

Here and There: Flânerie, Memory and Identity

Curated by Patricia Levin

“Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body. ‘I feel good here.’” Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Vol. 1

Here and There are simple adverbs that linguistically mark a place of being: “I am here; you are there.” They are also markers of time. This exhibit explores the phenomenology of space by the lived body. In this instance, the two specific bodies are women. Significantly, each one attempts to claim her autonomy by establishing a presence in public and private space. Wanting to see and know she is seen, being named and naming herself and birthing her silent stories through the embodied experience of walking.

It is a conscious choice to be a pedestrian, especially in American cities dominated by car culture and strategic urban design practices that create obstacles for those desiring to walk. Walking links private space to public space. Michel de Certeau described the city's built environment as a strategic landscape that pedestrians must tactically navigate, or assimilate to live within. The pedestrian marks her presence by inscribing steps in the urban space, step by step. Mary Jones and Gohar Droshakiryan make visible their stories by creating and recollecting memories of places they've visited. Through the experience of walking, both artists marked their private wanderings as purposeful expressions of identity.

I use the term Flânerie to mean a purposeful movement through cityscapes. Initially, this term referred to wandering aimlessly through new urban landscapes of the 19th century. The concept of the Flâneur, a figure of masculine privilege and leisure, is closely tied to the innovative urban design of Georges-Eugène Haussmann and the developing consumer sphere of the passages of Paris. The Flâneuse, the feminine of Flâneur, tactically walks through the city's spaces. She is purposefully looking/seeing and understands she is also being looked at. She is an urban practitioner. (xix, *Walking in Berlin*). Jones and Droshakiryan are contemporary versions of the Flâneuse.

I include Memory in the title to emphasize how important this process is to artmaking: In the context of the multiverse, which is how memory functions, memory acts as a sort of anti-Museum of fragments defying conventional notions of time-space. Playing on de Certeau's definition, “...memory is only a Prince Charming who stays long enough to awaken the Sleeping Beauties of our wordless stories.” (108, *Practice of Everyday Life*). Both women rely on memory to review fragments of past experience from places they've walked, in order to gather materials for their silent stories. In this case, memory is a persistent dream or unconscious file, with folders of experiences for the artists to recollect and translate.

Finally, identity is claiming selfhood by naming and embodying the I. Identity is as fluid as the individual who names herself. It encompasses the memories, experiences, relationships, and values that create one's sense of self. This amalgamation makes a steady sense of who one is over time, even as new facets are developed and incorporated into one's identity.

Here and There also references the places where each artist lives and works. Mary Jones has lived just outside the city of Des Moines for the last twenty-plus years. It is a small city but the largest in

Iowa. It has some notable Beaux Arts buildings and an Art Center with buildings designed by Eiel Saarinen, I.M. Pei, and Richard Meier. But her memories of Chicago dominate her body of work. The big city on Lake Michigan is known for its architecture, public sculptures, museums, and lively, diverse neighborhoods. It is the third largest city in the United States.

Gohar Droshakiryan lives and works in Yerevan, the capital of the Republic of Armenia. Yerevan is a lively city with colorful neon lights, a grand boulevard, fountains, and parks. It is dynamic and noisy, with a constant flow of people on foot, in cars, taxis, and buses, and frequenting the hundreds of cafes scattered throughout the city. Above the city and overlooking the cascade stands a giant heroic sculpture of Mother Armenia holding a large sword. She stands on a pedestal that once held a statue of Stalin. For those not familiar with the geography of the Caucasus, Armenia is a landlocked former Soviet republic. It is bordered on the north by Georgia, on the east by Azerbaijan, on the south by Iran, and to the west by Turkey. Its history is long and rich. Its flora and fauna are extraordinarily diverse, which makes it a unique travel destination. You will find a Greco-Roman temple at Garni, many medieval churches (Armenia was the first nation to adopt Christianity) scattered throughout the country, and brutalist architecture from the Soviet era. Today, it is a nation of less than three million people.

Mary Jones is a senior-level artist, well-established with an extensive exhibition record. Gohar Droshakiryan is an emerging artist with a growing exhibition record. Different cultural, geographic, language, and life experiences inform Jones and Droshakiryan's work. However, their art has a curious and unexpected kinship--humor, and a particular interest in personifying sense of place.

We live in the 21st century; there is no need to debate whether there is such a thing as a flâneuse. She does exist, as both artists prove by marking selfhood with images she produces, gathered from memories of each unique urban landscape she has walked.

“What if it's the there
and not the here
that I long for?
The wander
and not the wait,
the magic
in the lost feet
stumbling down
the faraway street
and the way the moon
never hangs
quite the same.”

— Tyler Knott Gregson, *Chasers of the Light: Poems from the Typewriter Series*

The artists were given the following prompts to use as a guide to make works for the exhibition. Each artist agreed to make new works—with no restrictions on media.

1. Choose your favorite place in the city where you live. Walk there and spend some time observing this chosen place. As you walk to this familiar place, take account of your movement through the cityscape.

Once at the site, observe what is there, who is there, and how you feel.

When you are back home/studio, write your thoughts and feelings about the experience. How can you translate those thoughts/feelings (memories) into visual form?

2. Go to a place you have never been in your city. Walk there and spend some time observing this chosen place. As you walk to this unfamiliar place, take account of your movement through the cityscape.

Once at the site, observe what is there, who is there, and how you feel.

Back home/studio, write down your thoughts and feelings about the experience. How can you translate those thoughts/feelings (memories) into visual form?

3. Create a self-portrait as Flâneuse: “the idler, a dawdling observer,” or the purposeful agent of mind/body.

4. Create the shape of your walks by visualizing and mapping--forming the cartography of the walks. “We are inhabited by deep imaginings—visual and verbal, auditory and tactile—that we reinhabit uniquely. Poetics is about hearing and feeling as well as crafting and shaping.” Gaston Bachelard *The Poetics of Space*.

5. Visually render the soundtrack of your walks.

Mary Jones: Drifting/Mapping/Drawing Stories

“What the map cuts up, the story cuts across.” Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol. 1

Here and There are not fixed points. I propose considering these adverbs to be more about dislocation than specific places or points on a map. They are lived and imagined.

Mary Jones creates works that are both celebratory fabrications and recollected accounts of places the artist visited, experienced, and marked. Jones uses illustration and collage to produce poetic reveries, critiquing the blatant commercialism of art. Her training in advertising is used as a kind of “subvertising;” and mapping reflects modern cities' complex “psychogeographical contours,” articulations, and vortexes. These artworks are collaged reimaginings, reflecting the personal and solitary experience of walking an urban environment. Mary Jones is a poetic cartographer who creates lyrical images of place, familiar and unfamiliar.

For Jones, walking can be a lonely and claustrophobic aesthetic practice. In “The East Side of Des Moines,” the central figure, a woman in polka dot pants and rolled-up white shirt sleeves, strides confidently across a collaged map. She shields a smaller figure, who seems to echo her self-assured gait. There is movement all around this confident pedestrian. Figures lurk. They are involved in different activities, seemingly unaware of the woman as she marches forward. Two female busts in the foreground glance fleetingly at each other. Fragments of architecture are collaged into an imagined map that commemorates the experience.

Jones asks, “Who holds up the city? Who can tell the city’s story?” In “Caryatids,” she references draped female figures used as structural support in classical architecture. The Roman writer and historian, Vitruvius, wrote that the caryatids represented women doomed to hard labor. In this case, Jones has portrayed three androgynous figures in the foreground and two smaller figures in the background, all holding various structures. These figures move across an intensely periwinkle-colored backdrop of text fragments and maps with painted facades and strips of grids. In this piece, Jones reminds us that while “a city has no personality,” it is a collection of stories or memories drawn from the individuals who walk, work, and live in its environs.

The bright teal background of “The Day I Was Somewhere Else” dramatically calls our attention to its central female figure, her feet firmly planted on the ground. Jones wears a patchwork skirt in this self-portrait with aerial views of green-belts, grids, a chessboard, and other various figures, including a female toddler. Jones describes walking as “bringing the body in sync with past, present, and future—all demanding equal measures of attention.” Walking also allows the mind to daydream, to move in time-space and relive or imagine those experiences and places that were especially meaningful. One might be Here, now, but thinking of There and Then.

Multiple perspectives invite us to enter and travel along this once-private reverie, as does the small female figure to Jones's right. This is also a portrait of motherhood, an important relationship, often an aspect of Jones's work.

"Portal," with its cobalt-turquoise background, portrays the significance of the portal as a space that takes us to another place. Three figures shape a contour: one holds a small house, another creates a picture window with her arms and body, and the third holds an invisible object. Sometimes the shape of the portal is a house. The house is a potent signifier for Jones. It represents the private spaces from which we begin our journeys. We cross the threshold of our home and enter the great beyond.

"At the door of a house who will come knocking?
An open door, we enter
A closed door, a den
The world pulse beats beyond my door."
Pierre-Albert Birot in Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

The shape of a walk might be determined by the map one follows or the map one invents. In "Revelator" the protagonist seems to struggle fighting the pull of an unfurling snake-like accordion map. Is it a trap? Must one follow what seems prescribed, or can we write our way through life, marking different paths through life's journey? This struggle is further emphasized by the contrasting colors of the deep burgundy background and the pale blue and gray checkerboard ground she seems to float above. Two significant observers in the foreground, a man and a dog, watch as she attempts to make things cohere.

Finally, with "Paulina," we are invited to imagine the freedom and danger of walking, and the city's soundscapes as well. Paulina is wearing a *looking dress*—with its myriad eyes—reminding us that self-awareness is necessary for a woman who walks. She is on the *lookout* and she knows she is also being *looked over*/ up and down. Paulina lifts her dress to avoid tripping, revealing her black mid-heeled shoes. "Character shoes" are made for dancing, not walking. They are perfect for reveling in the delights of walking the city; drifting by the architecture and along the sidewalks, alone or with other pedestrians. Her body moves through the city to her own internal soundtrack mixed with the city itself. She stands at a three-way intersection in Chicago. Her movement and the lively multi-layered background made up of real and imagined bits of street suggest a chaotic cacophony that one experiences when walking in a large city. The Chicago L, cars passing and honking, motors cranking, and bits of conversation can almost be heard. --Patricia Levin

Ink and Paper: Drawing Out a Path of/for/with/in Past-Present-Future

Few people have the imagination for reality.
-Goethe

Depending on which classic, continental, eastern, or contemporary philosophy you read or reference, motion comes in many forms, including spatial, temporal, natural, violent. Some movements we initiate bodily; some befall or simply happen to us.

Gohar Droshakiryan is a Contemporary Armenian artist, who, in her hometown of Yerevan, has moved and been moved in myriad ways. She has walked the streets of the city her entire life. And this walking has always had purpose—destination, health, wandering, thinking, or being inspired. The specificity she engaged for this exhibit was prompted, however, offering her new frameworks in which to experience zones of familiarity and personal affinity, as well as territory that is completely new.

Black ink on white paper is not only aesthetically in keeping with Droshakiryan's influences (Japanese, Mayan, and Aztec folklore and mythologies) and training (printmaking, woodcuts, and illustration among them); the way she imbues the drawings with humor while still addressing realities mandating massive transitions, is miraculously balanced. Black and White is no way to understand politics, governance, culture, personal relationships, or the act of making art. But her mark making finds nuance with repetition and detail. Often, her drawings feel like continuous contour lines, filled with the smallest intricacies, which create new architectures within and around these lines.

Drosahkiyan says, "Although my characters are very contemporary, they still have a link to the horror and attraction of ancient cultures. They demonstrate a real affinity to various aspects of human and animal life." The artist, Hieronymus Bosch, is also a favorite of hers. She takes great influence from "his creatures, hybrids of animals and humans, and the complicated scenes of nature, done in a fantastic manner." And she considers her work as "an imaginative expression of everything that inspires [...] as a fusion of animistic and primitive industrial cultures."

These drawings are delicate and haunting portraits of the layering of time in a city in which she grew up and currently lives, though she has traveled worldwide. The ink builds up to darken, to strike a perfect opacity, and embolden the compositional parts that contrast her refined lines and light. And like this emboldening, a woman may become empowered when she, alone, takes to city streets on foot. But the vulnerability of doing so can also make her a target of others, in their various privileged and sanctioned forms.

"Morning Watch" is a portrait of Mother Armenia (which symbolizes peace through strength). This female personification has stood above the city of Yerevan since 1967, replacing the monument of Joseph Stalin which was erected in Victory Park after WWII. The title alone tells of each new day with the same eyes upon a body politic. A 'watch' can be protective—a mother—or controlling—a monumental panopticon-like station, high up in the city center. Both can be felt as one traverses the area.

"Clash Between the Old and New City" is a double portrait of Mother Armenia and a structure that has been built or withstood the country's ongoing transitions (1991's independence from Russia; 2015's parliamentary republic; and 2020's war over the Nagorno-Karabakh territory, again). Each eye of Mother exists in one historical era; the inanimate body becomes building, filled with windows within windows (the Old Norse origin of 'window' is 'wind' and 'eye'). Droshakiryan here is the architect, conjoining images of very different eras, with a sharp eye to the transitional pains in this epoch she currently walks and creates.

The portals by which we see are paramount to all that Droshakiryan creates. “Eyes Following You” portrays a swirl of woman and eyes, the latter worn like a painting on exposed flesh (like the bodies used as canvas in Japanese and Mayan cultures), but also wrapping the central figure so voluminously and intently that they start to appear as more solid—a concretizing of constraints that the cumulative gaze can build around women. They appear as if the eyes are ‘hers,’ but Droshakiryan enacts a smart reversal of literally having ‘eyes on’ the body. They become a part of her; they reform, if not deform, a body into a house-of-mirrors pose. Eyelids are thicker and heavier in this drawing, invoking vulvas, which, after all, is tantamount to what some onlookers are likely thinking about. Some eye/vulvas seem to be weeping, or seeping. The tentacles that frame this portrait are black in background, holding the sun and architecture of a city that surrounds her at yet another remove.

“Dancing Queen” is a netlike, airy portrait, where the contour of the body is not unlike that in “Eyes Following You.” However, this female figure has fewer eyes ‘on her’—one could say, she has been liberated from the gaze. Instead, the form holds flowers and fruit which begin to frame her. The eyes upon the body are also growing leaves and petals, transformed by flesh in motion, and no crying eyes can be ascertained.

“Through My Eyes” is a drawing, diffused. Spread out as a city map, it works as both a linear and aerial view, where hair makes land strata or water waves, and dotted flames become ocular clouds. One finds trees as tails or wide paths to either climb or cross. There is a third eye in this self-portrait, but it is placed differently than one might imagine—it is below the subject’s right eye (looking out), almost as if mirrored. But the eye it is mirroring is upside down, making this reflection one that feels right but makes little sense re: physics. All objects, be they necklaces or satellites work in both planes—one can look *at* them or *down upon* them.

“Love and Passion” depicts two figures, one at the bottom left and the other almost hovering, spirit-like, in the top right corner of the image. The floating figure now appears tattooed with flowers and one can notice hands or feet drawn across and down her legs (again, a reference to body as canvas). It is as if a shared caress has been built in, and it is notable that the eyes in the piece are restricted to the two figures, in their rightful places—as if Droshakiryan is telling the viewer that these two ‘only have eyes’ for each other.

The central female figure in the drawing, “Mother and the City,” brings us back to Mother Armenia standing tall and central—the place from which the city expands. A root, one might say, though Droshakiryan’s work has more to do with rhizomatic movement than any rooted plant could abide. There is an almost ghosting around Mother—a space of halation, perhaps—before the roads and byways can be discerned. To her right (viewer’s left), is what appears as something from space, or is it royal, or is it the science center in Yerevan?

In the case of “Mother and the City” and many of her works, the actual places themselves matter less than their relation to the monumental or central subjects. Droshakiryan is a master at telling of distance, close or far. And this is what her art does for those who experience it: these drawings create distance by capturing duration, both personal and cultural, landed and air bound. --
Michaela Mullin

Artist Bios

Mary Jones

Originally from Kane, Pennsylvania, Mary Jones built her career in Chicago. She has an MFA in Printmaking from Indiana University at Bloomington and a BFA in Art History from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. She is included in the permanent collections of the Linda Lee Alter Collection of Women in the Arts at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia and the State Museum of Illinois. Jones has been an artist-in-residence at the Ragdale Foundation and Anchor Graphics, Chicago. She was named an Iowa Arts Council Fellow in 2018–19 and a notable artist in *New American Paintings, Midwest Edition #134*. She currently lives and works in Indianola, Iowa.

Goharik Droshakiryan

Droshakiryan lives and works in Yerevan, Armenia. She earned a B.A. in Art History and Theory on a four-year scholarship at the Yerevan Academy of Fine Arts. She studied studio arts at the TUMO Center for Creative Technologies and the National Centre of Aesthetics in the Department of Fine Arts. She has studied printmaking with Herbert Maier, Minjie Zang, Hassan Zahreddine, Claudia Kulenkampff, and Rita Kohel.

Sound Design

Devon Yagian Boutelle

Yagian grew up in Long Beach, California, where he enjoyed surfing and skateboarding. He founded the punk band “They Fear the Reclaim” as a teenager. He took a BA in Social Anthropology at UC Berkeley and earned an MA in Sound for New Media at The Glasgow School of Art. He is the founder of Rhinocervs Records. He lives between Yerevan, Armenia, and Amsterdam, the Netherlands, where he founded the sound design studio Stilte Collective.

Curator and Writer Bios

Patricia Levin, PhD

Patricia Levin grew up in a military family. She has a BA in Dance Performance/Choreography from UCLA, an MA in Museum Studies and Art History from USC, and a Ph.D. in Visual Studies with an emphasis on Feminism, Modern Media, and Theories of Spectatorship from the University of California, Irvine. She has curated over 60 exhibitions in the United States and Canada. She taught Art History and Women’s Studies for 34 years at Saddleback College and directed the Art Gallery. She currently lives in Des Moines and Amsterdam, the Netherlands. She has been an independent curator for 25 years.

Michaela Mullin, PhD

Michaela Mullin is a writer, editor, and Pushcart-nominated poet living in Des Moines, IA. She earned her BA in English from Drake University, her MFA in Creative Writing from University of Nebraska, and her PhD in Philosophy, Art, and Critical Thought from the European Graduate School. She is a recipient of the Helen W. Kenefick Poetry Prize from the Academy of American Poets and the Thomas Dunn Scholarship in English. Her full-length poetry collection, *must*, was published in 2016. She was the Associate Editor at Nomadic Press, Oakland, CA, during its decade-long life, and currently works at Moberg Gallery in Des Moines.