

Critics' Forum

Visual Arts

Sara Anjargolian's Photography: Re-imagining the Homeland in Diasporic Discourse

By Ramela Grigorian Abbamontian

Los Angeles-based photographer Sara Anjargolian recently exhibited her work in the engaging and interactive exhibition, *How We Live*. Along with another of Anjargolian's recent projects, *Not Here, How We Live* focuses its lens on Armenia; while the earlier traces the realities of poverty, the latter documents the disruptive effects of labor migration on families.

Like many other diasporic artists, Anjargolian also uses her medium as a vehicle for coming to terms with the role of Armenia in her own identity. As artist and theorist R. B. Kitaj notes in *First Diasporist Manifesto* (1989), "Diasporist [art] is an unfolding commentary on its life-source" (p. 31), and as such, it reveals the responses to the condition of being in the diaspora. Therefore, beyond their immediate subject – the portrayal of poverty-stricken families in Armenia living in dire conditions and eking out a living for themselves – Anjargolian's photographs also engage larger themes concerning the construction of diasporic identity as it relates to Armenia.

In *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997), anthropologist James Clifford asks critical questions regarding this construction: "How do diaspora discourses represent experiences of displacement, of constructing homes away from home? What experiences do they reject, replace, or marginalize?" (p. 244). My own dissertation research revealed that artists of Armenian descent living in the United States have produced rich visual material to process the inherent tensions in responding to such questions of identity. Those explorations concluded that the diasporic Armenian envisions a geographic Armenian homeland that is idealized, derived as it is primarily from historical memory and pride in an ancestral past.

Anjargolian's photographs, on the other hand, operate on a slightly different level: the potent images construct a more accurate and up-to-date image of an Armenia beset by social and economic troubles, though one that still communicates the dignity and courage of a resilient people. By inserting a re-imagined Armenia into the diasporic consciousness, Anjargolian provides access to formerly unacknowledged realities; as she says, she wants "these voices to be part of the public discourse about what's going to happen to the future of this country."

Anjargolian's own past resonates with this crisis of diasporic consciousness. Anjargolian was born in London to an Iranian-Armenian father and Iraqi-Armenian mother. After spending her formative years in Tehran, Iran, she moved to Los Angeles in 1981. She first visited Armenia in 1994, as part of a Homenetmen Scouts trip. More frequent visits began in 1999, until she eventually settled in Armenia from 2002 until 2004. Since moving back to Los Angeles in 2004, Anjargolian has returned to Armenia regularly.

And those trips have produced hundreds of images of a homeland that has changed dramatically, even over the decade and a half since her first visit.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that photography has emerged as the medium best able to capture such a rapid change in conditions, in both the homeland and the diaspora. In recent years, photography has become a chosen medium for several diasporic Armenian artists in Los Angeles. (One might recall, for instance, Ara Oshagan's series on Los Angeles and Karabagh Armenians.) The photographs of diasporic Armenian artists have served a critical as well as a documentary function. That dual role is entirely fitting with photography's recent rise in prominence: my research indicates that the visual output of many diasporic artists is an attempt to place the recent changes in perspective by articulating, preserving, and coming to terms with their diasporic experiences.

Extending the thought, one also wonders whether part of the photograph's strength as a medium does not also lie in its ability to suggest facticity and survival. The suggestion recalls social and critical theorist Roland Barthes' claim in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1981) that "every photograph is a certificate of presence." The very facticity of photographs, I would argue, reveals the preservation impulse I believe is demonstrated by many diasporic Armenian artists – the desire to record and preserve aspects of their history, whether past or contemporary. As Anjargolian has suggested, the preservation impulse transforms the photographer into a chronicler, witness, and even a "voice" for such a desire.

A common approach utilized by many diasporic artists, whether in photographs or paintings, is working in a series. The technique suggests, once again, a confrontation with history, with the changing nature of the facticity being captured and represented. It is also in part self-referential, pointing to the fact that the process the artists are themselves engaged in cannot be contained within a single work. As such, the photographic explorations enable them to more fully explore the multiple, complex facets of both homeland and diaspora and, through them, a reimagining of their own identities.

If, as I am suggesting, Anjargolian's photographs re-imagine the identities intertwined in the geographic homeland, such an assertion then begs the question: what type of Armenia do they reveal and reconstruct? As a whole, the photographs in *How We Live* and *Not Here* include fragments, in the form of incomplete human figures, segments of home interiors, and parts of furnishings. The angles of the photographs also vary, ranging from head-on viewpoints to slightly tilted camera shots. That choice to represent the fragmented reality of homeland also indicates an attempt to re-imagine it, to align devastation with reconstruction, both in social-economic and representational terms.

A closer look at the photographs themselves reveals the process in its details. Many of the photographs are dominated by square or rectangular forms – tables, chairs, beds, and windows – often read as denoting solid, confined, static, and impenetrable spaces. This seeming rigidity of the spaces is mitigated, however, by the presence of the people that fill the photographs as well as the various articles of clothing and textiles that surround them, their tactile forms and curved lines softening the severity of the angular spaces.

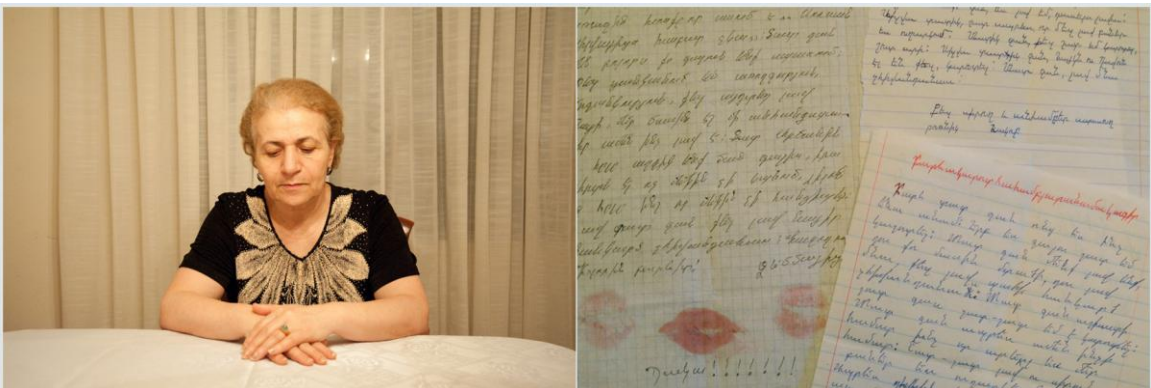


In one photograph of a crowded interior, Susanna sits at the edge of the bed. Though the text notes that her home is made of metal rods covered with plastic sheeting and cloth, what the viewer sees instead is a space whose harshness is alleviated by the addition of an animals-in-nature tapestry on the wall and the beautifully-patterned coverings for the furniture. Amidst the harsh reality surrounding her, Susanna sits and engages the viewer directly with eyes that don't complain but confront, expressing a heroic will to survive.

Along with text and images, Anjargolian's photographs often meld objects and people, using the compositional contrast to great effect. A particular semiotic signifier – an object of representation – frequently used in such compositions is the table. As I suggested earlier, the table is a solid figure denoting an enclosed space. But in the Armenian context, tables also traditionally denote a space of gathering, where family and friends congregate to share a meal, live life, and make memories. According to Anjargolian, the presence of the table reveals such a sentiment: “despite the fact that [the subjects of the photographs] find themselves in these impoverished situations, they could gather at a place together.”



Interestingly, a majority of the tables depicted in Anjargolian’s photography embody difficult contrasts – of plenty and poverty, family and solitude. Many of the photographs, for example, are devoid of a gathering and instead include a solitary individual, head bent, contemplating the surroundings. For example, in a poignant juxtaposition from the *Not Here* series on separated families, Silva sits at the head of the table and looks out into the emptiness surrounding her. Meanwhile, in Armenia, her family of thirteen barely fit around their crowded table.



Another set of images highlights the emptiness that Silva experiences in Los Angeles as she forges a life for her family back home. In one image, Silva occupies the focal point of the compositional space, hands crossed and eyes tilted downward, the visual composition highlighting thematic connections and contrasts. Silva appears at once alone and an extension of her sparse surroundings. The beige embroidery on her black blouse echoes the drapery behind her, while the contrast of her black blouse suggests separation, sadness. The viewer senses that Silva is not in Armenia to witness her children’s and grandchildren’s lives, a notion reinforced in the lovingly-kissed letters of her family – the subject of another photograph.



Another poignant photograph illustrates the fragmentation noted earlier while elaborating once again on the paradoxical reference of the gathering table. In this image, twelve-year-old Ani, one of four children, clutches her doll as her father Senik sits at the table in the other room of the tin and wood shack. The dividing wall protrudes into the image's foreground and strikingly intrudes into the viewer's space, imposing its presence – and the reality of fragmentation that it represents – into the diasporic viewer's imagination (and consequently, the *re*-imagination of homeland). As in the photograph of Susanna earlier, here, too, the flower-print tablecloth and bed cover enliven the starkness of the walls and furniture, if merely visually.

Another key feature of the photographs in *How We Live* and *Not Here* is the role of text, used to recount the stories of the people and families represented, like the letters mentioned earlier. A critical visual practice of many contemporary artists, text functions to identify ethnic sites, legitimize belonging and place, recall and record memories, and preserve artistic legacy. According to Geoffrey Batchen in *Forget Me Not: Photography & Remembrance* (2004), “the addition of text to photographs was a common strategy used by those who wished to enhance the memorial power of the image” (41). The text in Anjargolian's photographs, likewise, functions to give voice to the people portrayed. What might appear as the universal, or anonymous, story of poverty and labor migration becomes, through the use of text, the story – the specific struggle – of Armenians.



That effort at particularization extends beyond the portrayal of texts to the people themselves. In one particularly striking photograph, 29 year-old Grigor occupies the compositional middle ground amidst a vast garbage pile – his workplace for the day – that extends from the viewer’s space deep into the background. The composition portrays the monumental task that lies ahead for Grigor, as he attempts to find objects that he can sell. But it also re-imagines the scene, rendering it both individual and momentarily heroic. As such, the reality that defines Armenia, represented through the specific experience of people like Grigor, attains a monumental presence in the diasporic space.

The technique recalls similar 19th-century attempts at elevating the seemingly mundane and tragic. In mid century, as the landscape of Europe was adapting to the impact of industrial and political revolutions, several artists took it upon themselves to portray the marginalized of society. They used the large format of history paintings – generally reserved for more “noble” subjects such as Biblical tales, classical history, and royal chronicles – to give subjects from society’s periphery a heroic stature.



Anjargolian’s photograph recalls one such painting, Jean-François Millet’s *The Gleaners* (1857), in which three impoverished peasant women set in the foreground carry on the back-breaking task of rummaging through the “leftovers” after the harvest has been picked. Grigor’s portrayal in Anjargolian’s photograph recalls Millet’s painting, both compositionally and thematically. Together, the images rehabilitate and bring to viewers’ attention marginalized subjects typically ignored in the visual representation, and the social reality, of similarly difficult times.

One might ask: what type of an Armenia do these photographic projects create? And what type of a diasporic response might they generate? Anjargolian’s multi-faceted photographs suggests that, while the people they portray certainly elicit the viewer’s compassion, concern, and – as one visitor to the *How We Live* exhibition shared with me – even guilt, they simultaneously demand respect, resilience and a response. Juxtaposing their subjects’ poverty and dignity, humility and resilience, the photographs envision a different future by re-imagining the present.

The exhibition How We Live was undertaken in collaboration with the James Tufenkian Foundation. To view Anjargolian’s work, visit www.SaraAnjargolian.com.

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