

ALEXIA MARKARIAN: PAINTINGS AND WORKS ON PAPER 2000-2008

CURATOR'S STATEMENT

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Alexia Markarian's distinctive and thought-provoking imagery has earned this San Diego-based artist a reputation as one of the city's preeminent artistic voices. Spanning nearly a decade, "Alexia Markarian: Paintings and Drawings on Paper, 2000 to 2008" offers gallery goers an unusual opportunity to witness a recent, dramatic change in the evolution of Markarian's art, and to view major, earlier works that have rarely or never been exhibited.

Stylistically and conceptually Markarian's paintings and drawings of the past few years are not easily categorized. Although they are grounded in figuration and representation, they are challenging and elusive; deliberately ambiguous, spontaneous, and random appearing. Because they are so enigmatic, eccentric, and visceral, they evoke comparison to works by Outsider Artists, that is, non-conformist artists with no formal training, who live and work away from the influences of mainstream culture and the art establishment. In the mid-1940s, it was none other than Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985), the influential French artist and avant-garde rebel, who was the first person to recognize the merit of this type of art, coining the term *art brut*. Although the definition of what constitutes Outsider Art has grown over the years to include a broad array of primitive-looking art, and marketing it has become big business, works by patients afflicted with serious mental illness and living in mental institutions (the art that originally caught Dubuffet's eye) still rank among the most interesting and authentic of this type.

In the broadest sense, the scores of objects, symbols, and organisms that Markarian depicts in her work can be divided into two categories: real and imaginary. Among the recognizable and reality-based images recurring frequently in Markarian's works are stylized renditions of the female figure (usually nude or partially nude or transparent enough in strategic places to enable viewing of the internal organs); chains; birds; disembodied hands; insects; microorganisms; botanical specimens; funnels, veins, arteries, and coiled tubes (these reveal the artist's fascination with objects or structures that convey liquids); and organs separate from the body, to name a few.

However, it is Markarian's ability to conceive and render mutated, distorted, and wholly imagined subjects, combined with a curious layering and juxtaposing of these images with one another, that take her art into disconcerting and uncharted territory. These include oddly and impossibly hybridized mammalian organs; small or microscopic alien creatures that look especially menacing when enlarged; altered cartoon characters; and thick, graceful loopings that could pass for intestines, snakes, or worms. One of Markarian's favorite approaches to her multi-legged subjects is to disassemble them and leave the parts (pincers, antennae, legs, thoraxes, and heads) strewn about the picture plane, all the while rendering every stiff hair and curved spine

with precision and flair. Many of Markarian's imaginary shapes are intriguing but unidentifiable other than that they could have been spawned by carbon-based life forms. *Gud Dawg*, a painting which bombards the viewer with a cryptic array of images ranging from a brain to anthropomorphized organs dancing around the painting's perimeter, includes objects that suggest laboratory equipment. The artist's scientific background offers a partial explanation for this orientation. At one point during her college education, which emphasized microbiology, biology, and mathematics, she considered becoming a medical illustrator. Her father wanted her to become a doctor. To this day, she collects 19th century medical and biology texts, and for her own pleasure, enjoys creating small, extremely detailed anatomical drawings.

In the majority of Markarian's works in this exhibition their compositions are arranged around a solitary female figure. With the exception of the woman depicted in *Sending and Receiving*, a painting in which a bizarrely coiffed female with a deranged, quizzical expression on her face levitates through a dripping, milky cloud swimming with spermatozoa and other detritus (Markarian confesses that the painting was partially inspired by her captivation with the dysfunctional singer Amy Winehouse), none of her images are based on real people. However, the manner in which they are portrayed can be disconcerting. Limbs may be missing. Heads, tethered to their torsos by the most tenuous, can-like connections, or teetering precipitously on cushions of air, are on the verge of falling off or drifting away. Proportionally, feet and hands are miniscule compared to the mass of the body, or are missing altogether. Faces have an expressionless, manikin-like quality, and are surprisingly demure considering the chaos that surrounds them. Some bodies appear to be hollow vessels, their stumps of arms and legs hanging limply like tubes. And, if they're present, breasts can range from full and well-formed, as in *Earbone Settee*, to reptilian patterns of thorns (*Schizophrenic Ear*) or a pair of defiantly protruding pacifiers (*Black Bun/Red Line*). In Markarian's most recent works, especially, the women's bodies are static, frontal, and rigid. Arms are folded behind backs; legs are tucked under in yoga-like poses.

Markarian doesn't offer any explanation as to why a female figure is often the focal point of her works, other than that the form somehow emerges during the painting process. It should be noted, though, that images (including three-dimensional works) of women, women's garments, and accessories such as high heels and purses, have figured prominently in Markarian's art for much of her career. And, for a time, Markarian's work was included in many feminist-oriented art exhibitions, although she denies that her works were governed by feminist doctrine.

It's easy to see why Markarian's art was embraced by feminist critics and curators. In the mid-1990s, for example, exploring unusual materials for making art, Markarian fabricated a series of full-scale dresses and bikinis from flattened soft drink and beer cans. Other similarly themed works included a long skirt fashioned from braids of synthetic hair; paintings executed on girdles; and *Steel Chemise*, a garment made from cut and riveted stainless steel. Also in the mid-1990s, Markarian began producing a line of women's art jewelry that has brought her considerable recognition. The offbeat themes and design motifs of her jewelry echo those found in her drawings and paintings.

Looking at the women in Markarian's art, their demeanor and the objects surrounding them appear to suggest mental unrest, illness or injury, and physical pain. Markarian is adamant,

though, that she's not painting womankind, per se, or specific torments. "The figure that's meant to come out will come out," she says of her current work, adding, "Sometimes there's not an explanation." And, although Markarian's imagery is rarely overtly sexual, the voluptuousness of the biomorphic forms that pulsate through her compositions like life in a fertile tropical reef, and the dark, twisted things happening to the characters in some of her paintings, cannot be denied, either. "At times my line is palpably sexual," she points out.

The perception of suffering and sexuality in the context of Markarian's female figures leads some viewers to see similarities between her works and those of painter Frieda Kahlo (1907 – 1954), "the Mexican icon of suffering." For reasons ranging from Kahlo's realistic style to the narrative and autobiographical content of her works (nearly one-third of Kahlo's paintings are self-portraits), Markarian rejects the notion of any kinship between her art and Kahlo's. When pressed to cite an artist with whom a more valid comparison might be made, Markarian cites Neo-expressionist painter Jean Michel Basquiat (1960-1988).

Again, relying on intuition, the viewer might read a lot into the lack of detail in Markarian's figurative rendering and the parts that are missing versus those that are present. However, as we've already learned, when it comes to Markarian's art, most conventional interpretations are likely to be off-base. According to the artist, the reasons that she doesn't fully render her figurative images are simple. "Why have hands and feet?" she asks. "Sometimes to put more in would be superfluous." The same rationale applies to necks, which Markarian often depicts as can-like cylindrical shapes, or segments of pipe. "I don't see an expressive reason to paint all connections. A tin can shape or a red line is all that's needed. The way that the marks are made. Conveying emotion. Expressiveness. Those are the things that are important to me."

Some of the objects with which Markarian surrounds herself are directly related to the imagery she uses in her paintings and drawings. Like many artists, she is fascinated by the out-of-the-ordinary and has impressive collections of things like costume jewelry, vintage clothing, antiquarian plates of anatomical studies, anatomy dolls, paper ephemera (especially those with Asian motifs), odd tools and toys, packaging, and unusual books. She points out two vintage dress forms that she keeps in her studio; forms (or variations of them) which appear repeatedly in her works. "They have no head, no arms, no legs. But you know what they are," she says. "I'm not concerned with making the perfect representation. I want to make the perfect painting."

Likewise, any attempts to decipher Markarian's images and parts of images (many of which have long-accepted and specific interpretations and meanings in art and psychology) are made more perilous by her assertion that they have no conventional or easily discerned meanings to her. They emerge from her subconscious as she paints and draws. They are what they are. "I'm not afraid to go where others might not want to go," says Markarian. "I don't censor myself. I allow myself to paint what I want to paint."

The shape and structure of certain objects, such as chains, resonate so strongly with Markarian that she incorporates them repeatedly into her works. For example, one-third of the works in this exhibition incorporate chain iconography. In Markarian's hands, chains make versatile compositional devices and she exploits their artistic potential fully and inventively to add visual interest, fill in negative space, unify scattered images, and anchor compositions to the

edges of the canvases. However, the powerful symbolic meanings of chains (especially when they appear to relate to other objects nearby) make it difficult to resist the temptation to build a narrative around them, rather than seeing them as the mere forms in a composition that Markarian suggests they are. For example, *Peninsula*, a painting on paper, features a snake-like length of what could be intestine superimposed on top of a circle of heavy chain. The third element in the composition, a piece of apparatus shaped like a woman's body, resembles a medieval torture device or fetish wear.

Markarian's practice of using a pastiche of representational images to create a visual collage, an overall abstraction (something that American art icon Robert Rauschenberg did brilliantly), is particularly apparent in paintings such as *Off Across Rooms*; *Gud Dawg*; *Please, Baby, Please*; and *The Bigness of Your Bang Fills My Heart with Jelly*. These works are so dense with imagery they nearly dissolve into non-objective tangles of lines and colors. Markarian uses the same approach, but to different effect, in comparatively understated works such as *At the Last*; *Ask the Robot for Love*; *Peninsula*; and *Escarpment*. In these pieces, one or a few individual elements are islands in seas of negative space, but the compositions can still be read as abstractions. This idea pleases Markarian greatly because she paints intuitively, directed by an inexplicable "aesthetic compulsion." "There's no rational reason for what I do," she reiterates.

Additional information about the processes and techniques that Markarian uses to conceive and execute her art may be helpful in understanding it. As mentioned above, her canvases and works on paper are not preplanned in any way and she makes no preliminary sketches. She describes the birth of a painting as "sometimes a battle, sometimes a standoff." Preserving the illusion of spontaneity, both technically and conceptually, leads her to rework paintings until all indications of obvious storytelling, excessive planning, or labored execution, have disappeared. One way she accomplishes this, and at the same time enriches the image, is by partially revealing the inevitable missteps, changes of mind, and myriad reworkings that accompany the painting and drawing process. Sometimes she works on two or three paintings simultaneously, but stopping and restarting an individual painting can take place over a period of several years. Repositioned figures, altered poses, reconfigured lines, and discarded elements are at least partially visible through the translucent layers of Markarian's glazes and paints. The cumulative effect of this overlapping and collaging suggests several images superimposed on top of one another. That Markarian allows herself to reveal the imperfect nature of the creative process, all the while managing to overcome the fear of "ruining" a painting – one that she has battled for years – certainly tie in to the openness and gut-wrenching expressiveness of her art as a whole.

Because of Markarian's sensitivity to the chemicals used in painting with oils, and her impatience with their slow drying time, she prefers acrylics. Her tools include brushes, rags, cotton swabs, squeegees, and sandpaper. Alcohol is used as a solvent to adjust density and to remove selected areas of pigment. She has never painted at an easel, but instead hangs a stretched canvas flat against a wall in her studio and works standing up. At times, she obtains an alternative perspective on balance and color by painting with the canvas upside down. This is another way that energy and dynamism can be added to an image, and the appearance of a contrived composition avoided.

An alternative to a canvas support is paper. Painting on paper evokes a different mindset than painting on canvas, explains Markarian. “Your approach changes. Paper is more ephemeral and that quality is ultimately reflected in the image.” The paper she uses most frequently is Bristol board that has been sealed with gesso applied with a squeegee. These works often incorporate fine detailed passages, so working on them is more easily accomplished sitting at a drawing table than standing. In terms of their artistic merit, Markarian’s values her works on paper as much as those on canvas. “They’re just different,” she says.

Some of the best insights into Markarian’s imagery, psyche, and art-making techniques are offered by two books of drawings, “Midnight Auto” and “Woosh,” that she illustrated, wrote, and published in limited numbers to accompany this exhibition. Markarian’s inventiveness as a writer are hinted at in the thought-provoking titles she composes for her works, but it is in her books that her irreverence, subversiveness, and dark sense of humor are more fully revealed. Unlike the relatively expressionless characters in her paintings, characters whose conflicts (if we’re not being *too* presumptuous in assuming they’re not happy people) are internalized but visible through the chaotic imagery that swirls inside and around them, the characters in her books are angst-ridden, socially alienated, frustrated, teeth-gnashing entities. Their demented antics are accompanied by observations, commentary, and dialogue written and hand-lettered by the artist in the rambling, meticulous manner and style reminiscent of a schizophrenic. Through these characters’ bizarre ravings and obsessions, odd truths are revealed. Originally drawn in pencil, ballpoint pen, and fine tip Uni-ball pen using a deliberately crude technique that Markarian describes as “scratchy,” these vignettes can be painfully revealing about human nature. However, they have an innate elegance that, combined with the dialogue, makes them haunting and unforgettable.

After a several-year hiatus from art-making, many of Markarian’s most recent works on canvas are more like drawings than paintings. Her imagery is sparer, large sections are left bare or intentionally unfinished, and her palette is subtler. The woman’s face in a large painting titled *At the Last* has been reduced to a crudely painted red rectangle contained within an oval outline. These restrained works have as much, if not more, psychological impact than her denser, more colorful ones. “A successful painting conveys something strong, although you may not know what it is,” says the artist. “It’s the emotive power that draws you into the work.”