



THE ACT OF *WITNESSING*

HRAIR SARKISSIAN



PROFILE

The evocative and beguiling photographs of Hrair Sarkissian stand at the junction between seeing and knowing. **Vali Mahlouji** explores their intellectual and emotional energy and looks at how the artist leads us to see the invisible in the visible.

A

great deal has been said about Hrair Sarkissian's series *Execution Squares*. The almost sublime serenity of these images harbours the shattering and harrowing truth of acts of violent death. The series depicts public execution squares in three Syrian cities – Aleppo, Latakia and Damascus. The images are taken at dawn, at about the time when the death penalty is officially enacted by hanging. Created four years ago, these images assume an obviously epic dimension today in the context of the present-day bloodshed and conflicts raging across Syria, the country of Sarkissian's birth.

These squares, gently lit at dawn, look like any other: urban settings with old, new or unfinished residential and commercial constructions, tarmacked streets, concrete, weathered surfaces, shrubbery, palm trees, cables crisscrossing overhead, parked cars, signs, notices and adverts, street lights. The apparent harmony of the spaces, their ordinary everydayness and the deliberate quietude of the photographs distance us from the reality that is central to the work. The title acts as the sole signifier, imposing a demand on us as viewers to do more than just look. It is only through the direct and honest use of such a title that we not only recognise, or realise, the real meaning of the work, but are also compelled to reconsider each image and its meaning. The viewer is now forced to reconcile with what is nowhere to be seen.



PRISMS OF LIGHT

By omitting any evidence of the violence or its associated political notions and implications, Sarkissian comments on the apparent invisibility of the act itself as well as on the relative anonymity of its victim. What was done at dawn in public is no longer on view or available to be seen. "Most of my work is about how we see the invisible in the visible," he remarks. Sarkissian had witnessed such a scene as a child and has been carrying the traumatic memory of it ever since. For him, as a citizen and as an artist, the spectre of violence remains embedded, memorialised and memorised in the physicality of the squares.

Born in Damascus in 1973, he earned his foundational training at his father's photographic studio, where he spent all his childhood vacations and where he worked full-time for 12 years after high school. During this time, he assisted several European photographers doing projects in Syria, who introduced him to Contemporary photogra-

phy. Today he is based in London, but he returns regularly to the region for his projects, which are always closely tied to his background and personal history.

Two years before the *Execution Squares* series, Sarkissian embarked on a project in Armenia called *In Between*, which depicts images of Armenia, most of them showing urban or natural landscapes buried under a blanket of snow. "The series grew out of an inconsistency in my own identity [born in Syria with Armenian origins] that came to the fore after I visited Armenia several times," explains Sarkissian. "The reality of Armenia struggling to survive did not match the image of a self-assured and proud 'Mother Armenia' with which the Diaspora Armenians grew up."

In the photograph *In Between 1*, the camera frames a large portion of a densely foggy sky encroaching upon the sleepy city below it. The gradual emergence of the low-rise buildings remains subdued and subjugated by the sheer whiteness

Opening spread: (Detail) *In Between (No 1)*. 2007. Archival inkjet print. 120 x 175 cm.

Below, from left to right: *Execution Squares (No 4)*. 2008. Lambda print. 125 x 160 cm; *Execution Squares (No 16)*. 2008. Lambda print. 125 x 160 cm; *Execution Squares (No 20)*. 2008. Lambda print. 125 x 175 cm.

The dreamy landscape and the serenity of the photographic image together obscure and soften the darker realities.



Below, from left to right: A view of the exhibition *from Beirut with Love*. From left to right: Three untitled 2010 works in media on wall, photo, and print. Aref Alami. © Aref Alami. All rights reserved. Untitled 2010 series.



This page:
 Above: (Detail) *Istory* (No 7).
 2011. Archival inkjet print.
 190 x 150 cm.
 Below: (Detail) *Istory* (No 8).
 2011. Archival inkjet print.
 190 x 150 cm.

Facing page: *In Between*
 (No. 11). 2007. Archival
 inkjet print. 120 x 175 cm.



of the snowy cover, which obscures all detail, distinction and activity. The dreamy landscape and the serenity of the photographic image together obscure and soften the darker realities, both in their physical manifestations of everyday city life and in the artist's own relationship to that reality. As Sarkissian puts it, "The white blanket obstructs our vision and hides the reality underneath it, covering what we absolutely do not want to see."

The relationship with his homeland produced two further series based in Yerevan, Armenia – firstly, *Underground* in 2009 and then *City Fabric* a year later. The *Underground* series comprises 10 photographs depicting different underground metro stations in Yerevan. These are poignant spaces, constructed in the Soviet era, and a present-day source of pride for the city's inhabitants. The images show the corridors and stairwells of the metro system, totally devoid of humans and resembling mausoleums. Solely using the light available, a distinct feature of Sarkissian's work, the eerie images depict long passages to nowhere. The Armenian police facilitated his photography, holding back the public beyond the frame while Sarkissian shot the images. The knowledge of these invisible masses, outside the frame, brings added impact.

CHANGING FACES

The series *City Fabric* was inspired by the rapid transformation of Yerevan's city centre at the hands of developers over the last decade or so. "The intention has been to build a modern city that could be the universal centre and a pole of attraction for the Armenians of the Diaspora," explains Sarkissian. Existing residential houses, most of which date from the late 19th century, have been replaced with new luxury buildings, most of which remain unsold or even unfinished. The city authorities, or the developers themselves, conceal the facades with large fabric covers decorated with images of the dream buildings. Sarkissian has shot a series of photographs recording these fabric monuments to a ghost-like urban existence.

City Fabric was not his first foray into this domain. Whilst studying in Amsterdam, he became interested in the many churches in the city that had been deconsecrated and converted to public uses other than spiritual, like sports, music or dance clubs and as private party venues. Sarkissian produced a group of photographs entitled *Churches* (2009), which record such interior spaces, very dimly lit by natural light. He uses this with great sensitivity to imbue the spaces with a vision akin to the sacred. Interestingly, and somewhat conversely to his usual conceptual instinct, here the



invisible is made *visible* through the painterly use of light in otherwise darkened surroundings.

Across his studies of the sacred, Sarkissian produced another group of images, entitled *Zebiba* and created during a stay in Cairo in 2007. He came across the very pious men who wore their piety on their foreheads in the form of a prayer scar, produced by prolonged application of pressure upon the forehead when pressing against the prayer stone (*mussallah*) or rug. What fascinated Sarkissian was that, "On one level, the worshipper aspires to disinvest himself from earthly culture and render himself invisible through his devotion to the creator. Paradoxically, the desire to become invisible in the face of God, renders him actually more conspicuous, and highlights him visibly."

These images are a rare instance in Sarkissian's work of the figure appearing as subject. For the most part, he omits the figure from his photographs altogether, but in this instance it is the camera's sole

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focus. The heads and shoulders are isolated against a dark background void, the closely focused facial portraits revealing intense gazes which appear detachedly solemn and distinctly sad. Beyond the sadness, these expressions appear tinged with latent aggression. Both the scarred nature of the *zebibas* and the intense expressions captured in the frame appear confrontational. The images are afforded an additional and contemporary resonance through



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their questioning of the role of the religious zealot in contemporary society.

WINDOWS ON THE PAST

Sarkissian's other works include a poignant group from 2010 entitled *Istory*. During a residency organised by the Garanti Platform in Istanbul, Sarkissian studied, visited and photographically documented the history sections of various semi-private and public libraries and archives in the city. Many of the documents he examined relate to the personalities, communities and minorities which were once part of the Ottoman Empire. "My own history is closely tied to these papers, as my grandparents were forced to flee from Eastern Anatolia to Syria in during the 1915 genocide," he explains. The trauma of this historical episode, which saw hundreds of thousands of Armenians deported from their homes, has imprinted a tragic dimension on the collective Armenian memory, as well as on the personal sentiments and relations within Sarkissian's own family. It remains the subject of controversial debate in contemporary Turkey.

Across Sarkissian's photographic contemplations, the archives remain closed and their contents unrevealed, pretty much as they are in reality. "I shot these dark and oppressive spaces with only

the light available in order to express the complex relationship that exists with the contents of the archives," he explains. The choice of title, *istory*, deliberately omits the first letter of the term to which it is referring, perhaps as a signifier of the missing and unseen parts of the historical truths. It also appears, intentionally or unintentionally, to signify the very personal dimension of the story behind the work – *i* in *istory* referring to the story of the artist's own self.

It is this omission of evidence, the invisibility of the central subject, which ultimately endows Sarkissian's work with its powerful poignancy. A string of solo and group exhibitions and residencies have seen his *oeuvre* reach new international audiences, and his works have been acquired by Tate Modern, the Sharjah Art Foundation and the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Modena, among others, as well as by several private collectors. Unfazed by the attention and interest in his work, Sarkissian remains focused on subjects dear to him. In his own words, "With each series of photographs I always and primarily aim to explore an inner contemplation on a subject close to my heart." 

For more information visit www.hrainsarkissian.com and www.kalfayangalleries.com

Facing page:
Underground (No. 8),
2009. Lambda print.
125 x 160 cm.

This page: *Zebiba (No 2)*, 2007. Archival inkjet
print. 60 x 60 cm.

All images courtesy
Kalfayan Galleries,
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