



ABOUT THIS BOOK

Born in Lebanon in 1945, Seta Manoukian is a painter. Her early drawings reveal a sense of composition, a strong artistic hand and an original talent. She was teaching at Lebanese University when the Civil War began in 1975. After 10 years of war in Lebanon she had to flee, to LA defeated by war, where she still lives today, as a Buddhist nun.

This publication looks back at Manoukian's work, focusing on the 70s and 80s periods of her practice. It includes essays by Gregory Buchakjian, Kristine Khouri and Aline Manoukian.

TECHNICAL DETAILS

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Gregory Buchakjian

Gregory Buchakjian (b. 1971) is an art historian and visual interdisciplinary artist, Université Paris IV Sorbonne PhD, acting director of the School of Visual Arts at Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts – Alba. His visual work emerged in the aftermath of the 2006 war with the series Nighthawks. Since then, he focused on city and history with publications such as Fouad Elkoury, *Passing Time* (Kaph Books: 2017), *Traversées Photographiques. Le journal du Docteur Cottard* (Arab Image Foundation: 2017) and his contributions to *On Photography in Lebanon: Essays and Stories* (Kaph Books, 2018). In 2018, his *Fragments from the Ridge Line* are part of first Lebanese pavilion at the Venice Biennale of Architecture while *Fragments from the History of Civil Aviation in Lebanon* are in the book accompanying the exhibition *Cycles of Collapsing Progress*. Member of the advisory committee of the Saradar Collection, he took part in juries including Sursock Museum Salon d'Automne (2009), Boghossian Prize (2012), Beirut Art Center's Exposure (2013) and Beirut Art Residency (2017).

Kristine Khouri

Kristine Khouri is an independent researcher and writer whose interests focus on the history of arts circulation and infrastructure in the Arab world, and archival practices and dissemination. Together with Rasha Salti, she has co-curated *Past Disquiet: Narratives and Ghosts of the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, 1978* shown at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (2015), *Haus der Kulturen der Welt*, Berlin (2016), and at the Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende, Santiago (2018). Khouri also curated *The Founding Years (1969–1973): A selection of works from the Sultan Gallery Archives at the Sultan Gallery, Kuwait* (2012). Kristine has contributed to numerous publications and was a section editor for the publication accompanying the exhibition *Time is Out of Joint* (Sharjah Art Foundation, 2016). She is a member of the Arab Image Foundation, Beirut.

Aline Manoukian

Aline Manoukian studied the history of photography in California. In 1983, she covered the Lebanese conflict, as a photojournalist for the Lebanese daily newspaper the Daily Star. In 1985, she joined Reuters news agency and later became head of the photo department, managing a group of staff and stringers, while covering the Lebanese conflict. In 1989, she moved to Paris, where she continued her career as a photographer and later as a picture editor. From 2010 to 2013, she was president of the French photo-editors' association ANI. In 2017, she became director of the newly established non-profit organisation Beirut Center of Photography, dedicated to promoting quality photography in Lebanon.

Launched by Mario Saradar in 2012, the Saradar Collection is built around a private collection of modern and contemporary art from Lebanon, with a public mission to preserve, study and share.

The Saradar Collection continues to grow through the acquisition of works and through the development of critical thinking and scholarship around the artworks and, more broadly, art in Lebanon. As well as being accessible to the public via its website, the collection is also the starting point for programming and research. This includes expanding the archive by gathering previously published texts, commissioning essays and videos, and organizing public events.

Kaph Books is based in Beirut, Lebanon, and specializes in publishing quality art books featuring Middle-Eastern artists and art practices in the fields of photography and the fine arts. Each book is unique, created in close collaboration with the artist and the contributors, with high production and design values. Our mission is to promote the talent of artists from the region—both internationally renowned names and emerging artists—, and to document artistic practices in the region.

The Saradar Collection and Kaph Books share the same commitment to fostering research and critical thinking and to promoting the work of Lebanese artists. This joint initiative takes the form of a series of books dedicated to artists, or to themes related to the works in the Saradar Collection.

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Seta Manoukian



Seta Manoukian
on her sister Annia's balcony,
in Beirut's Sanyeh neighborhood, 1977

Painting in Levitation, Painting for Healing

Grégory Buchakjian

The Manoukian family archive displays scenes that could be found in any modern-day household. It includes photographers' studio portraits and "surprise" snapshots taken in the public space. Among the members of the household, a girl appears regularly, adopting classical-ballet postures, first on a balcony and later onstage. She subsequently becomes a beautiful woman, mingling with people and dancing in the Swinging 60s. She poses frequently among paintings, either in galleries where her work is being exhibited or in her family's apartment, in the Batrikiyeh (Patriarchate) neighborhood, in Zokak el Blat. Apart from photo albums, the belongings contain two drawings by Rafic Charaf, a prominent figure on the Beirut art scene of the second half of the 20th century, depicting her elegant face. A painting by Paul Guiragossian, another major artist of the time, shows her looking more expressive and less delicate. In the early 21st century, Magnum photographer Eli Reed shot the same woman, sitting and smiling. Her face is as gentle as it was before. Though, something—is it tranquility? Or wisdom? Or empathy?—emanates from her smile and from her eyes. Seta Manoukian, having been through crises and struggles, has found her equilibrium and become a Tibetan Buddhist nun by the name of Ani Pema Tsultrim Drolma.

Seta Manoukian was born into a family of Armenian origin in Beirut. Although she is not part of the generation that experienced the genocide, she belongs to the Armenian diaspora. Her childhood dream was to become a ballerina, and for years, she took dance classes. Then, at seventeen, she won first prize in a show, consisting of a three-month scholarship to Perugia, courtesy of the Italian Embassy in Beirut. Later on, she enrolled at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome. On her return, she became a rising figure on the burgeoning Beirut art scene. For two decades, she created some of the most singular and striking paintings ever seen in Lebanon. These pieces were produced in her studio, which was the bedroom she had occupied since her childhood in the family home. In her book about women artists,

¹ Nori Bassil, et al.
Mapping-String.
On Portraiture and
Photography Beirut.
Arabi Image Foundation,
2003, sect. 5.84.

"White walls had a great significance for me because I saw empty space in them. We think that space is nothing, but in reality it is the heart of our inner silence —without it there would only be noise. I started using white, which is not a color, which is intangible. In the early 70s, I started painting white bed sheets on white backgrounds. These sheets were horizontal, as if carrying a huge burden. This was when I started to become aware of horizontality and verticality. From these sheets, people started emerging, and then a vertical line. It was liberating —a purification process. Still today, vertical and horizontal forms have a great significance in my work. I would say an essential significance."



First Atom of a Dream
on Trauma, 1970, from
the White Period series.
Oil on canvas, 91 x 110 cm.
Saxtor Collection



AN 2, 2017
Acrylic on canvas, 56 x 61 cm
Artist's collection, Los Angeles

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Kristine Khouri

In conversation with Seta Manoukian (Ani Pema Tsultrim Drolma)

Los Angeles, California
November 2017

Can you tell me about your relationship to art and religion, or spirituality, during your early years?

At the age of twelve, I took private art lessons with Lucy Nersess for a year, followed by two years with Paul Guiragossian who saw my potential as an artist. When I was sixteen, I won first prize from the Italian Cultural Center which offered me a grant to study in Perugia for three months. After an assessment exam, I was placed in the second year of the equivalent of a master's program, and I enrolled at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, returning to Lebanon at 21 with a master's degree.

I also became an athlete at age ten and, when I was sixteen, I underwent a very important spiritual experience. At the time, I didn't realize it was connected to Buddhism, nor did I think about it as a spiritual moment. What happened during this "experience" was that in the midst

of speaking with someone, there was a sudden shift in my mind and I became aware of my movements and my thoughts as if I was detached and observing myself from the outside. It was very powerful, and something I will never forget, but at the time I put it aside.

What did you learn from your time in Rome, beyond your studies?

Were there any artists whose works particularly inspired you?
I shared the Italians' love of life. They seemed to love nature, people, art, everything. It is a culture I connected to deeply and learned from. Of course, painting, reading in libraries and visits to museums and galleries were another type of education. When it comes to artists, I was interested in Piet Mondrian—something drew me to him. Observing the vertical and horizontal lines in his paintings, I was very interested in his way of seeing how empty space was also

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"Here, two men, each in his own world.
Even if the environment we live in is a part
of us, we are separate from it and from
the rest of humanity. It is wholeness versus
individuality."



The Arcades, 1985
Mixed media on canvas, 223 x 174 cm
Soprano Collection



Seta Manoukian at age 3,
photographed by her father Avedis, 1948

Seta Manoukian: a chronology

by Aline Manoukian



1957-59

At her maternal grandmother's house, she comes across catalogs of antique and classical sculpture that had belonged to her late grandfather. Fascinated, she prefers leafing through them to going on afternoon family outings.

1945

Born in Beirut, Lebanon, to an Armenian family. Her father, an industrialist, became an artist at the age of 84.



1949-57

Full of energy, her favorite childhood pastime is tree-climbing. Only reading calms her. She takes classical ballet lessons and hopes to become a ballerina. During these years, however, she grows too tall and has to give up her dream.

Her grandmother discovers her talent for art and persuades her mother to enroll her for private painting lessons with Lucy Nercess who, for some reason, has in her possession large sheets of rejected plans by Altounian, architect of the Lebanese Parliament. Seta uses them to practice drawing.

1959

She joins an Armenian folk-dance group. With them she performs in Lebanon, as well as in Damascus and Jerusalem. She often dances solo.