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ARSHILE GORKY RETROSPECTIVE AT MOCA

BY JOHN O'BRIEN

THE life and artwork of Arshile Gorky have long since passed from this world into the realm of myth and legend. That is probably due to the combination of tragic circumstances that accompanied him throughout his life, the incredible group of artists and innovators with whom he kept company in the post-WW II New York avant-garde and the peculiar beauty of his hybrid form of surrealism and abstraction. No less compelling were the ways in which he self-documented his life, even creating purposely fabricated histories and conveniently modified dates, and how he would work through the same compositions in paint and drawing — leaving behind tangible

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Top left: *Betrothal I*, 1947, MOCA, LA, The Rita and Taft Schreiber Collection © 2010 Estate of Arshile Gorky/Artists Rights Society, NY; Top center: Gegam Kacherian, *Never I'm Gone*, 2008, Collection of Barry Zito; Top right (detail): Gegam Kacherian, *Place Out of Time*, 2009, Collection of Peggy and Bernard Lewak, courtesy Rosamund Felsen Gallery; Bottom left: *The Artist and His Mother*, 1926–36, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, gift of Julien Levy for Maro and Natasha Gorky © 2010 Estate of Arshile Gorky/Artists Rights Society, NY; ; Bottom right: Photo of Gegam Kacherian by Kireilyn Barber

Gorky continued...

traces of the evolution of his creative thinking that art historians and art aficionados love to unravel.

Therefore, the Gorky exhibition at MOCA is a wonderful opportunity to get drunk on painting and drawing or to contemplate the myth of the damned genius. Whatever the motivation, I would argue that a long-drawn-out visit to see this show is an occasion very much worth the time and energy.

You can try to figure out what is more important about the group of works in the room housing two versions of *The Artist and His Mother* along with several preparatory sketches and related works. Is it the poignant tale of a young Armenian boy whose mother dies of starvation when the Turks chased that population from their land or is it the post-Eurocentric/neo-American stylistic developments that he created en route to telling that story — or is it the astonishing palette of colors and superlative formal work that flows from Gorky's hands that matters most? I would say that it is all of the above and, like the odd satisfaction that derives from any passionate philosophical discussion, none of these perspectives entirely excludes the others. It is just a question of where the accent is placed.

The artwork on view is the most vital element to reckon with. In its evolution, Gorky's style shows a chameleon-like quality. He takes it through many changes before devising his own vocabulary of forms and way of working. Much has been made of the way in which Gorky emulated artists from the past as a copyist would, by retooling Cubism, Cezanne, Stuart Davis or Picasso to his own way of generating an image. His ability to paint certainly owes something to this practice, but by the time he has finished with a work, he had indeed gone beyond derivation into innovation.

There is much to celebrate visually in the work: multiple versions of the *Garden in Sochi*, his images in *Khorkom* and several versions of *The Betrothal* (to

name just a few) are served up to our senses like a lush set of invented mindscapes in which figures and places are taken out of his memory and then morphed into a dazzling array of shapes and patterns in which the origin is absorbed and intensified beyond recognition. The tendency to reduce and essentialize, in which abstraction and hermetic ellipsis operated on later American styles such as Abstract Expressionism or Field Painting, is vibrantly countered by Gorky's celebration of whirling and arabesques, the quirky and the calligraphic. Avoiding any conceptual or stylistic rigidity, Gorky's thoughtfulness remained emotional and sensual throughout.

This exhibition could have easily been titled "Arshile Gorky: A Revision" because at this distance in time, Gorky is finally also being viewed and discussed as an Armenian-American artist. He is given his belated due as being central to those who brought a new gamut of colors into the art world of New York. He is even being looked at as a particularly open case of how New World immigrants achieved cultural assimilation in a complex game of renaming themselves and forging an identity without too much overt baggage from their traditions or origins. The room in which we can see how Gorky wrestles pictorially with the prerogatives of public art in fashioning his Newark Airport murals is an interesting re-view of the artist — craftsman schism that is still being played out in the difference between studio art and public art practices today.

"Arshile Gorky: A Retrospective" provides us with plentiful material to do a number of in-depth archeological digs. Viewers are invited to plunge in, and what we pull out of the excavation depends only on our own willingness to delve deep. 

Ends September 20.
Visit moca.org for more information