

Retrieving Lost Sight in *Stone Time Touch*

*Mute Autumn Smells. The
aster, unbent, passed
through your memory
between homeland and chasm.*

*A strange lostness was
bodily present, you came
near to
living¹*

All acts of self-portraiture necessitate a chasm, a splitting of persona that emerges from a self-inflicted blindness. This chasm is even greater when crossed by the outstretched hands of the Diaspora artist, whose grasping gestures are sketched from the perspective of exile. There is a sense of urgency in the confessional of the self-portrait. Diaspora artists yearn to put their arms to rest, longing to retrieve their sight by turning their homeland into a mirror and finding their faces in the landscape.

With *Stone Time Touch*, Gariné Torrossian fashions a mirror from the layered fragments of a journey to Armenia. It is perhaps her most accomplished synthesis of collage, first-person documentary and experimental fiction. Unlike the dystopian, spiritually panicked work of collage filmmakers such as Arthur Lipsett, Bruce Connor, and Craig Baldwin, Torrossian's films are emotionally charged, harmonious strata of light folds. Her work in collage cinema does not aim to be ironic, nor to shock or disturb. Rather, she smoothes the sharp edges of her fragments, fusing the contents of the frame to create radiant, colour-drenched windows. Her films are translucent textiles draped over the eyes, the epitome of *textum*.² a web of memories, secrets, and fantasies woven into a tactile labyrinth of fleeting impressions.

Unravelling this *cinetextile* reveals a series of repeated patterns: the confessions of substitute protagonists Arsinée Khanjian and an unnamed Armenian alter-ego whose profile is constantly analysed and traced between conflicting ideas of homeland; scattered ruins, a metaphysical incantation and physical manifestation of the narrator's divided self, of the fracture found in all acts of self-portraiture; and drowning shots of Armenia's spectacular landscape, a silent purification from the alienating cacophony of exile.

The first thread of the film is found in the melancholy limbo of an airport. Here we are introduced to the unnamed protagonist. Through her, Torrossian takes her first step, a survey of the emotional homecomings of Armenians returning from abroad. The protagonist wanders past the crowd, into an estranged homeland draped in night. Torrossian begins to draw on screen, tracing the features of this unnamed guide, analysing her profile, as if the very secret of what it means to be Armenian lay within that particular physiognomy. Caught in the act of filming her fictional double, Torrossian layers an image of her own camera-eye over the act of tracing. This tracing continues throughout the film, often superimposed on the profiles of numerous Armenian women. We soon discover the source of this playful, poetic game of semblances: these faces are being fitted against and compared to the profile of a young woman, a face that emerges from a God's-eye view of Armenia's jagged, land-locked borders. Finding a match with the quintessential face of Armenia may alleviate Torrossian's Diasporic doubts of national identity.

As the film progresses, the *cinetextile* is woven tighter, infused with off-screen whispered

1 Celan, Paul. "Mute Autumn Smells". *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*. Translated by John Felstiner. New York; W.W. Norton, 2001.

2 Benjamin, Walter. "The Image of Proust". *Illuminations*. New York; Schocken Books, 1968, P204.

confessions, secret hand-written notes, and shards of eyes, faces, hands, and stones. Torrosian shifts from solidly framed observational shots of landscapes and cityscapes to a synaesthetic flux of fragments. These luminously layered images induce a form of self-imposed blindness, a dense cinematic eye covering that facilitates the inward reflection necessary for self-portraiture. Blindness is precipitated in the progression from heavily framed contemplative shots to kinetic suffusions of intricately spun light textures.

The interconnection of blindness, self-portraiture, and ruins is explained by Jacques Derrida in his notes to an exhibition he curated at the Louvre entitled *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*: “at the moment when the self-portraitist fends off the temptations of sight and calls for this conversion from the light to the light, from the outward realm to the realm within, it is a theory of the blind that unfolds, a procession [théorie] of the blind that files past.”³ Before the self-portraitist reconstructs the features of her face from the scattered ruins of memory, she must resign herself to the facial fissures that are induced by such an inquiry. To engage in an act of self-portraiture is to consign oneself to a state of ruination, where an alternative sense of self is reassembled from fragments: “[The] ruin is the self-portrait, this face looked at in the face as the memory of itself, what remains or returns as a spectator from the moment one first looks at oneself and a figuration is eclipsed.”⁴ In *Stone Time Touch*, a self-portrait is assembled from the fogged impressions of a trip to Armenia. Conflicting ideas of homeland motivate the intricate weaving of a cinematic blindfold, one that blocks incongruent realities and makes space for conciliation and self-reflection. Eventually, Torrosian’s face emerges in the landscape of an alternative Armenia, one that is gleaned from the stones and ruins that Diaspora artists often assemble in their fragmented identity.

It is actress Arsinée Khanjia who encourages her to walk through these ruins, to enter into the “white space of the unknown,” swimming in the mystery of *Hayastan*, a homeland that desires to speak in its own voice. A mirror for her confessions, Khanjia articulates Torrosian’s doubts. She is filmed as she browses through photos and speaks of her wanderings through Armenia; Torrosian uses this conversation as a point of abstraction, moulding the source material, re-filming monitors, sanding them into video static. Khanjia speaks of floating into the sky through the shattered ceiling of a roofless church, a spectral journey that aims to find a solid sense of place. Placing her hands on the stone foundations of another church resurrected from ruins, Khanjia descends from her airborne dream. Touching stone is touching time; it produces an acute awareness of the essence of the homeland. Khanjia equates this gesture to that of a Doubting Thomas, “touching Jesus’ wound” to confirm that half of their dreamed homeland can be found in the remnants of a waking world.

These resurrected churches represent both a physical and metaphorical return from exile. Sitting with a small group of men outside one such church, the unnamed protagonist returns. Off camera, someone asks: “Which ruin are you from? We are all relics...but we are relics that are connected.” Reconstructed from stones scattered across the Armenian Diaspora, the church is a symbol for the persistent connection between dispersed communities.

Yet an enduring return from exile can only be achieved by moving past these reconstructed memory towers and away from the conciliation of contrastive faces. Time may be felt by the touching of stones, but it can only be consumed through a contemplation of landscape. Contemplating her connection with Armenia’s breathtaking terrain, Khanjia says: “Why is it that it is so close to me, why is it that I feel like I am part of it? What is belonging? When I see landscape I stop questioning, more so than when I talk with the people, because here is an unspoken relationship between nature and oneself.” As Paul Celan knew when he wrote “Mute Autumn Smells,” it is here that the Diaspora artists come “near to living,” where they finally retrieve lost sight. The eternal, unbent aster bridges the chasm between homeland and self. The silent truths drawn from the contemplation of landscape unfasten the

3 Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*. Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1993. Page 117.

4 Ibid. P. 68

blindfold of self-portraiture and allow Torrosian to walk past the scattered stones and ruins to find her face in the skies of her homeland.