

OCULA NEWS & VIEWS

Hera Büyüktaşçıyan takes us around the Armenian Pavilion at Venice

Basak Senova | Ocula | 05 Aug 2015



Hera Büyüktaşçıyan. Photo:: Silvina der Meguerditchian

The Armenian Pavilion, curated by Adelina Cüberyanyan Von Fürstenberg, situated on the Island of San Lazzaro, Venice, features a group exhibition titled as *Armenity* by eighteen diaspora Armenian artists: Haig Aivazian (Lebanon), Nigol Bezjian (Syria/USA), Anna Boghiguan (Egypt/Canada), Hera Büyüktaşçıyan (Turkey), Silvina Der-Meguerditchian (Argentina/Germany), Rene Gabri & Ayreen Anastas (Iran/Palestine/USA), Mekhitar Garabedian (Belgium), Aikaterini Gegisian (Greece), Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi (Italy), Aram

Jibilian (USA), Nina Katchadourian (USA/Finland), Melik Ohanian (France), Mikayel Ohanjanyan (Armenia/Italy), Rosana Palazyan (Brasil), Sarkis (Turkey/France), and Hrair Sarkissian (Syria/UK).

As Cüberyan Von Fürstenberg explains in her curatorial text “Armenity derives from the French word *Arménité*, a notion which expresses the particular characteristics of the grandchildren of Armenian Genocide survivors”. The same text underlines that the concept has developed with the notions of displacement and territory, justice and reconciliation, ethos and resilience. *Armenity*, a layered and extensive exhibition, which processes and reads historical archives, personal stories, muted voices, cultural heritage, and controversial and suppressive responses, well deserved the Golden Lion for Best National Presentation of the 56th Venice Biennale.

The conversation below was conceived as a journey to the pavilion through the eyes of participating artist Hera Büyüктаşçıyan. The voyage is to an island that metaphorically recalls the vision and longing of the Armenians for their motherland. Throughout this voyage, sometimes a question directs the route, sometimes a reading navigates through the works in the monastery, and sometimes the flow is dictated by the dialogue among the works. Büyüктаşçıyan is a storyteller, who works on historical and cultural narratives mostly based on her Greek-Armenian roots. Her practice has been always guided by the idea of ‘water’ as a way, tool and compass to consider the politics of memory and identity.

The voyage starts with the Island of San Lazzaro. What was your vision of the island before seeing and experiencing it?

Before seeing San Lazzaro, it was like the unknown and unexpected for me. One wonders why islands are always dreamed lands for all. Is it because it is unreachable or is it because it promises the experience of an unknown reality of life that is hidden like a treasure, waiting to be discovered? Whilst waiting for the vaporetto at the San Zaccaria station I thought about the journey of Mekhitar, an Armenian Monk who founded the Mekhitarist Congregation in 1717 in San Lazzaro.

Monk Mekhitar is the person who first drew the contours of this voyage. How do you read him?

Mekhitar, who was born in Sebaste (Sivas), had the ideal of establishing a theological school which would also become an important educational centre whose main focus would be the Armenian language and of course book printing. As a young monk with this dream to base his educational center and monastery [there], he travelled to Constantinople in 1701, but due to the pressure of the Ottoman Empire, he moved to Peleponnese after a year, where he and his students lived for around 13 years. Finally by [the] 1717s when they arrived in Venice as their

final destination, he received permission to found his congregation from the Venetian Authorities of the time. San Lazzaro is the island that was given to the congregation, where previously leper patients were quarantined, and the ruins of the hospital remains. After this journey of Mekhitar, Armenian language, culture, history and knowledge also travelled through this route and finally found a place to create its own habitat.



The Armenian Pavilion, at Mekhitarist monastery on the island of San Lazzaro degli Armeni

Which thoughts and questions hunted you on the way to this island?

The vaporetto arrived and we set off to San Lazzaro where the National Pavilion of the Republic of Armenia is situated.

During our journey, I remember the hypnotic movement of the waves which invite one to dive in the depths of the virtual sea of memory.

Whilst thinking on what 'Armenity' means, I began to go deeper by questioning what it means to 'remember' and to 'commemorate' a certain fragment of the past? How does it cure certain wounds and fill gaps of tragic histories within the world in the current time? How do we unfold memories whilst carrying them to the present tense?

In the same line of thought, the curatorial concept of Armenty comes up with these questions, which process the notions of displacement and territory, justice and reconciliation, and identity.

Yes, the year 2015 is dedicated to the one hundredth year commemoration of [the] 1915 Armenian Genocide and through this occasion a very rare transnational gathering. The exhibition brings together 18 artists of different generations from all around the world, [all of] Armenian origin.

How do you feel about this unification?

It's a rare togetherness of a dispersed identity coming together like lost pieces of a world map coming back to their original place and completing the picture. Whilst getting lost in these reflections of time, the island began to reveal itself. As the vaporetto approached, a sailing boat named 'Armenia' waved to us. With enthusiasm and a bit of anxiety, we stepped onto San Lazzaro, the so called Little Armenia or an Armenian island in foreign waters.

If we go back to our voyage, when we step on the island, what is the first encounter of the exhibition that greets the audience?

It begins with Melik Ohanian's piece *Presence-Belongingness to Present-Part I. Streetlights of Memory – A Stand by Memorial* (2010-15) which is a particular version of the monumental piece he produced for an international project organised by the City of Geneva for the memorial of the genocide. Due to diplomatic and political pressures, the monument could not find its place. The installation shows the resistance to the notion of forgetting and its persistence to exist.



Melik Ohanian, *Presence – Belongingness to Present – Part I. Streetlights of Memory – A Stand by Memorial*, 2010–15. Site-specific installation. Installation view, Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Venice. Courtesy the artist

After leaving Ohanian's installation, which oscillates between the act [of] erasure and the mirage of reappearing like a phoenix, arising from the ashes, we follow the circular path and enter the monastery.

Once we get in, the dark corridor invites us to move forward and we see *A story I never forgot ...* (2013-15), a video installation by Rosana Palazyan. This video narrates the stories about the genocide she has heard throughout her childhood and her grandmother's journey from Thessaloniki to Rio de Janeiro.



Rosana Palazyan, "... Uma história que eu nunca esqueci..." / "... A story I never forgot...", 2013–15. Video installation – video 13 minutes; threads on the floor. Installation view, Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Venice. Collection of the artist. © Piero Demo

The notion of remembrance and forgetting is also essential for this piece.

Also, the strong feeling of the tension in recalling a past of displacement and pain plays an important role. Through the stories that are narrated within the film and the visual language used, the audience is enabled to see history through the eyes and memory of a child. This invites us to question how we position ourselves within oral histories, and how we maintain our

existence through remembrance. This in turn involves the transformation of a painful past into something positive through the artist as a visual poet who translates a fragment of history into the present.

The act of translation in various layers is one of the strongest aspects of this exhibition. Hence, this act imposes never-ending questions.

Whilst considering these questions we enter the old printing workshop of the monastery, which is a museum today. We begin to hear multiple voices from Nigol Bezjian's site specific video installation titled *Witness.ed*. His work focuses on Daniel Varoujan: his life and works, as well as his brutal death in 1915 by the Young Turks. In between the letter prints, stamps, and old printing instruments, Bezjian places images from the *Aztag* newspaper published in Istanbul in which Daniel Varoujan's poem, *To the Cilician Ashes*, (a masterpiece which addressed the massacre of Armenians in Adana and Aleppo) was published for the first time. The films in the same room reveal the notion of mourning, memory and witnessing through the poet's life.



Nigol Bezjian, *Witness.ed*, 2015. Installation view, Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Venice. Courtesy the artist. © Piero Demo

While walking through the works, the audience is being conditioned to think about fragments of memory and the act of remembrance by becoming a part of each narration. The history rewrites itself with multiple times, the audience witnesses each of them while the perception

of time freezes with the atmosphere and the architectural characteristics of the monastery itself.

Now, we enter into Anna Boghiguiian's room where histories are witnessed from a bird's eye view in her work *ANI*. With her drawings, prayer books, birds and interior micro garden [she] has created a universe which gives the sense of a space of prayer to a certain fragment of memory ... an elevated space which also elevates the vision of the past itself. Here the birds become the storytellers, and they sing about history. The birds accompany us while we enter into another sacred space.



Anna Boghiguiian, *Ani*, 2015. Site-specific installation. Installation view, Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Venice Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut. © Piero Demo

Now we are at the entrance of the church. The serenity and the silence of the space enraptures the audience. Sarkis's installation invites us in. How do you read it?

Danseuse dorée en haut du toit, from 'Ailleurs ici', Chaumont-sur-Loire (2012) by Sarkis is situated at the entrance of the church where the tombs invite us to a space of remembrance, which he calls 'My memory is my homeland'.

The two photographs in stained glass are watching the viewer from high above [and] float in the air like elements from our mental space. His works on paper with wooden figure-like objects are viewed one by one, page by page as the layers of time and history. With these works on paper

and the floating stained glass photographs they create a new perception of mental space with all the elements in the same room such as the tombs, columns, busts of former archbishops, angel winds hung on the wall ... a space which includes motifs from personal and collective memory and totally out of the borders of time has been created.



Sarkis, *Ada Ewe vierge*, 2013–14. Metal furniture, 30 sheets on Arches paper 300 g, 56 x 76 cm, with wooden objects, 132 x 68 x 92 cm. Installation view, Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Venice. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris-Brussels. © Piero Demo

While moving in between personal and collective memories, we come across Yervan Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi's piece *Return to Khodorciur: Armenian Diary* where Yervan Gianikian's father is reading his life story. By listening to his story, the tension of recalling one's own past is well sensed: the difficulty to give a voice to memories that have been muted [for a] long time yet the will to recollect personal histories.

We begin to climb the stairs surrounded by amazing walls. The presence of the monastery is so strong that the visual balance of the works, which are not competing with the space, is quite remarkable. They spread all around the monastery with a big respect.

In alike manner, on the way to the upstairs, we see a piece from Sarkis at the stairwell, a dinosaur bone whose gaps are filled and gilded with gold leaf with a watch laying beside. Not only within this piece but the sense of being out of time is somehow the true identity of this

island/monastery.



Sarkis, *Atlas de Mammuthus Intermedius*, 2014. Bones from the site of Romain-la-Roche (160,000 years B.C.). Resin, natural glue, gold leaf, 38 x 25 x 15 cm. Restored by Olivier Bracq according to the Japanese technique of restoration Kintsugi, dating back to the 15th century. Installation view, Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Venice. Collection Musées de Montbéliard. © Piero Demo

As a whole, walking through the exhibition, the monastery has embraced the works. Each piece has found its true place. When we reach upstairs on the right hand side, we see a long corridor surrounded with paintings by Armenian artists all around the walls. We see a long white roll inside a glass table where watercolor drawings of the artists, narrate the Armenian tales that Yervant Gianikian's father used to tell. Each story/fable is narrated vertically, which forms a new visual language or an alternative imagery alphabet of oral narratives.

On the other side of the corridor there is Gegisian's (Greece) work titled *A Small Guide to the Invisible Seas*. Collage works made by collected images from Soviet Armenia, Turkey and Greece, which create a new sense of both personal and collective mental cartography. Images of spaces that are placed in our collective memory, transform into new transnational, hybrid spaces, that also relate to each of our personal daily atlases and so called homelands we create for ourselves

with a sense of belonging.



Aikaterini Gegisian, *A Small Guide to the Invisible Seas*, 2015. Collages on paper. Installation view, Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Venice Courtesy the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens/Thessaloniki. © Piero Demo

Speaking of personal maps and collective cartographies, the works of Yervan Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi have a strong dialogue with Aikaterini Gegisian's work. The corridors covered with paintings turn to an atlas and amplify the feeling of a voyage in time. How do you relate this feeling to the historical narratives?

From such personal atlases, we move towards the part of the building where the historical libraries and archives are. The space itself is a lively organism within itself, a space where multilayers of time exist and breathe. In this sense together with each work, their own historical narratives from different geographies, the energy of the space and each time layer that is hidden inside expand more to create a new sense of historical topography. Moving on our voyage, at the entrance Silvina Der Meguerditchian's (Argentina/Germany) *Treasures* are placed within the glass closets in between archeological pieces either brought or gifted to the monastery from Asia Minor and all around the world. These are old glass bottles, clay vases, objects etc. Just like the monastery as a whole, this specific room itself is a cabinet of curiosities, where the artist invites us to gain back our sight and ability to see things rather than ignoring

them.



Silvina Der-Meguerditchian, *Treasures*, 2015. Manuscript, collages, digital images and small glass bottles. Variable dimensions. Installation view, Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Venice Courtesy the artist. © Piero Demo

Her work is based on a manuscript written by her great grandmother in Buenos Aires, which included herbal recipes for healing purposes, especially healing the eyes in the case of serious illnesses. In the light of the presence of the original manuscript, the artist's drawings carry the similar approach of creating her own manuscript through underlining her own memory as well as her interest in book-making as a manner of documenting time just as her grandmother has done. As the viewer's eyes are healed whilst witnessing written histories we move to a beautiful library with a huge Tiepolo mural on the ceiling.

Just in the case of Der Meguerditchian's work, the ability to see the invisible is also essential in Mekhitar Garabedian's sculptural piece. The concrete form of the sculpture *Untitled (Daniel Varoujan Ghent)* transforms as we get nearer and invites us to read the monochromatic stamped sentences on white papers from the poems of Daniel Varoujan (Belgium). The paper blocks relate to the book binding and printing history of the monastery and also to the role of books

and paper as a means to record our thoughts and history.



Mekhitar Garabedian, *Untitled (Daniel Varoujan Ghent)*, 2011. Paper, intaglio print, 73.5 x 58.5 cm. Installation view, Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Venice Courtesy the artist and Albert Baronian Gallery, Brussels. © Piero Demo

Travelling between the invisible words of Mekhitar Garabedian's surfaces and Daniel Varoujan's universe, within the silence of the library, we begin to gaze at the piece of Haig Aivazian (Lebanon) *Hastayım Yaşıyorum* _(*I am Sick, But I am Alive*). The noisy silence of the sculpture has a strong sense of gravity, which pulls our sight towards it. From a distance the piece resembles an oud, yet once one approaches and walks around it, it surprises the viewer by transforming into the embodiment of sound and echo of a vocal memory. The piece, which is about Udi Hrant Kenkulian, a Turkish-Armenian oud master, whispers [to] us his own story as well as the story of the disappeared musicians and composers in Turkish history. Kenkulian as a blind musician, has reflected his spirit and musical perfection through sound, where the unseen

becomes visible.



Haig Aivazian, *Hastayım Yaşjyorum (I am sick, but I am alive)*, 2014. Wood and polyester varnish, 235 x 40 x 100 cm. Installation view, Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Venice. Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg. © Piero Demo

We are moving along the rooms by diving into different notions that are repeated one and after with each piece, such as history; the acts of remembering and forgetting; the tension between visibility and invisibility; lost identities; the muted voices of neglected stories; distant lands; and the atlases of memory. The variety of the media used in the exhibition strengthens the mental links between the works. Such a material richness adds different perspectives and readings on the exhibition.

Yes, exactly. This richness also invites the audience to be a part of these narratives, geographies and mental spaces. The fact that each person experiences this intense voyage and find a reflection of themselves in terms of different but similar global politics and social backgrounds, the notion of ‘otherness’ politics begins to melt in a good sense. At the point when people put themselves [in] the place of the so called ‘other’, they find a reflection of themselves within that.

One of the good examples of this for instance, Nina Khatchadourian ‘s (USA/Finland) *Accent Elimination* video installation, [which] is presented on six monitors within the next room. The artist has a question and answer type of dialogue with her parents through the different family origins and languages spoken in Armenian, Turkish, Lebanese, American Finnish and Swedish accents. Through the piece one witnesses the notion of recognition and the aspect of language

within the context of belonging and appropriation of identities through generations.



Nina Katchadourian, *Accent Elimination*, 2005. Six monitors, three channels of synchronized video, three single-channel video loops, six media players, three sets of headphones, three pedestals, two benches Variable dimensions. Installation view, Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Venice. Courtesy the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery. © Piero Demo

Walking back to the other side of the libraries, we arrive to the room of Lord Byron where he studied the Armenian language at the age of 28 and translated several books from English to Armenian as well as writing a grammar book that is in half Armenian and half English. Here my piece titled *Letters from Lost Paradise* and *The Keepers* take place. Referencing Lord Byron's attempt to learn Armenian, which he called "the Language of Lost Paradise", with the kinetical sculpture *Letters from Lost Paradise*, the existence of Byron is being reenacted as if he is writing letters at his desk. The moving wooden blocks, which resemble the letter stamps, also commemorate the printing history of the island as well as trying to revive the no longer functioning printing machines. This act is more related with the [relationship] between oral and written histories and how the printing tradition in Armenian history has had an important role in documenting /recording time and memory. The text (*Letters from Lost Paradise*) on the letter stamps are written in English with Armenian script. The wax hands on the bookshelves titled *The Keepers* relate with the Egyptian mummy in the room as an act of giving eternal life to one's

own language.



Hera Büyüktaşçıyan, *The Keepers*, installation detail, 2015. 12 casted hands in wax and bronze, 19 x 9 cm. Installation view, Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Venice. Courtesy the artist. © Piero Demo

Byron's Room leads towards the hall of the manuscripts where 250,000 manuscripts are, and we see Rene Gabri & Ayreen Anastas's piece *The Meaning of Everything* in glass cabinets. The work itself is like an open book where history is being unfolded one by one with its multiple layers. The artists have created a sense of mobile manuscripts with the postcard size images which are mostly collected from the archive of the monastery as well as various sources. In this sense they excavate memory like an endoscopic look towards the [depths] of time, history and trauma. Getting lost in the corridors of history and time, we walk towards downstairs and come to daylight.

Aram Jibilian's photographic series *The Gorky Mask* are seen on the corridors of the courtyard. As a very powerful gesture the artist creates masks from the portraits of Arshile Gorky paintings and places them on people around him. Considering the traumatic and miserable life of Gorky, as an artist who tries to create a new life and place to belong in America, trauma has become a visible reflection of his life within his paintings, especially in the expressions of the figures. The artist's act of transforming the Gorky portraits into masks becomes a reminder of the various histories and traumas that are reflected in our daily lives whilst personally struggling with the sense of belonging and being ourselves.

Walking through the courtyard we also see Rosana Palazyan's series *Why Weeds?* which were placed in the manner of instructive labels of plants in botanical gardens.

Weed here, does not represent a species of a plant, but rather it means something that is the undesirable or unwanted. In this respect within societies we live, especially in terms of identity and otherness politics, the notion of being the unwanted is visible and through this piece the

artist surrounds the garden with these plants whose roots are embroidered by the artist's hair.



Rosana Palazyan, *From the series Por que Daninhas? / Why Weeds?*, 2006-2015. Plants and embroidery with thread and human hair on fabric. 25 x 20 cm each. Installation view, Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Venice. Private collection. © Piero Demo

Towards the end of the courtyard, is a room where Hrair Sarkissian's photographic series titled *Unexposed* surrounds the viewer. This series undertakes the aspect of the descendants of Armenians who converted to Islam during the period of 1915 and their rediscovery of their roots. With this rediscovery of their roots, some have converted back to Christianity and due to gaining back their identities most of them are forced to stay invisible within the society in order to survive. The notion of social acceptance and being the unwanted is also essential in this piece in relation to Rosana Palazyan's piece in the garden.

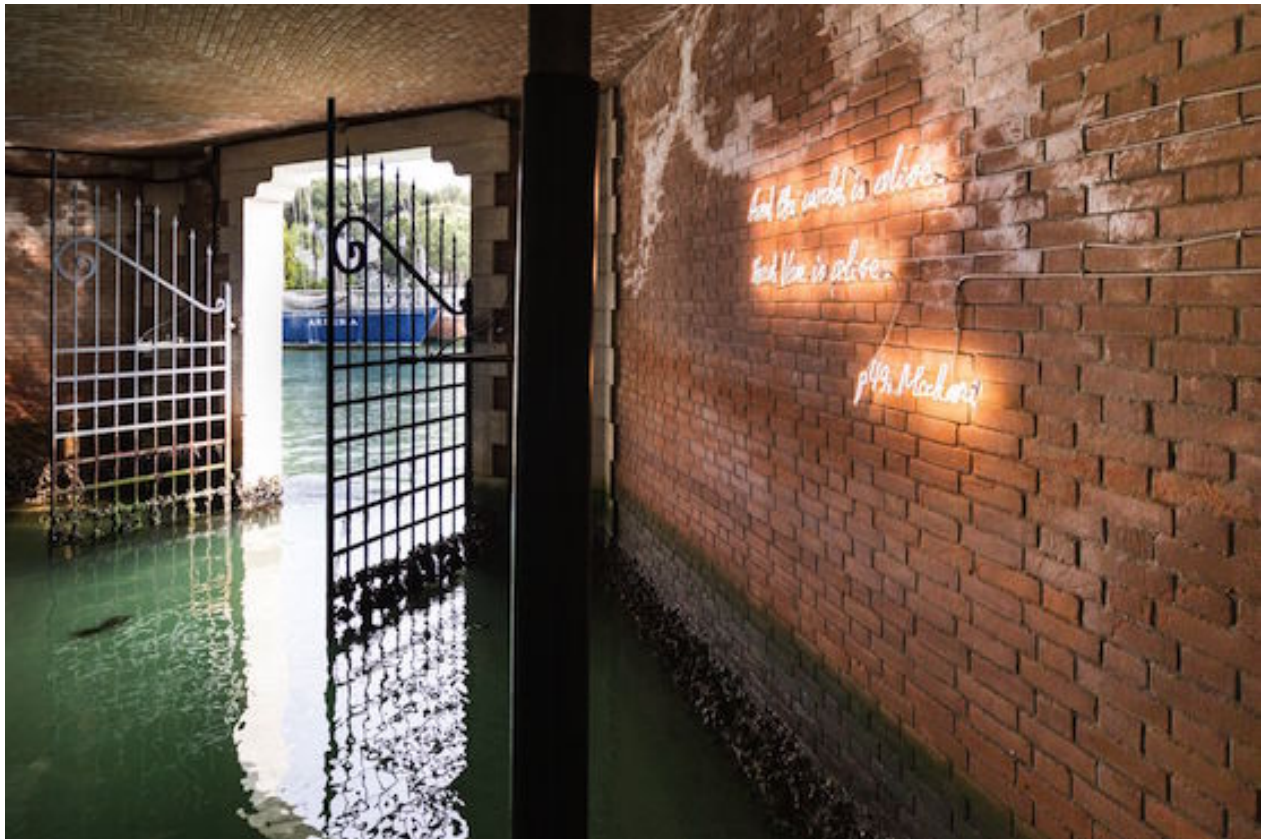
The journey of the exhibition finishes with Mekhitar Garabedian and Mikayel Ohanjanyan's pieces. Walking through the garden one hears Mekhitar Garabedian's piece involving continuously recited Armenian names from speakers placed on the grass. The ephemerality of the sound also reminds [us] of the transience of people we all know within our lives as well as all these names who one by one disappeared through the aspect of time and traumatic histories. As the recited names echo in our ears we move towards the entrance of the boat house.



Mekhitar Garabedian, *Agheg*, 2003 - 2015. Sound installation, 9 min, voice by Agheg Garabedian. Installation view, Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Venice. Courtesy the artist and Albert Baronian Gallery, Brussels. © Piero Demo

Once the sliding door opens, the neon work of Garabedian titled *Untitled*, (*Gurgen Mahari, The world is alive*) is revealed. It is a beautiful hidden work that first enchants the audience with its strong visuality, then, leaves the audience alone with the feeling of sorrow in such a serene location. The quotation from Mahari is written with tremulous letters from light: 'The world is alive, and Van is alive'.

Being within the boathouse, the quotation is like an inner sound from the depths of time, which recall the conflict between temporariness and permanence of memory.



Mekhitar Garabedian, *Untitled* (*Gurgen Mahari, The world is alive, Venice*), 2015 Neon. Site specific installation. Installation view, Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Venice. Courtesy the artist and Albert Baronian Gallery, Brussels. © Piero Demo

Climbing the stairs up above the boathouse, Mikayel Ohanjanyan's (Armenia/Italy) sculptural installation *Tasnerku* awaits for the viewer to complete their journey within the exhibition. *Tasnerku* meaning the singing or the screaming stones. The sculptural forms are made out of basalt stone, specifically found in Armenia, and brings up a certain sense of rhythm with their circular position. This rhythmic setting, the distances between the stones and their dialogue with the belvedere creates an intense energy in between. At the end of the exhibition tour, Ohanjanyan's work gives the audience a sense of feeling complete with one's own being and

identity.



Mikayel Ohanjanyan, *Tasnerku*, 2015. Mixed size basalt blocks and discs of corten steel, Ø 120 cm each disc. Installation view, Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Venice. Courtesy the artist and Tornabuoni Arte Gallery, Florence. © Piero Demo

At the end of this voyage, how do you choose to remember the San Lazzaro Island?

San Lazzaro degli Armeni is the embodiment of the following saying from an anonymous author I discovered sometime ago 'Revolutions break out on ships, and utopias are lived on islands.' Not only with its multilayered history and preservation of identity and culture but also with the exhibition *Armenity*, the island's entity and existence has become visible to the current and future audience.—[O]