

Critics' Forum

Visual Arts

The Forging of an Artistic Identity: A Gorky Retrospective

By Jean Murachanian

Los Angeles is the proud recipient of the final installment of the traveling exhibition, *Arshile Gorky: A Retrospective*. The exhibition began at the Philadelphia Museum of Art before moving on to the Tate Modern in London and is now appearing at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA). It will remain at MOCA's downtown location on Grand Avenue, across the street from the Disney Concert Hall, until September 20, 2010. The show was organized by Michael Taylor, curator of Modern Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, with whom I had the pleasure of meeting at the College Art Association conference last year when we both presented papers on the panel titled *Surrealism au naturel* – he on Gorky and I on the Armenian surrealist, Léon Tutundjian.

It has been almost three decades since the last Gorky retrospective, organized in 1981 by Diane Waldman at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. (However, there have been wonderful smaller shows over the ensuing years, including the 2006 exhibition at the Fresno Art Museum.) Gorky scholarship has changed in the meantime, because the primary sources for Gorky's musings on art are believed to have been fabricated.

Scholars such as Gorky's son-in-law, Matthew Spender (*From a High Place: A Life of Arshile Gorky*, 1999) and Nouritza Matossian (*Black Angel*, 2000) concluded from their research that the translations of Gorky's letters to his younger sister, Vartoosh, published by her son, Karlen Mooradian, had been embellished. It is thought that Karlen sought to heighten Gorky's prestige and connection to his Armenian roots while enhancing his own standing – he was Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Oklahoma. (Our own Critics' Forum contributor, Ramela Grigorian Abbamontian, wrote her M.A. thesis on this very topic by demonstrating that the content and structure of the fabricated letters differed widely from that of the known original letters [*The Mystery of the Missing Letters: The Myth-Making of Arshile Gorky*, 2001]). Recent work sets the record straight – the most recent Gorky biography, *Arshile Gorky: His Life and Works* (2003), was written by noted Frida Kahlo biographer, Hayden Herrera, while the most accurate translations of Gorky's letters to family and friends were published recently as *Goats on the Roof: A Life in Letters and Documents* (2009), edited by Spender with translations by Father Krikor Maksoudian.

The resurgence in interest in Gorky signals his rehabilitation in scholarly circles. Although Gorky was not famous during his lifetime, he is now widely acknowledged as a forerunner of the Abstract Expressionist movement and is routinely mentioned in art history survey textbooks. In addition, Gorky's works are now worth millions. His work fetched a record auction price in 2007, when Christie's New York sold *Khorkom*, circa 1938, for \$4.2 million. Private sales of Gorky's paintings have garnered even larger sums, up to \$12 million, as noted by Tobias Meyer, worldwide head of contemporary art at Sotheby's.

Taylor is to be commended for putting together this extensive exhibition, consisting of 125 works (73 paintings, 49 drawings, and three small wood sculptures) and accompanied by a well-researched catalogue, *Arshile Gorky: A Retrospective*, with contributing essays by Taylor, Harry Cooper, Jody Patterson, Robert Storr, and Kim Servart Theriault. The exhibition also includes a 19-minute film, *Life with Gorky*, by Gorky's granddaughter, Cosima Spender, featuring interviews with Gorky's 96 year-old American widow, Agnes "Mougouch" Fielding. Several special events also accompany the show, including a screening of the film *Ararat*, with a Q & A with the film's director, Atom Egoyan, at the Pacific Design Center on June 24, lectures by UCLA History Professor, Richard Hovannisian (June 20), MOCA curator, Paul Schimmel (July 8), and Dominican University Art History Professor, Kim Theriault (Sept 12). (MOCA's website includes a more complete list of events.)

The retrospective presents Gorky's pieces chronologically and thematically against the white gallery walls (a variation from the colored zigzag pattern of the Philadelphia venue) across several rooms of widely different sizes with minimal labeling: one concise introductory panel; individual image labels (some with expanded text); and two large chronological biography panels placed almost mid-point in the exhibition. For those searching for more information, there are audio descriptions of select pieces, accessible by cell phone, and laminated placards, though they are often difficult to spot throughout the exhibition. This unusual label treatment allows visitors to contemplate the whole of Gorky's oeuvre visually, with few distractions. But it may leave those unfamiliar with Gorky struggling to make sense of it all, especially since the colorful, biomorphic shapes that inhabit the artist's mature work can make it sometimes difficult to understand. While most visitors may look at these shapes and see only abstract forms, many contain directly biographical markers. As demonstrated by Matthew Spender at a recent lecture, a little knowledge of Gorky's background and some careful observation yield references to Gorky's personal life, particularly his childhood in Turkey. Scattered throughout his works are forms suggestive of simple village life, of families living in rustic homes in close proximity to their working animals, where chores are divided along traditional gender roles.

Perhaps the exhibition's greatest drawback is its layout. The first few rooms, which visually document Gorky's experimentation with the masters, are small and a bit overcrowded with images. It is not until one passes Gorky's works for the Newark Airport mural – produced under the WPA Project, the federal public works program, in the 1930s – and walks through the hallway with the detailed biography panels (and a small shelf with samples of the key texts on Gorky and the Armenian Genocide) that the rooms suddenly open up, the large rooms with high ceilings creating great expanses of space in which to view the pieces. Without a doubt, it is wonderful to view such a large selection of these later works in a space worthy of their contribution. Still, although the movement from the tight spaces into the expansive ones may be intentional, meant to evoke the intensity with which Gorky studied the masters of modernism on his way to developing his own style, navigating through the first few rooms, packed as they are with the artist's voluminous earlier works, may leave viewers a bit fatigued and overwhelmed by the time they reach the large airy rooms. The layout does also cast some light into

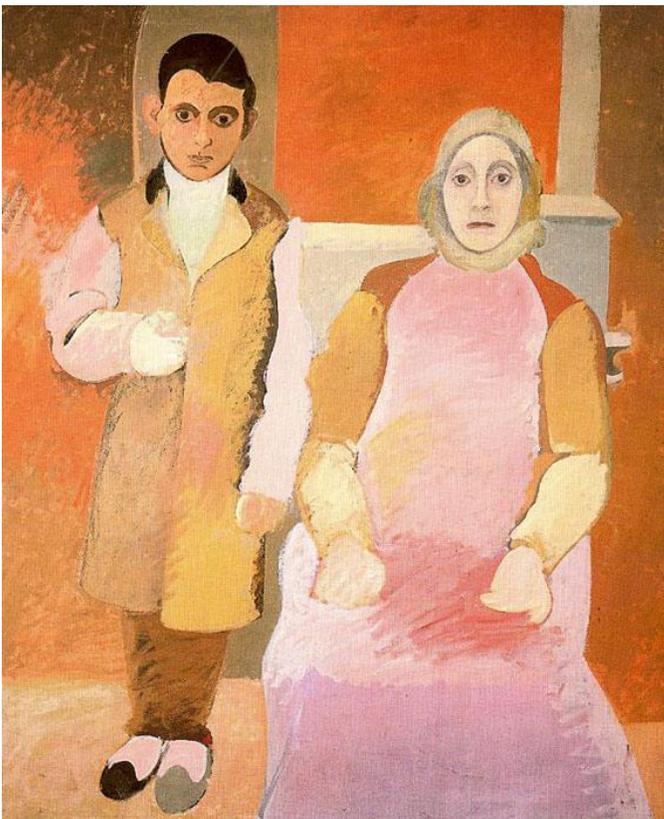
Gorky's biography. Although Gorky was largely self-taught, he was recognized, unlike his close friend, the well-known modernist William de Kooning, as having an innate understanding of art. De Kooning himself acknowledged that "I had more legitimate schooling in Holland (at the Rotterdam Academy of Visual Arts) but the things I was supposed to know he knew much better. He had an uncanny instinct for all art."

What will, no doubt, be a high-point of the exhibition, particularly for a Gorky retrospective mounted in Los Angeles, home of the largest Armenian community in the United States, is the presentation of the two versions of *The Artist and His Mother*, one held by the Whitney Museum of American Art and the other by the National Gallery of Art. While it is certainly exciting to view these two works side-by-side, their importance is minimized by their placement in a small side room at the beginning of the exhibition. The two images are painted from a 1912 professional photograph taken in Van for Gorky's father, Setrag Adoian, in the United States, most likely to remind him of his obligations back home. (Gorky's father had moved to the United States in 1908 to avoid being drafted into the Turkish army.) Apparently, Gorky "borrowed" the photo in 1926 when he found it at his half-sister's home in Watertown, Massachusetts, during a visit from New York. Given the importance of the photograph upon which the paintings are based, it is a shame that a copy is not displayed in the same room. A trip down the hall to the biography panels would be in order, should one want to compare the canvases to the photograph.



Gorky, *The Artist and His Mother* (Whitney Museum of Art)

The Whitney version (1926-36), owned by Gorky throughout his life, is carefully painted in flat, subdued, somber tones, while the National rendering (c. 1929-c. 1942) is executed in rapid brushstrokes in shades of pink; both are believed to be unfinished. As depicted in the movie *Ararat*, Gorky was obsessed with the original image and repeatedly reworked the paintings, trying to capture something that no longer remained. Gorky achieved the flatness in the Whitney copy by repeatedly scraping the paint, a technique he observed in the work of the 19th century painter Ingres, as seen in his polished iconic piece, *La Grande Odalisque* (1814). Both images generate a strong psychological impact, particularly for Armenians. In comparing the images, one cannot resist contemplating Gorky's state and intension as he feverishly worked on them. They are equally harrowing, though in different ways.



Gorky, *The Artist and His Mother* (National Gallery of Art)

There are eight rooms (out of a total of 14) devoted to Gorky's abstractions in his mature period, which runs from about 1940 to his premature death in 1948. Among these are four must-see images: *Garden of Sochi*, *Liver of the Cock's Comb*, *Betrothal*, and *Agony*. In *Garden of Sochi*, 1941, Gorky utilizes biomorphic shapes inspired by Miró to develop his own fluid abstract forms, which are at once animated and still. The canvas is painted in thick paint with a solid green background, which effectively pushes the figures to the front of the picture plane. Seemingly abstract, the forms depict an Armenian rural scene where participants churn butter with a goatskin object. The imagery reflects memories of

Gorky's childhood spent in his birthplace, Khorkom, though the canvas was named after the Russian city Sochi, presumably because it had been in the news and hence would have been more familiar to the general public. The exhibition room includes several similar images, many of which are also titled Khorkom. Although Gorky was often purposely evasive regarding his personal life, frequently making up obscure facts, he would nonetheless tell stories about Khorkom to his students at Boston's New School of Design. (Given his obvious talent, he was given a teaching position shortly after attending a few classes at the school. The influential abstract expressionist, Mark Rothko, was among his students.)



Gorky, *Sochi* (1941)

Liver of the Cock's Comb, 1944, is considered one of Gorky's finest works. Unfortunately, however, only MOCA's own preparatory sketch is on view in the current exhibition because the large canvas (6' x 8') was deemed too fragile to travel beyond the Philadelphia opening. Here we see a fundamental change in Gorky's output. He continues to use biomorphic forms, but the shapes cover the entire canvas and are much more colorful and fluid. In the canvas the paint is thinner, almost runny and somewhat fuzzy. The variation in his work at this time is due to the influence of Surrealism, most notably through his friendship with exiled Surrealist, Roberto Matta, who encouraged Gorky to be more spontaneous. In keeping with Surrealist tendencies, the image has sexual connotations, as seen in its visual reference to both male and female genitalia.



Gorky, Study for 1944 *Liver of the Cocks Comb*

Matta was also influential in advancing Gorky's career. He helped him secure shows with the art dealer Julien Levy and introduced him to Andre Breton, the father of Surrealism. Like many European artists, Breton was in exile in the United States following the outbreak of World War II. He was enchanted with Gorky's work, hailed him as a Surrealist, and asserted that *The Liver is the Cock's Comb* was "one of the most important paintings made in America." Gorky was flattered by Breton's attention but nevertheless avoided a formal affiliation with the group. Although much has been made of Gorky's relationship with the Surrealists – some scholars, including Michael Taylor (see catalogue essay, *Gorky and Surrealism*) have sought to claim him as a Surrealist – the categorization seems ill-fitting. Gorky's deliberate practice of using preparatory drawings, for instance, differs fundamentally from Surrealism's reliance on automatism, or chance, as a means of tapping into the unconscious in the process of creating art.

Located in a small room in the right rear corner of the exhibition is the excellent *Betrothal* series. Created in 1947 following a period of personal tragedies – a humiliating operation for colon cancer and the loss of several paintings in a studio fire – the images evoke a visceral response. Painted in subdued earthy tones, the forms in these canvases are delineated by thin black outlines. The shapes suggest a plethora of possibilities, including plants, animals, and inanimate objects. Many readings have been proposed. Some no doubt contain sexual connotations in the Surrealist manner, similar to *Liver of the Cock's Comb*. And like the *Garden of Sochi* series, the forms are surrounded by a vast expanse of space, although here they are lighter and more optimistic. Perhaps they

demarcate the brief period of hopefulness Gorky experienced on the road to recovery, both physical and artistic.



Gorky, *Betrothal* (1947)

Painted in fiery reds, *Agony*, 1947, seems to refer to both the studio fire and the artist's personal crisis. The image is direct and powerful; its intense reds seem to scream out in anguish. Although Levy had sponsored several shows for Gorky and critics such as Clement Greenberg supported him – in a 1948 exhibition review, Greenberg said Gorky was "among the very few contemporary American painters whose work is of more than national importance" – the artist did not sell enough works to support his new family. Gorky married Mougouch in 1941, and they subsequently had two daughters. As a traditional patriarch, the financial struggle was particularly humiliating for him. The painting encapsulates these and other difficulties that marked the final years of his life. Barely recovering from these personal set-backs, Gorky was further thwarted in 1948, when a car accident left his painting arm temporarily paralyzed. Soon thereafter, his wife left him and had a brief affair with his friend, Matta. The following year, Gorky committed suicide.



Gorky, *Betrothal* (1947, Museum of Modern Art)

Although the works from his final years are typically understood to reflect his personal tragedies, the artist's works have also been read through the lens of the trauma of the Armenian Genocide. But how does one depict trauma? As Kim Servart Theriault has noted in her catalogue essay, *Exile, Trauma, and Arshile Gorky's The Artist and His Mother*, and in her new book, *Rethinking Arshile Gorky* (2009), the act of restructuring one's life or art can be interpreted as an attempt to overcome, or at least avert, trauma. Gorky continuously attempted to restructure his own life, as revealed in his name change and the frequent fabrications of his life story. His new name allowed him to shed what he viewed as the demeaning connection to a despised people and provided cachet by suggesting a family connection to the Russian writer, Maxim Gorky. (Ironically, the writer's name was also invented; he was born Alexei Maksimovich Peshkov.) Gorky even embellished his artistic background, telling others he was educated in Russia, trained with Kandinsky, and attended art school at the Julian Academy, when he had never been to Russia or Paris.

Gorky's biography and his work together suggest the fractured identity emblematic of the personal and artistic lives of many Armenian artists of Gorky's generation. My own work on trauma in Léon Tutundjian's work, for instance, situates the manifestation of trauma in the artist's depictions of a fractured identity, a technique that Judith Herman, Professor of Clinical Psychiatry at Harvard, considers common in trauma victims. In Tutundjian's oeuvre, I identify what I consider to be a series of self-portraits that suggest a fractured psyche through three fundamental markers: a doubling in the portraiture; a separation from the body; and a lack of defined space. In fact, the multiplicity of self-portraits itself implies a lack of a defined sense of self, as noted by English Professor, Jenjioy La Belle. I would argue that Gorky's forging of a new identity – his name change and frequent fabrication of his personal history – suggests a similarly fractured sense of

self resulting from trauma. The analogy extends to survivors of the Armenian Genocide like Gorky, near-victims of tragedy whose resulting trauma produced a dual sense of suffering – not only the physical fact of death, deportation and displacement but also the psychic aftermath of a problematic, tenuous personal and public identity. The Gorky retrospective currently on view at MOCA is a must-see for those interested in a comprehensive viewing of the artist's oeuvre, a glimpse into the troubling visual expressions of his psyche and perhaps those of others in his generation.

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