a miniature house, its collapse, and its rebuilding– the narrative loop representing visually the many homes built and rebuilt by Diasporans. In the following segment, people at Union Station, in downtown Los Angeles, are hurriedly walking from one place to another. The final projection is of a set of hands protectively and reverentially cupping soil. Could this be Mnatsakanian's – or any Diasporan's – attempt to capture a piece of the land, to render it a “homeland”? Or does it express the desire to claim a certain land as one's own, in a paradoxical attempt to halt the movement inherent in the diasporic experience?



In the statement describing the installation, Mnatsakanian elaborates on this temporality, uprootedness and the endless search for a “home”:

. . . Sense of belonging to a place, a home or a homeland, is a natural feeling. When one abandons the homeland, the sense of belonging becomes abstract and sometimes unattainable. Duality or plurality is a feeling created in such circumstances as a result of various cultural influences. It can be enriching, yet differences and contrasts may also create confusion. A person with a multi-cultural upbringing might feel alienated in a society that is prominently from a single cultural background. One way of facing this issue is to completely conform to the new culture. Another way is to find a possible coexistence.

Mnatsakanian, it seems, recognizes the challenges of multiple belonging ultimately by embracing her diasporan identity as multi-dimensional, what we might call a “transnational” self inhabiting several identities at once.

House on Wheels has been exhibited at Neuchâtel, Switzerland, California State University, Los Angeles, and the Sam Francis Gallery (Crossroads School, Santa Monica). You can view Mnatsakanian’s art on her website at <http://alinamn.com/>.

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