

HIDDEN GEM IN TORONTO

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Interview with Tamara Harutyunyan by Arus Karapetyan

Toronto, Ontario, 11 March, 2021



It was a beautiful Sunday morning in mid-town Toronto when I visited Tamara. Upon entering her home, I felt the warmth of light that filled the air and promised a unique meeting. Good taste and sophistication were my first observation as Tamara walked me through her artful space. Slowly the symbols of Armenia began to appear as pomegranate decorations complemented paintings of Lake Sevan, the white peaks of Mount Ararat, and the golden Armenian autumn followed by abstract images of electric jazz and swirls of churches. As Tamara spoke about her art pieces, I felt as if she had taken me through her history.



Tamara is the second born of three daughters to a mother who was music teacher and a father who was construction engineer. Following her graduation from the Tehrlemezyan Visual Art College and the completion of her Masters degree, Tamara continued her studies in St. Petersburg. Most interestingly, Tamara's thesis and art pieces were inspired by her dreams. The subject revolved around Armenian churches and the Holy Trinity. Her paintings are bright and filled with light--just like Tamara. Upon graduation, Tamara returned to Armenia where she married. The honeymoon was in Shushi where part of her family is originally from.

Our conversations, for a moment, sounded like a dream until we emerged into the destiny of her family which many Armenians share. "My great-grandmother and her family fled Shushi when they learned of massacres being planned by residents," she said. "It was in 1913. As they began fleeing, my great-grandfather had to return for they had forgotten important items that belonged to the children... he did not make it back." Her great-grandmother fled to Tbilisi, where her mother was born. Silence followed our conversation. We then drifted to current events, the war, and our cruel history. We agreed that for as long as we lived, it would be our calling to fight for our existence.



KEGHART: Tell us about yourself and your background.

TAMARA HARUTUNYAN: I was born in Tbilisi and moved to Yerevan when I was six years old. My father, who was an engineer, was leading the construction of the main tunnels of Armenia, including subway construction in Yerevan. My mother is a music teacher. All my life I have studied different art fields. In Yerevan, I graduated with honors from the Terlemezyan Visual Art College, and then did my Master's at the Yerevan Pedagogical University. Later I worked on my Ph.D. in Industrial Art Academy, Interior Design in St. Petersburg. After I moved to Toronto in 2003, I graduated from Graphic Design College in Toronto and completed Rhino 3D courses.

KEGHART: Having a strong musical background, what led you to switch to visual arts?

TH: I grew up in a musical family. My parents used to sing and play the piano when we got together with friends. My mother used to take my sisters and me to opera and ballet performances. We attended concerts-- from classical to jazz to rock. We had a big collection of music at home. I graduated from music school and all my life music has guided me and helped me appreciate every step of my life.

Since childhood I have been drawing and sketching pictures: some were based on my dreams; others sketching portraits of our teachers in class at the back of notebooks... Illustrating books, drawing the portraits of favorite musicians, making posters for



friends of rock stars have occupied me since my All That Jazz

early days. At the age of 14, I started to take classes at a professional artist's studio. My first teacher, Robert Khachatryan, helped me prepare a portfolio to be admitted to the Terlemezyan Visual Art College. Since then, my life has changed completely and I feel happy and motivated to learn everything in art and design.

KEGHART: Tell us about your immigration journey to Canada and what it is like to be an Armenian artist in Canada.

TH: I came to Canada in 2003. At the beginning it took me a long time to adapt and find my place as an artist here. I tried to connect with the Armenian community, and I volunteered as a stage set design decorator for Sassoon Dance Ensemble and Opera Belcanto. In the first few years I participated in art shows, studied at the Graphic Design College, and after graduation I worked on freelance projects. Soon after, I became art teacher and taught visual art at different schools in the Greater Toronto Area, from Grade 1 to 12. Even then I continued painting and participating in art shows - solo exhibitions and group shows. One of them was in September 2015 in Arta Gallery dedicated to 100 years of Armenian Genocide.



KEGHART: Your art often revolves around music. You have frequently painted during musical performances. Please tell us how such a unique concept was realised and about the concerts where you have performed.



Fall in Armenia

TH: Studying music for seven years in Sayat Nova school helped me make parallels in visual art compositions and find lots of similarities in compositions. Kandinsky wrote that his synesthesia allowed him to see colors when he heard music and to hear music when he painted. In my mind music and colors bound together. I felt a strong connection between visual art and music, colors and notes, accords and shapes, composition, and rhythm. During classical or jazz concerts, I would bring my sketchbooks and draw what came to mind with every composition played on stage. The whole composition is thought to correspond with song, with dissonant colors and harmonious shades to represent the same idea in music.

One of my favorite artists Paul Klee once said, "One day I must be able to improvise freely on the keyboard of colors". When I paint, I feel the same improvisation process that gives me enormous gratification. The first time I had the opportunity to perform a live painting was for one of my favorite blues singers, Shakura S'Aida at Hugh's Room in Toronto. The inspiration came with the very first chords. I felt like a part of the melody and every time the songs progressed, my painting changed with it and more and more new shapes and colors started to appear in composition. It was an unbelievable experience.

In the last ten years, we have done live painting projects on stage with several musicians, such as Levon Ichkhanian at Sony Centre, Armenian Jazz in Jazz Bistro, Milch Smoking concert in Toronto Centre for the Arts, and Ara Arakelyan along with pianist Narine Mardoyan at different stages. Most impressive project to be part of were Ara's 'Armenia Meets Cuba' and a fund-raising concert "Together for Artsakh." Other performances in which I participated include Astor Piazzolla Argentine Tango Night, Jazz Quartet of Vahagn Hayrapetyan, New York, concert with Hakob Jaghatspanyan, and Musical Garden Party with Nurhan Arman. The last Live Painting project before the pandemic was during a chamber orchestra with Nurhan Arman and Sinfonia Toronto. I have also participated as live painting artist at Middle Eastern festivals, jazz festivals, Toronto Roubina Chapter International Women's Day Concert and others.



First Dream in Canada

KEGHART: You teach art and have plans to design jewelry. How can Keghart readers learn about you and ostensibly place an order?

TH: I have been teaching visual arts for more than 20 years and many of my former students are successful artists and designers. I learned 3D Design in Toronto six years ago and I use the Rhino programme for jewellery at work in one of the best jewellery custom design companies in North America. I enjoy doing engravings and design projects. I have many sketches with jewellery design in my sketchbook that I am planning to bring to fruition down the road.

I love to share my experience (oil painting, acrylic, pastel, watercolour, art history and more) not only with children but also with adults willing to explore art. I believe it is never too late to explore the world of art. For more information and details about online classes, you can visit my page on Facebook, Colour Wheel Art School, and contact me by email at tamaraharut@gmail.com

KEGHART: In the last five months, Armenians have lived through a national calamity and now face an uncertain future. What are your thoughts on the Second Artsakh War and the future of Armenia?

TH: Armenia is going through a difficult time and a lot of heartache. However, I do have hope that we can overcome these difficulties and persevere. We can be united and become stronger and change this situation. It will not be easy, but we don't have another choice. We all want to see our Armenia strong, independent and live in harmony. Therefore, we should start by supporting each other and unite like never before.



Armenian Alphabet - Painting on Guitar
for Levon Ichkhanian collection

Comments



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I'm so happy we have such a remarkable artist in our midst here in Toronto. It is people like this that make Toronto truly world class. This artist is obviously unique. We need this cultural treasure!