

Armenian Women Artist Questions: Written Interview

Submitted by Neery Melkonian as part of her research on the topic of art and spirituality.

Biographical

Q. Where/when were you born?

A. I was born in Beirut, 1945.

Q. Where were your parents born, how/where did they meet?

A. My mother came from Alepo, Syria, and my father was born in Aintab, Turkey. They met in Beirut during the staging of play at the Armenian Social Club, both were amateur actors.

Q. Do you have siblings, are they also in the arts?

A. I have two sisters and one brother. One of my sisters, Ani Kupelian is a sculptor, she lives and works in Los Angeles. Another sister, Aline Manoukian is a photographer, she lives and works in Paris, France. During the Civil War she was a Chief Photographer for the Reuters.

Q. When did you decide to become an artist?

A. At the age of 15 I decided to become an artist having lost my hope to become a ballerina when I grew too tall for classical ballet.

Q. Was art encouraged in your home/upbringing?

A. Yes, by my parents and my maternal grandmother.

Q. Did you or your family move a lot, how did the environments (places) you grew up in influence your work?

A. I was studying art in Italy from 1964 to 1970 and in England, London, from 1972 - 1973.

Q. Was art school helpful/conducive for you, in what way?

A. In Italy and London I was studying with a group of artists and was exposed to museum and gallery exhibitions which I found most helpful. At the age of 12 to the age of 15 I had two art teachers, Lucy Nercess and Paul Giragossian, they gave me passion for art and encouraged the artist in me.

Q. Being multi-lingual and multi-cultural, where is home for you?

A. Everywhere is home.

Q. Which language you feel more at home in?

A. In France it is French, with Armenians - Armenian, with Italians I am Italian, With Arabs I am Arab.

Q. How important is it for you to be (known as) an 'Armenian', 'American' or 'Middle Eastern' artist, to be defined by ethnicity and nationality?

A. When I was painting the Streets of Beirut during the war I was a Lebanese artist, but now I do not have nationality. I know only that I am of Armenian origin.

Q. How does your ethnicity define/inform your work?

A. Maybe Armenian music I listened to in my childhood gave my work some rhythm but in a very subtle way.

Q. Other or beyond ethnicity what do you regard as important in informing/ shaping your work?

A. Silence and an empty canvass or paper.

Q. Do you feel your cultural heritage has been transmitted to you adequately? Where/how does this transference happen, how do you make up for the gaps, absences?

A. I am a multi cultural person and all different cultures have been transmitted to me adequately.

Q. Where/who is your 'community', why or how would you describe this relation?

A. Now it is Sangha (community of monks and nuns)

(Art) Historical:

Q. Of all the art movements, artistic tendencies of both past and present, is a particular one closer to your sensibility more than others, why?

A. Right now it is a representation of Tibetan deities that interests me. I was in love with Andrei Rublev's work, and at my 20s I used to love Italian contemporary art.

Q. How do you internalize, transform the above, to make it your own?

A. I do not think in these terms. It happens naturally.

Q. How about art history, how relevant is that for you?

A. Fascinating, but to be put aside.

Q. Do you consider yourself a feminist, how does your definition of feminism fit within broader tendencies of the culture(s) you live in? where do you part/meet?

A. Usually I do not pay attention to gender differences. I forget all about it because probably I am a natural feminist. But I become a fierce feminist when I am in the presence of some individuals with rigid views -- talking to them makes me feel as if I am in front of an antique table.

Q. Does context/content supercede formal considerations or, technical factors in making your work? are they separate or related matters for you?

A. They are inseparable.

Q. Where/how does the political enter/configure in your work?

A. When I was painting the streets of Beirut during the war, was it political or was it compassion? or both?

Q. What is an encounter, experience, or an event that has affected you considerably as an artist?

A. Spirituality, war and emigration

Q. How does memory factor in your work?

A. I work in the NOW, no PAST, but visual memories come from the past.

Q. How important is identity or identification in making art for you?

A. During the War Period it was important to identify myself with Beirut but in later periods it became irrelevant.

Work Process, Be(coming)ing an Artist:

Q. Describe your work process: how do you determine your subject/topic, how do you proceed or prepare, is your approach preconceived on paper or the process determines it?

A. I have the impression that artwork I am going to paint is already painted somewhere. All I have to do is to make my mind empty enough to make the work tangible, visible.

Q. Does another form of art, discipline or practice, augment your primary mode of art making i.e. writing, music, cuisine, philosophy, meditation, walking, etc.

A. Meditation

Q. Who do you make art for, do you have an audience in mind?

A. NO

Q. Do you feel understood/appreciated by your contemporaries?

A. Some periods are understood, some are not, even forty years have passed.

Q. Do you see yourself as part of a broader 'international art-world' or other type of networks?

A. I have never thought about it.

Q. How would you assess the reception of your work, misplaced, understood?

A. Depends on a period. After 40 years only four people understood my White period . The War Period in Beirut everybody understood. The last period with a Vertical line is generally liked by people who like the work without really understanding it.

Q. What do you consider the biggest impediment on your work or yourself as an artist?

A. Teaching was an impediment. Later it helped my work it helped me to develop love and patience.

Q. Is there a market for your work? Does that bother you?

A. I gave all my works to my sister Aline. Let her bother about it.

Q. As a woman artist do you feel more or, less appreciated?

A. I do not mind being not appreciated, I am only a Buddhist nun, in the past my work was very much appreciated in Lebanon.

Q. What, if anything, do you want to pass on, transfer, to someone else or, say, the future generation?

A. Art is not in the concepts, theories out there, but in the silence of your own mind. Also it is good to know about, appreciate or reject what is going on now in the art world as far as theories and concepts.

