

# The New Criterion

Dispatch September 10, 2020 04:55 pm

## Rear window

by James Panero

I last saw the work of Varujan Boghosian in the closing hours of New York. It was a Thursday afternoon in mid-March when I made my way up to the private showroom of Alexandre Gallery on 57th Street. The small collages and constructions of the ninety-four-year old artist were propped up in the crook between the wall and the floor. Taking half breaths, the city seemed to be in a rush—rushing to where, we did not yet know. As it turns out, like much else, this was the gallery's last open day for a while, and I was its last visitor. I bent down to see Boghosian's work and took some comfort in what came into view.

Since the Renaissance, the rectangle of a painting has been likened to an open window. As he describes in his treatise *On Painting*, Leon Battista Alberti, the fifteenth century artist and theorist, constructed an image by first drawing a "rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen." Exhibiting since the 1950s, showing at the legendary Stable and Cordier & Ekstrom galleries along the way, Boghosian offers a new perspective on this perspective. His collages and constructions supplement and illuminate Alberti's window through innovative and intimate points of view that look both forward and back, inside and out, shallow and deep. At those times when you cannot see straight ahead, it helps to have some rear windows.



*Varujan Boghosian, Smoking (For Guston), 1989-90, Mixed media construction, 17 x 10 3/4 x 1 1/2 inches. Alexandre Gallery.*

One of the ways that Boghosian helps us see anew is by building up the back of old frames into his own constructions. These assemblies are both paintings in reverse and windows onto their own visions. Boghosian works with the subtleties of his fragmentary and found materials to excavate their hidden meanings. A stain on the back of a canvas becomes a puff of cigar smoke in *Smoking (For Guston)* (1989-90). In *The Artist* (1982), an equestrian silhouette, held together with tape, rides

out across a mysterious landscape created out of the dark wood of the frame backing. *Valentine* (1986) looks through the back of a frame to a vision of flowers created out of matching pieces of paper. The break across the middle recalls the sash of a window, the spine of a book, and the horizon line of a painting. A heart now appears at the vanishing point of the constructed image, while tiny bells hold the parts together.



*Varujan Boghosian, Valentine, 1986, Mixed media construction, 15 3/8 x 12 7/8 x 2 5/8 inches. Alexandre Gallery.*

About those bells: symbols and subtleties infuse this work. The mix-and-match-ups of these constructions are not done for easy laughs or simple statements. While much is revealed by turning these old paintings around, just as much is now hidden away. What exactly is on the other side of these frames, after all? The revelations of hidden gems play off the urge to see the overturned paintings front and center. What we lose in single-point perspective we gain in unexpected materials and uncanny points of view.

Art and books, myth and mystery, history and memory are the raw materials of a body of work that opens a window onto all of these subjects. In *Trio* (2009) and *Currency* (c. 2006), the marbled endsheets of antiquarian books form their own abstract designs that play off the portraiture of old money. In *James Joyce* (2009), the glasses, mouth, and goatee of the famous Dubliner seem to appear out of the cracks, as a fragment of collaged text adds its own wordplay.



*Varujan Boghosian, Duchamp's Valise, 1990, Mixed media construction, 11 1/4 x 15 1/4 x 4 1/2 inches. Alexandre Gallery.*

The history of art is a recurring theme. Through his innovative constructions, Boghosian looks forward by reaching back to the fragments of art history. Artists from Dürer to Duchamp influence and echo across the work. *Spinner* (2013) combines the image of Duchamp's "bicycle wheel" with a real spin-and-spark tin toy—a "readymade" now remade. *Duchamp's Valise* (1990) turns a picture

frame into the straps and handle of a traveling bag, a homage to the artist who turned the history of art upside down and ran away with it.

Boghosian has described himself as a “junk collector. You never have enough, the more you have, the more opportunities you have to do something. It’s not really junk. I use all manner of artifacts, ancient and modern, and I make constructions. I put them together. When you live long enough, you see all of these objects, you relate to them.”

Boghosian has collected materials for over sixty years, from abandoned fishing boats, uncovered pipes and clay marbles at low tide, and the junk shops and trash bins of the Lower East Side. Through his work, he shows us the life in dead and dying materials. His constructions are more like reconstructions, memories unearthed out of the feel of the unseen made newly apparent. His works are acts of reanimation, the illustration of new beginnings out of old things.

As I write these words during the closures and quarantines of 2020, I look forward to having another chance to see Boghosian’s work in person. These are visions that reward close and repeated looking. The world may seem framed in, but there is hope on the other side, a new turn, just as Boghosian shows us there will be.



*Varujan Boghosian, The Artist, 1982, Mixed media construction, 13 x 11 1/4 x 2 1/4 inches.*  
Alexandre Gallery.

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