

ALEXANDRE GALLERY

PROVINCETOWN

Varujan Boghosian: A Poet without Words

Provincetown Art Association & Museum: July 24 – August 30

Berta Walker Gallery: August 21 – September 7

VARUJAN BOGHOSIAN's work is inspired by the past, by an appreciation of the lives and legacy of myth, of people and objects that have gone before, and a love of images and iconography. A Renaissance man with expressive eyebrows hovering over twinkling eyes, he is a sculptor, assembler, constructionist, beachcomber, scavenger, collector, historian, and conservator, and gathers the relics of our common experience, transforming them into poetic tributes, homages to the universal limitless creative spirit. His references are elegant and classical, steeped in history and mythology, and reverberating with profound depths of meaning, though on the surface they appear quite simple. He is the first to admit that he is, in fact, a poet without words.

Boghosian has a reverence for the handwrought, with a deep appreciation for the weathering and patina that makes everyday objects resonate with a mystical quality. He brings this aesthetic to comment on our post-modern world, pointing out the paradoxes, complexities and humor that is rife in our lives today. His vocabulary is mystery, ambiguity and humor, and he seeks associations between items in his arsenal of objects—his palette—that imbue his choices with wit, pathos and deep insight.

He was born in 1926 in New Britain, Connecticut, a factory town, the son of immigrant parents from Armenia. His father had been trained as a cobbler; Boghosian remembers him spitting tiny

Varujan Boghosian received his MFA from Yale University where he studied with Josef Albers (1888-1976), a German-born artist who became known as a pioneering abstractionist, color theorist, and one of the most influential art teachers of the twentieth century. Boghosian was a Fulbright Scholar in 1953, and twice Sculptor in Residence at the American Academy in Rome. His work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum, and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, as well as in many other important museums around the country.

BY GILLIAN DRAKE



Above: "Overview"

Below: Berta Walker and Varujan Boghosian in the Berta Walker Gallery, 2009.



nails out of his mouth, hammering them into shoe leather. He would have used hand-made implements, but later, fate led him to a job in the huge Stanley Tools factory turning out mass-produced tools. He was a bitter man, remembers Boghosian: "I had a very complicated childhood. My father was very disillusioned but he was a wonderful storyteller. He had had a good education for someone coming from a tiny village. But he never amounted to anything, and was hard on his children."

The teachers he had in the public schools in New Britain, however, were wonderful. "They were a real inspiration to me," he recalls. "One read Wordsworth to us, another would have us learn a famous quote every day, another took us to see a Shakespearean play. They instilled in me a love of poetry, and because of these teachers I had a great fundamental education. My Latin teacher was a published poet and we got to be very good friends, so that was a huge influence on me. The city was a mixed bag, it was full of immigrants, lots of young people, second-generation Americans learning the language, learning the ways of their parents' adopted country, hoping their children would have an easier time than they had had."

"A lot of my work is about America and people don't talk about that," he mused. "I use American tools—a jack knife, a flask, things that in a way are a kind of glorification of an object,

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making an object holy. 'Everything that lives is holy,' said William Blake, a quote that Stanley Kunitz liked to repeat."

He continues: "A European has a lot of weight to carry—architecture, religion, history, echoes of the past. In this country you can relate to futurism in a different way. America is so productive. To find roots is very hard, it has to be part of your being." One cannot help but think of the Armenian Genocide in 1915, when 1.5 million Armenians were killed at the hands of the Turkish Government and thousands fled their homeland. Though America was the Boghosian family's new land, it may not have been by choice. But the young Boghosian made the most of it.

He joined the Navy during WWII and took advantage of the GI Bill. "Being in the Navy and having the experience of travel, you get to see the world; it was amazing," he said. His love of poetry convinced him he wanted to be an English teacher, so he attended teacher's college on the GI Bill. His plans changed when he decided to attend Vesper George School of Art in Boston with some friends from Connecticut. "I had discovered James Joyce at the college. He stirred my imagination. Joyce for me was another gold mine of imagery."

He came to Provincetown in 1948 with Sal del Deo, Romanos "Ray" Rizk, and Ed Giobbi, who were his colleagues at Vesper George, to study with Henry Hensche, the American impressionist. "James Wingate Parr, an outstanding watercolor teacher at Vesper George, who loved John Whorf, talked the five of us into coming to Provincetown," explains Boghosian. "Jim Parr was a terrific teacher. He lived with us on the first floor of a studio owned by Al

Silva on Miller Hill Road called Shangri La. We all had a great time!"

In 1953, Boghosian received a Fulbright Grant and went to Italy to study. When he returned, he studied at Yale School of Art with Josef Albers, who had himself started out as a grade school teacher and figurative artist. By 1958, Boghosian was employed as a teacher, a career he had pursued for so long. He has held teaching positions at the University of Florida, Cooper Union, Pratt Institute, Yale, Brown, and from 1968 until he retired, at Dartmouth College.

Asked about his early art influences, he replies, "I love early Dali, Max Ernst, the surrealists, and also Eugene Berman. He painted stage sets for Stravinsky and Diaghilev." Boghosian's constructions often seem as if set on a stage, with a surreal juxtaposition of objects—18th century cards and dice, fans, images of people, cut-outs of antique engravings or sheet music, flowers and butterflies, antique toys, found objects, old tools, beach combed items—many providing a narrative or a pun. It's impossible to list the objects that he lovingly collects and uses in

his work. Visiting his studio, one is amazed by the array of objects, many valuable antiques, arrayed on concentric rings of tables, the huge studio filled with a huge amount of glorious stuff. He walks around the tables meditatively, rather like walking a labyrinth, intuitively choosing objects that he feels might work together. A horse and a shoe. A clown and a heart. A fish and a galleon. He tells a tale of once meeting a pawn broker who invited him in to see his treasure trove. Boghosian bought a dozen old rusty iron roses from him. He fixed a bottle opener shaped like a set of teeth (ouch!) onto a board, stuck a rose in the "mouth," and titled it "Ole!" It sold immediately. Titles give us a clue to his internal process, though "sometimes the titles are after the fact, like christening them!" he says with glee.

Whereas Gerard Manley Hopkins painted pictures with words, Boghosian creates poems with images. The title of one of his pieces, "Out of the Swing of the Sea," came from a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins which he remembered from high school. It may have resonated with him because of his own unhappy home life.

Heaven—Haven: A Nun Takes The Veil

I have desired to go
Where springs not fail,
To fields where flies no sharp and
sided hail
And a few lilies blow.

And I have asked to be
Where no storms come,
Where the green swell is in the
havens dumb,
And out of the swing of the sea.

—GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

He started making his distinctive assemblages in Junior High. "I made a tray with Dopey, one of Snow White's seven dwarfs, riding a horse," he remembers, adding with a laugh, "I still have it!"

One of his most beloved themes is clowns, derived from the figure of Pulcinella from the *Commedia dell'Arte*. He owns a book of drawings of Pulcinella by Tiepolo. "A clown hat is a wonderful thing to put on someone's head, it changes things," he explains. "For me, it's a wonderful image."

Gallery owner Berta Walker believes that he treats many life situations in that same way. "He is a generous, heartfelt man," she said. "His references are grand, but

Right:
"Out of the Swing
of the Sea," 2009
mixed media collage

Far Right:
"Bareback Rider
(Why Knot?)" 2001
mixed media collage



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he has a glint in his eye."

"Boghosian's humor is often impish and always thoroughly delightful," she continues. "I see his use of clowns and hearts as a kind of self portrait. A wonderful collage he made a few years ago shows a clown offering a heart almost bigger than the clown. To me, that is the essence of Boghosian, a man filled with love, which

he offers to all, and always with a note of humor. He takes care of everyone. If you're a friend of Boghosian's, you're in his sphere of protection forever. Just as he pays careful attention to every segment of his collages and constructions, so too does he show the same loving care with all his personal friends. There can be no better friend than Varujan Boghosian."

Looking back on his life, Boghosian says: "When I think of where I came from and what I've been fortunate enough to see and experience, it's fantastic! I've been drowned in material, actual and imaginative." Now in his 83rd year and joyously making new work for his show at PAAM this summer, he says, "I'm having a lot of fun!" No artist could wish for more. ▲

Gillian Drake is the editor and publisher of this magazine.



Top left: Untitled ("Self Portrait, Says Berta"), 2006, mixed media

Top right: "American Beauty", 2007, mixed media

Left: "Removing Red," mixed media

Courtesy Berta Walker Gallery, Provincetown

