

Hrair Sarkissian Homesick

7 July – 2 October 2017

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سراسق

Sursock
Museum



Cover

Homesick (film still), 2014

Two-channel video, 11', 7'

Courtesy of the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens – Thessaloniki

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Hrair Sarkissian's work is often based on his personal relationships to geographies and people. Frequently produced with a large format camera, his carefully crafted photographs enable a deeper engagement with a scene, allowing a slow unfolding of revelatory details, conjuring up elided histories and forgotten places. His work is concerned with minor histories and everyday stories that too often disappear without celebration or remorse.

This exhibition marks his engagement with the moving image, created with the same studied craft as his large-scale photographs. The two related video installations, *Homesick* (2014) and *Horizon* (2016), speak of journeys taken in response to the war in Syria.

In *Homesick*, once again turning the lens on himself, the artist is shown destroying his childhood home in Damascus, where his parents continue to reside. A carefully crafted detailed replica of the building, made of concrete and metal, slowly crumbles as the artist repeatedly strikes an off-screen object, only pausing when out of breath or to move aside some rubble.

Leaving Damascus in 2008, Sarkissian has been unable to return. The destruction of the replica represents both a catharsis and a reclamation of agency, to destroy before others destroy you.

Horizon is a visual meditation on the perilous journey at sea those fleeing conflict are often forced to take. The video traces the journey of one of the shortest and most popular routes from Kaş on the southwestern Turkish shore, across the Mycale Strait, to the island of Megisti on the edge of southeastern Greece. For many, this marks the start of a more perilous journey into the unfamiliar and precarious life of a refugee.

Together, these works portray a sense of loss and apprehension. The loss of solid ground, of home and of the familiar, coupled with the apprehension towards what is to come.

Nora Razian

Head of Programs and Exhibitions, Surssock Museum

Homesick

Omar Kholeif

When I think of Hrair Sarkissian's *Homesick* (2014), I am reminded of a headline that I saw while watching CNN on the treadmill at the gym, which is one of the few times and places that I can bring myself to watch televisual news. The headline read: "Syrian Family Finds Hope and Jobs in the USA."

Within this supposed opportune moment of hope lies a great irony. The American ally to Syria, which has enabled its violent dictatorship to flourish for years, is patting itself on the back for taking in one refugee family, and is even more emboldened by the fact that it has enriched these people's lives with the potential to fulfill labor for the Americans. As the news segment continued, the characters in the video spoke of their longing for their home, and of the impossibility of fabricating a sense of home elsewhere. The narrator of this segment glossed over this point and ended the piece with a picture of the family, all smiles.

All smiles, however, are no longer the means by which the public imaginary relates to Syria – the Syria we once dreamed of, the land of fertile plains and luscious mountains, inviting deserts, and ancient history, has dissolved into an ashen memory. The brokering – indeed, the negotiation of time and space in relation to the violent and conflicted recent histories of Syria – is what underpins Armenian-Syrian artist Hrair Sarkissian's two-channel video installation, *Homesick*.

A five-story building sits before us, made out of concrete – eight units – with balconies atop of each other. Blacked-out steel windows run down the middle. Spread across two screens, this architecture stands as a monument, a hopeful piece of construction in an empty landscape. On the second screen, a pair of hands appear and start to slowly take to the façade, gradually crushing it to a pulp. It is the artist. The roof begins to collapse. Rubble, crumbling, falls to the ground. This is destruction in slow-motion. A sluggish silence: Sarkissian destroys this building until it is a heap of debris.

The building before us is an exact architectural model of the artist's parents' home in Damascus, which they continue to live in today. Despite having being offered the chance to flee as asylum seekers, they have persevered, unwavering, longing for a day of reconstitution in a land that they have adopted as a home. Sarkissian's slow destruction acts as a metaphor for the gradual decay of Syrian society: a dream of a land whose history has been shattered, despite a utopian aspiration for liberation.

Sarkissian himself lived in this house until he left Syria in 2008. He has called this building not just a home, but “a container of his memories”; it is, like it is for his parents, a place of continual belonging, a site where he expectantly hopes to return to. Is this narrative a proposition for the future? Taking fate into his own hands, he takes ownership of the future. Or is this an act of reverse superstition? If he is to imagine it turned into wreckage, will he shield it from its ultimate erosion?

Horizon (2016) functions as an adjoiner to *Homesick*. Two screens: on the one side the sea; on the other, a beautiful landscape, blooms, covered in trees. Panning shots drive us forward across the sea towards an island; towards disappearance?

The water starts to consume the screen: is this sea a beast that will ensnare its captive passengers, or will it free them? Is it a soul about to devour itself? Birds chirp. We are approaching land, an isle. A boat appears out of nowhere. Is it a speedboat, a vessel for luxury, or a carrier for those who have escaped? The landscape starts to dissipate as we arrive closer. All of a sudden, this setting seems ashen, covered in rocks; its trees seem charred, the panorama barren. This is not a site of utopia for the artist, but one of unease and potential regret.



Horizon (film still), 2016
Two-channel video, 6'58"
Courtesy of the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens – Thessaloniki

This work maps out the route over the sea on one of the shortest and most popular refugee trails from Kaş on the southwestern Turkish shore, across the Mycale Strait, to the island of Megisti on the edge of southeastern Greece. Sarkissian sees the sea as a place of continual metaphors, an expanse where “visions and memories disappear” into the abyss of the unknown. By delineating the path that refugees take across the Mediterranean, Sarkissian presents the vulnerability of being surrounded by water. The sea is a marker of unpredictability, of depths, of drowning. Only uncertainty awaits if one is to make it to the other side. The horizon becomes a line between the earth and the sea; is it the future?

The future in all its ambiguity becomes the perpetual site of investigation for Sarkissian. His works pulse with an anxiety about the new world order. As the globe continues to decay into endless fascistic regimes, from east to west, where does one find solace? Does hope become an imaginary construction that will roll on forever, never to be realized? As a diasporic Syrian, Sarkissian constantly attempts to connect with a present that is slipping away from him, and although he hungers for relief, he knows all too well the impossibility of such events. For him, the future is already ruptured like the outer layers of the Earth – the Anthropocene, the man-made anthropogenic outcome of years of violent abuse of our world’s natural resources.

Are there correlations between human violence and the violence that we have taken out against the earth and its landscapes, which are bound to never flourish against the sea of endless conflict? Sarkissian leaves us with boundless questions. This lack of resolve, perhaps, mirrors his own interiority – the bruised shell of a being unsure of how to make his way out of a world that is constantly rehearsing scenarios that may ultimately never be realized.

Omar Kholeif is the Manilow Senior Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

Next spread
Homesick (film stills), 2014
Two-channel video, 11', 7"
Courtesy of the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens – Thessaloniki





Beyond Exile: Hrair Sarkissian's *Homesick*

Murtaza Vali

Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and bond with, one's native place; what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both.

—Edward Saïd, *Reflections on Exile*¹

A scale model of a non-descript muddy brown apartment block, of the sort commonly found in cities across the Middle East, fills the photograph's frame, the first of a series of five large-scale images that form a part of Hrair Sarkissian's project, *Homesick* (2014). A stairway running up the center of the building bisects it into two equivalent wings. Each features four front facing balconies, of which some are completely open while others have been partially enclosed to create additional interior space. The style and color of the curtains, window treatments and metal railings running along the edge of each balcony varies. A small water tank is visible on the roof as are the wall mounted air conditioning units and exhaust fans used by each apartment. Distracted by the high degree of detail it can take a moment to register that the structure is, indeed, a model isolated within a white walled space, and not real and part of the urban fabric of an Arab city. And though the photograph provides no detail through which we can confirm relative scale, its subject commands both the space and the frame in a manner that suggests a roughly equivalent relationship to the human body, somewhat comparable to that of Tony Smith's *Die* (1968), an archetypal Minimalist sculpture. The structure is actually a 1:30 scale replica of the building in Damascus where Sarkissian grew up, and where his parents continue to live. Collaborating with an architect and a building contractor, Sarkissian worked from blueprints and photographs of the original structure to carefully construct this detailed facsimile at Darat al Funun in Amman, Jordan, which, unlike conventional architectural models and for an added degree of material verisimilitude, was made using actual construction techniques and materials like rebar reinforced concrete.

Sarkissian is not the first among contemporary artists to work with an architecturally precise replica of home. As art has become more global and artists' lives more transiently transnational, home has become a frequent

¹ Edward Saïd, "Reflections on Exile," *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002) p. 185.



Above
Homesick (film stills), 2014
Two-channel video, 11', 7"
Courtesy of the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens – Thessaloniki

subject, a familiar motif through which one may address issues of cultural displacement, loss, memory and the past. Do Ho Suh's sculptural oeuvre frequently features replicas of the many homes he has inhabited through the years. Made out of brightly colored but diaphanous fabric, the ethereality of the life size versions, which are sometimes presented suspended off the ground, recreate the fragility and transience of home as a visual and phenomenological experience. And in a detailed scale model like *Fallen Star 1/5* (2008-2011), which is more materially present, Suh literalizes the clash of cultures commonly endured by immigrants, as one home physically crashes into the other. Since 1996 Rirkrit Tiravanjia has constructed life-size replicas of his New York apartment within galleries and museums around the world. Modestly built out of sheets of plywood, these replicas are fully functional and made to be inhabited and used freely by anyone throughout the exhibition's run. Carving out spaces within the disciplinarian order of the white cube, they serve as shells within which acts of conviviality may unfold. But as a sculptural object Sarkissian's model seems closest in terms of scale, materials and sentiment to Marwan Rechmaoui's *Spectre* (2006-08), a replica of the modernist Yacoubian Building in Beirut, where the artist once lived, which serves as a repository of personal memories but also indexes the trauma of the Lebanese civil war.

What distinguishes Sarkissian's project from these other examples is the replica's eventual fate. Laboriously constructed over a month it was promptly demolished upon completion – by hand, through the better part of a day – a process documented in both still and moving images. Each of the other four large-scale photographs in the series mark the razing of a floor and by the final image the edifice has been largely leveled. This photograph, essentially a studio still life of a large pile of concrete rubble, resembles journalistic images of the aftermath of bombings, eerily evoking the everyday carnage experienced not just in Sarkissian's native Syria but also in places like Iraq and Gaza. Sarkissian's boyhood home serves as a proxy of sorts, for the countless others destroyed across the region.

Though Sarkissian emigrated in 2008, the civil conflict that has engulfed and devastated Syria since 2011 has made his return impossible, turning him into an unwitting and reluctant exile. As a Syrian-Armenian, whose grandparents were forced to abandon their homes in Anatolia under the threat of genocide, Sarkissian inherited the melancholy of exile and its elegiac poetics permeate much of his earlier work. On one level, Sarkissian's replica can be understood as a nostalgic monument to a lost home, its photograph-like veracity providing a wealth of mnemonic anchors through which to desperately cling onto a fading past, while its eventual destruction serves as an allegory for its inevitable disappearance from memory.

But *Homesick* is, perhaps, to date Sarkissian's most direct attempt to deal with the effects of his own displacement and the two videos that accompany the photographs reveal some of the complexities and contradictions of his own condition. An eleven-minute long silent video shows the model's demolition in time lapse but never reveals the cause of the destruction; the building seems to implode, slowly collapsing in upon itself, its leveling the result of an inner pathology rather than attack from the outside. Another eight-minute long video, this one with sound, shows Sarkissian unsteadily but repeatedly swinging a sledgehammer. Though the clear assumption is that his blows are directed at the model, his target is never shown. Instead, the camera stays focused on his head and upper torso, studying his body language and the emotional response this act of destruction elicits; despite obvious anger and frustration Sarkissian seems to tire quickly. Through these somewhat contradictory videos Sarkissian seems to both admit and deny his guilt in the process, scrambling our understanding of the exile's relationship to his home.

As conditions in Syria have worsened, the literal destruction of his home, and with it his family who continue to reside there, has become an increasingly real and paralyzing fear, a source of constant worry only intensified by the continuing separation and distance. The malady referenced in the project's title is not therefore limited to a lingering attachment to a home once left behind and now seemingly lost forever but also refers to an exile's growing frustration with a past he desperately wants to but is unable to escape, that continues to lay its claims through the deepest of memories, that refuses to release him. *Homesick* is a form of cathartic therapy, an attempt to exorcise the memories, traumas and paranoid projections that cohere to his childhood home by ritualistically obliterating its simulacrum. It is an attempt to refuse the very conditions of exile, of the loss inherent in the idea of home that Said so eloquently speaks of, by eradicating, at least symbolically, its very existence.

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Murtaza Vali is a writer, art historian, and curator. He lives between Sharjah, UAE, and Brooklyn, USA.

Hrair Sarkissian

b. 1973, Damascus, Syria

Lives and works in London, UK

Hrair Sarkissian earned his foundational training at his father's photographic studio in Damascus. He attended the École Nationale Supérieure de la Photographie in Arles, France, and in 2010 completed a BFA in Photography at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Sarkissian's work revolves around personal and collective memory and identity. His photographs of urban environments and landscape employ traditional documentary techniques to re-evaluate larger historical, political, or social narratives.

His work has recently been exhibited at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art (Newcastle, UK); Kulturcentrum Ronneby (Sweden); 10th Bamako Encounters (Mali); KW Institute for Contemporary Art (Berlin, Germany); the Golden Lion-winning Armenian pavilion at the Venice Biennale; Museum Folkwang (Essen, Germany); Mosaic Rooms (London, UK); Tate Modern (London, UK); The New Museum (New York, USA); and Darat al Funun (Amman, Jordan).

Works on display

Twin Gallery 1

Homesick, 2014

Two-channel video, 11', 7'

Courtesy of the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens – Thessaloniki

Twin Gallery 2

Horizon, 2016

Two-channel video, 6'58''

Courtesy of the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens – Thessaloniki

Hrair Sarkissian: Homesick is part of an ongoing series of exhibitions in the Twin Galleries, showcasing recent work by early-career artists.



Sursock Museum
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www.sursock.museum