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The Soviet Union
as Seen in Capriccios

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Gregor Danelian and Sergo Parajanov

AFA Archive

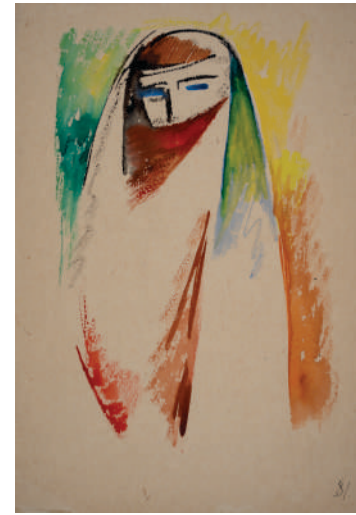
The Next Chapter in a Timeless Story

The Soviet Union as Seen in Capriccios

The name of Gregor Danelian (1950-2021) has been forgotten in Georgian Soviet fine art. Danelian is unlike anyone else in the Tbilisi-Armenian school of painting. He is capricious, impetuous, bold, and with a complete sense of aesthetics, he embraces decadence. Neutralizing Soviet cultural-ideological norms was possible only by rejecting these norms and their conventional, salon-like quality. It is for this very reason that the artist creates what is *déclassé* and decadent. The disappearance of human space, the leveling-sovietization of Armenian-Georgian traditions, and the Socialist Realist canon were the main components of the atmosphere surrounding Danelian, which created an "undesirable environment" for an individualistic and imaginatively thinking artist, for whom psychological escapism and introspection were the only way out.

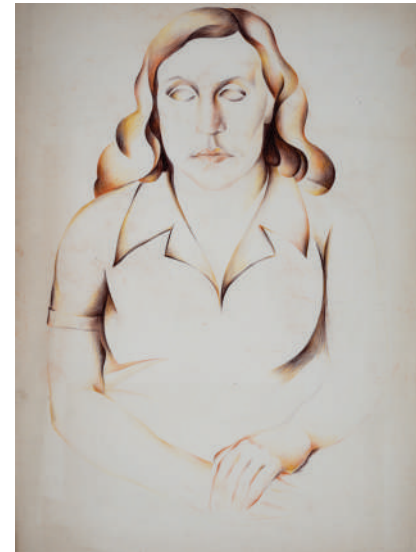
Danelian's creative work, his explorations, and his unified visual world could not be inscribed into Georgian art—he simply lived, moved away, and passed away, a sequence that to some extent repeats the Soviet system's tried-and-tested punitive scenario. From the 1950s, a secondary method of repression became a policy of ignoring; the social monolith consumes the distinctive, the genuine, and that which it deems unsuitable. By their value, the works Danelian created and exhibited in Tbilisi are an inseparable part of 1970s-1980s Georgian art, while at the same time revealing, on the level of an artifact, the cross-culture of Tbilisi and the phenomenon of nonconformist art juxtaposed with the socio-political background. Being rendered invisible, being ignored, and facing harsher sanctions were applied to a certain caste of artists—namely, those who created individualistic art, with works emerging from feelings, archetypes, Thanatos, and national-historical, political, or Western styles. Their list is long, but mentioning Danelian on this list is a perfect illustration. These artists include: Sergo Parajanov, Sergo Chakhoyants, Temo Japaridze, Avto Meskhi, Ema Zar-Khutsi, Otar Chkhartishvili, Robert Kondakhsazov, and others...

Gregor Danelian was born in 1950 in Tbilisi. In 1964, he graduated from the Tbilisi Art School, where his teachers were Shota and Margarita Metreveli, whose own instructors had been Alexandre Bajbeuk-Melikov, Evgeni Lanceray, and Iosif Charlemagne. Danelian always emphasized the contribution of his art school teachers, as well as the merits of their own great painting instructors. In 1972, Gregor Danelian participated in a state exhibition. In 1973, he graduated from the Yerevan



State Institute of Fine Arts and Theater, where he initially studied in the Faculty of Industrial Graphics before transferring to the Department of Carpet and Tapestry Design under Akop Keshishian. Danelian had several solo exhibitions of his carpets in Tbilisi and Yerevan. From the 1970s, he was actively involved in the creative process. In 1988, his solo exhibition was held at the "Artist's House" in Tbilisi. From 1988 until his death, he participated in over 40 exhibitions in various European countries. His works are held in numerous private and museum collections around the world.

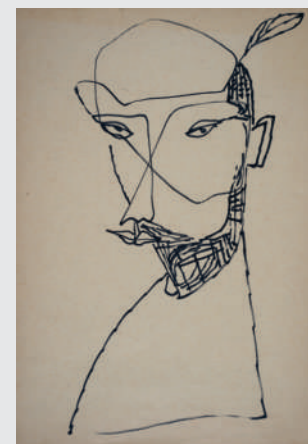
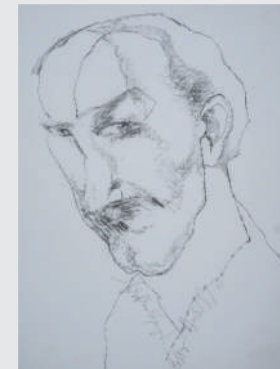
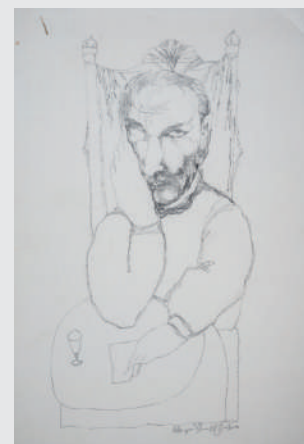
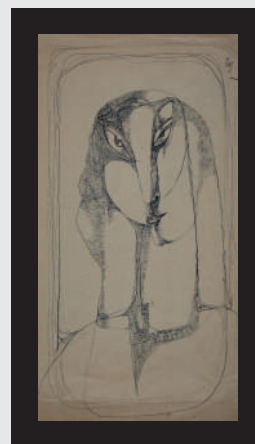
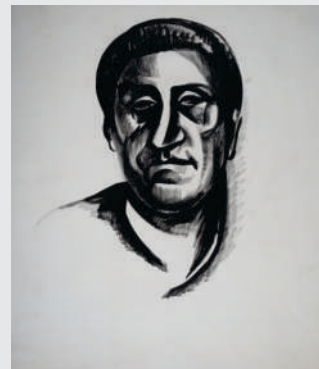
Danelian's creative style changed with each decade: from 1965-1975, it was Expressionism, Pop Art (collages), and Monumentalism; in the 1970s-1980s, it was Rayonism, Cubism, and Metaphysical Painting; and from the 1980s until his death, he created mystical-esoteric, meditative paintings exploring themes of irrationalism, spiritual vibration, and light as the absolute. In the works created on these themes, echoes of the Vienna School of Fantastic Realism can be detected.



Gregor Danelian's artistic metamorphoses, his transitions from one style to another, are somewhat reminiscent of an act of initiation, as if biographical, personal, and karmic cycles are coming to a close. His artistic nomadism is imbued with a "prodigal son" syndrome; the hearth to which he returns, disillusioned, is comprised of Armenian cultural or genetic codes in the form of color schemes, expression, stylistic elements of craft (carpets, embroidery), or the Armenian grotesque. A breeze of Tbilisi motifs can also be felt in Danelian's work. He is defined by Georgian moderation and the coexistence of cultures; indeed, he can easily transform the Armenian-Tbilisi into the European and vice-versa...

Danelian's characters, spaces, still lifes, religious scenes, and Armenian ethnotypes deftly slip from one's consciousness when one attempts to concretize, typify, or in any way name them. They are a non-referential and self-contained system of signs. In relation to this artist, it would be most appropriate to frame his work, intentionality, and communicative language within a single definition, which implies a stylistic affiliation with Outsider Art and Nonconformism. Both styles expand into the following chain of markers: protest against the Soviet system and its cultural ideology; exaggeration through modernist and post-modernist styles and mediums; exploration of the self (sexuality, psychoanalysis); the world of the vulnerable human; the individual's alienation from society; and the expansion of aesthetic frameworks, that is, the subjective perception of beauty (formalism). Danelian's heterogeneous and complex artistic play, which is extremely "un-Soviet," is a super-structure built upon each of these listed elements.

Within the presented collection, Danelian's painterly works in different media are difficult to classify—they are united by neither decade nor theme, though they were primarily executed in the 1980s and 1990s. The still lifes in the style of Metaphysical Painting remind us of Giorgio de Chirico, Giorgio Morandi, or Robert Kondakhsazov. The volume of the forms, their planar resolution, the resonance of the color, and the dreamlike ambiguity of the



background and lighting unite Armenian and European sensibilities. One group of painted portraits reflects the Armenian grotesque, with the detached and planar forms characteristic of frescoes and timeless Armenian ethnotypes; this line connects to the portraits of Gayane Khachaturian. A second line of portraits depicts men of indeterminate ethnicity in wild, screaming colors, with dramatic expression. The gaze of these capricious characters is grotesque, and the plasticity of their facial features is both voluminous and planar; the relief is faceted like a mask in the light. In several family or multi-figure compositions, the visual language and surface of tapestries and carpets become apparent. The frontally posed figures carry the precision and charge of Armenian ethnographic painting, yet the background is arranged like a carpet, into ornamental patches and stripes. Of course, though in a different artistic manner, the family scenes of Martiros Saryan or Arshile Gorky come to mind with a similar mood and pathos. In



painterly-graphic compositions of various genres, Russian-European modernism—for example, Orphism, Cubism, Rayonism, Cubo-Futurism, Cézannism—is uniquely synthesized



through the principles of deconstructing, faceting, or redistributing form.

The series of graphic works created in the aforementioned decades can be divided into several typological groups based on their morphological fabric: a series of female portraits in sanguine, a series of self-portraits in various media, religious scenes (Lamentation of Christ, Crucifixion), and portraits of men and women. In the sanguine series, a wide variety of artistic visages emerge. Some are extremely delicate, radiating an idea of beauty, while others are decadent, destructive, or grotesque (Northern Renaissance—Dürer's portrait of his mother). A similar variation exists in Danelian's self-portraits—fluid lines, patchy stripes, a misanthropic gaze, the declassing of the face into non-objective forms, and so on. In his religious scenes, the Northern Renaissance grotesque, brutalism, the blockiness and monumentality of forms,

and sometimes even their geometrization, all converge. In a subgroup of graphic works, the series of still lifes and portraits, Danelian's unique discovery of form and its volume is revealed; he strings or embroiders the image as if with beads, showing us rhythm through a play of dimensions. In this way, the artist somewhat embroiders within the drawing, embedding one of the world's most ancient and filigreed crafts, Armenian embroidery, as a cultural code and an unbroken link to Armenian craftsmanship and national foundations. Through such artistic insertions, the artist seeks form, the unfolding of its volume on a flat plane, and its relationship with light... The fracturing of the forms of male and female bodies and faces, and their plastic transformation into dramatic, iconic units, also connects to the Spitak earthquake, which the artist depicts as a national tragedy (paralleling Arshile Gorky's work "The Artist and His Mother," dedicated to the Armenian Genocide); that is, beyond the formal search, Danelian fetishistically embeds national codes into the image.

Sergei Parajanov plays a major role in Gregor Danelian's life and his work from the Tbilisi period. The photo archives of Yuri Mechitov and Levan Mamulov clearly reflect this cycle in the artist's life. In Danelian's artistic world, the subjective-objective search for aesthetics is a kind of charter or modus, which he pursued until the end of his life through various compositional elements, principles, or theses. In his memoirs, he constantly emphasizes the phenomenon of Parajanov and his good fortune in having a relationship with him. From





these memoirs, we learn how Sergo worked and how fascinated he was by Danelian's individualism.

When Gregor would disappear, Sergo would constantly look for him, call him, and even send people to him... During one of these disappearances, Danelian replied to the maestro: "You are like the sun; if I don't hide from you, I might get burned by your side." The meetings at Parajanov's house captured in photo-graphs reflect the unique artists of that period who possessed a dual cultural identity. Danelian was also a representative of this pleiad. In the photos are: Lyova Bayakhchev, Gayane Khachaturian, Zuleika Bajbeuk-Melikov, Albert Dilbarian, Gregor Danelian, and others.

Many layers unfold in an analytical section of Gregor Danelian; his work and his personality are faceted like a kaleidoscope and become elusive... He is ephemeral, a mirage, throwing you into a Fata Morgana-like optical frustration; you cannot fit him into any specific definition.

Finally, the most relevant component of and cultural echo in Danelian's work is nonetheless the capriccio. This is a passionate musical composition whose harmony is atypical and unpredictable, yet memorable. The language of the capriccio was



Danelian's form of artistic self-preservation in Soviet reality, through which he formulated an equation of Tbilisi-Armenian and Western visual variables—one that was true to that environment and remains alive today.

As we know, Francisco Goya lost his hearing in 1792-1793, and when he recovered, he began to create "Los Caprichos"—a series of satirical etchings. In this series, a personally tragic, somewhat "cacophonous," and socially severe social satire emerged from the artist—on the themes of the Inquisition, religion, and politics. The Soviet Union, and the collectivist society saturated with the absurdity common to humanity, was reflected in Gregor Danelian through the prism of the capriccio; only the new and unique artistic gestures of the capriccio could present the painful world of an Armenian artist in Soviet Georgia untarnished.