

# Varujan Boghosian

## THE ARTIST AS ORPHEUS

By Christopher Busa

PHOTO BY PHIL SMITH

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RPHEUS WAS GIVEN a lyre by his father and learned to play it so well that animals stopped grazing, their ears acutely attuned. Even in the absence of wind, trees began to sway. Marble was said to soften, and Sisyphus rested on the cushion of his rock. With the allure of his mesmerizing lyre, opening Pluto's ears to the sound of high harmony, Pluto granted Orpheus entrance to the underworld to rescue his beloved Eurydice, after she died from a snake bite on one of her ankles, very shortly after their ecstatic marriage. Orpheus almost succeeded in his valiant rescue. But he violated a crucial condition demanded by Pluto, lord of the underworld: Orpheus was forbidden to turn and look back at Eurydice as she followed

him, limping on her wounded foot, single file, on their ascent to the world of the living. As darkness began to lighten, he turned to confirm her presence. Stretching his arms to grasp her, he embraced empty air. She vanished, and his solitary return became the occasion for still greater grief. He was attacked by the beautiful women he scorned in the delirium of his sorrow. They tore his body into pieces and let the head float down into the blue sea, with the name of Eurydice trembling on its tongue.

VARUJAN BOGHOSIAN, 2009  
FACING PAGE: THE ARTIST'S  
STUDIO IN DARTMOUTH





This myth—mingling themes of illusion and reality, dream and wakefulness, hope and despair, love and loss—has fascinated artists and poets since the dawn of civilization in ancient Greece, and its influence continues unabated in our day. Jean Cocteau’s film *Orpheus* (1949) begins with the hero living in postwar Paris among friends at the Café of the Poets. Tennessee Williams’s play *Orpheus Descending* (1957) is set in a dry goods store in a bigoted and repressive Southern town. Orpheus is portrayed as a mysterious drifter who arrives wearing a snakeskin jacket and strumming a guitar. Williams later wrote in a poem about Orpheus: “for you must learn, even you, what we have learned, / that some things are marked by their nature not to be completed / but only longed for and sought for awhile and abandoned.”

The very things that were once desired and later abandoned are precisely the objects that Varujan Boghosian selects for his constructions and collages. Throughout his fifty-year career, Boghosian has scoured junk shops, antique offerings, small-town dumps, and urban wrecking yards, seeking what is worn, distressed, or otherwise diminished by the passing of time. Never does he use anything new, save perhaps for the glue that holds together the elements he has rescued for redemption.

Something of an ethnologist, gathering shards from past cultures, Boghosian amasses a variety of artifacts that cluster into categories: wagon wheels with missing spokes; weathered doors and windows; stacks of bat-

tered and empty picture frames; turn-of-the-last-century schoolboy slates; birdcages; bells (“when I see a bell,” he says, “I hear the wonderful sound they give out”); toy trumpets; carnival masks; wooden mannequins with flexible legs, arms, torsos, and necks; billiard balls; hockey pucks; trays holding moveable type; children’s letter blocks for learning the alphabet; composite stone “anchor blocks,” developed, like erector sets, to teach yesterday’s children how to build structures; hairbrushes and combs; archaic tools that remain functional; wooden clamps; dull knives; artificial birds and butterflies; hat blocks for fashioning felt bowlers and silk derbies; ironing boards severely cracked along a check in the wood’s grain; odd metal clasps and the most tenuously bent wire; the stems, bowls, or other fragments of clay pipes found in Provincetown harbor; Confederate currency; toy boats; wax fruit; grainy photographs and damaged etchings; wallpaper samples bound in mildewed booklets; marbled paper; paper stars for excellence in work by children in kindergarten; dog-eared playing cards; tattered pincushions; fraying canvas hats; brass wing nuts that may serve as butterflies. He welcomes rust to iron, cracks in glass, tears in fabric, and stains on sheet music. Presently, he is on the prowl for old horseshoes, especially, he says, “ones with the nails still in.”

In *The Savage Mind*, the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss developed the concept of a type of artist he called a *bricoleur*; the word derives from the verb *bricoler*, which means to putter about, tinker with an object,



CHARIOT, 1979, MIXED MEDIA: BRONZE, MARBLE, AND LEATHER, 28.5H BY 13.5W BY 30D INCHES

or fiddle around. The bricoleur fashions improvised arrangements from whatever he can scavenge. Lévi-Strauss believed that mythic thinking was also a kind of bricolage, in that a structure was created from signs standing for something else. What is signified becomes a signifier via a discussion between its materials—asking what is added, what is omitted, what is substituted, and what is transposed. Art is about transformation, and the bricoleur, like Boghosian, is a type of collage artist.

A salient feature of Boghosian's mode of presentation is his architectural awareness of the frame itself. Last January, I journeyed to visit his studio at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, famous for its vast surplus of *stuff* the artist, never in his lifetime, will ever utilize. Since his retirement he has moved most of its contents to two smaller studios in the basement of the English Department. His previous studio in the basement of Webster Hall, which many visitors toured, was remembered for the stimulation of its silences. The same atmosphere prevails in the present studios. In the quiet of puppets and mannequins sprawled on shelves, many voices seem to be muttering sotto voce, just beyond the range of audibility. I had the distinct sense that I heard several clocks ticking at alternative intervals from each corner of the room. Indeed, there is apparent purpose in the placing of rows between tables, storage counters, shelves, pedestals, chairs, stacks of books. Nothing is hidden away behind closets or out of reach; instead, everything is on display and available at arm's length.

But one looks in vain for a working area, where the artist would do the actual fitting together of a particular construction. Boghosian told me that he did use a lot of the tools available at the Hopkins Center of Art, across the street from his studio. Elegant and raw at once, Boghosian's boxes are not demonstrations of his craftsmanship. Rather, they are demonstrations of his *touch*—his artistry and the quintessential resurrection of the acquisitions of his foraging.

Robert Motherwell was Boghosian's colleague during the decades of summers they showed together at Long Point Gallery, and they discussed this phenomenon of foraging as basic training for the artist. Motherwell told me in 1991 (for an article featuring the group in *Provincetown Arts*) about looking at art through the eyes of some of the Surrealists he had known in New York in the early 1940s, including André Breton, whom Motherwell called "The Pope of Surrealism." Paradoxically, for a group that valued originality so highly, their practice often took the form of joint projects. After a lunch of "good bistro food" on Fifty-fifth Street, Motherwell would accompany a dozen artists on a walking tour of the flea markets and eclectic antique shops located on Third Avenue. "We would go in,"

Motherwell said, "and out of the heaps of old beds, strange furniture, fragments of sculpture, porcelain, whatever, each of us had to point out what was surrealist and what wasn't. If you were wrong, then the Pope said you were wrong. In all my life, and I have spent my life looking, I must say I have never looked as hard as during those moments where I had to pick out what was surrealist from a given mass of junk."

Another student of "close looking" in Boghosian's circle of friends was the poet Stanley Kunitz, who dedicated a poem to him after a visit to his studio. The poem "Chariot" was published in the exhibition catalogue that accompanied Boghosian's retrospective at the Hood Museum at Dartmouth College in 1989. Kunitz's poem alludes to a heroic dimension in Orpheus's rescue quest, charging into Hades—not supine on Charon's sluggish raft, but standing heroically on "that horse-age wagon wheel," where "Tomorrow, maybe, at the crack of a whip / a flock of glittering birds will perch / on its rim, a burnished stranger / wearing an enigmatic mask / will mount its hub / and the great battered wheel / will start to spin."

Kunitz sensed how elements in the studio of his friend were alert and ready to spring into action, and no doubt the organization of Boghosian's studio is a coherent maze of pathways and relationships, some secret even to the artist. Like a bird-watcher, he uses his ears to locate the bird through its song. Throughout every phase of his career, birds, as well as butterflies, have figured as orphic emblems, representing the beauty of music and recalling the strum of Orpheus's lyre. They appear as harbingers of happiness, singing some song about life's circularity, and especially how death is bonded with life. There is a leaping quality to the large metaphors that Boghosian finds in small details; adeptly, he leaps between the verbal and visual. He is thrilled by puns that cross mediums. In fact, his cross-cultural work invokes an unfamiliar word, *ekphrasis*, a rhetorical turn in which one medium is presented in terms of another. A poem may describe a scene as well as a painting, and a painting may say more than a poem. It is an ancient confusion about how we see and say, not always knowing what we mean, but enjoying, sometimes raucously, the sense that traverses nonsense.

One of Boghosian's series, which he calls his *Why Nots*, combines the letter Y with a knot found in some piece of wood. No two *Why Nots* look



OUT OF THE SWING OF THE SEA, 2008, MIXED MEDIA, 30 BY 22.75 INCHES



alike. “I do my *Why Nots*,” Boghosian said, “because of Louise Bogan’s great poem, ‘The Daemon.’” He knows the poem by heart and he quoted all three stanzas when we stood in his studio looking at a *Why Not* on the wall: “Must I show outright / The bruise in the side / The halt in the night, / And how death cried?”

Boghosian explained that he accumulates more than he will ever utilize as he needs a large selection to find the one item that will finally finish a piece. The stockpile is his source, an inventory that is like a bank account for the magical thinking that is his imagination. He more than replenishes what he withdraws. He has remarked, in fact, that when he is in the studio he feels like a “businessman who has a terrific investment in stock that must be put to use.” His collections, which also are spread through every room of his house, are the valued things he lives with much of his day and night. He seems to have volunteered as their caretaker and taken responsibility and keen interest in their well-being. Over any period of several years, he will have dozens of projects in progress. He likes to be lucky, and nothing pleases him more than to find by accident some orphan that becomes the capstone to conclude a piece that otherwise would not be finished. (One of the roots of Orpheus’s name is *orphan*.)

When Webster Hall took him in, Boghosian found a home that was curiously full of the very riches that Pluto stored in the earth, the metals and minerals that nourish the plants that return each spring when Pluto’s wife, Persephone, emerges from her annual separation from Pluto. When she returns to the underworld, winter will commence. She is the reason we have winter. Mythic thinking allows the imagination to reify an abstraction, and make real the transformation of something abandoned into a thing of value. If Boghosian is mostly Orpheus, there is also his Plutonian side, hoarding his treasure in the basement of Webster Hall, yet allowing care packages to go out into the world.

Webster Hall, an elegant colonial building set majestically on an immense grassy knoll, houses the college’s rare books and special collections. The building, named after the great statesman and Dartmouth alumnus Daniel Webster, is saturated in history; its collection includes 95,000 printed volumes dating from the fifteenth century and manuscripts dating from the thirteenth century BC. Besides forty-four of Robert Frost’s notebooks, the library possesses recordings of Ono and Yaghan natives of Tierra del Fuego, the only known record of their now extinct tribal ceremonies. The building’s prestigious collection has been supplemented with many gifts from Boghosian, when he discovers that something he bought for a song is now worth a lot of money.

In the light-filled atrium on the second floor, at the end of a ritual walk, positioned against the wall like the door to some sanctuary, hangs Boghosian’s bronze sculpture *Prima Porta*. The massive, dark door seems to float forward from the white wall. Boghosian mentioned that it weighs eight hundred pounds. The door suggests entrance to a secret room, and is a fitting memorial to the time Boghosian worked here when his studio was below in the basement. Four finely articulated bronze birds perch in the four compartments or divisions of the door, and they are singing just as they do in Stanley Kunitz’s poem. Next to the sculpture is a dictionary opened to the page where the definition of the word *apse* is cited: an especially sacred area in a place of reverence, such as a library, a church, or the studio of an artist.

Boghosian began teaching at Dartmouth in 1968 and was awarded an endowed position in 1982 as the George Frederick Jewett Professor of Art. Since retiring in 1996, Boghosian has continued his habitual descents to do his work, which has its origins in a love of enduring stories that began in New Britain, Connecticut, where he was born in 1926.

He was transformed by guidance from a remarkable teacher, Constance Carrier, a graduate of Smith College, who returned to her hometown to teach English and Latin in the high school. She was a charismatic mentor and was notable for publishing scholarly translations of the plays of Terrence and the poetry of Propertius and Tibullus. In addition, her own poems appeared frequently in the *New Yorker* and the *Atlantic Monthly*. She published three poetry collections, including *The Middle Voice*, which won the James Laughlin Award (formerly known as the Lamont Poetry Prize). Boghosian’s embryonic efforts concentrated on the big things that make us all unhappy—life and death. Carrier introduced him to the Orpheus myth as a way of grappling with his nebulous abstractions. He began to

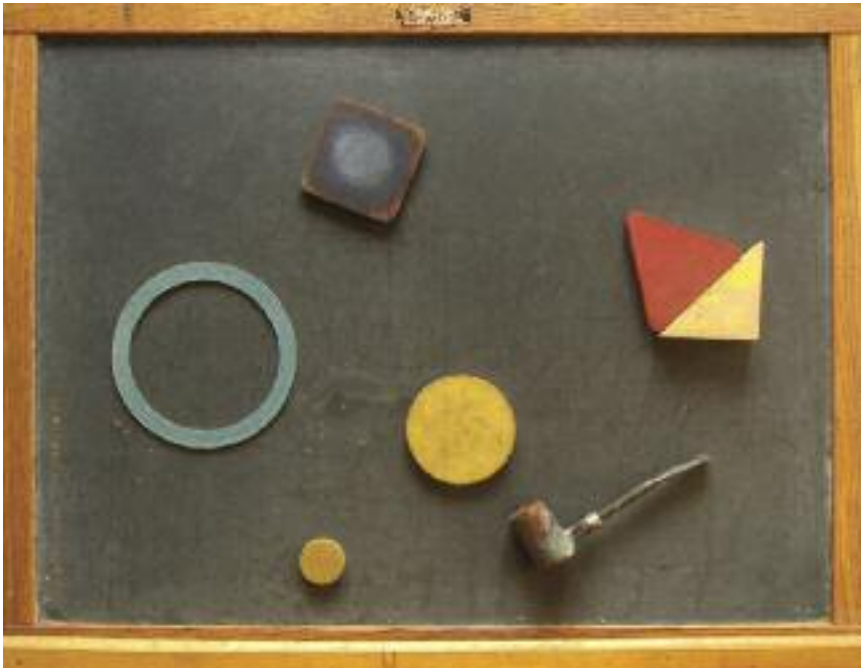
break down the various elements of the myth into a series of events, and, here, his sense of comedy was born. Three steps could transform an act into art. Jasper Johns had a three-step process: “Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it.”

Orpheus became Boghosian’s sidestepping alter ego, which he adopted for life, just as a man may wear a hat when he is in his twenties and years later find that he has become the hat. Even in ancient times, the existence of Orpheus was never affirmed. In an essay titled “Boghosian on Boghosian” published in 1993, the artist revealed a surprisingly frank explication of his driving motives: “Not being a scholar, I looked at the myth very simply. I worked with the raw basic myth and then made elaborations on it in my constructions. The meaning of the myth for me is the three principal characters: the hero Orpheus, Eurydice, and Pluto. These three characters formed a triangle that was very complex and also quite simple. The agonies that confronted Orpheus in his loss of Eurydice are comparable to the problems Pluto faced. Pluto’s similar dilemma involved having his wife, Persephone, spend half the year in the underworld and then releasing her to the earth. Thus Orpheus’s great sorrow in losing Eurydice was an emotion he had in common with Pluto. His journey to Hades was an expression of this sorrow as well as an attempt to resolve the problem. The sadness that results from human loss is a pervasive, universal emotion, and is common to all people.”

After the war, Boghosian received the “gift,” he said, of the GI Bill, which sustained him when he returned to New Britain in 1946 to attend Connecticut Teachers College, intending to develop a career in education. But another ambition was waking within him. He transferred to the Vesper George School of Art in Boston with the idea that he might become a commercial artist. Again, another teacher was pivotal in fostering his dream—James



PRIMA PORTA (WEBSTER HALL ATRIUM), 1978, BRONZE, 72H BY 45W BY 5D INCHES



PIPE DREAMS, 2006, MIXED MEDIA ON CHALKBOARD, 19.5 BY 23.5 INCHES

Wingate Parr, a noted watercolorist. “Parr,” Boghosian said, “was a fine artist in this commercial art school. He was the catalyst for Ed Giobbi and me and the one who turned us on to watercolors. He took five of us to Provincetown. We rented a house on Miller Hill Road, run by Al Silva, which we called Shangri-La. We grew vegetables behind the house. I had the downstairs with two others who didn’t end up staying. Sal Del Deo, Giobbi, and Ray Rizk had the upstairs. They were all studying with Hensche.”

What tied the group together was their love of cooking. Giobbi, who became one of Boghosian’s closest friends, came from a Depression-era childhood in Connecticut, much like Boghosian’s in the factory town of New Britain. They had come from families where the nightly dinner gatherings, besides Sunday mornings at church, were their most spiritually rewarding occasions. On Saturday nights, the group threw a party for friends they were meeting during the summer; pungent odors, Puccini arias, and excited conversation made the experiences unforgettable.

At Vesper George, Sal Del Deo had suggested to Parr that the school invite the Provincetown artist Henry Hensche to give a demonstration. Hensche had assisted Charles Hawthorne at the Cape Cod School of Art until 1930, and then kept the school going under the same name when the founder died. Hensche continued the teaching principles of Hawthorne, declaring that painting was not drawing and that structure in color was built up with one spot of color against its adjacent other, like bricks in a building, with their sheen seen in the light of the time it was painted. Hensche wanted to know the time of day a certain flower was observed. This impressionistic method teaches a way to paint so that one tone is adjusted in terms of the actual circumstances in which objects are witnessed.

Moving in another direction, one that depended on the accumulation of past sunrises and the wearing away of time itself, Boghosian was considering ways to capture, not a moment in light or time, but rather documenting the effects of time’s wear and tear on objects. On one occasion, Boghosian navigated his footing over the flat-topped boulders of the West End breakwater, built by the Army Corps of Engineers in 1911. Six or seven derelict fishing boats were slowly breaking apart as they were battered against the rocks. Boghosian climbed inside a pilothouse and unscrewed a porthole: “I used to go abroad and find something that had geometry to it, and I would take it.” My sense is that he wanted to be closer to the captain who had once piloted the ship.

Once he secured a ship’s timber, encrusted with barnacles, with a bent iron bolt protruding, which he used as a handle to drag it in low water along the breakwater. Clambering up the rocks to exit, he tipped the log into a vertical position so he could balance the center of gravity, and smoothly control its forward drop. He used the log as

a stable rail, gripping it as he climbed through the crevices in the boulders. At the top, two men said to Boghosian, “We watched you.” Boghosian, flabbergasted, asked them why they didn’t help. He can’t remember what they said, but he kept that piece close by in Webster Hall as something of a talisman. He never used it in a work. When he moved, he gave it away.

One sculpture that found its way to the Hood Museum at Dartmouth was originally discovered when he was walking barefoot on the beach below Highland Light in Truro and banged his toe against a blunt object buried in the sand, drawing blood. He dug in the sand and exposed a four-sided section of a ship’s beam, with two large nails protruding from each end. Buried deeper under this piece was another section of milled wood, but thinner and longer. Putting the two together in his studio, he found he had created an inverted cross, an upside-down crucifix. He did very little but align the two pieces in this T-shape, resting it on its horizontal base and embellishing the top vertical with a band of gray sculpt metal. He also “capped” the piece with a memory of his navy days by finding a sheath of black iron, about the size and shape of a sailor’s hat.

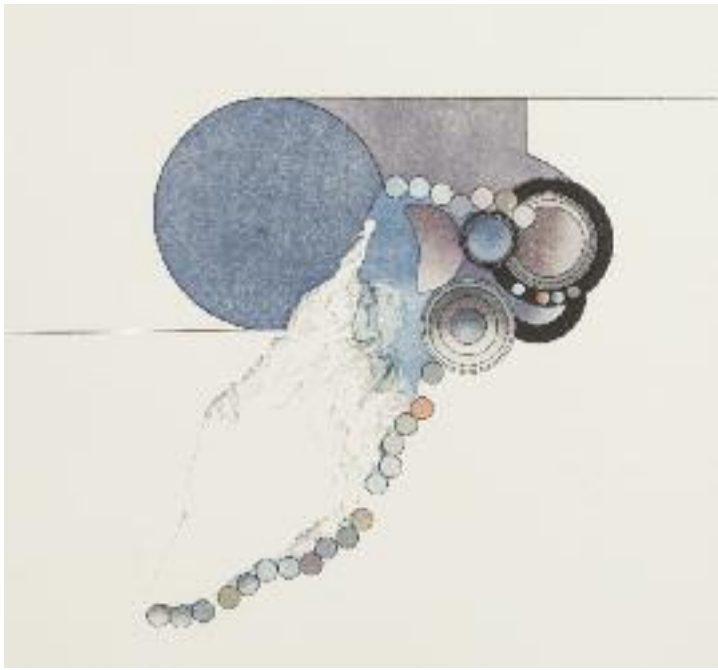
Boghosian often found objects of interest, and inspiration, as he strolled, face down, gazing at the exposed flats; the sandbars were almost continuous to Wood End Light, where the tip of Cape Cod sharply coils back upon itself. This area was the old industrial part of Provincetown, which clung to the waterfront because that is where the commerce was. During the nineteenth century as many as one hundred wharves thrust from the shore into the harbor. There were tall shacks for drying nets and open-air frames for drying fish. Most were gone by the time Boghosian arrived, but evidence of prior activity could be found in fragments littering the sea bottom, always accessible at low tide, when the water withdrew to reveal its hidden wares.

Until 1935, when the town created a dump, people tended to toss what they didn’t want into the harbor. Twice a day, the tides took their trash away, but bottles, ceramics, and a strange abundance of clay pipes, popular before the advent of the briar pipe, remained. Broken bowls and stems were scattered in abundance. Boghosian began gathering them, amassing



FALL OF ICARUS, 2008, MIXED MEDIA, 24 BY 17 INCHES





CHARON, 1979, INK AND WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 30.5 BY 22 INCHES

over decades more than ten thousand fragments. Only a small fraction has been incorporated into finished works.

Following his first summers in Provincetown, Boghosian returned to Boston for his studies at Vesper George. He began to frequent the Frameshop Gallery, nearby on Huntington Avenue, which, at the time, was mostly a vast railroad yard. He did a series of watercolors about locomotives—"from memory—very loose but tight." The gallery was run by Hyman Swetzoﬀ; besides showing upcoming local artists such as Boghosian, Harold Tovish, Hyman Bloom, and Georgy Kepes, Swetzoﬀ exhibited small works by European masters, such as Henry Moore, James Ensor, and Honoré Daumier. Swetzoﬀ mounted a memorable show of Daumier drawings, each priced around \$250. Boghosian, of course, could not afford to buy one; he had just married Marilyn, with whom he would remain linked until her death fifty-three years later, and the two of them were "struggling." Instead, he said, he acquired "a great education" at the gallery. Soon, Swetzoﬀ took him on as an artist. When the gallery moved to Newbury Street, so did Boghosian, showing with Swetzoﬀ until his death in 1965.

Boghosian's career was launched in 1951 with the first show he had at Swetzoﬀ's gallery, a portfolio of ten woodcuts, titled *Orpheus*. I viewed them recently at the Cape Cod Museum of Art in Dennis, which has a set in their collection. The same image of Orpheus is rendered in ten unique incarnations, some fuller, others more schematic. Yet no single version contains the most information. The fleshy and the skeletal achieve equivalence. Those with fragmented features say more with less, and perhaps that is why there is such balance in the grouping. It was as if a withered face disappeared into the structure of its bones, where its youth yet showed through its age.

Boghosian's benefits from the GI Bill expired when he finished at Vesper George. He applied for and received a Fulbright Fellowship in 1951, and he and Marilyn spent a transformative year in Italy. Boghosian appreciated how the Italians incorporated contemporary bustle into ever-present antiquity. He would return later several times on fellowships with the American Academy in Rome and a Guggenheim Fellowship. On his first trip, he stayed in Perugia in central Italy along the Tiber River. He produced a portfolio of watercolors and drawings, which he called *Italian Sketchbook*.

In *Perugia*, one of these works, Boghosian has departed from the black ink of his Orpheus woodcuts and captured the rainbow of colors cascading like sunlight on the glowing houses that rise up along the banks of the river. It is a dazzling display of shimmering vitality, and Boghosian's talent for inspired color play is evident. It is curious that his subsequent work much favors muted colors, as if he became suspicious of the beguilement of vivid color. *The Nile*, an anchor block construction from 1976, plays with the small difference between the pattern of the river flow and the pattern of the earthen banks that contain it.

In 1954 Boghosian returned to America to study with Josef Albers at the Yale School of Art. Albers, like Hensche, was a colorist, especially renowned for his series called *Homage to the Square*. Within squares—a recession of several squares, one inside the other—related hues were bound like something imprisoned. The drama in a work by Albers derives from a compressed tension between antagonistic energy, boxed within. At Yale, Albers told Boghosian that he was "monochromatic," which made Boghosian chuckle. I suspect that what Boghosian learned from Albers was not color but architecture. Boghosian retained Albers's framing device, but abandoned his fresh paint, preferring the patina of paint that is a mere ghost of the original, much faded, the surface pitted with the texture of time. His favorite stone is travertine, which is easily stained by lemon juice, vinegar, tea, or coffee. The surface always seems to be crumbling off in dusty molecules that cling to the oils in your hand. Boghosian finds revelation in the residue of something once new, now transformed by age.

In 1966 Boghosian had his first one-man show of constructions at the H.C.E. Gallery in Provincetown, run by the James Joyce scholar Nat Halper. Although several of Boghosian's future colleagues at Long Point, including Tony Vevers, joined the Sun Gallery, Boghosian was not involved with their group at the time. He remembers Jeanne Bultman—"a beautiful young woman walking up Miller Hiller Road." And Weldon Kees, worked in a gallery nearby—"he had this Continental. He was painting at the time, using house paint. I told him I didn't think that was going to last. He said he didn't care. He was publishing poems about a character named Robinson when he disappeared off the Golden Gate Bridge."

Boghosian had found his idiom in assemblage, declaring, "I don't make anything. I find everything." His process acknowledges that an aspect of the work cannot be created by him alone, and depends on alertness and receptivity to what the world offers gratuitously, which he receives with a measure of humility as a simple gift. His acquisitions, rarely costly, can seem sometimes priceless. A fascination with man-made objects and their origins drives the artist on his never-ending search for elements he can make use of. He is guided by his intuition, and seldom does a work excite him until he finds something fortuitous, unbidden, and unplanned for—the missing piece that completes the work. Unlike a painting, the item is real, representing itself as well as something larger, like a love note accompanied by an emotionally piercing token of fond memory.

It is significant that many artists feel beholden to the other artists who have helped, influenced, or inspired them, and this feeling generates



UNTITLED, 1963, WOOD, IRON, SCULPTED METAL, NAILS, 60H BY 30W BY 10D INCHES  
HOOD MUSEUM AT DARTMOUTH



MAGRITTE, 1980, GLASS, TIN, WOOD, AND FELT, 12.5H BY 8.75W BY 7D INCHES, COLLECTION OF JOEL MALLIN

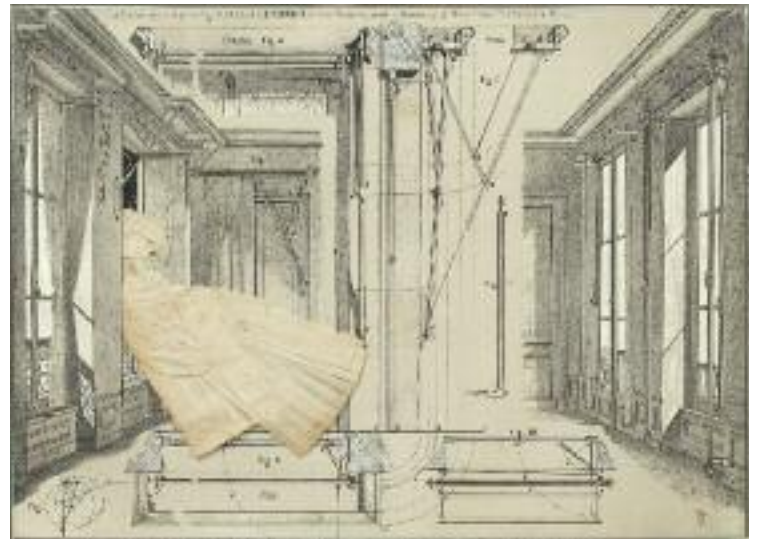
a desire to pass along anonymously what they have received. The acceptance of a gift generally creates an obligation to return. In his brilliantly original *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (Random House, 1979), Lewis Hyde discusses this phenomenon in the context of the “capitalist” economy, which hoards treasure for selfish purposes, and the “gift” economy, which amplifies its wealth through sharing. Hyde distinguishes between reciprocal and circular giving: “When

I give to someone from whom I do not receive (and yet I do receive elsewhere), it is as if the gift goes around a corner be-

fore it comes back. I have to give blindly. And I will feel a sort of blind gratitude as well. When a gift moves in a circle its motion is beyond the control of the personal ego, and so each bearer must be part of the group and each donation is an act of social giving.” In its widest circumference, such an exchange creates a bond between the dead, the living, and the yet-to-be-born.

Boghosian’s constructions almost always integrate what frames them into what would be otherwise isolated for its separate expressive emphasis. His framing devices are architectural environments for display of treasured artifacts, not unlike the reverential placement of a relic in the recess of a stone wall, where the space itself would look holy even if it were empty. Boghosian’s effort is to reveal what is missing. His habitual instinct is to reverse what is obvious. If a frame is supposed to be frontal, then he will prefer to expose its back side, showing the wire that would affix the picture to the wall and the hidden braces that square its corners.

Boghosian’s own career was becoming cemented and secure in the decades when he showed at Cordier and Ekstrom (1969–1988), his prestigious New York dealer. As he had done with his teachers, so Boghosian



THE BRIDE LEAVES, 1994, MIXED MEDIA, 9 BY 12.5 INCHES

maintained fast bonds with the galleries that took him on. Berta Walker in Provincetown, Irving Luntz in Palm Beach, and Lori Bookstein in New York are presently his principle representatives.

*Orpheus* (1983) is such a construction that reveals Boghosian’s hidden braces. In a double frame, larger than the canvas it encompasses, Boghosian has presented a carved wooden bird in profile as it bursts from a tear in the linen, emerging from behind in some strange act of birth. Something artificial is born through an act of imagination. Frail threads of fabric drape across the bird’s stiff tail. Its beak, with a morsel clamped in the crevice, seems to be eating its way out of the cloth, as if the creature were consuming the shell that encased it. A nail, protruding crudely from the breast of the bird, cruelly affixes its body in an inert position, as if it were a kind of martyr whose moment of agony is frozen forever in eternal time.

Another construction, *Orpheus and Eurydice* (1987), imposes two dark hearts on a white paper ground, deeply grooved where the two hearts touch



ORPHEUS, 1983, LINEN, BRONZE, AND WOOD, 13H BY 17W BY 3.5D INCHES



PERUGIA, 1953, INK AND WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 9.5 BY 4.5 INCHES



each other. A tenuous wire, so thin as to be only faintly visible, lifts out of the groove and lopes across the fine point where the two hearts touch at their narrowest point. The image combines, suggesting a formal, black bow tie against a white tuxedo, or the rapid wings of a butterfly. Something both ceremonial and fleeting is captured at its most evocative instant. A complex range of emotion is compressed in mute simplicity: lyrical joy, rich pathos, and comic surprise. The white ground, foxed and blemished, splotted with watermarks, summons an alternative history that is, so frankly, smudged with regret. What is logical is lost to irony—if “irony” is restricted to the vitality of complex feeling that Boghosian can condense, contain, and capture in the volatile cage of his creations.

The boxes of Joseph Cornell enamored Boghosian, and he made a pilgrimage to Cornell’s house and studio on Utopia Parkway in Queens, New York. Boghosian saw how Cornell lived in his house among his work, stepping over stacks of papers, sorted in piles that one had to navigate. (When Cornell died, his estate returned to Boghosian the same work he had given Cornell on his visit.) Cornell contributed to art history by diminishing the hallowed emptiness of the art museum to its function as a container. Cornell made us understand, in his boxed-in worlds, that the museum itself was a large box with many compartments and closets, which organize cultural artifacts into thematic coherence. Cornell brought his mode of presentation into a relation with its contents. Fragile relics representing fading emotions persist in their fragility, and the weaker the material becomes the more does it exude expressive potency. The box used for storage of discarded objects becomes the place of renewed scrutiny.

The concept of the box as a container for a desired material intrigued Boghosian. Boghosian’s display cases for his embellished hat blocks were deep, square wooden containers, formerly used on a farm to hold the mineral blocks that cows lick for nutrients not otherwise found in their diet. Boghosian obtained several of them at an antique shop in Provincetown for \$10. The tongues of cows are as rough as sandpaper, and the rims of the containers are beautifully contoured from years of incidental licking, smoothing and shaping them with strange artistry. Boghosian was delighted by this conjunction of bovine and the sublime. Is it art because the cow’s tongue shaped the lip of the lick’s container? Or is it art because Boghosian saw what the container could do for the context of the art contained? He was not making packing boxes so much as presenting what had been hidden in packaging.



ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE, 1987, PAPER CONSTRUCTION WITH WIRE, 16H BY 14W BY 1D INCHES

Boghosian’s work exudes the odor of an old thing just ripped apart and releasing its fresh scent, and this kinetic impulse is implicit in Boghosian’s static scenarios, which always seem to be prologues to a performance or a depiction of the high point of the performance itself. In the year Boghosian was born, Marcel Duchamp was working on a piece called *The Large Glass* or *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, 1926. It is a double-glass contraption that would make Rube Goldberg blush—with romance and courtship treated as if it were purely mechanical. When I asked Boghosian about Duchamp’s influence on his work, he replied, “It’s not so much Duchamp’s work, but the *idea* of Duchamp that I absorbed.”

Boghosian wants to take us to our limits of knowledge, where we must decide when explanation fails and mystery manifests itself. Boghosian was intrigued by what may have caused Magritte to make his eerie paintings of the man with the bowler hat, but without a face. One possible explanation is that Magritte suffered the childhood trauma of seeing his drowned mother being retrieved by rescuers knee-deep in a river. His mother’s face was obscured by a portion of her clothing, and Magritte saw only emptiness. In one of Boghosian’s pieces, *Magritte* (1980), Boghosian fills the airy emptiness beneath the bowler hat with a fluttering butterfly. A number of Boghosian’s works seem to feature people without faces or heads, and people wearing hats. Recent works include *The Bride Dances* (2004), *The Bride Vanishes* (2001), and *Bride and Groom* (2005).

Boghosian’s father, an immigrant cobbler from Armenia, worked in the Fafner Ball Bearing Factory making ball bearings, and the spherical shapes reappear in many works by the son. The multiple meanings its shape suggests depend crucially on how they are used in tandem with other elements. Boghosian’s father, something of a bricoleur himself, spent some hours evenings and weekends repairing the family’s shoes. He sat before an anvil and tapped rhythmically into the leather soles. He kept a handful of the little nails he used in his mouth, plucking them one by one, and keeping up a musical pattern that was pleasant for the son to listen to.

His father had fled the atrocities of the Armenian genocide, passing on stories of astonishing cruelty. Recently, a Boghosian image



NIGHT AND DAY (ORPHEUS AND PLUTO), 1963, WOOD AND STEEL, 12H BY 12W BY 7.25D INCHES  
COLLECTION OF WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK





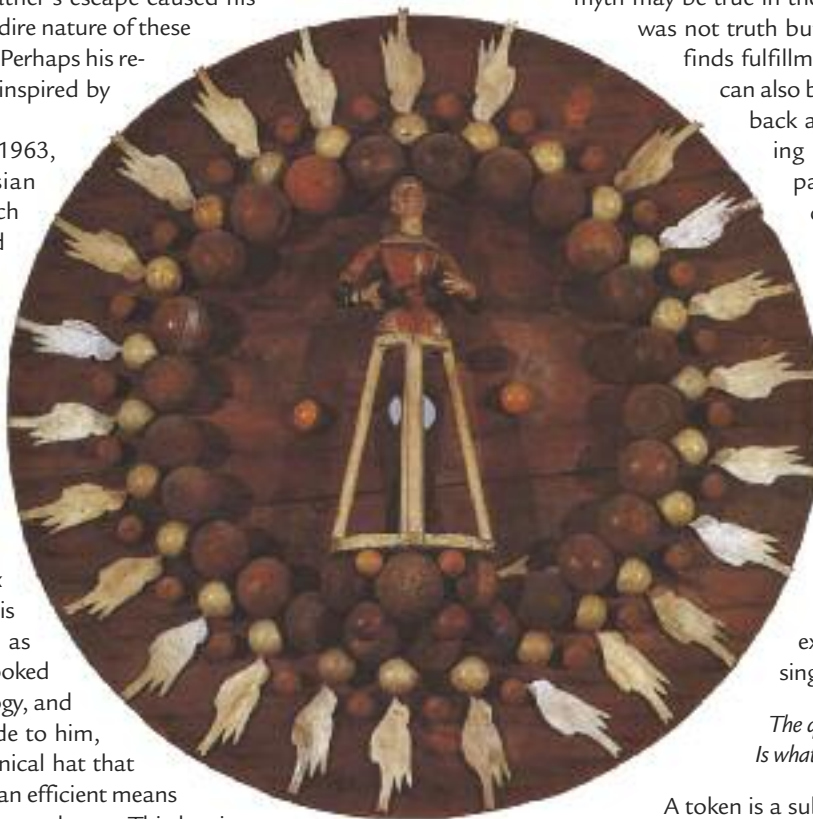
ABOVE: PAUL RESIKA AND VARUJAN BOGHOSIAN, 1990 PHOTO ©BLAIR RESIKA  
 BELOW: *THE MEDALLION*, 1965, WOOD, IVORY, CLOTH, 47 INCHES IN DIAMETER BY 3 INCHES, WILLIAMS COLLEGE OF ART

graced the cover of a book by the poet Charles Simic, born in war-torn Belgrade, who writes in *The Monster Loves His Labyrinth* (Ausable Press) about his boyhood disillusionment with war: "The occupiers everywhere, I note, are outraged by the bad manners of the occupied that do nothing but complain about being mistreated." Such humor in the face of horror is also typical of Boghosian. His father's escape caused his lucky son to be born. No doubt the dire nature of these stories affected Boghosian strongly. Perhaps his recent work *Genocide* (1997-99) was inspired by his father's experiences?

*Night and Day (Orpheus and Pluto)*, 1963, is one of several pieces Boghosian fashioned from hat blocks, in which portions of the crown are darkened with hundreds of small brads with wide heads, giving it some kind of variation on a Mohawk haircut. The shape of the hat block naturally echoes the shape of the human skull, and Boghosian's memento mori moves us even more to honor life.

In Boghosian's ancient theater, a key role is played by Charon, who ferries the dead across the River Styx into the moldy gloom of Hades. He is represented in classical portraits as nasty, short, and brutish, with a crooked nose and misshapen ears. In mythology, and in Boghosian's sculptures that allude to him, he is often depicted wearing the conical hat that Greek fishermen wear even today as an efficient means to shed sea spray and rain in their open boats. This hat is also associated with dunces, jugglers, and the entertainers of the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, including the clown Punchinello.

Like any professional, Charon expected some compensation for his valuable service. He liked the coin to be placed in the shade's mouth, for the security the mouth offered, with its encasing teeth being the hardest substance in the body. The token was the price of passage. Without the obligation of an object, there could be no crossing. The unburied body would slosh for a century in the shallows of River Styx. Charon would always pole between the waterlogged remains of dead souls cluttering the channel; routinely his beat-up boat thudded against their soggy thickness.



In the black humor of the ugly oarsman, Boghosian embeds the forgotten final irony that we must pay for our own funeral. Some token must grant our passage.

Boghosian served in the navy following high school, spending two years in the Pacific working the radar on a troop transport ship. Perhaps the characteristic sweep of light across a circular map was imprinted in Boghosian's mind as a way of seeing objects out of one's range of vision. Radar is effective day or night and in bad weather, much like the echolocation of bats, which use sound to "see." A series of concentric circles, one inside the other, appear in many works in the artist's career, offering a recurrent image of a conceptual world outside our range of perception.

One piece, *The Medallion* (1966), is itself an enormous, round, wooden token, fashioned to resemble the dual tracks of a set of ball bearings, in which one circular raceway spins and the other is fixed. Watching a set of ball bearings roll in rotation is to witness something of a juggling act. It reminds me of the way Boghosian has used marbled paper to suggest the turbulence of water. It could stand in the center of his studio, like the magic curtain of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Truly, it is a roulette wheel, meant to be spun and for its round bearings to be slotted in a secure track. The balls apparently slip so efficiently through their raceway that they seem to achieve a liquid coefficient, their interaction causing no friction.

A "myth" may not be something that is not true. It may be opposite: a myth may be true in the way that Aristotle said that poetry was not truth but "something like truth." Boghosian finds fulfillment in his knowledge that the token can also be a tribute for the privilege of passing back and forth between eternal and fleeting knowledge. How do we record the passing of vivid life? Wallace Stevens declared, "Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her, / Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams / And our desires." With equal profundity, D. H. Lawrence reminded us that "All vital truth contains the memory of all that for which it is not true."

Have we forgotten to connect Robert Frost's words to his belated observer? Frost wrote in his poem "The Oven Bird" what Boghosian learned in his life's work, which is that there is a singer in every existence who knows in singing not to sing, and rather ask:

*The question that he frames in all but words  
 Is what to make of a diminished thing.*

A token is a substitute for currency, and is valuable only for a restricted use. We give others tokens of appreciation when we are sincere. We give small tokens to those we love. We give some object we have touched to another, passing on the memento as a thing of value. A token is a metaphor, standing both for itself and the feeling it embodies. The Greek origin of metaphor is the verb *move*. Our language, our art, has taught us this trick: how the real is separated from its symbol just as the self is from its soul. Myth is our main method of reifying the abstract into a tangible object, and this is why Boghosian has always said and felt, "Myth is real to me."

CHRISTOPHER BUSA is editor of Provincetown Arts.