

Marcos Grigorian

Earthworks



LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

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A Rooted Nomad

Artist, teacher, gallerist, collector, actor, curator: these are some of the attributes that may be attached to the name of Marcos Grigorian (1925-2007). In his activities as an artist we find the same multifaceted diversity: from figurative expressionist paintings to sculptural abstractions made with straw, mud, and earth to works incorporating found objects and even perishable food, all the way to performative photographs. Grigorian was of Armenian descent. His nomadic trajectory took him from his birthplace, in Kropotkin, Russia, to Tabriz at the age of five, then to Tehran, Rome, Minneapolis, New York, and his final resting place in Yerevan, Armenia. Grigorian was a global artist before the term was coined. To the three identities he is most known for — Armenian, Iranian, and American—he added Italian: “I might just as well be Italian, because my painting began there,” he claimed in an interview.¹ He is mostly remembered as a pioneer of modern art in Iran.

After graduating from the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, Grigorian returned to Tehran in 1954. In opening his Galerie Esthétique (1954-59)—the second gallery to open in Tehran after the short-lived Apadana Gallery (1949-1950)—and in organizing the first Tehran Biennial in 1958, under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture, Grigorian was a functioning art impresario.² He provided exhibition space for much of the modernist art seen in Tehran in the second half of the 1950s. As a gallery-owner and curator, he was also among the first to recognize and pay serious attention to a form of popular folk art, naively painted and inspired by religion and literature, commonly known as *qahveh khaneh*, or coffee-house painting, after one of the locations where it was displayed.

Grigorian was also an influential teacher at the Honarestan-e Honarha-ye Ziba. He encouraged personal visions, taught printing techniques such as linocut (Charles- Hossein Zenderoudi attended his class), and disseminated his enthusiasm for expressions of local popular culture. Above all, he was a staunch adversary of the traditionalists, be they miniature painters or followers of Mohammad Ghaffari, known as Kamal al-Molk (died in 1940), the prominent advocate of classical art and the academic realism of European painting. On the other hand, Grigorian did not favor Cubism, which had been imported in Iran in the late 1940s. Farhang Farahi, writing in the bulletin of the Galerie Esthétique, presumably echoed Grigorian’s views when he wrote that the nation should have its own visual language, that “one must be of one’s time,” and that “Cubism or any other Western style cannot develop widely in our country because they lack authenticity.”³ Grigorian’s own trajectory reflects the search for an expression that is modern but not borrowed. By 1960 the intense expressionism (not devoid of influence from Picasso) he had imported into his own work from his years in Italy, exemplified in his twelve panel painting *Gate of Asuschwitz*, was dissolving in favor of the very stuff of the Iranian desert: parched earth and mud. With these humble materials the entire grand tradition of painting, traditionalist and modernist alike, crumbles into dust.

Grigorian continued to use humble, non-traditional materials in works that range from a close-up view — an indexical relation with a piece of Iranian parched land— to a distant perspective of what appears to be plowed fields, and even further to a cosmic vision of the planet Earth. He harnessed his metaphysical visions to the structured geometry he had absorbed from Minimalism, but he did not shy away from the other aesthetic pole: Pop art. His appropriation of the “*sangak*” bread and soup dish called “*dizy abgousht*”, the Persian equivalent or translation of Andy Warhol’s Campbell soup cans or Daniel Spoerri’s assemblages, reveal Grigorian’s knowledge of Western idioms as well as his deep cultural ties to a popular culture fully infused with an Iranian flavor. At this contemporary moment, in which the Iranian identity in art is often equated with certain expressions, such as calligraphy and miniature painting, Grigorian opens doors to an art that is global without being derivative and local without being reductively ethnic.

Fereshteh Daftari

¹ Janet Lazarian, “From the Despair of Auschwitz to the Joy of Persian Soup,” *Tehran Journal*, November 27, 1973.

² A section of this introduction is based on the author’s essay, “Another Modernism: An Iranian Perspective,” published in conjunction with an exhibition co-curated with Lynn Gumpert at New York University’s Grey Art Gallery in 2002. See *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), pp. 39-87

³ Farhang Farahi, *Galerie Esthétique*, no. 1 (n.d.), pp. 5, 15



Earthwork 1963
Mixed media and soil on canvas
33 1/2 x 16 1/2 x 2 1/2 in (85.1 x 41.9 x 6.4 cm)



Eclipse 1988
Found construction object on acrylic mixed media compound on board
32 x 23 1/3 in (81.3 x 59.3 cm)



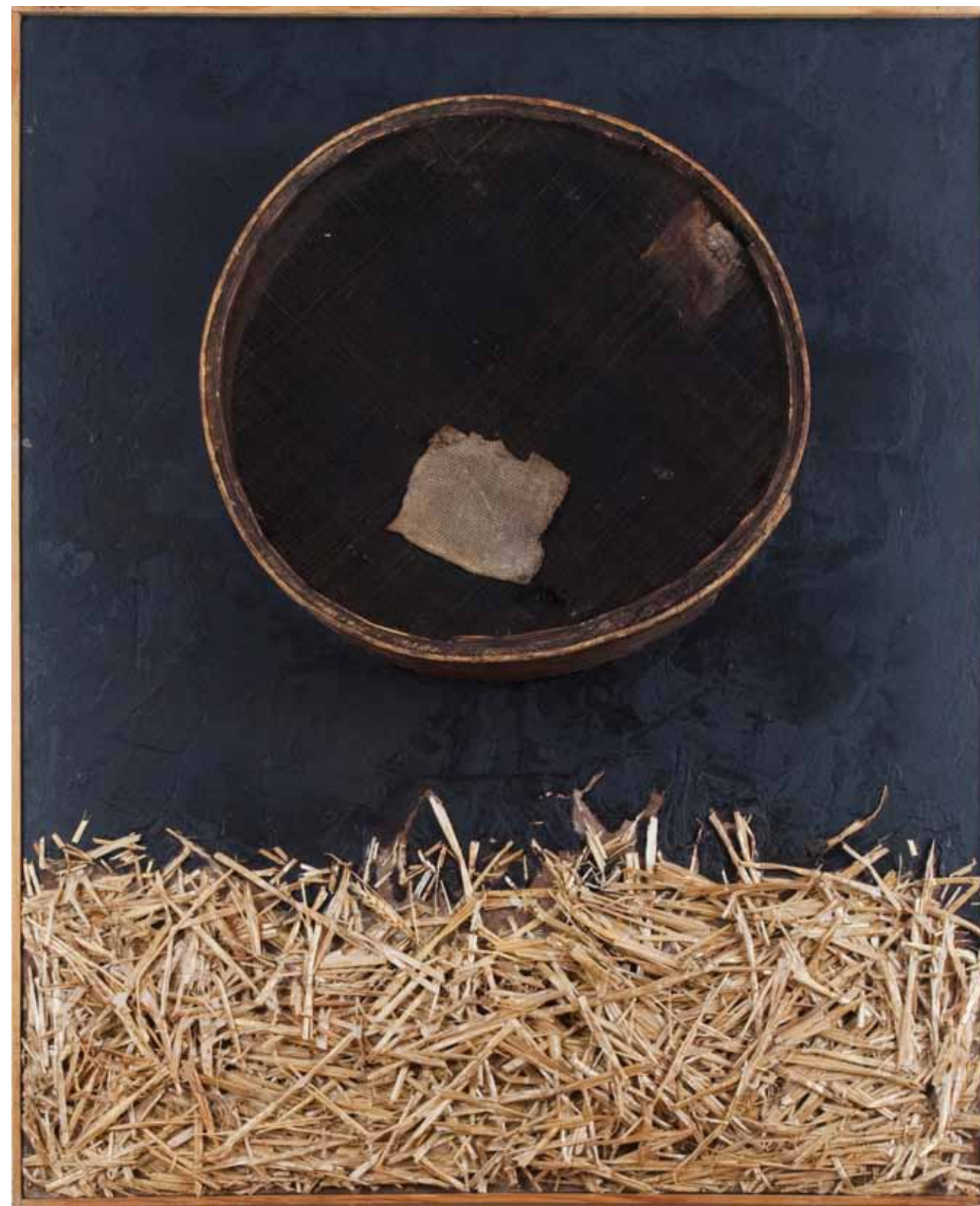
Tree of Life 1960s
Acrylic on mixed media compound on canvas
31 x 21 1/2 in (78.7 x 54.6 cm)



Tree of Life 1961
Mixed media compound on canvas (probably w/acrylic or gesso)
43 1/4 x 18 in (109.9 x 45.7 cm)



Full Loaf 1966
Acrylic and glazed bread on burlap
39 1/4 x 30 1/4 in (99.7 x 76.8 cm)



Eclipse 1988
Mixed media on panel
31 3/4 x 25 1/2 x 6 in (80.6 x 64.8 x 15.2 cm)