

The work of **Mekhitar Garabedian** (b. Aleppo, Syria, 1977) can be seen as a continuous journey of excavation into his personal and complex identity as an immigrant, an investigation that immediately also shines light on the concept of ‘descent’ in general. Garabedian was born in Syria, but has Armenian roots. His family fled the Armenian genocide in 1915 and in 1981, during the Lebanese civil war, they moved on to Belgium. He has lived in Belgium since he was a child, but as a second and third-generation immigrant, he indisputably carries his past with him. Again and again, Garabedian attempts to translate (often quite literally) the individual remembrance of his heritage, laden with stately images from a long-ago past, into a present that is continually in motion. With the help of the languages of media, including text, photography, sound, neon, publications, video and installations, this individual starting point in turn nestles itself in a new collective narrative.

Garabedian’s own family history can consequently be seen from a more universal perspective, one in which we are all multicultural people, comprised of an unlimited number of identities. Garabedian relates the perspective of the other (in ourselves) not by forcing us to be open to it, but by inviting us to take pause, as a simple matter of course. He engages us in his journey of reconnaissance, into an expression of the idea of identity, language, physical and mental migration through places, so that ultimately, it is the interaction of a work of art with its observer that becomes central.

Young Man Blues, is an exhibition comprised of an intuitive assemblage of works, each of which was created in a specific time and space. They nonetheless form a lucid whole, in which the artist, by means of both language and symbolism, repeatedly gives expression to the typical ‘homelessness’ found in the Armenian diaspora: the feeling of always having to choose between two differing positions, but in reality never being able to succeed in bridging the distance between two places, in order to find the peace of mind to truly feel at home – somewhere.

Works in the Exhibition

The neon installation, *Young Man Blues, Neon*, tells us, ‘A young man ain’t nothin’ in the world these days’, a sentence from the song of the same name by jazz musician Mose Allison. At the same time, for 94 minutes, we hear Garabedian’s voice, *a capella*. This reinterpretation inadvertently evokes an image of a young man who, as the sound track progresses and the tempo becomes increasingly intense, becomes ever more deeply lost in his own thoughts, steadily moving towards the future.

Two additional text works have been written directly on the wall. *Words, Recollected (February 2010)* is a list of Armenian words in Roman letters: the tangible result of an associative mental game, originating in Garabedian’s memory of the Armenian language. In *Fig. a, a comme alphabet (February 2010)*, we read the Armenian alphabet, from ‘a’ to ‘z’: a carefully executed exercise in style, based on a process of consistent, perpetual conditioning. This gesture, of drawing on walls in Armenian, currently takes a repetitive character in Garabedian’s artistic practice, which here gives us the idea of a fear of simply forgetting his ‘mother tongue’. Or, perhaps he wants to protect the awareness of ‘the use of language’ – as the language that is often underestimated, but which weaves an essential guideline through everyone’s life.

The publication, *Yavreeges hokeet seerem*, illuminates the everyday space that surrounds Mekhitar Garabedian, by way of photographs and philosophical quotations, in a playful combination of image and imagination, of what a house or a home might represent, wherever it might be. He shows us the intimacy of his slept-in, still warm bed, the memory of a passer-by (coincidentally recorded in a photograph), the closed character of the narrow corridors that he walks through each day, or the darkness of a nearly empty clothes closet. The whole is created from a self-assured selection from Garabedian’s image archives, conveying a message that can be poignantly summarized in the leading quotation from Boris Mikhailov. It deals with the standpoint that a photographer should take and the notion that the power of recording a simple, but honest image is stronger than hunting after the ultimate gesture.

Gifts, T-shirts is an installation of worn-out T-shirts that, like *May 2002 (calendars)* en *January 2001 (calendars)*, refer to the Armenian culture and its national colours. The whole installation has something of a suggestion of a faded Armenian flag that for lack of wind hangs unmoving on a chord. Like a gift, the t-shirts stand as a symbol of the love for one's land of origin that is taken for granted and which, by way of traversing the American clothing industry and the *Fruit of the Loom* trademark, found a second home in Garabedian's wardrobe.

Finally, there is the small work, *Fig*, which, all on its own, succeeds in completely filling an empty wall. In this space, what is frequently used as a closing note in Garabedian's publications serves as a starting note for the creation of new references. It is therefore difficult to interpret precisely what the artist is referring to. How do we make it possible to give a name to something that is 'placeless', such as the 'non-location of a foreigner's identity'? Such questions as this can only be answered by silence, or by an empty wall. It is perhaps this that makes the artist's desire to express it – and the visitor's desire to be receptive to this expression – all the greater.