



Armenian Institute
Final Report



Hermineh Keshish. Untitled 2006, monoprint.

Layered Lives Iranian Armenian Identity Through Contemporary Arts

Project Director: Dr. Susan Pattie

Background

This project began with the fieldwork of SOAS anthropologists, Dr. Abdollah Guivian and Veronica Castro, working with Nayer Qajar in Iran. They encountered a number of active and eloquent Iranian Armenian artists through their work and wished to bring them to London to show their art and express their thoughts on issues of identity. Guivian and Castro were also creating a documentary film in which some of these same artists spoke about their lives and work.

In London they contacted Dr. Susan Pattie, Director of the Armenian Institute, asking for assistance in bringing the project to fruition. In September 2005 work began on honing the ideas that Guivian, Castro, and Qajar had been considering while in Iran, building on their initial work there. Grant proposals were written and sent out. Dr. Guivian was forced to return to Iran in November due to family circumstances and visa problems following the receipt of his doctorate. Ms Castro followed in December, returning to London in February.



A view from the exhibition.

Artists exhibiting at Layered Lives, Brunei Gallery



Karen Babayan. The Medium 2006. Oil paint on wood.



Marcos Grigorian. The Four Seasons. Triptych 1995. Mixed media (straw, tar and clay on canvas).



Raffi Avnessian. Untitled 2001. Black & White photograph.

- Edman Aivazian, painter, (born in Tehran, lives in London)
- Raffi Avnessian, photographer, Founder and Director of Armenian Association for Photographers in Iran (Armenian Photographers of Iran), (lives in Tehran)
- Karen Babayan, painter, (born in Iran, lives in Leeds)
- Sonia Balassanian, multi-media artist, Founder of the Armenian Centre for Contemporary Experimental Art in Yerevan, (born in Iran, lives in New York)



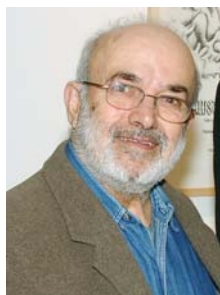
Sonia Balassanian. Brooding 2001. Video installation.



Henrik Khachatoorian.

- Leon Ghalichian, designer, sculptor, painter (born in Tehran, died in London)
- Sharis Garabedian D'Ambrosi, photographer, (born in Teheran, lives in Paris)

- Marcos Grigorian, painter, (born in Russia, lived in Iran, now in New York and Yerevan)
- Hermineh Keshish, painter, (lives in Tehran)
- Henrik Khachatoorian, graphic designer, theatre director, (lives in Tehran)



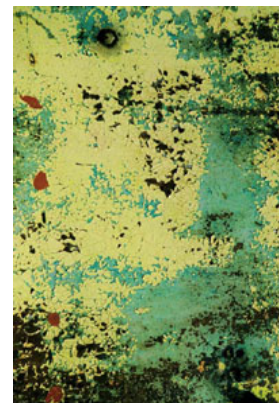
Edman Aivazian.



Edman Aivazian. Kashan I 2005 Acrylic on canvas.



Leon Ghalichian. Screen 2004. Inkjet print on plastic foil, laid on polycarbon.



Sharis Garabedian D'Ambrosi. Domik (detail) 2003. Digital print laid on aluminium.

Achievements and Highlights



Dr Susan Pattie at Opening Night.

away. Artists and visitors from the diaspora were very happy for the opportunity to meet those from Iran. The five days of the Opening provided a time for artists to meet each other and to speak with visitors about their work. Over the two month exhibition, some 6,500 people visited the Gallery. Added to this figure, many more attended the lectures, performances and workshops, bringing the total number of people reached to well over 7,000 (contrasted with the figure of 2,500 proposed in the grant application).



Co-organiser Nayer Qajar, Nairi Sahakian (curator, diaspora artists), Anahit Abad (filmmaker).

reflected in comments listed at the end of this report but others emerged in conversation and discussions during the period. The complex question of merging so-called “eastern” and “western” images and ideas was one emerging theme and deserves a follow-up workshop or seminar. Themes of long-term spatial and temporal belonging, distancing, insecurity, and its opposite, perhaps playfulness in the face of overt concerns, each were explored. The title of the exhibition, Layered Lives, was evident in most of the work and in the performances surrounding them. These conversations carried on into the Oral History workshops and there was a stimulating connection between these and the exhibition.

Opening Night on Thursday, 27 April 2006 was itself one of the highlights of the two month exhibition. The Brunei Gallery was crowded with people from different backgrounds, age groups, interests. The outgoing Director of SOAS, Prof. Colin Bundy gave the welcoming speech and noted that this was the first time SOAS was hosting a major event that focussed on Armenian culture. His speech and Dr Susan Pattie’s talk were followed by outstanding short performances by Shakeh Tchilingirian Major (London – modern dance) with Peter

The exhibition of Iranian Armenian arts, both from Iran and from the Iranian diaspora, was a “first” not only at the Brunei Gallery but in any major gallery in London. The combination of diaspora and “homeland” artists was well received and provided a stimulating and artistically rewarding experience for those who visited the exhibit. The Iranian artists themselves were pleased to take part in an exhibit that included artists of the older generation whose influences had been felt in Iran, though they had moved



Veronica Castro, co-organiser and curator (Iran artists).

As noted by some of the visitors, this exhibition was not only an opportunity to view new artists from Iran but also to see, in person, works by artists who are well-known to Armenians in the West, who have not exhibited in a major show in London. Of those exhibiting, only Edman Aivazian has exhibited widely in London. The works themselves raised very interesting

questions for the viewers, aside from the enjoyment of their artistic merit and beauty. Some of this is



Poet Varand reciting at Opening Night.

Barker (reading Armenian poetry in English), Varand (Iran – poetry), and Levon Chilingirian (London – violin). Chilingirian played a piece written by contemporary Iranian Armenian composer, Ludwig Bazil.



Levon Chilingirian playing a piece by Ludwig Bazil,

Other highlights included the afternoon of lectures and films on Saturday 29 April 2006, with the premiere of “Lullaby”, the documentary film by Guivian and Castro, being very well received. That evening a large crowd attended the innovative “One Thousand & One Journeys: an evening of Armenian dance, poetry and music”, presented by Shakeh Tchilingirian Major and Peter Barker. The audience was impressed by the beauty of the dance and the professional level of the event itself, combining traditional and modern dance, poetry recitations, and a musical interlude

provided by Rouben Haroutunian (Paris – *tar*) and Vahan Kerovpyan (Paris – *dap*), singing songs of the medieval troubadour Sayat Nova.. Beata Ghavimi also performed a solo dance. Hratch Tchilingirian

contributed to the evening through his original poetry as well as technical assistance and as artistic consultant.



Peter Barker.



Shakeh Tchilingirian Major.

The weekend continued with a poetry workshop on Sunday afternoon by Varand. This was very well-attended and enthusiastically received. He recited again in the evening, where one of his poems was finished as an ensemble with the audience spontaneously joining him in the last verses. He shared the stage with more music played by Haroutunian, accompanied by Kerovpyan. They provided a mixture of more traditional Armenian songs with *tar* and *dap* alongside two flamenco pieces. A delicious home-made dinner was prepared and served by London Iranian Armenians, with additional contributions of foods from Jakobs Deli, Gloucester Road..

Lectures covered a variety of topics related to Iranian Armenians and each was received with appreciation by those attending. Prof. Theo M van Lint (Oxford) gave a general background and context for the exhibition and Prof. Edmund Herzig (Manchester) spoke on the formative Safavid period. The largest audience came for the thought-provoking lecture on diaspora issues by editor of *Diaspora Journal*, Prof. Kachig Tololyan (Wesleyan, U.S.). We were fortunate that he was already coming to London and we were able to share minimal costs for his visit with the University of London.



Patricia Rozario.



The Chilingirian String Quartet.

The final event was a superb performance by the Chilingirian String Quartet with soprano Patricia Rozario. The audience was able to make a final visit to the gallery, opened during the interval of the concert, and were treated to the London premiere of

a work for quartet and soprano by the Iranian Armenian composer, Ludwig Bazil. The poetry of Sayat Nova in this piece was echoed by an earlier piece in the programme by John Taverner, a setting of poetry by Anna Akhmatova. A quartet by Haydn was the first piece of the evening.

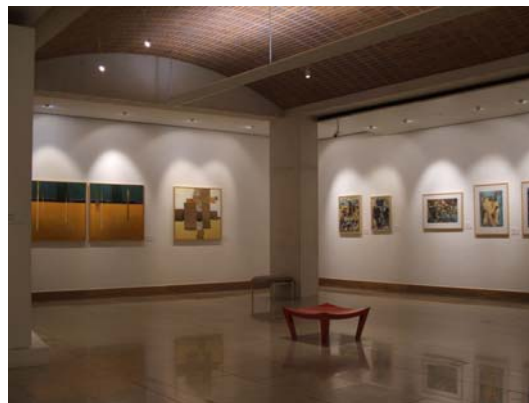
Comments by Others

Reactions from visitors and participants over the two months were almost uniformly positive, excited and enthusiastic.

From John Hollingworth, Director, Brunei Gallery.

"The exhibition Layered Lives was well received here at the Brunei Gallery, SOAS giving an insight into the cultural exchange represented through art and multi

media not previously shown receiving over 6,500 visitors, not including those attending the thorough programme of accompanying events. Press coverage of the exhibition included comprehensive listings both hard copy and online and inclusion in publications such as Aramco World and Middle East London magazine, with coverage and interviews by British Satellite News and Yorkshire Television."



Another view from the exhibition.

Comments from visitors to the exhibition and workshops' participants include:

"Moving and very emotional. Respect and thanks to all."

"Armenian Iranians have been part of our lives and upbringing in Tehran and we have always been proud to enjoy co-existing with them. Congratulations on the beautifully curated and well-observed art on display."

"Congratulations. How interesting to see the fusion of Armenian and Iranian culture."

"All works are simply wonderful! Congratulations and go on in that way!"

"Brilliant. Such rich work from such deprived and unknown country"

"Incredibly interesting, disturbing video – haunting – will remain with me for an extremely long time – provocative and worrying – dragged me from my lethargy! Congratulations – a masterpiece!"



At Opening Night.

"Well done. Iranian-Armenian spirit/body. Thank you – it reminds us of the layers of all our lives."

"I found nearly all images very western and familiar – why?"

"A number of haunting images. An insight into an old tradition with modern materials and interpretation."

"The exhibition is excellently prepared and well-selected. Repeat?"

"Well done to the Armenian Institute for organizing this excellent exhibition. Specially liked Edman's works, but all good."

"Wonderful! Hope this endeavor is followed by similar exhibitions in the very new future."

“Well done to all the young Armenian artists. Good to see the talent being finally showcased to a wider, not just Armenian audience. Well done to the Armenian Institute for putting the project together.”

“Strong, thought-provoking works, balanced exhibition.”

“I am excited with this exhibition – thanks to all of whom that provided this exhibition.”

“Splendid work – well organized and talented group.”

“Well done – it was interesting, very well presented and highly informative – my compliments to all the artists and all the organizers.”

“Inspiring work.”

Funding Organisations

The Armenian Institute is very grateful to the following organisations and people who generously supported Layered Lives.

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Nayer Qajar
Nairi Sahakian

Rita Barseghian
Sokina Begum
Levon Chilingirian
Sossie Kasbarian
Gagik Stepan-Sarkissian
Nairi Stepan-Sarkssian
Hratch Tchilingirian

We would also like to thank Tania of Jakobs Deli for her continuing and constant support.