

Across The Body

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

By

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DEDICATION

This one goes out to the nine-month-old little boy who carried his tattoo of faith in the Holy Land Jerusalem; my dad whose life and occurrence has been a great source of inspiration in my art. And to my mom who carried me for nine month into this world, I LOVE YOU!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank every soul who's been greatly supportive since day one of my arrival to the United States of America and those who have been generously encouraging from afar and providing positive energy into my continuous efforts to successfully complete this body of work; from East coast to West coast; from India to Lebanon, THANKS!

Special thanks to Sarah-Jane Issa Arida for her unequivocal guidance throughout my six years in the States; Brian Diaz for his patience; Gwyneth Vanlaven for bravely sharing this experience with me; Deborah, Mel and Luc for their unconditional love and understanding. Gail Scott White, Edgar Endress and Louis Karim I cannot thank you enough!

To my family, that has been participating in my pursuit of self-realization. Vick and Nay yours was the noblest of efforts.

Lastly, I would like to thank myself for putting myself in grave danger for a greater cause: for love and peace.

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LIST OF PERFORMERS

Performers from my family from Lebanon

Elizabeth Sarkissian Khatcherian, my father's sister

Hasmig Marashlian Sarkissian, my mother

Janet Mardoyan Sarafian, my mother's cousin, daughter of my grandmother's brother

Ohannes Garabed Sarkissian, my uncle

Krikor Vatché Sarkissian, my father

Vicken Sarkissian, my brother

Performers from the Armenian community from around the world

Sirvart Marashlian Ajemian, my mother's sister from Damascus Syria

Araks Petrossian, Armineh Hovanesian's grandmother from Vanak Tehran Iran – USA

Margrit Yousefian, Mathilsa Tavanian's grandmother from Tehran Iran – USA

Janet Bedoyan, Viken Bedoyan's mother from Beirut Lebanon

Jack Halladjian, Hagop Artinian's best friend from Beirut Lebanon – USA

Rita Ajemian's father from Jerusalem – Damascus Syria

ABSTRACT

ACROSS THE BODY

Nelly Sarkissian, MFA in Digital Arts

George Mason University, 2010

Thesis Director: Edgar Endress

This thesis is a plateau for cinematic documentaries that illuminates the story of cultural religious tattooing ritual of the Armenians, neighboring in the Middle East and Eastern Europe; A camera-pan that exposes the present geo-political regional conflict between Lebanon and Israel to the young generation, who at the present is restricted due to their Armenian-Lebanese identity to have access to their past. It is a momentary meditation on border and identity conflicts that creates an obstruction for reconnecting to the memory of the path of their both Lebanese and Armenian Christian identity. I challenge in my thesis the representation process of reconstructing the memory, collectively, within the exhibition space in order to depict the realm of universal quest of existence. This metaphorical body language transcends this journey from literal to lateral experience of survival and peace. This thesis is the journey of becoming, recognition and introspection of life. Each breath is a crucifixion and a resurrection.

INTRODUCTION

A stage in the Armenian history

From worshipping the sun to following Jesus Christ, Armenia¹ became the first nation to declare Christianity as its state religion in 301 AD. The Christian faith has shaped the Armenian culture so intimately that it permeates the very landscape at virtually every corner of the country. Once called, the land of one thousand and one churches², Armenians fought many battles in the name of Christianity and one of the most significant battles for the Armenian Nation was the Battle of Vartanantz. Around year 450 A.D. when the Persian King Hazkert tried to abolish Christianity and turn the people back to sun worship (paganism). The Armenians proclaimed their willingness to accept the Persian mandate in all respects providing their freedom to practice Christianity remained intact. Determined to fight for Christianity to the very end, Commander-in-Chief Vartan Mamigonian give his historic speech preparing the 60,000 Armenians physically and spiritually for the holy battle; Thus, chasing back the group of Persians. By the 10th century, a golden era of peace and prosperity followed, which saw the invention of a distinct alphabet, a flourishing of literature, art, folkloric arts, and

¹ Named Hayastan, became independent in 1991

² Ani (the city of 1001 churches) is the most loved and famous capital among the list of other Armenian capitals.



Figure 1. Khatchkar - From Armenia (left) and Jerusalem (right)

commerce, a unique style of architecture and the Cross-Stone carvings called katchkar.

By the 1890s, young Armenians were calling for a constitutional right to vote to put an end to discriminatory practices against them because they were Christians.

Ambitious Young Turks³ wanted to unite all of the Turkish peoples expanding the borders of Turkey eastward across the Caucasus all the way into Central Asia creating a new Turkish empire, a "great and eternal land" called Turan with one language and one religion, the Islam.

Along with the Young Turk's newfound "Turanism" there was a dramatic rise in Islamic fundamentalist agitation throughout Turkey. Christian Armenians were once again branded as infidels.

There were also big cultural differences between Armenians and Turks.

³ Consisting of Mehmed Talaat, Ismail Enver and Ahmed Djemal

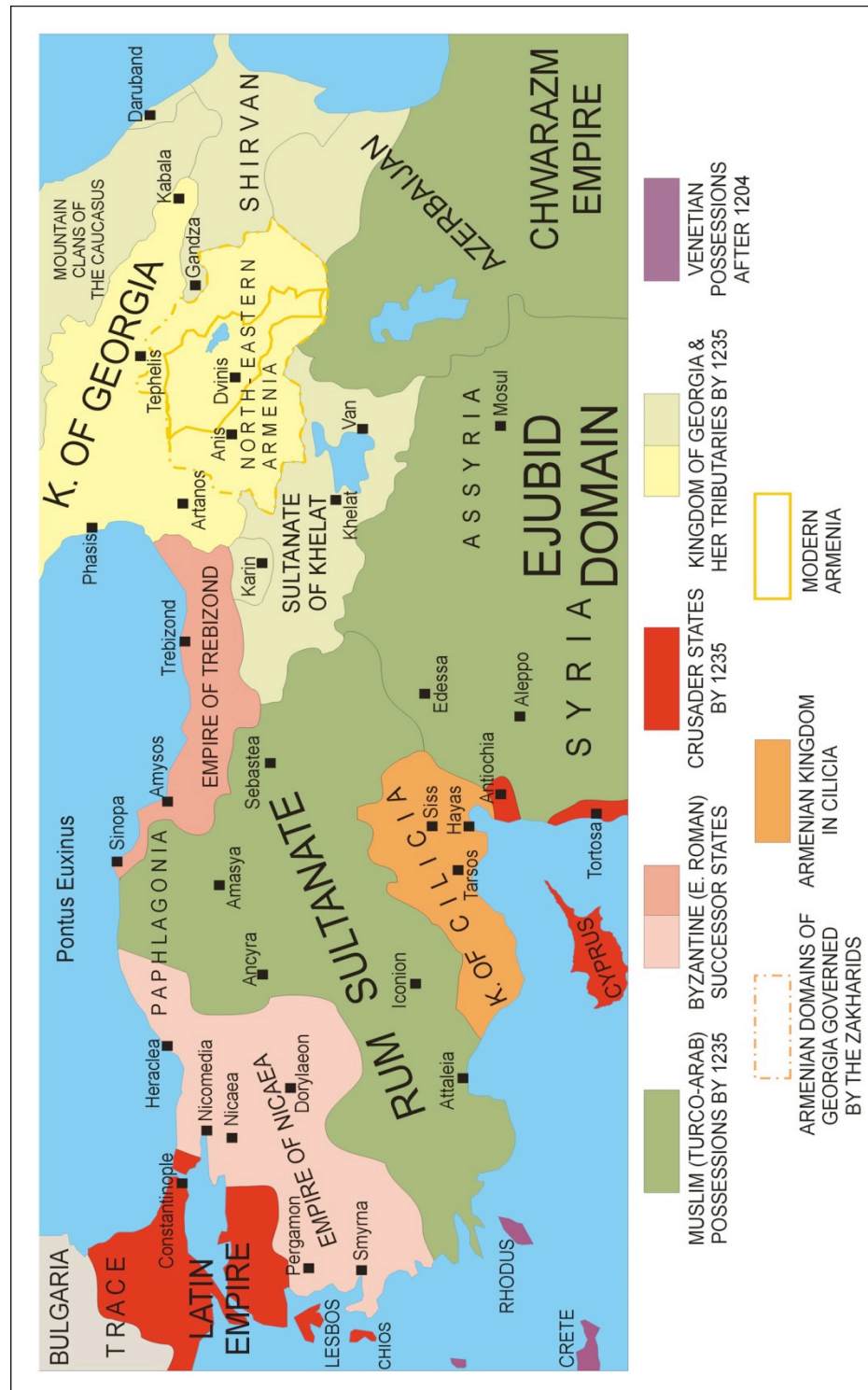


Figure 2. Cilicia and Armenia, Source: Andrew Anderson © 2000

The Outbreak of World War I provided the perfect opportunity to solve the "Armenian question" once and for all. A series of “Death March” were planned after decapitating the intellectuals and the men of the Armenian villages to avoid any attacks; leaving the women, children and elderly unprotected.

An estimated 75 percent of the Armenians on these marches perished, in the Syrian Desert specifically in Deir ez-Zor as it was designated as final destination point of the Armenian refugees.

By the initiative of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Diocese of Aleppo, an Armenian genocide memorial church was constructed on that site.

Today, on April 24 of every year, tens of thousands of Armenian pilgrims from all over the world visit the memorial site to commemorate the genocide victims, with the presence of their religious leaders.



Figure 3. Armenian Demonstration - April 24. 2010 - Armenian commemoration march in Lebanon,
Source: Achnag PhotoPress

RECONSTRUCTION OF ARMENIA

From Cilicia to Lebanon

Armenians, as I was told, were living in accordance with the Turks sharing the same land. However, the territory within the Ottoman ruling was definitely zoned and left at growing peace especially during the Ottoman empire until the birth of the one nation one language Islamic Turkish new world concept that was slowly pressuring the Armenian neighbors. Ironically, I define it to be a very identical situation facing the fate of the Palestinians with the Israelis pressuring the natives to migrate.

On the map figure 2, I indicate the geographical existence of once called Cilicia, the present southeast turkey as the prosperous land of Armenians.

What is interesting, every time I face the question of where I come from; Fellow Armenians would want me to refer to which Cilician villages my grandparents belong. My mother's family came from Aintab, and my father's from Kilis. I am from Bourj Hammoud⁴ Lebanon.

Continuing, the winter of 1890's sabotaged any plan of a strategic comeback attack or an escape; left my great grandfather Der Krikor Sarkissian, the priest, escape with my grandfather, Madathia Sarkissian, who shed bloody tears, as my Aunt, my father's sister Elizabeth describes. My great grand father was obliged to travel south all the way

⁴ One of the most condensed Armenian towns in Lebanon after Anjar in the Bekaa Valley

through the Anatolian desert, crossing Deir ez-Zor reaching Lebanon. An embedded reconstruction of traveling “south” underscores the direction this journey travels “South” to the Lebanese southern borders.

So, a new chapter began for my family in Bourj Hammoud, Lebanon; and for all Armenians displaced in Kessab, Aleppo and Damascus in Syria; Baghdad in Iraq; Amman in Jordan and Cairo in Egypt.

This is an important fact that deserves attention, this early adoption of Christianity by the Armenians due to the importance that it had in the history of the Armenians, in the process of formation of an Armenian ethnic identity and for the role that it still plays in defining the boundaries of that identity. I am Christian Armenian, and I can hardly imagine a non-Christian Armenian.

Preservation of identity

Any nation such as Armenia, who goes through genocide, gets to reinforce and reunite the act of faith and belief. Unambiguously, I emphasize the undying spirit of solidarity, the old, common background, the historical experiences, shared values and ideals, social concerns and family aspirations that bond the Armenians together and have brought us where we are today in the immigrated countries: Lebanon etc...

However, I believe that the Armenian identity nowadays within the wave of globalization is striving for its enduring existence; miraculously when its ancient culture, sacred religion and historical language meet, there is celebration of the Armenian identity and its

Christianity; deeply rooted bondage throughout the history; deeply pierced in the skin.

In this regard, I would like to quote William Saroyan, the Armenian American author from Fresno, California: “For, when two of them meet anywhere in the world, see if they will not create a New Armenia!”

The Diaspora in Lebanon

From a small family effort of building Haigazian College and becoming its first director in Bourj Hammoud to the sermons in its little conjoint chapel, my grandfather, on the road to recovery, combined his efforts with whoever had survived the Genocide. They took upon themselves the extraordinary task of rethinking their role as intellectuals of an Armenian Diaspora, of giving a sense to it in the light of what had happened.

The Armenian life was reactivated for a promising generation through churches, schools and the charitable associations to build a sense of Identity. We certainly lived a clustered life in encountering only Armenians, hardly making any Lebanese friends up until the years of college.



Figure 4. Dad - Constructing the mockup for his school “Yervant Demirijian” and serving the army

The Armenian youth is culturally sheltered in between segregated schools and Armenian Scouts. However, since the residential areas are dispersed in different locations, it is difficult to describe that living as ghetto.

With their business savvy and survival skills, Armenians have coped with the French Colonization and all sorts of political upheavals happening in the Middle Eastern countries after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and their own quest for independence⁵.

These geopolitical challenges were major shapers of identity and it's the Diaspora nationalist role to refuse to pledge allegiance to that particular homeland or tongue.

So, it is necessary for me to underline that both language and religion are the two primary vehicles that correspond with the challenge of preserving this identity.

⁵ November 22 1943, National Lebanese Independence Day from the French Mandate since 1920.

Conflict of identity

During the years following 1968, Lebanon was drawn into a profound political crisis centered in the conflict of Palestinian resistance. In the midst of the turbulence, the Christian Maronites⁶ pressured the Armenian leadership to take a political position favorable to them.

Armenians, who proved over the years their peaceful and supporting role, held status quo on the question of belonging and thus rejected fighting for beside the Christians of Lebanon. Armenian political parties⁷ decided to work constructively for the preservation of Lebanese power-sharing consociationalism⁸.

In spite of this “positive neutrality”, Armenians were forcefully engaged in fights and many civilian casualties occurred, mostly because of the Armenian concentrated regions like Bourj Hammoud and Karatina. Families, including my own, who were residing in that area, suffered great losses. But they successfully maintained their positions. The overcoming of these clashes has strongly influenced the Armenians in Lebanon, especially after being portrayed as betrayers. It naturally awakened the sense of belonging to their nation, to Lebanon.

⁶ Dominant Christian group in Lebanon

⁷ The Pan-Armenian National Movement (PNM) –Tashnag and Hentchag are both socio-democratic parties and Ramgavar function as a socialist party.

⁸ A form of government involving guaranteed group representation

Today, a question leaves many of us facing the belonging truth of our identity. Are we Armenian-Lebanese or Lebanese-Armenian?

In the light of this confusion, Charles Aznavour⁹ in one of his interviews said that he felt more privileged than others being a two hundred percent man, one hundred percent Armenian and one hundred French! This is a mere observation of the national pride of every Armenian who is born in the Diaspora's embracing nations and endured with the country's all time political ups-and-downs.

From alien to citizens, today, many young Armenians like me settled in or outside Lebanon, prior to our birthright of Armenian national identity, carry the national Lebanese passport and have no right to the Armenian passport without proven residency in Armenia. Armenia, like any sovereign country, mandates its immigration policy on its own Diaspora. Therefore, many Armenians, currently have dual-citizenships mainly Canadian or American along the Lebanese one.

In addition to that, an ever-present past, the French colonialism has a major "memory" stake in influencing the way the Lebanese community, including Armenians represent themselves nowadays.

An educational system inherited, the Lebanese are bound to learn three languages at early age, as the French education was implemented in schools along with Arabic and English after the completion of elementary school. Most Lebanese are trilingual, or quad-lingual

⁹ Famous Armenian decent French singer, who is currently the French cultural ambassador in Armenia

in the case of Armenian-Lebanese citizens who learn all three languages starting from kinder garden. Moreover, the use of Turkish by the 3rd generation genocide survivors constitutes a 5th language.

Another critical element that challenges all nations including the Armenian Diaspora in preserving their identity is the practicing of the Armenian language versus the extrovertly American, globally dominant English web-scripts.

In the next chapter, I will highlight more the characteristic of this language that serves as a vehicle to equality between men and women.

Border Conflict

Raising the question of independent Israel has evoked many fierce and continuous combats in the region; With Palestinian camps in Lebanon, residing Palestinian refugees, the battle front ground was, in addition to Gaza and West Bank, relocated at the border of South Lebanon with the presence of Hezbollah¹⁰ at the front lines.

¹⁰ Literally “Party of God”, Shiite Islamist political and paramilitary organization based in Lebanon

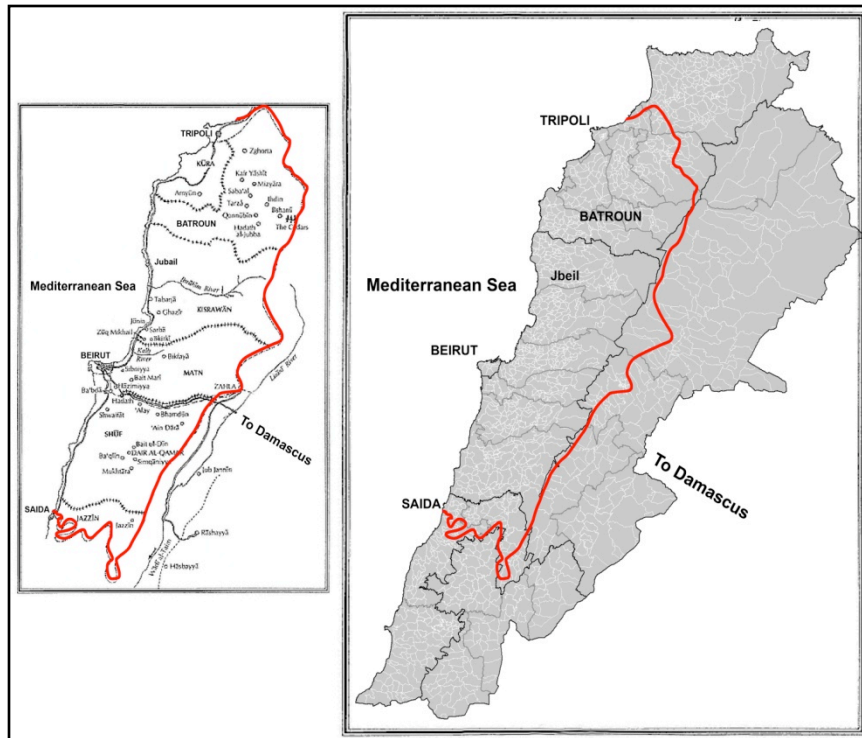


Figure 5. Lebanon map - From Greater Lebanon (1920) to independent Lebanon (1934),
Source: University of California Press



Figure 6. The Blue Line. The drawing, Source: Thomas Blomberg © using the UNIFIL map,
deployment as of July 2006

Over the years of resisting the Israeli occupation of Lebanon, Hezbollah gained a surge of support from Lebanon's border population, and in the summer of 2006, waged a cross-border raid against Israel. Hezbollah with their leader Hasan Nasrallah¹¹ revealed its strength in resisting the Israeli Defense Forces known as IDF.

With an unsuccessful series of critical peace negotiations for Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation, today the Lebanese-Israeli border remains shut at the Blue line. (fig. 6)

The border marking was drawn by the United Nations for the purpose of identifying the Israeli withdrawal line from South Lebanon as well as the extension that followed between Lebanon and the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights at the edge of the Shebaa Farms, another disputed border-area overseeing Kiryat Shmona, an Israeli front line targeted village.

Unfortunately, the movement of Lebanese and Armenian citizens has almost completely halted across the present border due to conflicts between these two countries, which is creating overall a challenge for anyone wishing to go on a pilgrimage.

The Story of a Pilgrimage

Christian pilgrims are as old as the biblical forefathers. From earliest times these journeys were a unique expression of the Israelites' worship of God. The journeys continue from

¹¹He became the movement's leader after the assassination of Abbas al-Musawi in 1992 by the Israeli government

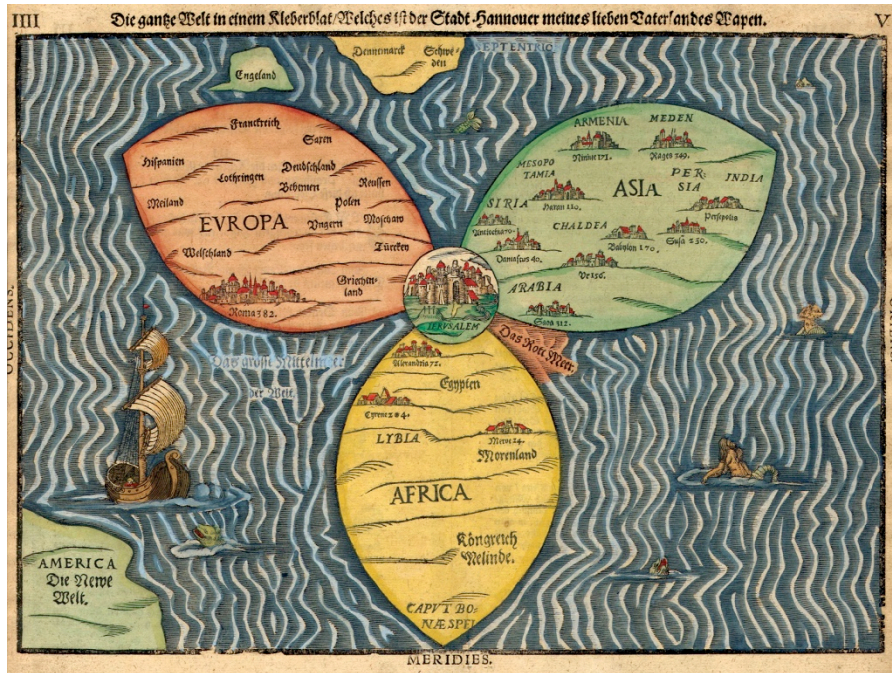


Figure 7. Jerusalem woodcut map - (16th century), Source: Heinrich Bunting - Germany

the time of Moses down to the time of the family of Jesus and the stages of his life.

Pilgrimage to Holy Places is an important part of the Orthodox way of life. At the same time for many contemporaries it is the ultimate need of spiritual mentoring and teaching road to Holy Places, which becomes starting point of way to Christ.

Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover¹², much in the same way, was the journey of the pilgrimage that took place during the holy week of Easter. He would enter into the times and places of the Christian story and remember the events surrounding the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Standing where Jesus was baptized, crucified, or buried connects his soul more intimately to the faithful. Visiting the shrine of a saint encourages the pilgrim to act with the same faith and courage to overcome all fears.

Christians in the first few centuries after Jesus' death and resurrection journeyed from Europe and other parts of the globe to the sacred sites of the Holy Land, eager to grow in their understanding of Jesus and to identify with his life. And ever since, Jerusalem, the holy city, has become the most sacred location to connect Christian worshippers to the history of their faith.

Armenians in Jerusalem

Ancient Jerusalem is an interesting irony of history blended into modern life. The turmoil

¹² Passover, important Jewish festival commemorating the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt and their safe migration across the Red Sea

of past centuries and millennia still exists behind its walls; old Jerusalem is divided into the Jewish Quarter, the Armenian Quarter, the Muslim Quarter and the Christian Quarter, which can be accessed by 7 gates. However, an 8th gate, the Golden Gate was sealed in the 6th century. It is believed to be the gate of mercy and of eternal life and that it will be reopened with the arrival of the Messiah. Thus, in its 48 sq. mi. relatively small piece of land, it represents this unique global convergence of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Some early Armenian migrations to the Middle East can be understood in the context of the Armenian Christian faith. This accounts in particular for the case of the Armenian presence in Jerusalem, whose focal point, since perhaps the 16th century, is the Cathedral and Monastery of Saint James, a traditional place of Armenian learning and pilgrimage.

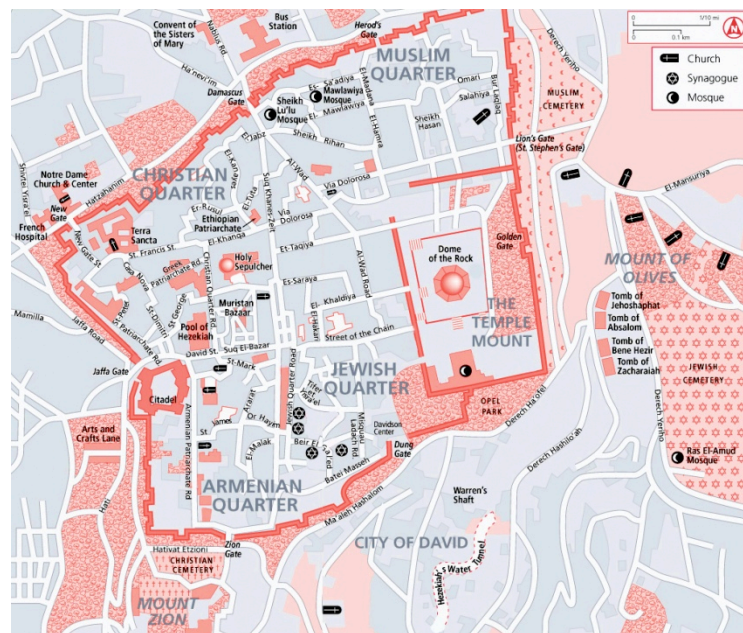


Figure 8. Old City of Jerusalem - The four quarters, Source: frommers.com/destination

The unsuccessful series of peace process agendas between Palestinians and Israelis and with the support of the United States of America, at the Camp David II¹³ talks in America in July 2000, proposed that the Old City be divided into two sections: Israeli control over the Jewish and Armenian quarters and Palestinian control over the Christian and Muslim quarters.

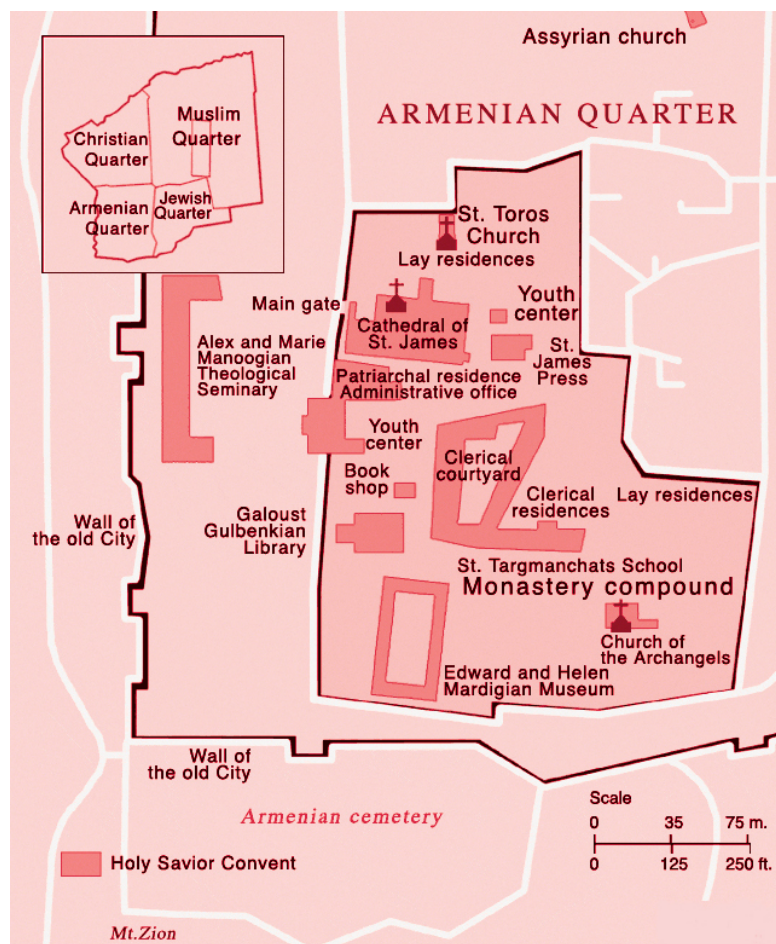


Figure 9. The Armenian quarter, Source frommers.com/destination

¹³ A presidential retreat and a major hosting ground for several peace initiative meetings

The Story of a Tattoo

Tattooing has been discouraged or forbidden by most Christian churches throughout history. While according to biblical records indicating that tattooing was prohibited early ages, Christians widespread in the Middle East and Eastern Europe were getting inked with the Cross of Jerusalem to embed their religious belief on their flesh. Tattooing a cross became a religious marking as it allied its bearer with the memory of his sacred journey for devotional purposes and in addition for claiming social distinction for an act of religious devotion.

Tattooing is a practice that entitles the worshipper to be called as “mahdes”¹⁴ in Armenian, recognizable from that artistic anthropological, religious and iconographic tattoo similar to “The Hajj”¹⁵ in the Islamic tradition after visiting Mecca¹⁶.

In the old city of Jerusalem, tattooing iconographic religious images on the right arm at end the journey for the pilgrim has become a heritage from the ancient tradition, a significant body mark inherited throughout the ancient traditions.

However, only the Coptic and Armenians are active practitioners of this tradition.

This tradition has all but disappeared in recent history, due to the instability of the region.

Coptic design of these tattoos dates back to the 13th century, an inheritance from the Razzouk family, who settled in Palestine.

¹⁴ The Armenian word for a pilgrim is mah'dess (mah: death, dess: I saw)

¹⁵ Is a pilgrimage of pagan origin to Mecca

¹⁶ A city located near the Red Sea coast in Saudi Arabia considered the most sacred of the Muslim cities. Only Muslims are permitted access to the region of the pilgrimage

A second source of the tattoo is the famous little Armenian shop right opposite the main entrance to the Armenian Cathedral of St. James.

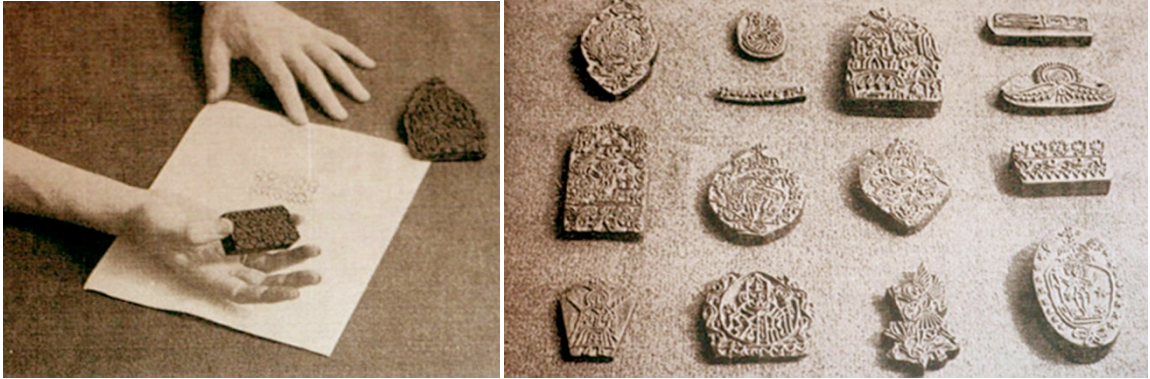


Figure 10. Stamping method of the tattoo woodblocks, Source: “Coptic tattoo design” by John Carswell and Margaret Murray

The tattoo was a common symbolic icon that was shared by all Christian believers as homage to their pilgrimage journey; the dominance of both Armenian and Egyptian cultures in performing the tattoo was due to the concentration of both societies in the Holy City.

Both groups inherited the religious images from their ancestors either on some forms of sheets or original collection of woodblocks, carvings on olive trees.

This tattoo had no restriction of age gender or national identity.

During Easter holy week, families would depart from their homelands on a journey of a pilgrim to the Holy City. Fathers would be mostly accompanying their sons and daughters. Certainly it was the Easter celebration mixed with quest of faith.

The choice of design is usually an equilateral cross, whose bearers would mostly be men on their right arms, but not women. Girls usually have a small tattoo on the upper arm where it would be concealed by the sleeves of the dress. Virgin girls often chose

Annunciation design to increase the chance of having children later: a characteristic image of fertility rather than a symbolic mark of devotion. All designs were accompanied with the date of the pilgrimage. It was believed that it was similar to the journey when Jesus' father Joseph took Jesus from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to register his name. Despite the similarity of the events of going into the Holy City, these events aren't related in term of registering the date below the tattoo.

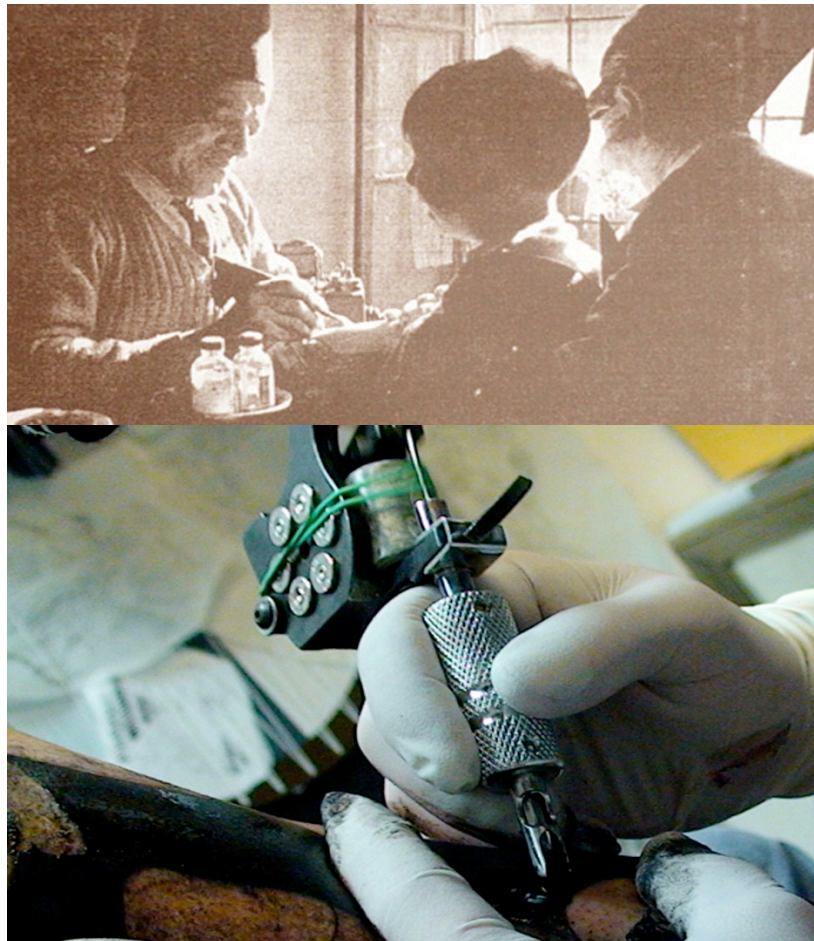


Figure 11. Tattooing then and now



Figure 12: Close-up shot of the needle

“Being common in both religions [Christianity and Islam], bearer of a “Hajji tattoo” was never persecuted for its physical appearance on the arm. On the contrary, it was sacred for both religious communities before the revolution¹⁷.” Armineh Hovanesian explains on behalf of her one hundred one year old grandmother Arax Petrossian Markarian residing in Glendale California, originally from Iran. “However, after the revolution, it wasn’t a question of concealing the tattoo since it was mandatory that women should respect the national dress-code¹⁸.”

Trying to avoid persecution by current religious extremists in areas such as Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the political active turmoil in the Middle East, nowadays the “hajji tattoo” artist will recommend the visitor to have it inked below the ring finger or in the inner part of the upper arm.

The Holy Cross and its significance

Recognizing the important significance of the cross in Christianity, its association with Jerusalem clearly is bound to the imitation of Christ on Good Friday.

¹⁷ The revolution transformed Iran from a monarchy under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to an Islamic republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution and founder of the Islamic Republic

¹⁸ Women should wear long dress covering their body and showing no skin

The precise nature and position of the cross are uncertain. In the old days, I heard many stories regarding this one tattoo shop around the corner of the St. Sepulcher Church. This is where you would pick the design of the tattoo and its placement on the arm. Most of the pilgrims carry it in the middle of the arm. However, I hear because of the Islamic periods in Jerusalem, a lot of the visitors received their tattoo in parts of the body that can be hidden, like the shoulder, the wrist and sometimes married women would tattoo it on the index finger to be able to cover it with the wedding ring. Religious conflicts left many visitors I met during the course of my research indecisive about the importance of receiving this marking. The tattoo's visibility vis-à-vis inner experience is a question of faith. A lot of pilgrims dwell on it regardless of its significant representation of accomplishing their journey.



Figure 13. Embroidering the Cross from “The Dialogue” – Directing assistance Ninar Keyrouz

NARRATIVE OF THE BODY

The dialogue

One of the least mentioned stories within my family is the story of my great grandparents, who and miraculously survived the Turkish atrocities; these stories are shared occasionally at family reunions.



Figure 14: The Sarkissian pilgrim family



Figure 15. Visual gender equality and the Trinity - Top view from “The Dialogue” – Translated by Bushra Jaber, Tony Taouk in Arabic and Mel Saroyan in English

Unfortunately, with the death of older members of the family, these stories have somewhat disappeared and have been left as streams of thought in the out collective memory. In the midst of my brother Vicken’s constant discourse with my late grandmother Lucia, in Turkish, I always found myself questioning identity and existence. Surrounded with several family members all marked with this tattoo, this part of the exhibition was setup in order to capture this particular narrative about my family’s pilgrimage. I believe it is a personal effort to represent that, which holds in its singularity the complexities of the intermixing images and languages. It holds a mere reflection of the gender equality transmitted through its video’s framing (fig. 15) as well preserving the spoken Armenian.

A very important notion to highlight is the Armenian languages’ unspecified indicative in its grammar for the male or female. It is distinct in that sense where you would speak for hours about a person without being able to discern whether or not the subject is a “she” or a “he”. Despite the gender intermix; I separated this dialog intentionally in order to underline the Armenians’ patriarchal society. It was a natural portrait of the

community itself. However, the “skin map” projection rebalances and detunes the gender through the construction of the map with both male and female skin.

The stranger

I wanted in my journey to focus on that aspect in encountering the other, the authority. Effortless conflict activation was pending and forthcoming at the happenstance of an expected encounter. Whether it was the encounter at the Israeli embassy in Washington D.C. for the passage to Jerusalem, or going to the border, the representation of this “Other”, as much as it was thoroughly politicized, it was intended to remain undefined. My developing interaction with the Israeli authorities in the progress of my work, at a turning point, became an intentional act to seek the rejection stamped as a proof of denial.

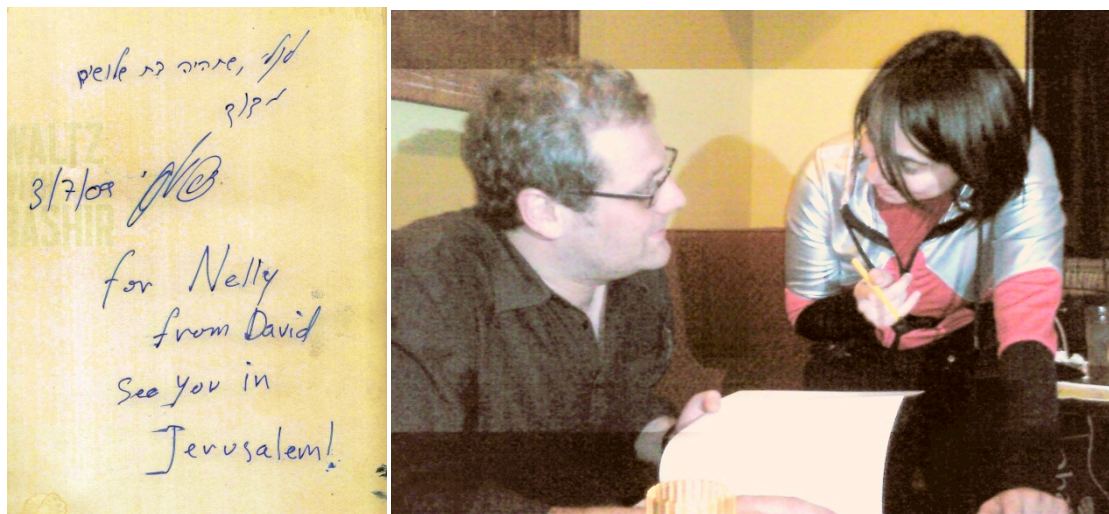


Figure 16. “See You In Jerusalem!” - Director of “Waltz of Bashir” David Polonsky’s encouraging message

The pilgrim

Body language is the root and fortunately it is universal. This thesis project employed walks most effectively as a means of investing its characters with distinctive personalities and to evoke particular emotions. In the early sequences, the protagonist is graphically defined as an insecure, cautious and immature type by her hesitant walk and tendency to cling to her naïveté and fear.



Figure 17. Ana Mendieta's "Fuego de Tierra" in research of origin - Visual Convergence

My control over my movement increased as I attained a higher degree of self-knowledge. I bravely embark on this journey guided by an overarching sense of responsibility for sacred tradition upon much perilous steps in the field, questionably clean and clear of mines.

The majestically picturesque and serene landscape mocks peace in its peacefulness and layering. My journey comes into existence by the paradoxical logic of dreams where all sorts of rules are suspended yet credibility is never entirely scarified. More real than the pure reality, daytime gives way to dreams and allows the visitor to immerse himself for a moment longer into the world in which he is irretrievably lost.

Avid and quite unique is the departure from the unfamiliar path at the level of the unknown character portrayal it's shunning of theatrical bombast and its exposure of human vulnerability and human kindness.

Bare feet, thrown into relief by unobtrusive scenes contributes to the development of the narrative isolating and yet long for human connectivity...by the contrast of the early scene driven by sheer panic, the halt and holding on the barbwire at the gate appears not just assured but arrogant as a concentrated movement underscoring my tendency towards grotesquely expression.

In the last segment of the movie in the silent imprint on my skin there resides a negotiation of superficially deeply impressed cross, which I was carrying surreptitiously.

The interview

It was at the beginning of this project that the duty of memory recovery became this particular task of creating friction with the subjects.

To extract these particular stories, the invitation to being heard was part of the collective remapping of this journey. Its effort constructed the "skin map" projection as a representation of the past through the living expression of these guardians.

In the exercise of remembering, a few subjects rejected their participation of remembrance in contrast of subjects who spoke of their intimate memories emotionally. I felt strong about members who totally forgot about their experience and were left with a simple marking of Jerusalem on their skin.

The performance of holding the arm straight up for at least 15 minutes was an unjust endurance. However with the narration process, the physical pain diminished.

Interestingly enough, most of these men and women's pilgrim storytelling were about praying for their own fate and their soul-searching.

Also, most of the encounters were based on one-on-one meetings with Armenians in Lebanon and the United States of America. However in order to seize the precise framework, I have not restricted myself from recording the voices of the memory over the Internet through VOIP skype. A collection of registration was vocally transcribed and registered from Australia, New Zealand and Sweden.

I believe this correspondence, dispersed globally, will be taking part of a future project despite the fact that they remained unrepresented during this particular presentation.



Figure 18. Sessions with the interviewees - Armineh Hovanesian instructing her grandmother



Figure 19. Testing the equipment



Figure 20. “Springbreak” Installation



Figure 21. “Making things happen” - With Prof. Edgar Endress, Sean Watkins, Solomon Wondimu, Jeff Golden, Amir Shahlan, John Uthoff, Justin Raphael Kass-Roykovich, Photography: Gee Vanlaven



Figure 22. The final exhibit, Composition: Mel Saroyan

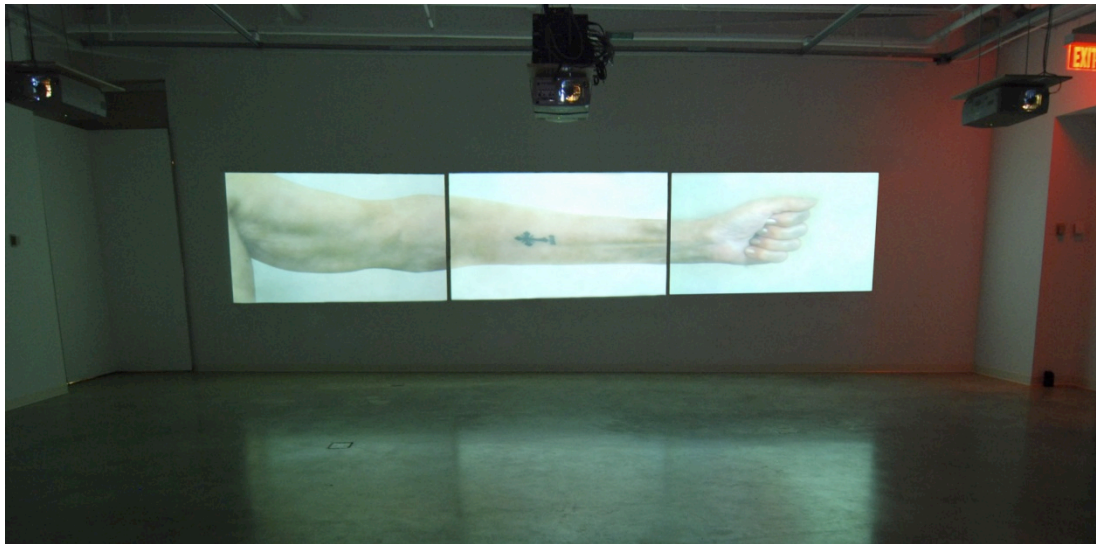


Figure 23. "Skin Map" projection - Triptych from "Across The Body" exhibition, Photography: Deborah Lash



The visitor

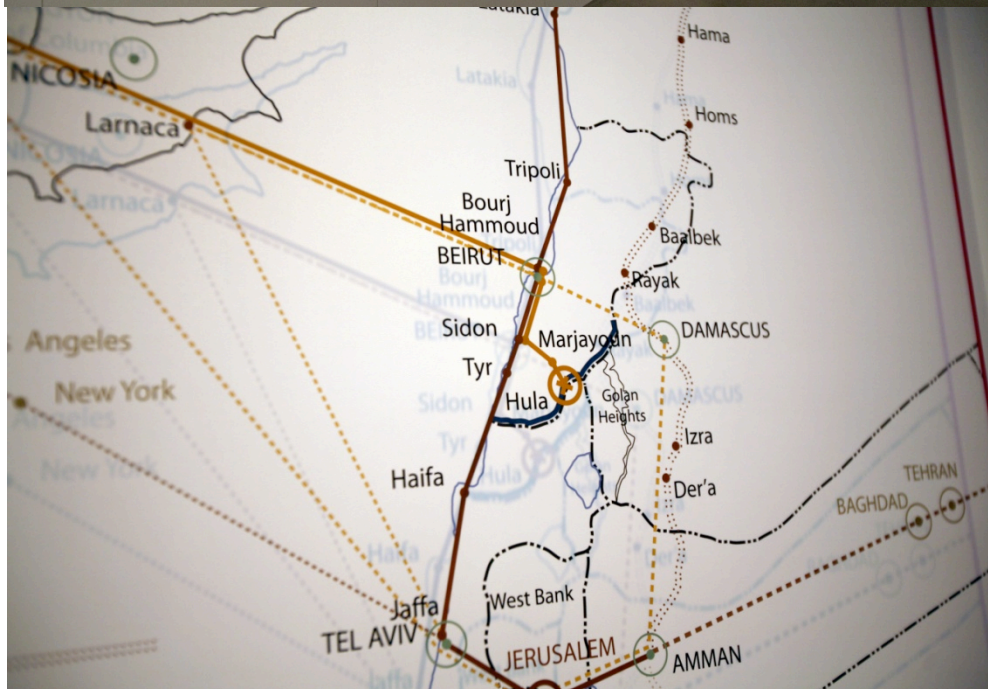
“To go on a pilgrimage one must travel EAST” is an ancient quote. Relative to the gallery space, its entrance faced EAST.

The visitor’s journey takes place by the act of observing the pilgrimage represented in various parts in the exhibit. The center point of the space becomes a pivoting point for the visitor to receive visual data from three projections to virtually construct in the mind the overall conflict of identity. Despite the relatively long segments (8 minutes per piece) standing is the only option in order to participate in the process of self-realization that I experienced while shooting my projects.



Figure 24. The Audience, Photography: Elmo Thamm

**To go on a pilgrimage,
one must always travel East.**



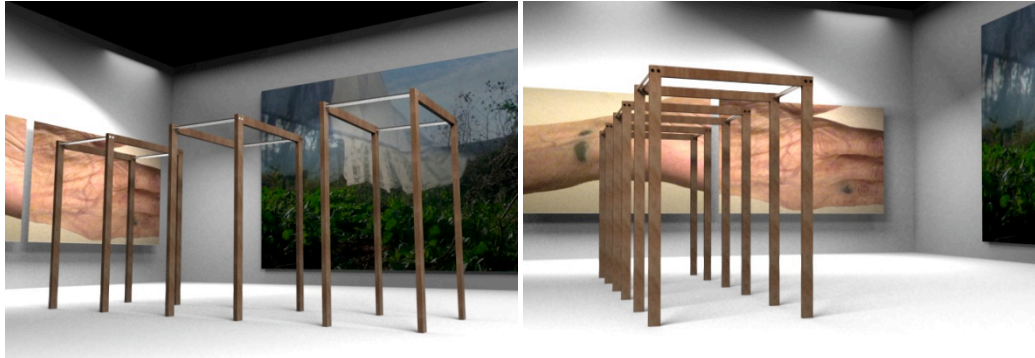


Figure 25. “The Passage” - An installation piece that allows the visitor to experience the 7 gated Old City of Jerusalem, 3D Rendering: James Boisvert

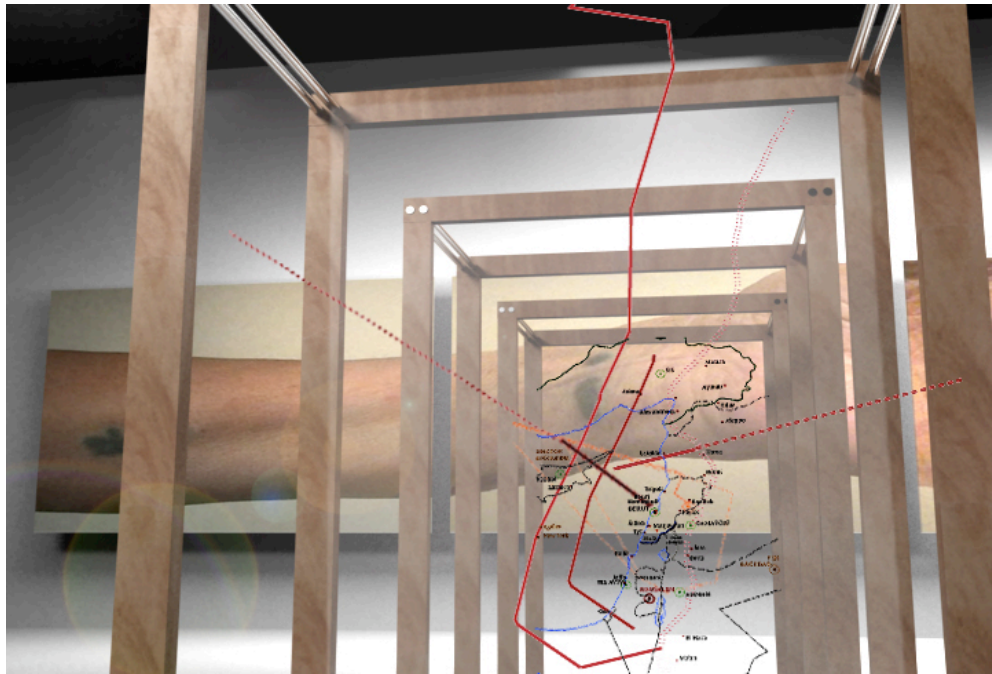


Figure 26. Close up on the gates - Each wooden frame represents a gate. Each gate carry a route map printed on transparent sheet to create one visual dimension of different access routings to Jerusalem

REMAPPING THE JOURNEY

The persistence of the tattoo into the present emphasizes the duration of survival and the strength of national identity. Its length denotes the very structure of the bearer's cultural identity. The passage of time and the age of the tattoo portray the survival, as it is a tradition that has been directly handed down from the first generation of survivors. Like genetic information passed on from parent to child biologically, the tattoo is an anthropological inheritance. With one simple act of marking the skin with a small iconographic image, the pilgrim's experience is translated into a live archive, a breathing identity.

In its permanence and persistence, the tradition of the "mahdes" has become a statement, a source of strength in overcoming repression. The act symbolizes in its agonizing pressure on the skin the endurance of the pain by the pilgrim, the story of survival and strength in face of death and destruction.

The journey literally and metaphorically remaps history of an entire nation for one individual through time, space and skin.

To extend the metaphor somewhat further, the tattooed cross has become the mark where the reconstruction of the bearer/pilgrim has occurred, and it also represents virtually the latitude and the longitude of a map a pilgrim might use to travel to the site of worship and

the gallery space itself. In terms of the layout of the exhibit, I kept in mind the shape of the cross while laying out the pieces, making sure that just like an equilateral cross, each wall of the gallery would give visual input to the viewer from the middle of the room.

The Memory: remembering, forgetting and forgiving

Crossing the threshold of pain of the memory, presentation in the gallery space becomes a structure that enables me to steer the participant's contemporary way of thinking.

Through this, the participant *becomes* part of the memory by whatever is presented visually. That memory itself becomes embroidery that is now embedded in the participant's identity, bringing introspection relative to his own cultural past. Thus, the observer becomes the *present* with respect to the visual input.

This projection of time is affected by mental images as I attempt to solve the problems of identity conflict and reconstruction of memory; a theory explained by Maurice Halbwachs on collective memory. As a presenter, I am the feeder of the collective memory: the fading imagery of the cross on the skin, my skin impression at the border, and the embroidery of the women. This collage of elements is constantly feeding the mind the experience of the life remaining from the past. "This is the moment of reflection," adds Halbwachs, "so that collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past in the light of the present." (Halbwach, 34)

I am the *presenter* who is conspiring to trace the social process in which the recognition in the present is being preserved in the collective consciousness of the coming generation. In contrast, ordinary forgetting follows the fate of happy memory, remembering and retrieving in relation to elapsed time. It is not amnesia; it is simply a result of old age that creates poetic wisdom arising against the backdrop of silent memory - the memory that many of my subjects could not recount despite their pilgrimage. This poetic wisdom is what leads to forgiveness.

Finally, growing up as an Armenian, slogans like “We forgive but not forget” beckons us more to poetry and to wisdom. A commandment to forgive our neighbors is embedded in our collective memory, especially based on Christian scriptures.

In Memory, History, Forgetting, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida notes,

“Forgiveness should be exceptional and extraordinary, standing the test of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of the historical temporality.”

This “test of the impossible” is what we must now confront.

The most irreducible aspect between forgiving and forgetting is the irreconcilable that still evokes growing tragedy for the present Armenian Diaspora.

Denial of Access

A body-political exchange took place by approaching the Israeli embassy in Washington, D.C. Perhaps due to racial resemblance I was addressed at first in Hebrew. However, I

proceeded to meet with the consular, which after six months of vague communication over the telephone, asked me to come and collect my American travel document with a refusal stamp from the Israeli government. It went without mention, of course, but she admitted that it was due to my Lebanese citizenship.

In the face of this rejection, I was thankful that I hadn't committed the mistake of applying for an Israeli visa with my Lebanese passport. A denial stamp from the Israeli government in my Lebanese passport would have precluded my access to my own country, as I would have been detained and investigated for treason for having Hebrew writing on my Lebanese papers.

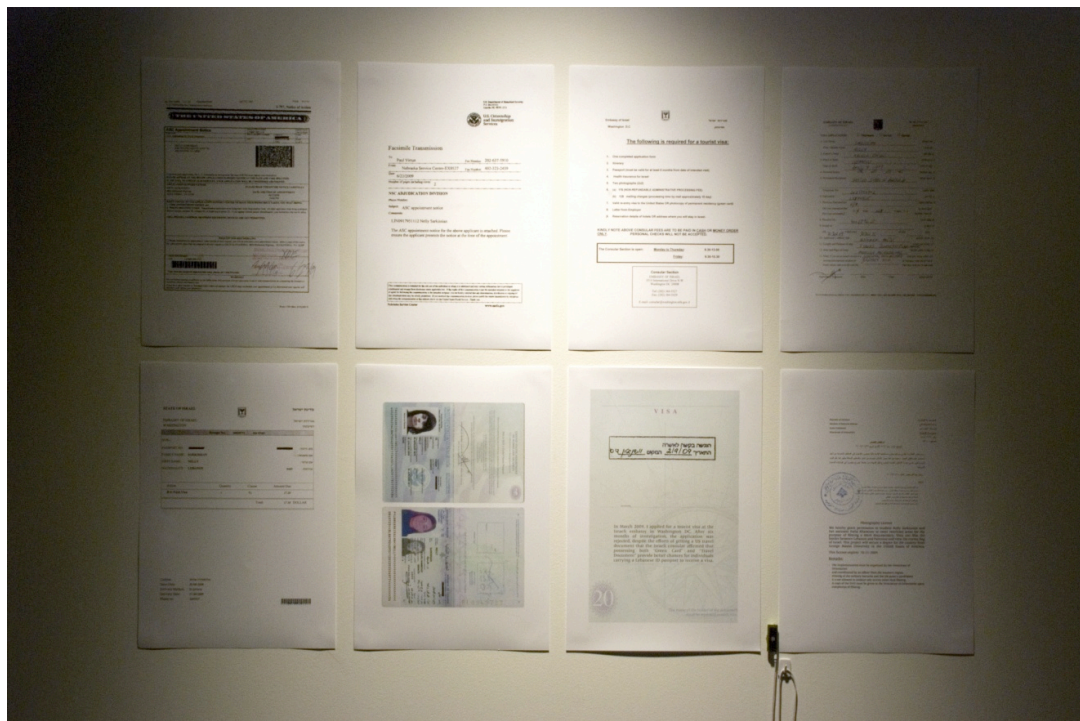


Figure 27. Documentation of the Journey - With the reenacted voice recording between the Israeli embassy and myself on the Ipod, Photography: Deborah Lash

Shooting my video at the Israeli bunker at Fatima gate was an undeniably heavy moment. Just to grab the barbed wires and shake them enough to disturb the imposed peace made me confront my own fears of age-old geopolitical conflicts that I have witnessed growing up in Lebanon. My presence at the border was my personal venture in displacing Jerusalem to the Lebanese border. Here I marked my own territory - my Jerusalem.

The six-month denial process in the civilized confines of the Israeli embassy in Washington, D.C. was now being manifested at the border with an Israeli tank rushing from afar towards my assistant photographer and me as our filming was perceived as suspicious activity. Fortunately, we managed a smooth evacuation with the assistance of a United Nations army officer.

The power of my work's earth and body art directly addresses the simple reality of "no trespassing", preventing us from encountering and creating human interaction. Regardless of having no access to the memory or to the physical origin of the memory, documenting myself at the border, I became existing evidence despite borders and political rejections.

Process of Denial

From enthusiasm to deception to resolution, this journey originally was planned to take place in the heart of Jerusalem.

Plan A - Reaching Jerusalem:

The Israeli embassy claimed that applying for a visa with a “White Passport” (a U.S. travel document) would facilitate my entry as a Lebanese national. On paper, my chances of receiving the visa looked good: I had family members living in Jerusalem, I had U.S. permanent residency, and I was applying for educational research.

Another option was not flying from New York to Tel Aviv, but instead driving from Lebanon through Syria, crossing the Jordanian border, traversing Palestinian territories, and eventually entering Jerusalem with my American travel documents. This route would allow for relative anonymity so that my entry into Israel would go unnoticed by the Lebanese government. At this stage, this route presented many complications. According to my cousin’s husband, Hagop Kerayr, this route required crossing two different bridges and several check points with the possibility of my video equipment being confiscated.

My plans for traveling to Jerusalem fell through, however, as the Israeli embassy denied my request for an entry visa.

Plan B - Reaching the border but not entering Israel:

After learning about the rejection from the Israeli embassy, the next best option was to take the conventional route of traveling from Lebanon to wherever there was the possibility to reach and have access to the Israeli border. This rerouting I considered to be

Claiming the self

Implementing Plan B automatically assumed that I would not be able to go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and receive a tattoo the way the elders in my family had. It was up to me now to reconstruct the experience with the options that were available to me. While at the border, I was inspired to walk on the wetlands barefooted, creating my own right of passage for this improvised pilgrimage.

Despite the input from several sources that informed my body of work, my pilgrim video in the gallery space among the performers' projections on each side is an active solo participation.

Being unable to receive the "mahdes" tattoo through my physical presence in Jerusalem, and with no option of permanence, it was only possible to symbolically sketch the consciousness of the past, both in the soil and on the body, an act, which is not to be mistaken for nostalgia. I prescribed this process. Progressing towards abstraction, it was a super-condensed rationality of inner-consciousness. Rejuvenated with a new spirit, I traversed the fields at the border reconstructing my own destination of pilgrimage with the memory passed down to me through generations.

This martyr, this exile, this immigrant progressed in the context of these circumstances by capturing the essence of an intended pilgrimage in every step and every gesture.

Empowered by my ability to reconstruct this pilgrimage with options that were available only to me at that point in time, I created my own language through my art. I wanted this art to connect me with the world of reality, for only art can release in its knowledge-enhancing power the language that spoke of this journey of self-realization.

Self-realization me also entails my claim to my female self. To be resistant and standing in those fields gave me the satisfaction of marking the site with my presence, enriched with powerful silence that echoes my sentiments about my, and many other women's, need to speak up about body and its borders. It was also a necessary act to stamp my skin with an iron cross, a final step I took towards emotional healing and acceptance of womanpower in the process of this thesis project, "Across the Body".



Figure 29. Iron Cross – At the Fatima gate

EMBROIDERING SKIN

Perceiving the body as a canvas, this project facilitated my need for self-expression, and fulfilled my desire for the recognition of my identity by political officials within widening set practical options. My use of body impression, instead of traditional tattooing, reflects self-narration, stressing that self-invention my artistic license.

Prior my return to Lebanon to shoot my final project, I was challenged with the question of how to represent such a tradition ritual of receiving the pilgrim tattoo. How to reinvent a legitimate mock-up performance in a way that represents the metaphor without perverting its actual sacred meaning?

Committee members at the beginning of this project suggested few methods. One solution was to stitch the skin with medical needle and red thread the symbol of the cross. Another was tattooing without ink. Due to their violent nature and possible health complications, however, I felt that these methods would disturb the serenity of the piece itself, taking away from the overarching idea of peaceful soul-searching.

This second method in particular presented its own challenges: (1) How to ensure a sanitary environment at the gate? (2) Where to find a tattoo artist who could commit performing the task at the border? (3) How to fit this premeditated plan into the

impromptu nature of my visit, which could possibly jeopardize the project by taking too long to shoot while under close scrutiny of the border patrol?

Also, I decide that using ink to simply stamp my arm was too trivial a gesture and would not express the depth of the "mahdes". As a result, came the actual creation of the iron cross (plied on a wooden round surface for easy handling) to inflame the skin with a visible impression of the cross.



Figure 30. Skin impression - From "The Pilgrim" video at the Lebanese border

I also shot a symbolic embroidery performance that due to length and space limitation was not included in my final project. In that video, a young Armenian woman sews a cross on a piece of fabric with an old sewing machine. It was to evoke a visual convergence to the piercing of the skin with the tattoo gun. This piece was fully edited but remained "in the can" for possibly showing at a different location.

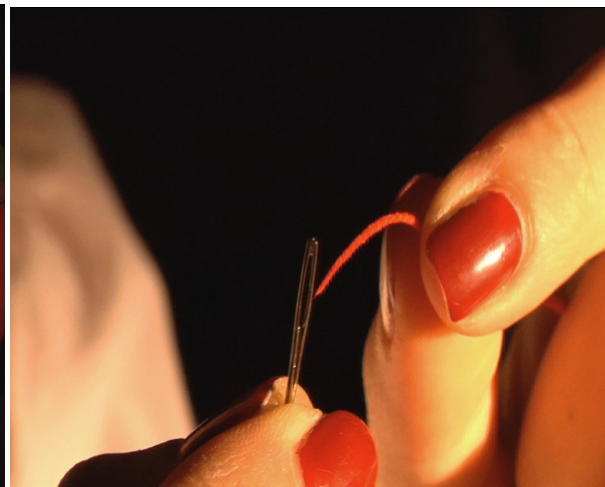
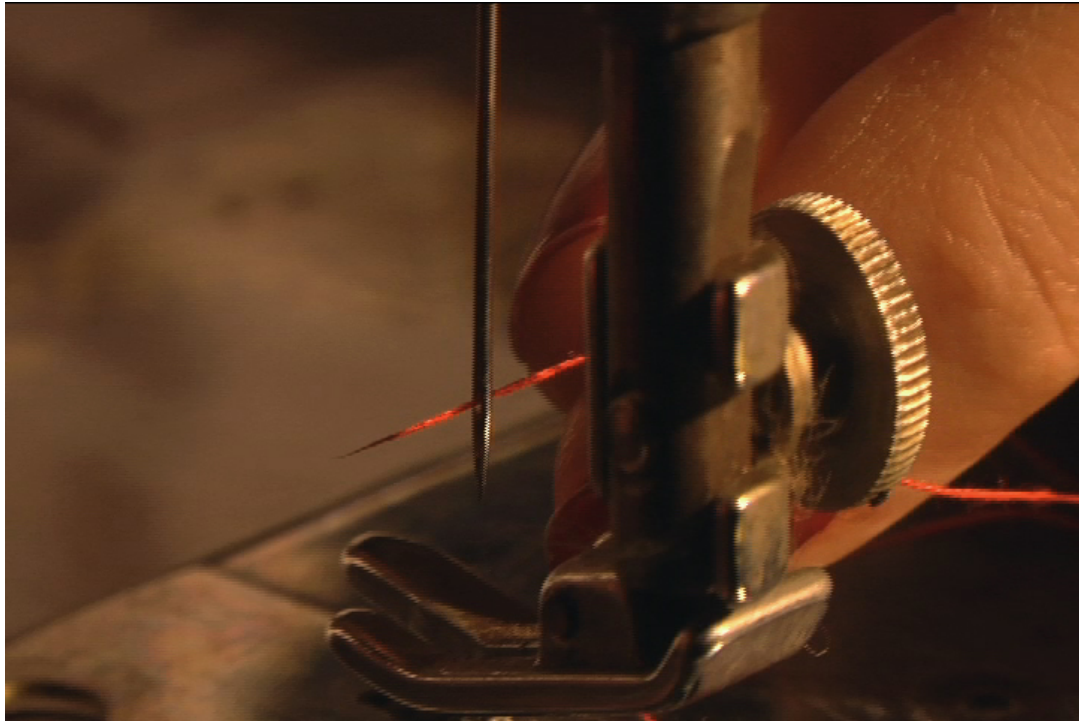


Figure 31. Performing the tattoo - With my sister Lucy Sarkissian

EMBEDDED CRITICISM

At the end of this journey, the question arises: in the face of historical violence, political strife and clear and present danger, why did none of my video pieces reflect any actual or implied footage of such factors? Why did I not include any ostensible visuals to inform the observer of Armenian history, and Middle Eastern politics?

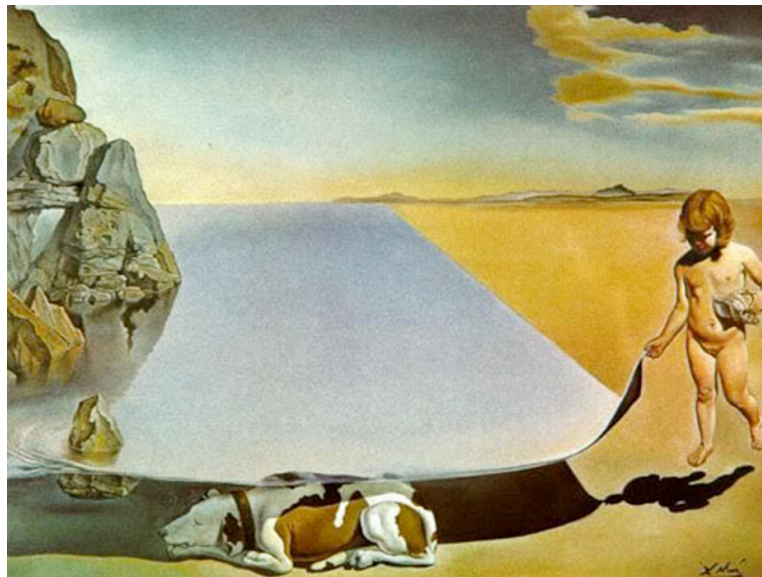


Figure 32. Salvador Dali - At the Age of Six Lifting the Skin of the Water to Observe a Dog Sleeping in the Shadow of the Sea", 1950

Upon deep introspection, time-and-time-again I came to one conclusion: I embarked on this journey as an artist, not as a political commentator. I perceived the purpose of my art to be a reflection of my inner life, and my beliefs. I was not there to document the past or

the present in factual terms, and I was not there to create reportage. I believe the very fact that I had to recreate my own pilgrimage inherently speaks of the antagonism I faced as a Lebanese citizen, and my performance in white symbolized the ghosts of my Armenian ancestors that went on this same pilgrimage over many centuries.

From the very beginning of this project, I set out to expose the invisible war in the imagination of the viewer, and to act as a peacemaker. I considered it part of my responsibility as an artist to break old patterns of antagonism. Taking the role of a peacemaker, humbly in white fabric as a symbol of peace, I found myself transformed by a process in which I walked towards the border and towards the truth, concentrating not so much on the arrival as much as on the journey itself.



Figure 33. At the Lebanese border - The “Hezbollah” leader and an Israeli tank, Source: Getty Image for TIME

REFLECTIONS

Juxtaposing panorama

In the light of exposing the truth and my reality, I previously projected a diptych in an intimate space, juxtaposing the Lebanese war against the mundane of my family life, each a single-channel piece. It is a brief depiction from the early clashes of 1975 in Beirut abruptly interrupted with happy family moments, an 8mm footage shot by my father.

This project made me realize that my life's pursuit was to understand why-growing up during that period in Middle Eastern history-things didn't go according to plan, how that affected me personally, and how it shaped my understanding of happiness and sorrow. The truth, the plain truth, filtered through by transparently projecting my video on a plain wall.

An unintended, but upon reflection, perfectly logical growth has happened to me as an artist. I started out my MFA program exposing the sorrows of war in the above diptych. However, by the end of my tenure as an MFA student, my final project became a statement of peace about the same subject matter.

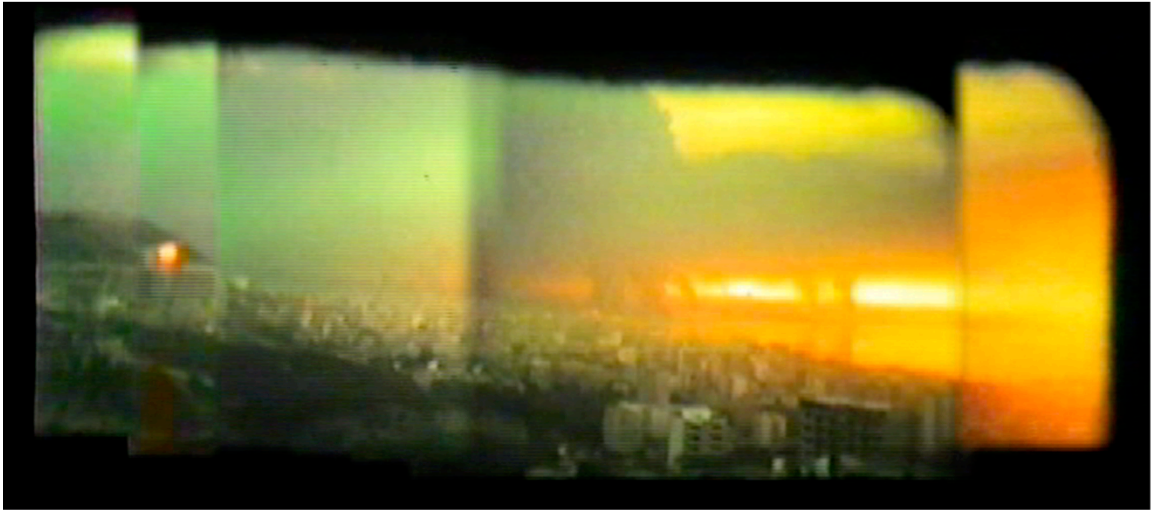


Figure 34: War and Peace

Getting Lost

A map and a compass were always handy. Getting lost as a child and a Girl Scout in the war zone was no question it was a cheer pleasure to solve the riddle of how to get to our chosen destination.

At this moment, we are all venturing into uncharted territory, whether we know it or not. The beauty of being lost is the same thing that makes it scary – and in facing all our fears, it asks us to look within ourselves to find the right way. If we have no map, we must go on instinct, relying on our inner compass to guide us which direction to go. However, we fear we might go too far in the wrong direction and become paralyzed and make no progress at all. And yet this is the very challenge we need to develop our ability to trust ourselves. We are also learning to trust that the universe is our cosmic help support and guidance. We may believe this intuitively, however it is only through experience that it becomes knowledge of the heart.

Learning to be “O.K.” with being lost and trusting that I will be guided, I began my journey on a personal interpretation sounded more like an extended camping trip.

Dramatic times, war present in my family life and mine. As a mature knowledgeable burdened with tragedy of the hostilities on my shoulder, it was only myself support I trusted to take my first step to independency. FREEDOM. Rather than following an established path, I somehow trusted the universe and felt strong its connections in the palm of my hand.



Figure 35: Crossing a familiar path - Sequoia valley – California (1966 & 2006)

My aspiration was to get lost in a new adventure! I quote from the book ‘a Field of Guide to Getting Lost’ by Rebecca Solnit: “Go to hell, but keep moving once you get there”. I was ready for my own hell to create! Only because I believe this hell, this war, I haven’t walked my being into it. Thoughts and dreams were echoed in the songs and my father’s Sunday stories. Maybe the message from the universe wasn’t being translated to my ears to understand; or maybe by then they didn’t even make sense in my “REAL” world.

Now here, spending time getting in touch with the higher self, intuition lead my being to become the best and most fulfilled. This positive shift in the energy moves everything around me settling into motion the universe toward details that all fall into place. A sense of peace comes along that any question could no longer make me wonder if the lyrics of those songs on my lips like a morning prayer were made to be only dreams. Lucid!

And like a rush of water, it goes ahead to clear all debris from the path!

Every adventure has an end. And the end is only the beginning!

Awakened, I realize that it was my father's same glorious path in America embedded in his Sunday lunchtime stories that I was walking throughout except only this time I was the narrator of my own version!

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DVD

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The tattooist (2007): Peter Burger

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Tattooing (1997): The documentary on History Channel

CURRICULUM VITAE

Nelly Sarkissian is an Armenian from Bourj Hammoud, Lebanon where she attended Faculté des Beaux-Arts Université Saint-Esprit de Kaslik and received a double major Maîtrise in Arts Graphics et Publicité in 2002. Moving to United States of America in 2004, Nelly Achkhen pursued her love of video art and media at George Mason University; currently works at Alhurra TV Network as a Sr. broadcasting designer and qualified Art Director and resides in Arlington Virginia metro area.

Solo Exhibitions

2010

“Race of Genocide”

Capitol One headquarters - Gallery 1708,
Richmond Virginia

2009

“on belonging”

The Morris & Gwendolyn Cafritz Arts Center at Montgomery College,
Silver Spring Maryland

2008

“Armenian gothic rock” concert,
Snatch music cultural Arena,
Gemmayzeh Lebanon

2007

“dislocation, disconnection, disembodiment”
Pyramid Atlantic,
Silver Spring Maryland

Collective Exhibitions

“Floating Lab Collective” Artist member since 2008

2009

“res publicas des usonia: space as essay”
The Morris & Gwendolyn Cafritz Arts Center at Montgomery College,
Silver Spring Maryland

“exchanges in usonia”
Nathan Cummings Foundation
New York

2008
"close encounters: facing the future"
Katzen Arts Center at the American University museum,
Washington DC

Awards:

“Graduate Fellowship” Award for outstanding performance
College of Visual and Performing Arts
George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia - USA
January 2009

“Merit” Award for completion of thesis project
School of Arts
George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia - USA
December 2010

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