

Arts Review

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Contemporary Art from Armenia

New Academy Gallery

Never having been to Armenia, all Armenians I have hitherto closely encountered have been living and working in exile, but they have always had certain traits in common; from the quintessential Twenties novelist Michael Arlen – first sitter to the poet/portraitist Osbert Sitwell, who described "his dark eyes, most alert and comprehending/ the face set in its formal frame of and undulating hair/ the elegant hands that nurse the elegant prose ...", through the Paris-based artist Kikor Bedikian, whose forte was the portrayal with honesty but without sentiment of little beggar boys, of whom he himself had been one, born in Armenia in 1908, orphaned in the massacres of 1917, and thereafter vagrant mendicant through Turkey, Greece and the Lebanon; to the cineaste Richard Serafian who directed that masterpiece of road chase films *Vanishing Point*, and the photographer whose name I have forgotten, but whose Harrods studio where he shared a birthday party with one of my dearest friends was a corner of old Armenia, complete even with his father's army uniform hanging in the place of honour, which he romantically dreamed of wearing in some future Free Armenia enterprise.

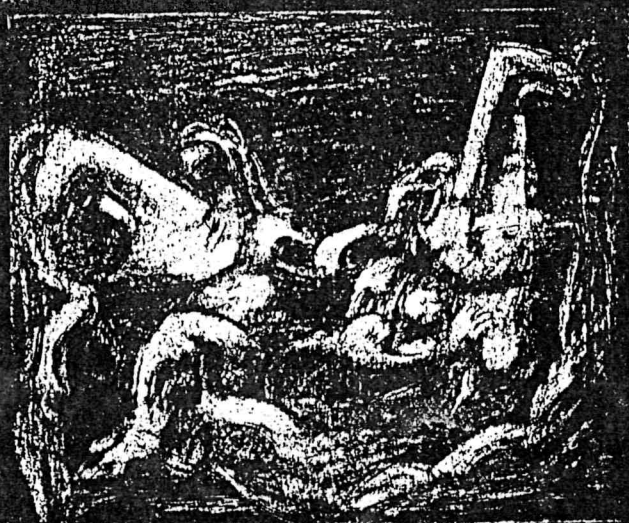
All were/are talented, sensitive and patriotic no matter how long parted from their motherland. It is therefore no surprise to me to find a similar common thread running through the imagery of all eleven of the exhibitors in this show, all of them living and working in Armenia, most in Yerevan, the birthplace of five of the eleven. Whether the art is figurative, as in *Mount Ararat from Mayissian Village* by Ashot Hovanesian (b 1929), or abstract as in *Chronicles of the Past* by Arthur Sarkissian (b 1960), it has in common the colours of the landscape, in particular the colours the houses are painted. High drama and an almost overpowering recognition of the quality of light is to be seen equally in the marginally figurative and near monochrome *Turmoil II* by Rudolph Khatchatrian (b 1937) and *In Defence of Anahid* by Rouben Abvovian (b 1948).

An historian writing of the work of one of the pioneers of contemporary Armenian art, the all-too-shortlived Minas Avetissian (1928-1975) observed "almost all of the artist's work can be grouped under the heading *My World*". Of course, that is true of any artist of merit; but it is more particularly valid in relation to contemporary Armenians, who, even if they studied as did Artzroonian in Leningrad and Khatchatrian in Moscow, have remained stalwartly and unmistakably Armenian. (to May 4)

MAX WYKES-JOYCE

CONTEMPORARY ART FROM ARMENIA

11th April – 4th May



Rudolph Khatchatrian 'Reclining Figures' 1990. Conté on Leykas 74 x 90 cm

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